

# A *Stranger*

*in the*

## *Promised Land*

### ~~~~ Chapter I ~~~~

## Upon Closer Inspection

**"Every problem is an opportunity in disguise"**

**~ Anon**

*"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.*

"You!" gasped Harry, his entire body freezing in horror. *This can't be!* Everything had gone correctly. He couldn't be in the right world! He must have gone to yet another world! What went wrong? Harry felt a sinking feeling in his stomach. He felt sick, chills ran up and down his spine and a shiver reached from his fingers to his toes. How could it have gone so wrong? Dumbledore and Flamel had agreed that the calculations were right. They were the wisest men in centuries. How had it gone so badly wrong? He had thought the other world was bad, but this...this was just awful! Riddle was...he couldn't even think it.

Tom Riddle rose slowly from his chair, surveying Harry with curious eyes. His eyes! They were not red, but a deep blue. The man before Harry was so similar to the Voldemort of the other universe that Harry instinctively took a step back, his hand flying to his wand. Riddle's eyes flashed to Harry's hand which was overtly wrapped around his wand, but made no effort to draw his own. Harry wished he had worn his armour. He stood ready, his eyes surveying Riddle.

Riddle was tall and thin, just as Harry remembered. His skin was pale and smooth; his long black hair cascading over his shoulders by a few inches, framing his face in the firelight, giving him a haunted look. The Headmaster looked calmly into Harry's eyes, and Harry stared back. Emerald green met sapphire blue as the two enemies locked eyes. Harry was surprised by what he saw; the Headmaster's eyes twinkled with a passion unknown to Lord Voldemort. There was kindness etched into the man's features even though he wasn't smiling. Harry found himself being sucked into those deep blue eyes. They reminded him so much of Dumbledore – but then he remembered exactly who he was facing. This was Tom Riddle: the man who murdered his parents, tried to kill his sister, murdered Cedric Diggory *twice*, and made his life Hell in more than one world. He was the enemy.

"Welcome back, Mr Potter," said Riddle softly. That voice! It was not the icy high-pitched hiss that caused grown men and trained Aurors to lose bladder control. Instead, it was perfectly normal: soft, kind and gentle, just like the peaceful voice that he had heard in this office so many times before. But no! It was Riddle! He was the enemy! Harry must not fall for this deceit. This man had murdered his parents! "May I ask where you have been?" asked Riddle calmly. There was curiosity in his voice, but patience as well.

"Where's Dumbledore?" snapped Harry, unable to control his hatred of the man before him. His mind was racing, trying to find answers to the sea of questions in which he was drowning. Who? What? How? Why? Dumbledore! If there was anyone who could explain what was going on it would be Dumbledore. Until he had spoken to Dumbledore, Harry would not do anything that Riddle told him to. His hand was on his wand, ready in an instant if the bastard tried anything.

"*Albus* Dumbledore?" asked Riddle, looking curiously at Harry. What was so confusing? Everyone had heard of Dumbledore. He was the most powerful wizard in centuries, everyone knew him. As a former Headmaster of Hogwarts, everyone must know his name – in fact there should be a painting on the wall. Harry wanted to check for the portrait, but didn't dare take his eyes off the murderer before him.

"Albus Dumbledore!" repeated Harry, his voice patronising and hostile. "Surely you've heard of him. He's the most powerful wizard in centuries." Harry half expected Riddle to contest that, claiming that he was more powerful, but Riddle and the Walrus merely exchanged curious glances. Harry's eyes moved quickly between them. What was wrong? It was a simple question. Even in the other world, Dumbledore had been the only one Voldemort had ever feared – until Harry came along that was. Why could they not give a simple answer to a simple question?

"Thank you, Horace," said Riddle, nodding to the Walrus, who turned to leave. Riddle took a step around the side of the desk as the man called Horace left. There was a look in Riddle's eyes that, if Harry hadn't known better, he might have mistaken for concern.

"Harry, are you feeling alright?" asked Riddle after the door had closed behind 'Horace'. Riddle seemed to be appraising Harry's face – luckily the infamous scar was concealed by the hood. He slowly reached out for Harry with a pale hand. Harry instantly backed away, sliding his wand half way out of its holster. Riddle noticed his retreat and withdrew his arm, palm raised in surrender.

"I'm fine, now answer the God-damned question," he snapped at Riddle. He expected a flash of anger from the Headmaster – No! He would not think of him as that – but all he saw was that insatiable calm that Dumbledore had. Who or what was this man?

"In the same place he's been for the last fifty years," sighed Riddle, a look that could be mistaken for regret or even pain on his face.

"And where might that be?" said Harry coldly. Riddle sank slowly into his chair and sighed deeply before answering.

"Parkside Cemetery."

"WHAT?" cried Harry, the world seeming to close in around him. "He's dead?" No, it couldn't be! All his life Dumbledore had been there. He hadn't appreciated it at times, but the old wizard had been. When Harry was in trouble Dumbledore always seemed to be able to make things better. But now he was gone Harry was completely lost. No, he couldn't believe it. It had to be a lie!

"Harry," said Riddle kindly. "Albus Dumbledore was killed over fifty years ago by the Dark Lord."

"You are the bloody Dark Lord!" screamed Harry. He could feel the tears coming; they were seconds away. He couldn't believe it. It couldn't be true. He had to get out of here! This was all wrong!

"Harry..." said Riddle, staring at him.

"NO!" he screamed, making Riddle jump. He'd had enough. This was the wrong world! He had to go back! He was not staying here! He had to find a way home! Before Riddle could stop him, Harry bolted out of the door and down the steps. As he sprinted down the deserted corridor, he felt the tears start to spill over. His anguish drove him harder. He ran past empty classrooms and suits of armour, ignoring orders to stop from teachers and prefects, and not even responding to Peeve's volley of rotten peaches. Something had gone wrong; he was in the wrong world. How had it happened? Why had it happened? Could he fix it? Could he really get back home? Was he doomed to float from universe to universe until, by luck, he found the right one? He would probably be so old by that time that he wouldn't even remember what his world was like. He didn't want to think about it.

Harry ran down the stairs three at a time and towards the Entrance Hall. He was exhausted but desperation kept him going. Out through the door into the cold night he went, opening the gate and breaking free of Hogwarts. He finally slowed to a walk but kept moving. He walked briskly, ignoring the stitch building in his left side and the ache in every limb of his body. Harry marched through the cold, calm night, ignoring the cries of wolves, and the Thestrals that swooped down and snatched small creatures from the ground. He didn't even notice the rain which was gently falling from the heavens in a light shower.

His mind was racing. Could he get home? He had to find out. The house had been called Raven Wood Cottage. If he could Floo back there, he could use the Node to return to his world. No, he couldn't! He didn't know how - the 'address' he had been given was wrong. He couldn't get to his own world, but he could go back to the world he had come from, back to the Unholy Land. Flamel might have given him the wrong 'address' but if he could get back, then the old man could try again. At least they knew how to calculate an 'address'. Harry had all the parchments and the key in his bag. It would be simple to get back - Flamel had given him the 'return address' to get back for visits. This wasn't going to be a visit, but it would get him back onto safe ground. God damn it! Why had he left? He was safe and comfortable there. He had a family, friends, and there was no Dark Lord - he had seen to that. *If it ain't broke, don't fix it.* He should have stayed where he was.

He barged into the Three Broomsticks, knocking patrons aside as he passed, heading straight for the fireplace. He charged headlong into a rather well built wizard covered in tattoos, spilling his pint of whatever all over his new navy blue robes.

"OI!" bellowed the drunken wizard. "WHAT'S YOUR GAME?" He grabbed Harry's lapels with one hand and balled the other up. Harry's anguish, desperation and anger at himself got the better of him, and he reacted instantly with excessive force. He grabbed the man's wrist and twisted it violently to the right, forcing him to let go of Harry's cloak and snapping his wrist in two with a resound crack. Then with all his strength, Harry forced the palm–heel of his right hand up into the drunk's nose. It exploded in a shower of blood. Had Harry been a little stronger he could have forced the broken fragments up into the man's brain, killing him instantly. As it was, the drunk just fell to the floor, clutching his nose and cradling his wrist.

Harry didn't hang around – he grabbed the floo powder and Floo'd to Raven Wood. The cottage was as dark and dismal as ever. His arrival had disturbed the dust and he had to cover his mouth to prevent a sneezing fit. He ran out of the front door and hopped the fence, every step taking him closer to the node, closer to being back home. He made his way along the path as fast as he could through the thicket, ignoring the nettles and thorns.

At last he arrived at the top of the cliff, the cascade of water falling away beneath him. He didn't even bother to change form, but jumped off the cliff, and spun in mid air to face it. Brandishing his wand like a whip, he muttered a charm and a long thin chord shot out of his wand and adhered to the rock, swinging Harry back in towards it, through the water and into the tunnel. He ambled along as quickly as possible, ignoring his damp clothes. He only had one thought on his mind: get to the Node; go home! He didn't know what had gone wrong, or why, and he didn't care. He had to get back to Flamel, to Dumbledore, to someone who could help. He had to get out of this nightmare.

The cave stood just as he had left it, a dark ominous cavern with jagged rocks that spiked eerily out of the darkness, like a sea of knives, casting vicious shadows on the wall. Guided by his wand light, Harry cut straight across the circle straight towards the globe. The sphere stood as it had in the other world, almost identical, except more dusty. Harry wiped it with his sleeve and found the hole.

He blew into it, releasing more dust straight into his eyes. Wiping them on his sleeve and cursing his stupidity, Harry swore into the darkness. The word was reflected back at him by the vast cave, as if it were mocking him. Able to see again, Harry removed the key from his bag and unwrapped it. He twisted it, just as Flamel had done, extending the diamond to the top of the key. Then turning it upside down so the diamond went in first, Harry pressed the key into the port.

*CLUNK!*

The diamond had gone in, but something was stopping the rest of the key from following. There must be something lodged in there.

"*Scourgify*," he muttered. The dirt in the port disappeared instantly and Harry could see that the inside of the pedestal was in fact gold. It was only stone around the top. Harry pressed the key into the lock once more.

*CLUNK!*

Again, the key refused to go in. Harry pushed down hard, but to no avail; it refused to slide in. Holding his wand close, Harry inspected the key. Did it have to go in a certain way? No, surely not; it was a regular octagon with no grooves or lines on it. It was fully extended, so why didn't it go in?

Lowering his light, Harry peered into the hole. To his horror he saw that the inside of this one was only a hexagon. He gasped in horror. The key would never fit! It was the wrong shape. He knew better than to try to make changes to such a powerful magical object. For all he knew it would destroy the machine and the whole world he was in.

He couldn't activate the Node!

Harry's legs gave way beneath him and he collapsed on the floor of the cave. Tears returned to his eyes and he put his head in his hands. He was stuck here!

Why oh why had he left the other place? He had a family there, he could have been happy, but no; his helping people thing had gotten the better of him and he had to leave. Just like he always did, he had tried to do what's right and ended up getting into a worse situation than he had been before, only this time there was no Dumbledore to bail him out. This time he was on his own and he didn't know what to do. He wasn't as clever as Flamel and Dumbledore. He didn't know what was wrong. He was stuck here, in this nightmare of a world unable to leave. He was marooned: never to be escape. He would die in this nightmare. Tears flowed freely down his cheeks as he cried, his sobs echoing off the cold, unwelcoming, walls of the cave. In a reflection of how much he had changed, Harry's only thought was that he wanted his mother.

*Why was I so stupid?*

Harry slammed his fist onto the ground hard. He deserved the pain for being such an idiot. He wished he were dead, anywhere other than right here, right now. Tears came faster. All his pain and suffering in the Unholy Land had been for nothing. This was supposed to be the Promised Land, but it was even worse than the first one. Was his suffering ever going to end? It seemed not. He was stuck here.

If was several minutes before he managed to calm himself and to think clearly. He would have to stay here, to make a living in this world. Riddle was headmaster, not the Dark Lord. The Dark Lord, whoever it had been, had killed Dumbledore fifty years ago. He would be too old to be a threat by now. There was no extra security at Hogwarts so it seemed that there was no threat – no Dark Lord. If there was no Dark Lord, this place might be all right. If there was no Voldemort, then he wouldn't be in any Prophecy and he wouldn't be the Boy-Who-Lived. If there was no Dark Lord, his parents wouldn't have been murdered. What the hell was going on here? This

place was more confusing than the last. At least in this one he wasn't a murderer. He was a no one - which was a blessing as he could now stay below the radar.

He shivered in his wet clothes; his teeth were chattering. He rose to his feet, drying his eyes and then his clothes. He couldn't stay here. As much as he hated to admit it, he would have to return to Hogwarts. He didn't have the papers, money or resources to support himself and he wasn't of age which limited his options considerably. Hogwarts was his only choice. At least from there, he could rest and it would give him time to find a way out of this mess.

*Remember, Harry, every problem is an opportunity in disguise*, he told himself. Though this one was wearing a bloody good disguise.

Sadly, he got to his feet and began the trek back to Hogwarts. His feet dragged as he lacked the enthusiasm to do anything but plod onwards. What was he going to do? Finish NEWTs, get a job and live out his life? He would be placed back into Gryffindor and live out a boring life, knowing that he didn't belong, knowing that he should be somewhere else, yet unable to be so. It was no better than living the lie he would have had to in the Unholy Land. The trouble was he had failed his own world; without him, they had no saviour, no Boy-Who-Lived. Voldemort was probably in power already back home, with Hogwarts as flat as a pancake. All those deaths were his fault.

As he left the Three Broomsticks, the heavens opened and it began to pour. Harry was drenched in seconds but hardly noticed. So deep was his despair that when he next looked up he was in front of the Fat Lady. His feet had taken him to Gryffindor Tower without him thinking. He turned around and walked slowly up to the gargoyle, which had been left open, and up the steps to the door. He took a deep breath, knowing that on the other side of the door was a man who had the same blood and body of the monster who killed his parents. He had to let that go. For all intents and purposes, Professor Riddle was a different man. He had to let it go. Harry tried to calm himself. *You are not the other Harry, just as he is not Voldemort*. He took a deep breath and then knocked three times.

"Come in," said a voice calmly.

Harry pushed the door open and stepped inside the office once more. This time he found the room to be completely empty. The desk was tidier than Dumbledore kept his; it was more ordered and less innocent. Professor Riddle must be stricter. What did the students think, since they didn't know of Voldemort? The shelves were lined with books, but they seemed to be in perfect order, rather than hickety-pickety like Dumbledore kept his. The cabinets contained various equipment, including some rather ornate, but very dangerous looking blades. The lights were dimmer, the shadows bolder, the air cooler, and the atmosphere less inviting. This was the very thing he had prevented in Rose's world.

Harry noticed that the lamp on the desk was in the shape of a leering serpent, a large glowing crystal in its mouth, illuminating the desk. Tom Riddle was still the heir of Slytherin, however nice he appeared. Harry would have to watch his back. He fell to temptation in his world, it could still happen here. The image of Voldemort just before he died in the other universe crashed into his mind. Would he have to do it here? Was this Riddle as bad as the others? Looking around, Harry saw some other snakes.

"Found what you're looking for?" hissed a voice. Harry jumped out of his skin. He spun around, his hand flying to his wand. His fingers wrapped around the wooden stick as Professor Riddle came out of the shadows. He was dressed in cream coloured robes, his long black hair flowing over his shoulders. He looked almost kind, almost like Dumbledore. NO! It was an insult to Dumbledore's memory to view this man as anything other than a murderer. No one could replace Dumbledore.

Riddle clapped his hands and the crystal in the snake's mouth became brighter, filling the office with a strong glow. It wasn't the warm, inviting, firelight glow that Dumbledore liked, but a cold, clinical white. The Headmaster walked slowly around his desk and sank into the seat, then lay back, interlocking his fingers beneath his chin and resting his elbows on the arms of the chair.

"You look disapproving," noted Riddle, gesturing at the lamp.

"You're Slytherin's descendent," said Harry icily. "Snakes are your family heirloom, dark as they may be."

"You know about my heritage," said Riddle nodding slightly. He wasn't even going to deny it - the echoes of Voldemort were still there and still strong. Harry had a sudden feeling that the whole school must be dark, if someone this evil could openly parade their ancestry, and do so with pride. "Impressive. Does your house rivalry extend to myself now?" House rivalry? Harry was above that sort of thing. In his experience, Heirs of Slytherin cost lives, not points.

"I'm above such petty sentiments," said Harry frostily. "I just distrust anyone who likes snakes, because they are a symbol of Dark Wizards."

"You believe snakes are inherently evil," asked Riddle, raising an eyebrow as if it were a minor point to be debated.

"They have fangs, they bite, they kill," said Harry coldly. "That's all I need to know."

"By implication, you then hate everything from a spider to a cat then, Harry," said Riddle, "And cats have a much darker past than snakes. Snakes have simply had their image spoiled by humanity. Every Dark Lord for the last nine hundred years has taken a snake to be its symbol, which is rather unfair to the snake. Snakes have long been associated with fertility, going right back to the ancients. Some believed they were the guardians of the underworld, and that is what is taught in schools, but for centuries the snake has been the symbol for fertility and Mother Earth. They are handled in fertility rituals around the world today, in Aboriginal, Native American, and African tribes. Their unblinking stare and habits suggest that the snake's mind follows logic rather than instinct. They work things out, Harry. Christian mythology tells how a snake tempted Eve, while Greek tells how Orphion the snake incubated the egg from which all life sprang. Buddhists believe that Brahma slept in the coils of Shesha, who protected him."

"Fascinating," said Harry sarcastically. He didn't need the history lesson and it was not interesting at all.

"But we have digressed too far," said Riddle. "There is still the matter of your return."

"And?" snapped Harry. Riddle interlocked his fingers beneath his chin and stared at him.

"I believe it was Sherlock Holmes who once said that if you eliminate the impossible, whatever is left, however improbable, is invariably true." He peered into Harry's defiant green eyes. Harry realised that his face had settled into a glare, but he wasn't going to change it. The seconds ticked by, and neither man said anything.

"Is there more," sneered Harry. "Or am I supposed to guess." He was openly rude; he didn't care. Let Riddle shout. Harry could destroy his office just as well as he had Dumbledore's. His entire body was tensed and ready to move. He had a sudden urge to lash out at...something, anything. *Control yourself, Harry.*

"I see you before me now," said Riddle calmly. "Yet I have it good authority that this cannot be true. You see several weeks ago several witnesses claimed that they saw you die. You were laid to rest just before Christmas, although with an empty casket."

"How did I allegedly die?" asked Harry. He needed to gather as much information as possible. He would need it or he would be suspected. At least he now knew that he would not run into another version of himself here. However, it might raise problems if he ran into his parents, people who would know in a second that he was not their son. He supposed he could win them over in time, but how many 'other families' would he collect before he returned home – if he ever managed it? Was there a version of Rose here?

"You have no memory of anything?" asked Riddle, examining him carefully. "You do not know what happened?"

"If I did, I wouldn't ask," said Harry.

"If you don't remember," said Riddle more to himself than Harry, "You won't know about..." He seemed to be staring down into his lap, or at something beneath the desk. Harry's hand tightened on his wand.

"About what?" He really hated it when people didn't give straight answers. Riddle looked awkward for a moment, before his calm returned. He sat back and fixed Harry with a cautious stare. Eventually he spoke.

"There was a fire," said Riddle. "In St Mungo's. The Long Term patients' wing caught fire."

"And that's what killed me?" asked Harry. He had been expecting murder for some reason. He was sure that he would have died by unnatural means. He almost felt disappointed.

"The fact that the Long Term Ward was destroyed doesn't trouble you?" asked Riddle, eyeing his cautiously.

"Of course it does," snapped Harry. Did Riddle really think he wouldn't care if all those people had died? "It was horrific, but it doesn't have anything to do with me."

"Harry are you feeling alright?" Riddle looked confused and worried. Harry felt a chill run down his spine. He was missing something, something the Harry of this world should know. He was in serious danger of giving himself away.

"Fine," said Harry hotly, hoping his hostility would distract from his error. What was he missing? What didn't he know?

"Harry, I'm sorry to tell you this, but your parents were caught in the fire," said Riddle. "They're dead."

"Dead?" echoed Harry. What were his parents doing there? Why were they in the lifer's wing? So they weren't killed when he was one, they were both in St Mungo's when it burned down. But what were they there for? Harry felt more perplexed than concerned. They weren't his family and now never would be. It wasn't that he didn't care; just that he felt no sense of loss.

"Why were they there?" asked Harry.

Riddle fixed him with a piercing stare that even McGonagall would be proud of. Harry had no idea what was going on inside his head, but he was fairly sure the cogs were whirring. What was wrong? Harry tried to Occlude his mind, to make sure Riddle didn't gain any information that way.

"Harry, I think you need to see Madam Pomfrey," said Riddle cautiously.

"I'm fine," said Harry, quickly. He didn't want to give the old bat a chance to inspect his various scars, and he certainly didn't want to spend a month in bed. He doubted she could get any hard evidence that he wasn't the Harry they knew, but he didn't want to take the chance.

"Harry, I can't help you if you don't let me," said Riddle gently.

"I don't want your help or need it. All I want is to get back to my life. I want to live in peace, that's all." Harry thought it was best to set the ground rules as soon as possible. He just wanted to be left alone.

"That is easier said than done, I'm afraid," said Riddle sadly. "If you can't even remember what happened to your parents, that suggests serious mental trauma. We need to take care of your mind."

"I am not mad," said Harry. "My memory is just a little off. What happened to them?"

"After the Dark Lord fell," said Riddle. "They were cornered by Death Eaters. Extensive exposure..." Suddenly Harry understood.

"To the Cruciatu Curse...", continued Harry, finishing for him. "...can result in madness. Their minds were fried by the Lestranges and Barty Crouch Junior?"

"You do remember," said Riddle, sounding partially relieved. Harry felt a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. This should have happened to Neville, not him. This whole world was back to

front. He could imagine his parents mindlessly wandering around all day, unable to recognise anything and cringed at the thought, remembering how Neville's parents had been last Christmas. Maybe it was better for them being dead.

"I just needed a nudge," said Harry. "I'm a bit confused."

"Do you know why that is?" asked Riddle.

"No," said Harry, sticking to single-word lies before the Legilimency master. He tried desperately to Occlude his mind.

"Look at this from an objective perspective," said Riddle, leaning forward. "Witnesses saw you walk onto that ward seconds before it burst into flame. Now, I accept your body was never recovered, however I see no means by which you could have survived. And now, a month later, you have reappeared out of the blue, with varying amounts of memory. These are not normal events, Harry, and I think it best you undergo a psychiatric evaluation."

"You can't lock me up in the loony-bin," said Harry hotly. If he was to have any hope of figuring out a way home, he needed to be free. That and he could not allow himself to be examined in case anyone found out the truth and tried to use the Node.

"That's not what I am saying at all," said Riddle, softly. "I am merely asking you to report to Madam Pomfrey tomorrow at noon for her to check you over. Is that too much to ask?"

"There's nothing wrong with me," protested Harry. "I just want to get on with life."

"I'm not asking you to commit to anything," said Riddle. "Should Madam Pomfrey report that you are, as you claim, fine, then that will be the end of it, but it's better to be safe than sorry. It's New Years Day tomorrow – excuse me, today," he added, checking his watch. "You have another five days before the students return for the term. When would you rather go through this, now or then?"

Of course, it was still the Christmas holidays. A vast majority of the school would have gone home. There would be a handful of students still here, but most of them would have left. In Rose's world the students had been kept there over Christmas for fear of safety. Here must be a little more relaxed. But then again, why shouldn't it be. If Riddle was here and there was no Voldemort, then why should they not be care-free?

"Okay, I'll go and see her," said Harry, appeasing the headmaster - if he didn't go, Riddle would never be off his case. He would just have to be careful. One single check-up would do, but of course, it was never only one with Pomfrey. "But the old bat will recommend a week in bed; it's her cure for everything. I am not staying in the Hospital for examination, understood?"

"We have a deal, Mr Potter," said Riddle, nodding with a small smile, "and I will hold you to it."

"Whatever," said Harry, not caring. "But now, I'm off. I'm cold, tired, aching and I just want to go to sleep."

"Then who am I to stop you," smiled Riddle. "Your things are still at the castle, I had not yet got around to sending them on to your Aunt and Uncle in Surrey. They will be returned to your room by the time you get there. Good night, Harry."

"Whatever," said Harry rising awkwardly from his chair. He turned to the door, but had only gone two paces when Riddle stopped him.

"Oh, Harry," said Riddle, his voice firmer this time. "I must ask you to leave that impressive array of weapons here." Harry, paused for a second, eyeing the headmaster. He had not unwrapped them, and the cloth was thick enough to stop him seeing through it. How the hell had he known what was inside? Then again, how many things did one wear across one's back in this fashion? At least he didn't ask to inspect the bag with the Node material in it - that would need a lot of explaining.

Harry was too tired to argue. He could always flame up here and retrieve the swords if the occasion called for it. He un-shouldered the bundle that contained the two swords, body armour, and the stun baton, and leaned them against the wall. He stared at Riddle, half expecting him to demand his wand and everything else he had on his person.

"Thank you, Harry," said Riddle, to Harry's relief. "Now I have something for you." He reached into the drawer in his desk and drew out a long, thin box about a foot in length. It was made of polished wood, with a floral pattern embossed in gold. Riddle placed it on the desk and lifted the lid, before offering it to Harry. Inside was familiar looking wand.

"This was recovered from St Mungo's," said Riddle. "I believe it belongs to you."

Harry stared down at the wand; it was identical to the one now tucked inside his cloak. It was the very same, not just a brother, but a perfect twin. Two identical wands, both as powerful as the other, since both were made for him and him alone. Harry reached out a hand, and picked up the wand. It felt warm in his hands, and sparks of pure scarlet fizzled at the tip as he lifted it from the box.

"It must be glad to see you again," noted Riddle, eyeing Harry. Harry was fairly sure that Riddle was trying to work something out, though he wasn't sure what. "I assume the one on your hip is a replacement," continued the Headmaster. "But it can never replace the original. I suggest you only use your original wand. For now though, you must get to bed; the password is Pandora."

Harry didn't move, as the password echoed through his mind. *Pandora* – a word that he had been called before. The Muggle Prime Minister had plucked the word from thin air and used it as a reference to him, and now Riddle had used it as a password. To the best of Harry's knowledge, Pandora, according to Greek Mythology, was a woman to whom a box was given with instructions not to open it. She had, due to her fatal curiosity and had unleashed pain and suffering into the world. Harry was himself curious, and he seriously hoped that he had not brought any pain or suffering to this world with him. It seemed like such a coincidence that the word Pandora should accompany him. He shook the idea from his mind, not wanting to give anything away.

"What do I say to the others," asked Harry. "I assume there are still a few Gryffindors staying in the castle?"

"I find the truth often works best," said Riddle, rising from his desk. "And yes, there are several, more so than in recent years. In fact, I believe most of your old friends are here. Though you may wish to avoid the subject completely tonight, I will announce your return to those of us still in the castle tomorrow, and then the rest of the school upon their return. Good night, Harry."

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Outside the door, Harry inspected the two wands. They appeared identical and felt the same in his hand. Harry held one in each and pressed the tips together. He could feel the magic flowing in them, both perfectly at place in his hands. As the tips touched it was as if a circuit was complete and that energy could then flow. It was a strange feeling of power that passed through his arms. His curiosity led him to test his theory.

*Lumos!*

A thin beam of pure white light shot out the end of both of them, merging into a single ball of light an inch from their tips. From there it sped across the corridor and into the other wall like a laser. The light was tremendous. What was normally a light akin to a torch was now akin to a lighthouse. Harry stopped the spell in shock. The two wands were more powerful than anything he had seen. Two identical wands were more powerful than two separate ones. He had used two wands simultaneously before, but since they were different wands; his power had been divided. But now, with two identical wands, his power was not divided, but multiplied.

Harry yawned involuntary, despite his discovery. He needed some sleep; now he just had to face the Gryffindors, what few were left in the castle. He wondered how many and exactly who Riddle meant by 'your old friends'. If he walked through the portrait to find Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle as Gryffindors he would scream. Just how different was this world? Pocketing both the wands, he turned and started the hike.

The trek to the common room seemed to take longer than it ever had. His limbs ached with every step. After what seemed like ages he arrived at the Fat Lady. He gave the password and the painting swung aside. Harry clambered through into the common room, which wasn't as empty as he had hoped. As Harry stood in the doorway silence fell upon the room. Every eye turned to face Harry. Games stopped and conversations were put on hold, as everyone stared at the boy who had come back from the dead.

He was a sight; dressed completely in black and sopping wet. His combats were muddy and covered in grass stains. There were bits of grass and leaves stuck to the material. He looked like he had just crawled out of the Forbidden Forest, which wasn't too far from the truth. He felt relieved that Riddle had confiscated his weapons as they would have taken a lot of explaining. He had enough on the plate already. The fire was roaring in the fireplace and on the chairs in front of it were two seventh-year girls, notes laid out in before them. In the corner were a few

familiar figures, including some of his dorm mates, playing chess or chatting. To his left were a gaggle of first and second years, presumably chatting about something inane.

"Harry?" asked a voice. He turned to see who had spoken. Neville Longbottom had risen from his chair and was staring at him as if he had seen a ghost. This wasn't the Neville Harry knew. He was glad his friend was alive in this world, but he had not expected to find him like this. His hair was shorter and the front was spiked up with gel. His appearance exuded confidence and if Harry had to guess, he would say Neville was a Quidditch player. His form was more muscular, his face less chubby, and his hair, clothes and posture reminded Harry of some of the Quidditch players he had known.

"Hello, Neville," said Harry softly, not entirely sure what to say. "Y'alright?" It was pitiful, but all he could manage. Neville's head sank into a slow nod, his face not changing from the curious, yet guarded expression.

"We thought you were dead," Neville explained. "Riddle said that you had...you know...the fire." Just like the Grinch who stole Christmas, Harry thought up a lie, and he thought it up quick, though the Grinch hadn't Occluded his mind as Harry now did.

"Muggle Fire Brigade," said Harry, lying through his teeth. "The shop window was on fire as well so they were called. They pulled me out, barely alive. That's where I've been: just another John Doe in a Muggle hospital."

"Did they stick a needle in you?" asked a young student nervously. Harry cringed at the thought of needles and Muggle medicine, but knew better than to tell the truth. They had to believe he had been unable to return, and that no one had known who he was.

"Yes," he said, making his tone sound bitter. "Far too many of them; enough to bring me out of a coma." He watched with satisfaction as several faces cringed. Fantastic! They thought he had suffered with the doctors and was now back, meaning that the ice was hopefully broken. Now he could go to bed.

"So you're fine now?" asked Ron, rising from his seat. Harry stared at his best friend, who at present hardly knew him. He was just as tall as he had been, and wore the traditional Weasley Christmas jumper.

"As I'll ever be," said Harry, fighting back a yawn. He needed to get to bed, quickly. "I'm just tired – it was a long journey back."

"How'd you get here?" Oh Christ, they wanted detail. He had to be careful here and not contradict himself or say something false. Every lie he told then had to maintain his cover as their Harry. He had to remember every one, so if asked later, he didn't contradict himself. As he wasn't sure how this world worked or even how to find Hogwarts in his own world, Harry had to make up his story and quickly. God he hoped they bought the lie.

"I hitch-hiked up to the Lakes," said Harry, knowing the stations the Hogwarts Express passed through. "The last ones that we go through and Muggles use are Windermere and Kendal. From

there it was a matter of buying a map, following the valleys and the lakes we pass and then hitchhiking a little further, across the border to Scotland, and then walking through a forest I was fairly sure was the Forbidden Forest. I knew it was because I could feel the wards."

"That's a bloody long way to travel," said Ron. Was he sceptical, or just in awe? Harry wasn't sure, but he didn't push it. To his relief, after a second, Ron began to smile. "Good on you. I'd have had no idea what to do."

"Well," said Harry, trying to avoid the praise as he literally had not deserved it. "I didn't know where I was at times. I just felt the school calling me. My mind is all screwed up from the coma. My memory is full of holes." It was probably best to label himself insane as it would excuse his lack of knowledge as he found out what was happening in this world.

"Are you alright?" asked Ron.

"More or less," said Harry, shrugging. "I just need rest." With that he began to head up towards the Boy's dorms, moving past Ron to get there. As he passed the base of the stairs, Ron leaned in to whisper in his ear.

"Katie is going to need to talk to you." Katie? As in Katie Bell, the Chaser? Couldn't Ron see that he was not in the best state to talk about Quidditch? The captain could wait; he was knackered. Honestly, it was poor taste, talking about Quidditch as soon as he heard Harry was alive.

"Katie can wait until the morning, I'm tired and in case you haven't noticed I'm not quite my usual self at the moment." Harry continued up the stairs, leaving a speechless Ron behind him. Harry climbed the stairs and entered the sixth year boys room.

He didn't even bother getting changed; he just walked over to his bed, drew the curtains and lay down. It was a matter of seconds before he was asleep.

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"You sent for me, Tom," said the stern looking woman sitting before the Headmaster's desk. She was dressed in a tartan dressing gown, her hair was a mess, her eyelids drooped and it was perfectly clear that she had just woken up.

"Indeed I did, Minerva," said the Headmaster, addressing his deputy. "Can I offer you any tea or coffee? I believe it might help." She could tell from his tone that whatever he was about to say was important. She needed to be awake for it, especially if it was about the Order.

"Thanks," said Professor McGonagall. She tied her hair back into its usual bun while the Headmaster poured her a cup from the bronze kettle sitting on his desk. She sipped it and instantly felt warmth spread through her. Her senses became sharper and she felt the fog of sleep dissolve. Minerva knew that Tom had put something in her coffee. She would normally object to being duped, but having been up until three in the morning the previous night thanks to Peeves, and the night before thanks to an Order meeting, not to mention being awoken ten minutes ago

by the call from Professor Riddle on the Frog Card, she was glad that something was taking the dreariness away. Feeling better and more attentive, Minerva crossed her legs in the chair, and stared expectantly at the Headmaster, who was stirring a slice of lemon in his tea, and staring absently at the desk. What had gotten him so rattled? It couldn't be good. Tom managed to appear calm even at the most trying times. Whatever was happening had shaken him, and that wasn't an easy thing to do.

"What is this all about, Tom?" she asked the Headmaster. She had known the man since they were at school. He was in his sixth year when she was in her first. He had been a Slytherin and she a Gryffindor. They had known each other for nearly half a century, and she had never seen him look so old and tired.

"Just when I thought that nothing else in the world could surprise me," said Riddle, sipping his tea. "It seems that nothing is beyond the power of fate."

"You're not making sense, Tom," said Minerva, almost impatiently. His last name suited him perfectly as he constantly spoke in riddles.

"There is no easy way to say this," he said, looking directly into her eyes. "So I'm just going to say it. Harry Potter is alive."

Minerva coughed into her coffee. "He's what...?" she blurted out, spraying coffee over the desk and her tartan dressing gown. That wasn't possible! As his head of house, she had escorted Harry to St Mungo's after the Healers had summoned him. She had been there when he had died. She remembered it clearly.

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"Now remember, Pot...Harry," Minerva said, softening her tone as the boy brushed the soot off his cloak. He was dressed in jeans and a red jumper that was at least three sizes too big for him. The seam that should have sat on his shoulders was almost at his elbow. If her suspicions were correct, that was a second hand jumper. This puzzled Minerva as the boy stayed with his Aunt and Uncle in Surrey who were well off, according to Hogwarts records. The poor boy had no confidence, and it was unsurprising, given what had happened to his parents, but that was not it. He seemed to accept minimal things unlike most boys his age. For example, he rarely spoke in her classes, unless asked a direct question. When asked to collect equipment from the front, he would always wait until last, and Minerva knew that the bigger boys, Draco Malfoy for instance, would walk all over him. Poor boy. At least he had friends big enough to protect him. While he was not particularly close to people like Neville Longbottom, Ron Weasley, Seamus Finnigan, he was friends with them and they hung around together, though it was clearly Longbottom and Weasley who held rank in the group.

Harry stood upright, having finished brushing the cloak he wore over the top of his clothes. They stood in the main entrance to St Mungo's. To their right was the shop window, through which they could see Muggles passing by, covered in plastic coats and cowering under umbrellas as the

rain thundered down around them. To their left was the reception desk behind which an unconcerned witch was 'helping' – not that Minerva would call it helping – the people in the queue.

"It's this way," said Harry meekly, pointing to the doors in the back wall, to the left of the reception desk. "The letter said to go straight through."

The letter he referred to had arrived at during breakfast several hours earlier. It was the tenth of December, only a week before the end of term. A letter had arrived for Harry, which in itself was rare as his Muggle relatives never wrote to him, noted Minerva, wondering how she had never picked up on it before. She made a mental note to speak to him about his home life once they got back to Hogwarts. The letter had been from St Mungo's. It seemed there had been an accident.

Lily and James Potter had been here since 1980, since the night when He–Who–Must–Not–Be–Named had fallen. While Minerva had been off with Tom delivering the chosen one, and seeing to the future, not only of the child but of the country, Lily and James had been on duty, as one of the few husband–Wife Auror teams. They had been set upon by Death Eaters; the Lestranges and Barty Crouch Junior. Since that day, their minds had been lost and their bodies drifted aimlessly around the Long Term ward of St Mungo's, neither awake nor asleep, just empty shells of the people they had once been. Yesterday, according to the letter, another patient, incarcerated in St Mungo's after pleading insanity before the Wizengamot, had become violent, throwing things around. Lily Potter had been hit in the head by something he had thrown. She was badly concussed and so the hospital had contacted the next of kin, Harry. He had been called for a visit, and Professor Riddle had permitted it.

Harry's head and shoulders slumped as he walked, staring at the floor in front of him. There was no pride in his movements. He seemed more sombre than ever. He had said three words since he had arrived in her office, ready to leave, and his voice had cracked on them. He was not a particularly bright or able boy, but he was kind with good intent. Minerva pitied him, but secretly wished he would get a grip, and concentrate. She had hoped that Longbottom would show him some guidance, but it seemed he had fallen into their wake, rather than walking proud, by their side.

Minerva followed, a pace behind him. She wasn't entirely sure what to say – what had happened to his parents was so horrific that there was nothing that could be said. 'It'll be alright', or 'things will get better' wouldn't work as their condition was irreversible. In short, the boy had nothing to hope for. They walked along the corridor, passed Healers dressed in green, and other inmates.

Up several flights of stairs and down another corridor, Harry led them into the Long Term Ward. He paused outside to take a deep breath, before pushing open the double doors and walking in. Minerva followed. The room was large and white with a line of beds down each side, some of them hidden by curtains. There were people in most of the beds, some asleep or vegetative – Minerva couldn't tell, and others were sitting up talking. Harry made for the curtained off area at the end on the right. He slipped through the curtains into the last two beds. Minerva followed, pushing the curtains aside and drawing them again behind her. She turned and saw for the first time what had happened to the Potters.

Lily was lying unconscious on the bed a large white patch on her forehead. She looked deathly pale and thin. Her once soft features were gone, and her skin hung off her cheekbones, waxy and white from the lack of sunlight. The area around her eyes was dark and a little red, giving her a haunted face, which brought a tear to Minerva's eyes. James, the once caring husband was now beyond the capacity for rational thought, or indeed any form of it. He was sitting on the next bed, a wide yet inane smile spread stupidly across his face. He seemed completely oblivious to anything that was happening around him. His son was present and his wife was fighting for her life, but he was completely incapable of caring or even understanding. His mind was effectively that of a baby, a blank slate, though where as babies soak up what happens around them, which is why you should never swear in front of a child, James Potter's mind was incapable of holding anything he learned. He could never recover and every time Harry visited, he didn't even recognise him. Merlin, what would that do to the mind of a young boy? The results were there for all to see: a feeling of utter worthlessness. Minerva definitely had to talk to the boy. As his Head of House how had she missed it all these years? Five he had spent at Hogwarts. She had known what had happened, but had never investigated, presuming him to be a naturally quiet and not very powerful. She had been concentrating so hard on helping another student, she had missed the one who really needed help. Merlin, she had been so wrong, but right here, right now, it hit her.

"Dad?" said Harry, his voice soft and lined with tears.

"Mr Potter, nice to see you again," Minerva turned with Harry to see a Healer enter the curtains, dressed in green. He shook Harry's hand warmly and then turned to Minerva.

"My name is Healer Rushdale," he said, shaking Minerva's hand. "I've been looking after the Potters for the past two years. Rest assured, they are getting the best care." Minerva nodded politely.

"Still hopeless, isn't it," muttered Harry. The doctor didn't reply for a second, and when he did, it was on a different subject. He guided Harry over to his mother's bed and began to explain yesterday's events.

"I'll wait outside, Harry," said Minerva, giving his shoulder a gently squeeze for support. She let herself out of the curtain and crossed to the main door, and stepped out into the corridor. She sighed deeply, having finally seen Lily and James. They had been in the once great Order of the Phoenix before He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named had fallen. Good people who hadn't deserved what had happened to them. Looking across the corridor, she saw a sign depicting a knife and fork. Minerva needed a shot of caffeine. She turned to her right and headed towards it.

It was horrific what had been done to the Potters. Good thing that the three culprits had gone to rot in Azkaban. Of course, two had escaped this year. That wasn't justice.

"Excuse me, Miss," said a man to Minerva's right. Minerva stopped to face him. He wore long back robes, with a cloak and hood that covered his face. Long rough tassels of black hair escaped the hood. In the light she could see his face, his dark eyes, hooked nose, and steely gaze. "Where might I find the Long Term Ward?"

"It's just down there, the last door on the left," she said to the man, pointing down the corridor.

"Thanks," he said, bowing slightly.

Minerva nodded before resuming her dark thoughts.

Poor Harry: she had utterly failed him as Head of House. It was her job to see to the care of her pupils, and she had massively misinterpreted the signs, keeping all her senses honed on another Gryffindor, whom she'd thought mattered more. How dare she? They were all people and all of them mattered, yet she had neglected Harry. She reached the café after about one hundred metres, and asked for two cups of tea from the young lady behind the counter. As the witch summoned what was needed from the shelves, Minerva turned her thoughts back to James and Lily – good Aurors and good people. What kind of person could do this to them? It was monstrous.

"Anything else?" asked the witch.

Feeling generous, or more specifically, guilty, Minerva added a slice of Black Forest Gateau for Harry and paid the witch. Turning around she headed back to the ward, carrying two paper cups of tea in her right hand and a plate of gateau in her left. It was the least she could do for the poor boy. She hadn't gone far when the doors to the ward opened, and the man in the black hood came out, heading swiftly down the passage towards her.

*That was a quick visit*, noted Minerva. The man walked swiftly towards her, causing Minerva to sidestep as he passed without even acknowledging her. As she moved she nearly lost her grip on the plate she carried. How rude. He hadn't even said 'excuse me'. Merlin, manners cost so little. She had also spilt a little of the tea on her robes, which she would have to clean once she had a free hand. Grumbling silently to herself, she carried on towards the ward.

She was only ten feet away when the doors exploded.

***BOOM!***

A jet of fire blasted both the double doors off their hinges and into the far wall, unleashing a fireball into the passage. The floors and walls shook under the force of the explosion. Minerva was launched off her feet by the force of the explosion, the cups and cake flying through the air. She landed hard on her back, and slid along the polished floor. The glowing crystal lights above her shattered, plunging the corridor into darkness. The passage was suddenly full of smoke. The orange glow of flames came from inside the ward, and a river of black smoke ran along the ceiling.

*Sweet Merlin!* Harry was in there! Covering her mouth with her sleeve to protect her lungs, Minerva surged forward towards the ward. As she peered in, she saw everything was covered in flames. The air was thick with smoke, making it hard to see. She cast the Bubble-Head charm on herself to help her breathing and then lit her wand light and held it up.

"HARRY!" she shouted into the flames. "HARRY! Where are you?"

Looking around she could see no way through the blaze. The heat was incredible - it hurt her to even stand in the doorway. Oh Merlin! There was movement in the fire. Minerva watched in horror as a burning figure staggered through the flames, flapping its arms in a futile effort to put them out. The man never made it to Minerva, crashing to the floor just in front of her.

"*Aquamenti!*" A jet of water shot out of her wand and Minerva doused the still, fallen body with water, putting out the flames. Was this Harry? Was this person dead? Using her foot, and fearing what she would find, Minerva rolled it over. She found herself staring into the lifeless hazel eyes of James Potter. His skin was burned black and his hair had completely gone. The whites of his eyes stared unseeingly up at Minerva, while his clothes, now fused into his skin, wrapped him like a mummy, and smoked in the darkness.

"AHH!" the heat on her skin was unbearable. The whole room was on fire and she could feel her blood boiling. Harry? Where was Harry? Minerva covered her mouth in an effort not to be sick as the fumes from the body, the smell of burned flesh, wafted up her nostrils causing her to gag.

"YOU! HANDS UP!" shouted a voice behind her.

Minerva turned to see a man in black with Security written over his chest aiming a wand at her.

"Don't try and arrest me, you stupid little man," seethed Minerva, unable to control her anger. Even her icy precision and control failed at this moment. "Get some Aurors and Healers up here and put out these bloody fires!" The wizard hesitated for a few seconds before darting out the door. Minerva, shone her light around the room again, but there was no sign of movement.

"HARRY!" she shouted into the gloom. There was no reply.

All of the Potters were dead.

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"You mustn't blame yourself, Minerva," said Tom softly from behind his desk. He always seemed to be able to read her like a book, not that her feelings were well disguised at this point.

"But Tom, he can't be. I was there, I saw..."

"You did Minerva," said Tom, rubbing his eyes. "I know Harry Potter is dead, and I accept that. However, ninety minutes ago there was a knock on the door and Horace announced that a student wished to see me. The next thing I know Harry Potter steps into the office as close to me as you are now."

"But it couldn't be him," said Minerva. "We know he's dead."

"Exactly what I thought," said Tom, He opened one of his desk drawers and pulled out a piece of parchment. He laid it on the table and tapped it with his wand. "I solemnly swear I am up to no

good." To Minerva's astonishment, lines began to appear on the parchment, snaking out in all directions. She began to make sense of what she was seeing.

"It's a map," she gasped.

"Something I confiscated from a young James Potter back in his day," said Tom, with a smile. "A magnificent piece of magic, one that has been most useful, I must admit." He smiled to himself again. Minerva was shocked that someone so young had managed to make such a complicated map.

"As you can see," said Tom. "It shows where everyone is and as far as I can tell, it is never wrong. It isn't fooled by Polyjuice Potion or disguises. As soon as he walked through the door, I checked the map, which happened to be open in the drawer, as I had been keeping an eye on certain students. The boy who stood before me was Harry Potter. I have checked the fingerprints on the cup he used when I offered him tea. I returned his wand to him, and the wand knew it was him. Minerva, that is Harry Potter."

"But how is he alive?" Minerva herself had accompanied Tom to identify the body. Harry Potter had died; she had seen it all. St Mungo's Long Term Ward had been burned to a crisp, all three Potters inside. Whoever this boy was, he was not Harry. "He's not an Inferius is he?"

Tom shot her a look that clearly said, "Please, I'm not that stupid".

"Okay, okay," said Minerva, blushing slightly - it was a stupid comment. "So how did he survive?"

"I could not get that far," said Tom, clearly troubled by something. Luckily Minerva didn't have to prompt him to find out what it was. "Minerva, I am going to be perfectly honest with you. I am more worried than relieved by Harry's arrival here tonight."

"Worried, why?" asked Minerva. "Surely we should be glad he was okay."

"You see the roll of fabric on the side behind you?" said Tom, watching her carefully and pointing to a long bundle of black cloth about a metre high propped up against the cabinet behind her. "Have a look at what's inside." Minerva picked it up and found it was heavier than she had anticipated. He pulled it up onto her lap and began to unroll it. She was ever more aware of Tom watching her every move. As she unravelled the cloth, a gleam of silver shot up into her eyes. She found herself staring down at the jewel-encrusted sword of Godric Gryffindor. Its blade was flawless silver, and the gems laid into the handle gleamed in the light. The name of its owner was carved down one side of it. But that was not all the fabric contained. There was another sword, a Japanese katana, secured inside a black scabbard, with gold at the tip; an armoured vest made from what she was sure were dragon scales; and a shorter stick. The handle looked like that of the katana, but instead of a blade there was a cloudy coloured tube made of some form of glass. Two swords and what looked like a glow-stick that people had at parties.

"Tom, what are...?" she began.

"Harry had those when he arrived," said Tom. *What the Hell was Harry Potter off all people doing with these weapons?* What was he doing walking around? "I'm sure you recognise the silver one?" prompted Tom.

"It was brought back from the Chamber of Secrets," said Minerva. "It's Gryffindor's Sword."

"Indeed," said Tom, pointing to a glass cabinet on the wall. "And the one that was recovered from the Chamber is still here." Minerva followed his gaze. Behind a layer of glass was a silver sword encrusted with jewels. It was identical to the one in her hands.

"It's a fake then?" suggested Minerva, lifting the one in her lap free from the cloth.

"If it is," said Tom, "Which I doubt, it's the best copy I've ever seen, and I would be very curious to know how it was copied when the sword was buried with its owner until it was pulled from the Sorting Hat, and has not left the office since. How anyone had the opportunity to study it well enough to copy is beyond me."

"How can that be?" asked Minerva.

"I cannot say," said Tom. "Every theory has a glaring contradiction. All I can tell you is what I have seen so far. He came to me armed. He was in hysterics; he was irrational. He started shouting about Albus Dumbledore, who's been dead for fifty years. He accused me of being the Dark Lord and then bolted out of the door. He returned half an hour later, calmer, but clearly distressed."

"Is he insane?" asked Minerva.

"I have no idea," said Tom. "It would explain a lot, but I saw calculation and logic in his eyes. He was thinking rationally. I have sent him to bed to get some rest. But I will tell you one thing, Minerva; I tried to Legilimise him gently as he sat there. Someone has taught him to Occlude his mind, and they've done a thorough job. He blocked me, and that's not something a sixteen year old should be able to do. I could have pushed harder, but he would have known I was trying it, and he is unstable enough as it is."

"Do you think he's a danger to other students?" asked Minerva, thinking that Tom was mad for putting a potential time bomb in the Tower with the Gryffindors. How would she extract him without setting him off?

"Students?" echoed Tom. "I wouldn't have thought so. His anger seemed directed at me, no one else. I think if he bears anyone ill will, it is myself. I saw loathing in his eyes, and his voice was controlled, but lined with anger."

"What do you plan to do?" asked Minerva.

"For now, nothing," said Tom, to her surprise. "But I want you to keep an eye on the boy, Minerva. He is in your house. I want him monitored around the clock, but not touched or segregated. There's something about this boy that worries me."

"It will be done," said Minerva, rising to leave.

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News travels fast in schools and Hogwarts was no different. Having lived here, or at least in one version of Hogwarts for a good portion of his life, Harry was well aware of this. It was with a sense of dread that he woke up the following morning. It was midwinter so it was still dark at half past seven, when the sounds of an early riser penetrated the curtains around Harry's bed and roused him from his slumber. His dreams had been of death, destruction and violence, and waking up warm and snug in the familiar surroundings of a Hogwarts bed, Harry, for one glorious moment, believed he was home. For a few blissful seconds, he genuinely thought it had been a dream, that the four months he had spent as a Stranger in an Unholy Land had been nothing but a horrific dream, and he was now home.

Then, a second later, reality hit home. He remembered coming back to Hogwarts the previous night, and all he had learned. Harry sat bolt upright in the bed as the images flowed back into his mind. Tom Riddle was Headmaster here, but for some inexplicable reason, he was not the evil son of a bitch that Harry knew. But he was the same person. This had to be a trick of some sort - Tom Riddle was a monster, plain and simple.

He had to get out of here. Harry couldn't deal with all this. Sliding out of his bed, he was relieved to see that the others still had their curtains drawn, except for one, and the bathroom door was shut, meaning that he was alone. On the floor next to his bed was a large trunk with the initials HP on it. Harry had never seen the trunk before, but assumed it was his. Riddle had said last night that the other Harry was dead. In a morbid sort of way, that was fortunate, as he didn't have to explain why there were two of them. However, it also might raise the possibility of family, and he should be guarded about that. Not having switched bodies, he had no residual memories to guide him in this world. Any sort of family would know in a second he was not their Harry. Still, there was no use sitting here worrying -he needed to have some time to himself to think things over.

Flipping open the trunk, he pulled out a pair of navy tracksuit bottoms and trainers and pulled them on, along with a white t-shirt. They were huge and baggy over his chest, and Harry had a feeling that they had once belonged to Dudley Dursley. This was confirmed by the DD scrawled in black marker on the label of the t-shirt. Harry stared at himself in the mirror. He looked far from the Dark Knight he had once been. But of course he wasn't the Dark Knight here, or even the Boy-Who-Lived by the sound of it. Riddle had not spoken to him like anyone special, and he had been dead. Therefore, it was safe to assume that here, he was no one. Also if Riddle was the Head, there couldn't be a Dark Lord, so it should be safe. To be safe though, it was probably best to hide his scar.

Harry pulled a handkerchief out of the trunk and with a little magic, transfigured into a black strip of fabric, which he then tied around his head, like a Thai Kick boxer, completely covering his scar. There was no point in advertising who or what he was. He slipped his false glasses back onto his nose, and checked himself in the mirror. Satisfied, Harry turned his attention to his

clothes. Using his wand he shrank them slightly so they didn't hang off him quite so badly. That done, Harry slipped out of the room, through the deserted common room and out into the corridor.

There had been between eighteen and twenty Gryffindors in the common room last night, so if that was about average, then that meant there were eighty students and if he included staff, just under one hundred people in the school, none of whom Harry wished to speak to at the moment. He walked in a daze to the entrance hall, replaying last night's conversation over in his head, trying to sort out exactly what he had been told, and seeing if there were any small scraps of information he had not picked up on first time around.

After he reached the Entrance Hall, Harry stepped out into the courtyard. The sun was just rising above the mountains. The air was crisp and cold, but the sky was clear. The morning sun was just enough to light up the valley. Harry didn't really know what he was doing, or where he was going, but he set off at a slow jog across the courtyard. He had never really been running before, but he needed to get away from the castle, to tide things over in his head. He was out of his depth here, and this time he didn't have Flamel or Dumbledore to turn to. Dumbledore was allegedly dead; probably murdered in his sleep by Riddle, and Flamel was God knows where. He was on his own here, as there was no way he could turn to Riddle for help.

Harry reached the outer walls of the courtyard and passed through the gates out into the valley where he broke into a run. The path stretched upward along the side of a mountain, skirting the peak by about one hundred feet. The track ran about ten feet above the canopy of the forest which stretched out before him like a carpet, covering the ground in until it met the lake which shone perfect blue in the winter's sun. The track was uneven, and the morning cold, but Harry's pace soon warmed him up. The cool air filled his lungs as he jogged up the hill. He was not running particularly quickly; aiming at neither distance, speed nor power, just simply as a means to get some time to think about his situation.

He could not go back to the Unholy Land as, for some reason, the key did not fit the Node. Why was that? The device looked identical and there was nothing in the hole. Was he expected to chip away at it to make it bigger? No, that would break it and then he really would be screwed. He wasn't stupid enough to start hitting a powerful magical object with a hammer and chisel - that was a recipe for disaster. He had to find out why it was not working, but of course there were no user-manuals for something like that. He had Flamel's translation of the book in which he had found the Node, lodged in his trunk in the Tower. But if Flamel couldn't answer the question, there was little chance Harry could alone. Maybe he would ask Hermione to go over the Arithmancy of it, if Hermione was even alive here, he noted. *How had things gone wrong in the first place?* Dumbledore and Flamel, two of the brightest minds in history, could not both be wrong. They had even had Vector check it. How on Earth had they cocked-up?

But there was no use in worrying about that now. He was here and he couldn't go back. Once again he was faced with the choice. Dig in here and make a life or fight for a chance to go home. It wasn't a hard choice. Riddle was headmaster, Dumbledore was dead and the world was screwed up. No, he would fight; he would find a way home, or a way back to his mother. He didn't care which, as long as it was not here. *Why did I even leave?* Harry thought, cursing

himself. *If it ain't broke don't fix it.* Why hadn't he left well enough alone and stayed where he knew it was safe?

So he would fight to get back. Now how could he do that? When he got back he would read through Flamel's notes (after a shower). If there was nothing to be gained from them, what then? How could he get home?

*Come on, Harry,* he thought to himself as he continued along the path. The cold air was stinging his lungs, and his muscles protested, unused to the effort of jogging. Some people found this therapeutic. Ha! Not likely! His legs ached, he was out of breath and his heart was pounding.

He had gone about a mile, and he was out of breath. He hadn't noticed, but as his thought became more determined, his pace had increased, until he was full out running. Coming to a halt, Harry put his hand on his hips and took a deep breath, forcing air into his lungs.

Below him was the canopy of the forest, which stretched for maybe fifty or sixty metres before opening up into the lake. A tree next to the path had fallen recently and the canopy had caught it, holding it in place. The log was about a metre thick and stretched out over the canopy like a bridge. Harry stepped up onto it, still panting and walked along a few paces. He sat down, his legs dangling off the edge, and nothing beneath him but the treetops.

Swinging his legs beneath the tree, Harry sat still, trying to catch his breath.

*Come on, Harry,* he thought to himself. Let's think about this logically. *The last time you were in this situation you came to the conclusion that it was all one giant prank, and somehow Voldemort was controlling the entire population. Let's see if you can do better this time. Why does a key not fit a lock? Because it's locked? No, it doesn't fit because you've got a wrong key. That's it!* The key back home was the key for that world, but not for this one. If *this* device was made in *this* world and then so would it's key. Flamel had said that they had gone exploring and others had come back through the Node. It worked two ways, because each of the other worlds had had a Node. Therefore somewhere in this world, probably in Greece, there was another key, one that would make the device work. It was so simple. He needed to find a key, wherever it was.

But then there was the code, the runes. If the 'address' to get home was wrong, chances are that the other Flamel equation, the one to return to the Unholy Land, would also be wrong and he could end up just about anywhere. He would need to start again, with Flamel's initial digits he gained directly from his blood and spells and do the whole equation again. Harry bowed his head. He didn't even do Arithmancy, and Hermione's homework had always looked very difficult. He would need to recruit Hermione at some point.

*Right, so that's it then,* thought Harry. *Number one: find the key. The clues must be in the book because Flamel found it. Number two: get Hermione to redo the equations.* He would not involve Riddle or even Ron and his friends. Last time he had become attached he had allow himself to be sidetracked. He didn't regret that now, but he couldn't afford to become attached here, and he knew that he had to stay as low-key as possible. He was not a soldier here, or a Dark Lord. It was not his world; it was not his fight. This time there was no need to get involved. He would

remain distant, he would find what he needed and he would leave, plain and simple. There was no family to keep him here, no war to fight, and no reason to stay. He just had to pass the time.

Harry got to his feet on the log a cheeky grin on his face. He had done it. He was smart enough.

It was simple: he had two jobs to do and then he could go home, and he had worked it out all by himself. It shouldn't take too long. Once he had the key he could go and see Hermione and ask for her help, force her, if needs be, and then he'd be gone like phantom. This world would go on. Harry Potter had died here, this was how it was supposed to be.

Harry jumped back onto the path and set off at a leisurely pace. He felt oddly relieved. It was so simple. He would need what? A month at most before he could get back home? He reckoned if he pushed himself hard he might be able to be gone in a fortnight. When he got it working, would he go back to Rose or home? He hadn't thought that part out yet, but that was far down the pipeline. He would jump that hurdle as he got to it. He jogged faster down the hill, heading back towards the gate.

He could imagine Dumbledore's face as Harry reappeared at Hogwarts. That was what should have happened last night, but it had all gone wrong and now he would have to wait even longer. Fate had a shite sense of humour. *Divine Comedy*, Harry scoffed, when was he going to get a break?

Harry stopped at the gates, and tried to catch his breath. He wiped his forehead on his t-shirt and tried to catch his breath. His muscles ached after a relatively short workout, but he felt oddly relieved, and much happier than he had been when he had set off. Breathing heavily, Harry slipped back into the courtyard and headed across towards the main doors. He stared at the ground, his mind wandering back home to what his friends might be doing as his feet carried him automatically forwards.

He got to the bottom of five steps that led up to the door. As he stepped onto the first one, another person arrived at the top. Harry struggled not to roll his eyes as the Slytherin adopted the usual arrogant stance that announced that a snide comment was on the way. True to form Crabbe and Goyle were right behind him, the first one standing behind his master, the other leaning against the door, rubbing his knuckles.

"You can train for ever-and-a-day," said Malfoy, his tone condescending. "But you're still nothing but a useless lardbucket."

"Yeah, well not all of us get liposuction and manicures for our birthday" said Harry, wiping his brow on his forearm. Malfoy's eyes grew wide for a second, before he regained composure. Harry was surprised to see his reaction. What was he so shocked about?

"What did you say?" hissed Malfoy, his eyebrows narrowing. He took a step forward down the steps towards Harry, his chest puffed out threateningly.

"Look, Malfoy," said Harry, his tone bored. "I'm sweaty, I'm stinking, and I just want to go for a shower. I am *really* not in the mood for this, right now. Please ask Tweedle-dum and Tweedle

–dee to get out of my way." Harry sidestepped Malfoy and walked up towards the door, which was blocked by Crabbe and Goyle. "Today would be nice," he added.

"What's with you today," sneered Malfoy. "Did you grow some balls since you left?"

"What?" asked Harry. What was confusing Malfoy? Harry was completely lost. What was Malfoy on about?

"So where have you been for the last few weeks?" asked Malfoy. "Not that you were missed. Rumour has it you died, though you're so stupid, you probably couldn't even die properly."

"BACK OFF, MALFOY!" called a voice. That voice was oddly familiar. A girl's voice, echoed out from the Entrance Hall. Harry turned around to see the new arrivals. Neville Longbottom, at least Harry was fairly sure it was him though he looked so different, stood on the right, but it was the girl in the middle that caused Harry to pause. It was Katie Bell, though not the Katie he knew.

"What the..." was all Harry could say. The Katie of this world was somewhat different from the Katie of his world and the other one. She had a fire in her eyes that his Katie lacked. There was pain there, a pain Harry knew all too well. She was dressed all in black and her hair was tied back in ponytail rather than flowing in the wind, perfectly kept and straightened. She had a much stronger presence to her, and a more powerful persona, but that was not the most shocking thing about her.

In the middle of her forehead was a thin lightning–bolt shaped scar.

"Well, look who it is," sneered Malfoy. "The *Slut–Who–Lived*."

## ~~~~ Chapter II ~~~~

### Retracing Steps Never Taken

**"I remember that I am here,  
Not because of the path that lies before me,  
But because of the path that lies behind me."**

#### ~ Morpheus (Laurence Fishbourne) – The Matrix: Reloaded

"Did he say an...y...thing?" Katie asked Ron the next morning, an involuntary yawn breaking up the last word. She had not had much sleep last night.

Shaking the tiredness from her mind, Katie repeated the question. The two of them were sitting with Hermione and Neville by the fireplace in the common room, waiting for Ginny to join them so they could all go to breakfast together. The topic of conversation, naturally, was Harry Potter.

Word of his reappearance the previous evening had spread like lightning, and although Katie had been up in her room at the time, it hadn't taken her long to find out.

It had been the beginning of December when Professor Riddle had announced to the whole school that Harry Potter had been killed in a fire at St Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries. He had been visiting his parents at the time, when a fire had started in the Long Term Ward. By all accounts, Harry had been trapped. The whole Potter family had been wiped out and no one even knew what caused the fire.

*Poor Harry.* Katie had found out last year why Harry's parents had been in the Long Term Ward. In the confusion after the Dark Lord had fallen, the Lestranges and Barty Crouch Junior had captured the Potters, believing them to know what had happened to the Dark Lord. They had tortured the Potters for hours until their brains had turned to mush. Following the fire in St Mungo's, their names had been engraved on a golden plaque in the newly refurbished Long Term Ward – a tiny token to the memories of two fallen heroes.

Katie couldn't imagine what it must have been like for Harry to visit his own parents and not have them recognise him, to be completely unable to communicate with them. He must have felt so alone. With them in hospital, he had gone to live with his aunt and uncle, who, by all accounts, were very anti-magic. It was no wonder that the boy had no confidence. Luckily Neville and Ron, whom he had met on the train to Hogwarts, had taken him under their wings, and they in turn had befriended Katie, a second year at the time.

Katie's dorm mates were somewhat...dull, to put it mildly. They had never really been her friends, and as such she had had a rather miserable first year. After five years of living with them, she knew what they were all about: men, makeup, and marriage plans. Not that Katie was by any means a tomboy; she just 'had a level head', as Neville phrased it. She wasn't an 'airhead', or a 'plank' which Neville also used frequently, and she did not consider herself 'bubbly' which was also a good thing, because according to the boys, bubbly translated into guy-talk as 'loud and annoying'. As such, Katie had become closer to a group of first years than she had people her own age. But poor Harry had always been a little on the edge of the group, a bit left out, though he had stood by her – until his death of course.

But then he had reappeared last night with apparently no explanation. He had died - McGonagall had been there. And yet here he was, alive and apparently unharmed. According to Ron, his mind was somewhat messed up, or to use Ron's words, his 'cheese had slid off his cracker'. What kind of state would the poor boy be in now?

Katie had long tried to protect him, taking pity on him. He was friends with her circle of friends and so they had looked out for him, though there had been a line. There were many secrets that they had not shared with Harry. The boy's clumsiness and inability to stand up to people made him hard to trust with secrets. As such, he had never been in the inner-circle.

Harry had also fallen afoul of old Slughorn. The Potions Master was the kind of person who, if you were rich, famous, or influential, wanted you in his class. If not, you were a nobody. He was Head of Slytherin House, though surprisingly, he was not against Muggleborns attending Hogwarts, nor a genuinely bad man. However, favouritism was the most prominent of his

character flaws. Poor Harry had always failed to match up to Slugger's expectations. Slughorn was always quite condescending towards Harry in lessons, according to Ron and Hermione. He had once invited Harry to join the 'Slug-Club' as it was affectionately referred to, due to the fact that his mother and father had been powerful in their day, but sadly Harry had inherited none of it. As such, he had been cast out, or more specifically, his invite to following meetings must have mysteriously gotten lost in the mail.

Now the poor boy was back, and if his mind was on the fritz, he would now need more help than ever, especially given the current environment in the school.

Katie had not seen him herself, but according to the others, he had come in through the portrait hole last night, dressed all in black, and covered in mud, grass, leaves, and all sorts. He had seemed distant as he mumbled some story about Muggle hospitals and then disappeared up the stairs, refusing to speak to anyone. According to Ron, his bed was now empty, so he must already be up and about. She had to find him, had to talk to the poor boy before someone else found him.

"...hardly a word," Ron was saying to Hermione. "He practically ignored us. I tell you, there was something in those eyes of his. He is one messed up boy." Were it not for her basic knowledge of Occlumency, she would not have believed anything could be told by looking into a person's eyes. Having said that, she hardly thought Ron was an expert on the matters of the mind.

"Where is he now?" asked Katie, perching on the arm of Hermione's chair.

"No idea," said Hermione, shrugging.

"He's not upstairs," said Ron unhelpfully. "His trunk is open, so I guess he got changed and went out. I didn't hear the shower going, so..."

"You could sleep through Goyle's trombone practice," said Ginny, arriving in the common room from the dorms, her hair still wet from the shower. Goyle had been asked in a lesson the previous week to transfigure a brick into a musical instrument. He had finally managed it but then McGonagall had asked him to try and play it. The sound had not been tuneful.

"Good point," added Neville, earning a playful smack from Ron. "Do you reckon Goyle does requests?"

"So none of you have seen him?" asked Katie, interrupting the conversation. Her patience was wearing thin. Her lack of sleep had made her ratty.

"Nope," said Ron. "Probably gone to brekky."

"Are you looking for Harry Potter?" asked a voice, causing them all to look up. A young girl had come back in from outside.

"Have you seen him?" asked Katie.

"Yeah," said the first year. "He was heading down through the Entrance Hall when I passed him, though he didn't see me. Looked like was going running."

"Running?" echoed Neville, chuckling slightly. "Are you sure?" he asked, grinning.

The girl nodded. "Positive."

"The guy doesn't do exercise," said Neville, turning back to Katie. "Even Quidditch is beyond him – what the hell is he doing running?"

"No idea," said Hermione, shaking her head. "But to be fair, from what I saw last night, I'd say running was not out of the question." She exchanged a cheeky wink with Ginny, who nodded.

"I'll see if I can find him," said Katie, rising from her chair. "See you later. We're still on for tonight, don't forget."

"I'll come with you," said Neville, also standing.

"Okay," said Katie, waiting for him. Neither of them were wearing their uniforms. Both wore jeans, and Katie had a green woolly jumper over the top of her t-shirt, while Neville wore a black fleece and woolly hat. They left the common room and headed down towards the Entrance Hall where Harry had last been seen. She kept her eyes peeled on the way down for any sign of Harry.

She walked swiftly down the stairs and out into the Entrance Hall. Both she and Neville paused as they arrived. They were too late. Harry stood just outside the main doors, his path blocked by Malfoy and his two gormless apes. He wore oversized tracksuit bottoms, a white polo shirt, trainers and a bandana around his forehead so that he looked like a cross between Rambo and Ali G.

Katie sighed in frustration, before raising her voice. "BACK OFF MALFOY!"

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"Well look who it is," sneered Malfoy. "The *Slut-Who-Lived*."

The look plastered on his face was the same one Harry had seen directed at him time after time. He must really hate Katie in this world. Harry turned to face the girl as she approached. She marched with a more aggressive, confident stride than he had seen her. Her blonde hair was tied up in a ponytail and her brilliant blue eyes seemed to twinkle in the morning light as she walked. Harry's heart nearly missed a beat as he noticed the thin lightning-bolt-shaped scar on her forehead. *Slut-Who-Lived*?

*You've got to be kidding*, thought Harry.

Was it possible that in this world, he wasn't the Boy Who Lived? Was it possible that here, it was not *his* fate to suffer?

*BRILLIANT!*

He didn't have Voldemort, or whatever Dark Lord Riddle was on about, trying to kill him. He could do his research and find the key in peace. He didn't have to worry about fighting wars, being killed and all that hassle. His happiness must have shown.

"Wipe that stupid grin off your face, Potter," snapped Malfoy.

"Wipe the mascara off yours," snapped Harry, continuing to grin. His grin widened as Malfoy's eyebrows shot up at Harry's retort. Surprise was etched into his face. He clearly hadn't been expecting Harry to respond. This only improved his mood.

*I don't have to fight!* The thought repeated over and over in his mind. No more curses, explosions, blades, Dark Lords, masks, blood, sweat, tears, screams, or anything else that he had suffered these past few months. He was free. He could be out of here sooner than he thought if he didn't have to worry about being killed at every turn. It was Katie's problem now - let her deal with it. He felt like a quick victory dance, but this was hardly the time.

"Since when have you been the gobby type?" sneered Malfoy, recovering his composure.

"I..." began Harry. He stopped short when it occurred to him that he didn't know his own past here. This time he had travelled 'the conventional way', as Flamel had phrased it. He had not possessed someone else. He had retained his strong body, and both Harrys' skills and instincts. He was the same person physically and mentally as he had been in Rose's world, right down to his phoenix Animagus form. He made a mental note to do a few transformations that evening to avoid the aches returning. That still left him with the problem of not knowing his past in this world. If he wasn't the Boy-Who-Lived, and Katie was, then who was he? Did Malfoy expect him to be weak and pathetic? If so, it was better to appear that way than to arouse suspicion.

"You're what?" asked Malfoy, in a baby voice similar to the one so frequently used by his demented aunt. "Is ickle baby Potter gowing to cwyt?"

"Shut up Malfoy!" snapped Katie.

"I wasn't talking to you, you filthy whore," snapped Malfoy, pulling his wand free from his robes. As the wand came level, Harry caught Malfoy's arm on pure instinct. His hand clamped over the Slytherin's wrist and held him firmly in place. Harry had been reluctant to get involved, but his instinct had overruled his conscious mind and acted to protect an innocent. As a result, he now held the Slytherin's wrist. He was committed to this confrontation now; people had seen that he was not a welp. There was no point pulling out - he might as well give Malfoy a warning.

"That's no way to speak to a lady," said Harry hotly. This Malfoy was even nastier than the one he knew, in fact, nastier than both the Draco Malfoys he knew. Didn't he know that a gentleman should never hit a lady? "I've had a long journey and I don't have the patience to deal with spoilt baby Slytherins, so why don't you, Tweedle-Dum and Tweedle-Dee sod off back to Wonderland and we can all have some breakfast." Harry released the blond's wrist, pushing it downwards towards his side.

Malfoy gaped a few times in shock. Clearly the Harry of this world was not one to stand up to Malfoy. Considering how influential Malfoy had once been, and if his father was on the board of directors here, Malfoy may have a lot of power here. To be safe, Harry decided that in future he had better tone down his character a little.

"You'll regret this, Potter," sneered Malfoy before stalking off, his cronies following in his wake.

Harry watched him go, his mind already reacting. So he was weak in this world, more so than in his home world. He would need to tone down his magic, lose some duels in Defence and generally be a slob. Still, if he put less effort into work, it meant more time on his research. However, this encounter had shown that he was out of his depth. From what he had seen, this world was very strange. He was dead, Riddle was headmaster and someone else had been marked with the infamous scar. Where the hell did he fit in?

On the bright side, he noted, if he was not the 'Chosen One' here, it meant he could concentrate on other things, i.e. escaping this world, and let this war rage on in peace, though that was probably not the best choice of words. Come to think of it, he didn't even know if they were still at war. Security was lax enough for this to be peace time.

"Harry?" said Katie slowly, after Malfoy had gone. Her brow was furrowed in thought as she regarded him cautiously. She hesitated. Harry turned to look at her, his eyes scanning her appraisingly. She wore trainers, jeans and a jumper, with her hair tied back with a clip. Her hay-coloured hair was ever so slightly highlighted by the sun, and her eyes sparkled for the same reason. His eyes scanned her scar, and he was grateful he had put on a bandana before going running as it now concealed his own. Her jaw tightened slightly in frustration as his eyes predictably scanned her forehead. He knew it to be frustrating and so didn't comment. Behind her eyes was a powerful stare, and he could see her mind working. *Oops*. In standing up to Malfoy, he had really made her suspicious.

"I don't mean to sound like Malfoy, but since when have you been the gobby type?" she asked.

Harry needed to tone it down, perhaps blame it on anger and frustration from having had his parents killed and then spending nearly a month in a Muggle hospital.

Harry fixed her with a piercing stare, his eyes boring into hers. She didn't look particularly comfortable and shifted from one foot to the other.

"Don't get me wrong," she quickly added. "It's good you're standing up to him at last, but I was just a little...surprised." She still seemed suspicious, and if she were anything like him, her curiosity would not permit her to stop nosing around until she found out why.

"So was he," Harry replied calmly, working out how to phrase his reply in his head. "But there is only so much a person can take before he snaps. I've had enough, I've put up with too much and I just lost control, right? Sorry." He sidestepped her and started walking off towards the stairs, his head hung low as if ashamed. Annoyingly, Katie fell into step beside him, with Neville on Harry's other side. They walked for a few seconds in silence before Katie spoke again.

"You've lost weight," she said, clearly trying to make small talk before asking the most obvious question. Harry kept his eyes straight ahead. He hadn't been expecting that particular question, but it wasn't hard to think of an answer.

"Spending a month comatose on an IV drip will do that to you," said Harry. "Not to mention the physiotherapy afterwards."

"An 'I'—what?" asked Neville.

"IV," answered Harry. "Liquid diet – ask Hermione."

It seemed that this little distraction was more than Katie's patience could take and she blurted out the question:

"Harry," she said. "What happened to you?" It was the question he knew he would be asked a hundred times a day, and so he had rehearsed his story, though to be honest, he didn't want to talk about it.

"I told Neville last night," said Harry absently, starting to climb the stairs. His t-shirt stuck to his skin as he moved. He really needed a shower. He could have a shower, get dressed, have something to eat and then it was definitely time to hit the books. Hopefully he could find the clues that had led Flamel to find the key, but this world's key may be hidden in a different place.

*However, first things first – let's start where Flamel had,* he thought. He needed to track down the equivalent book from this world. This would be a little more complicated than he would first have assumed, as he had no experience with translation charms.

"...for that matter."

Harry was suddenly aware that Katie had been speaking again. He stared at her blankly, obviously not having heard a word.

"Sorry, what?"

"I said, that can't be it," said Katie. "Surely Riddle would have found you if you were in a Muggle hospital, or the Ministry for that matter."

"Riddle doesn't care," said Harry icily. Didn't she see that he was a scumbag? He wouldn't put himself out to look for a student, especially one as weak and feeble as Harry. No, he would only look for someone who was of value to him. "And the Ministry couldn't find snow in the middle of winter," he added, to get it off his chest.

"What's with the sudden hatred for Riddle?" asked Neville. "I mean, I agree about the Ministry – they've been shocking this year; but I thought you and Riddle got on well."

"Things change," said Harry, noting that that was how he used to be. "Being left alone for a month with strangers sticking needles in you kind of puts the world into perspective." This was becoming dangerous. They were discovering more differences, and he definitely had to hide his

scar now. The longer he stayed, the deeper the hole he was digging himself into. He had to get out of here. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm a tad on the smelly side and I need a shower."

"Are you going to be alright?" asked Katie, concern etched into her face.

"I can walk up to the Tower on my own," said Harry bluntly. He had to keep up the persona; he couldn't afford to become attached.

"Malfoy will be out for revenge," said Neville.

"I can handle Malfoy," said Harry absently.

"I know your memory is a little wonky," said Neville. "In case you can't remember, Malfoy has a lot of influence thanks to his father. He can get away with anything."

"Then it should be interesting," said Harry. "Good day to you."

Harry turned on his heel and marched away, determined not to look back. He would not become attached; he would leave as soon as he had the key.

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Katie watched Harry walk off along the corridor, heading for the stairs. He walked delicately, probably due to his muscles being tired and achy from his run. He raised an arm to wipe with sweat on his face away with his sleeve, but he never looked back. His whole poise was very... out of character. She wouldn't have described him as head-held-high, but there was a feel about him. It wasn't exactly confidence, for he seemed neither cocky nor outgoing. The only word she could think of to describe him was 'arrogant'. Not arrogance in the sense of boasting, or thinking he was the centre of the universe and everyone else is inferior, but arrogance in the sense that he didn't seem to care what other people thought. His tone wasn't patronising, but Katie got the distinct impression that Harry thought she was...again words escaped her. Not an inconvenience, but he seemed to be polite in that he had to live with her and Neville in Gryffindor, but he didn't need or want their help or friendship.

The conversation had been in some ways very enlightening, and in others, completely the opposite. She hadn't found out where he had been or what had happened, but she had found out something about him. This Harry was more confident than before, and a very cool customer. Were it not for the fact that she knew his magical ability was...limited, she might even have felt a glimmer of fear. Oh well, the boy had to grow up some time and start acting like a man. If it was true what he had told Neville last night, and he had been comatose in Muggle London, well, that shock might do it. Being alone and surrounded by strange people after a near death experience and those loss of his entire family would have changed his perceptions. Maybe the shock and horror had woken Harry up, and that would be a good thing, right?

"Well that went well," said Neville beside her, removing his beanie to scratch his head.

"This isn't the time for sarcasm," said Katie, her temper quickly rising. She was on edge enough at the moment, without having sarcasm to deal with.

"Okay, okay, take a chill pill," said Neville quickly. "I was right though, wasn't I? He is definitely different."

"Being alone in Muggle London would have caused anyone to grow up," said Katie.

"Which is good, isn't it?" added Neville. "We don't need to watch out for him, and Malfoy won't be as...well, actually, he will want revenge for his loss of face, but Harry might be able to deal with it on his own. Still, Malfoy isn't the real problem, is he?"

"That's what I'm worried about," said Katie. Neville had taken the words right out of her mouth. The old bat would come down on him like a tonne of bricks if she thought him to be too weak. She had been vicious enough before he had disappeared, and if Harry's mind was all over the place, the next few weeks would not be pleasant for him.

"You reckon he can take it?"

"He seemed...not distant, but preoccupied," said Katie, playing the conversation over again in her head. "But he is definitely hiding something. I want to know is where he's been. Why won't he talk about it? He's known us long enough."

"Maybe it's too painful," suggested Neville. "You don't like talking about your parents."

"Maybe," said Katie. She knew that logically he was right, but there was dark feeling in the pit of her stomach that she couldn't shake. "But I've just got this feeling that there's something about him he isn't telling us. I don't trust him."

"It's Harry Potter," said Neville, almost laughing. "What could he possibly do?"

"Blow the whistle on us," said Katie, her face serious. This was anything but a laughing matter.

"He doesn't know what's going on, does he?" said Neville, becoming serious once more. "He was never invited."

"No," said Katie in agreement. "He wasn't, and let's keep it that way. Until we know exactly what is going on with him, not a word."

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Tom Riddle watched the Potter–Malfoy exchange with interest. He knew for a fact that the boy had died and yet now he was back, right as rain, but so different. In truth, Riddle was stumped about Harry. The boy was a walking, talking contradiction. He raised so many questions; questions that in turn made Tom question his own beliefs. If only he were wiser, he might see what was missing. *Albus would have known*, he thought sadly. *Albus would know what to do*. Tom's thoughts strayed to his mentor. Why oh why couldn't he have lived?

No. What was done was done. Tom pushed the thought of Albus aside. It had been fifty years ago, he needed to concentrate on the present. The climate in the school was changing, and he needed to keep the peace. With all that was happening, both publicly and behind the scenes, Tom

felt more stretched than ever before. He felt so tired - it was finally catching up with him. He had so much to worry about, both inside and outside of the school, and Harry Potter was definitely on his list, but how high?

Was the change in persona of one student who until now had nothing to do with current events, really so important? Were it not for the weapons he had carried when he arrived and his ability to block his mind, Tom would have said no, but there was something distinctly odd about Harry Potter. It was in everything from his slight, but noticeable weight-loss, to the way he now carried himself as he walked. He seemed so different.

He was definitely a concern, and he was not the only one in the school. Draco Malfoy was a prime example.

The boy's father had once been a Death Eater, though the charges hadn't been dropped. That was fifteen years ago. These days, officially he was a well-respected and law-abiding man and a member of the board of governors, though Tom had his suspicions that Lucius had not truly renounced his dark past. He was not the only one. Fifteen years ago, there were others who had been released, claiming bewitchment or duress. The sons and daughters of those former Death Eaters walked these corridors even today; sadly, it was always the Slytherins.

Tom had been a Slytherin; in fact he was even the *heir* of Slytherin. In his veins flowed the blood of the founder, but few people knew, of course. While it was his right to run the school, he did not want the bad image of being descended from a Dark Lord, nor to seem as though he was demanding power based on his heritage. Ironically, when he had been at school, the bitter and twisted little orphan with a passion for power, he had used his heritage to gain respect. He had paraded it amongst his closest friends. These days, he kept it hidden. Oh, how much he had changed. *Thank you, Albus.*

Even in Tom's day, Slytherin had been far from popular - on reflection, this may have been mostly Tom's fault. Through the years, the tension between Slytherin and the other houses had grown and grown. Now with most of the Slytherins' parents having been accused of being Death Eaters, the house was more feared than despised though it was a volatile mixture of both. Draco Malfoy above all strutted around as if he owned the place. He was feared for his father's influence. Potter had embarrassed the Slytherin, and the little snake would not let that go. Tom's thoughts turned to the other boy.

Harry Potter. The boy was nice enough, if lacking in confidence. He was friendly and his heart was in the right place. He was just one of those people for whom everything seems to go wrong. He was a little clumsy and his grades were a little below average. He had had a hard life, having lost his parents to a fate worse than death at less than one year old. He lived with his aunt and uncle in Surrey, a couple that did not embrace magic as something to be cherished and nurtured.

All this Tom knew to be true, but that was not what he had just seen. Potter had stood up for himself and made the sharp-tongued Slytherin look like a fool. He would never have done anything like that before. He had been gone for nearly a month. What on earth had happened to him? Tom could see that he was holding something back. Whatever he claimed, Harry *did*

remember something, but he wouldn't say what it was. Why was he hiding it? Shame? Fear? Guilt? Tom could not get rid of the feeling that it was something more, something darker.

Should Tom Legilimise Harry? No. the boy had Occluded his mind when Tom had tried before. Someone had taught him Occlumency – the boy would feel Tom's attempt, and there was no telling how he would react. Tom also noted that learning Occlumency was not a side-effect of a coma. Where had he learned it? Who had taught him? Why wouldn't he say? So many questions! Tom knew that the best course of action was to befriend Harry and have him share the information voluntarily. How – that was the big question. Whatever method he tried, it would take time.

But what if he was hiding something dangerous? One boy's privacy should not outweigh the lives of all the innocent students around him. Should Tom force it out of him? No – it was the wrong thing to do. Albus would never have done so. Tom resolved to find out what was wrong with Harry Potter - he would just take a subtler approach. *In fact*, he mused, eyeing the girl who had been talking to Harry. *It might be better if it were not I who asked him.* He made a mental note to ask Minerva to subtly encourage the girl's suspicions.

However, before he started plotting and scheming, Tom had official business to take care of. Tom went into the Great Hall via the back way to avoid the students. He disliked the way that all chatter seemed to stop as he entered a room. Sitting at the head table, Tom watched those who remained in the school arrive for breakfast. At the Slytherin table, Malfoy was shooting daggers over at the Gryffindor table and then at the door, presumably intended for one young Gryffindor who was not present. The boy himself had not yet arrived and Tom assumed he had gone up to the Tower for a shower. Potter definitely seemed more confident, more calm today. Still, it was better to announce him to the school, rather than let him walk in here unprepared.

"Your attention please," called Riddle when he felt the hall was full enough. Of the fifty or so students still here for Christmas, over forty were in the Hall. "So you are all aware, the notice you were given a month ago about the death of Harry Potter was inaccurate. Mr Potter is alive and well and will be joining you later today. This has been a tough time for him and he is not fully healed, so please give him space. Thank you."

There was a fair amount of muttering from the students who had stayed for Christmas, nineteen of whom came from Gryffindor. They immediately began to discuss the news, Longbottom and Bell taking the lead as they had met him since his return. Not feeling the least bit hungry, Tom decided to return to his office. He had some work to do, and he planned to begin his searches of Muggle Hospitals. Tom would find out where Harry had been, if only to get an accurate diagnosis of what kind of mental state he was in, but hopefully a lot more than that.

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Harry knocked on the door to the Hospital Wing at ten minutes past ten. He had had a shower and then breakfast as planned.

While he was eating, Neville had informed him that Riddle would expect him in the Hospital Wing at ten o'clock. Harry was in no hurry and didn't care if he kept Riddle waiting, so he had

had a long, drawn out breakfast of croissants and tea. As he had expected, the hall had fallen utterly silent when he had entered, so he had quickly taken a seat at the Gryffindor table, but several feet away from anyone else. Looking around, everyone had seemed to be staring at him, even those few teachers who had remained. McGonagall in particular had been staring at him with an expression he could not read. Malfoy had already up and left the hall, and the Slytherin table held only a pair of second years.

Once he had finished, Harry had made his way slowly up the stairs to the Hospital Wing, his mind miles away. He had promised Riddle that he would attend this meeting, though he didn't like having to do so. On reflection, there was nothing Pomfrey could get from him that didn't match the other Harry, however he still felt nervous. DNA, fingerprint, magical signature, even the Marauder's Map – wherever it was – would identify him as Harry Potter. Still, he resented the idea of being studied like a lab rat, though he would feel no pity if Peter Pettigrew was put in a cage and experimented upon.

He thrust the thought aside as he arrived. He had elected to wear a woolen beanie hat in addition to his oversized jeans and hooded jumper; both of which were still marked 'DD'. It was cold enough to warrant such a hat, and it certainly helped to hide his scar. He hoped he wouldn't be asked to take it off. Riddle must not see that scar.

Harry raised his hand and knocked on the hospital door. A voice replied from the other side of the door beckoning him in. Harry pushed open the door and stepped inside, his body instantly tensing at the sight of Tom Riddle.

The man stood to the right, next to Madam Pomfrey, who was seated behind her desk, a cup of tea and a plate with a buttered scone on it were on top of the desk along with a copy of the *Prophet*, which she appeared to have been reading. She looked up as Harry entered, but made no move to clear anything away or even fold the paper. She hardly seemed like she had been working, noted Harry. Probably just chatting with Riddle.

"Anything interesting?" asked Harry, trying to keep the conversation light and irrelevant.

"Absolutely nothing," replied Riddle. "Unless you count Mrs Agatha Dimpleton winning first place in the West Hampshire gnome throwing competition to be of great significance."

Harry shook his head. He took the opportunity to do a quick sweep of the room. There was nothing out of place and the beds were all empty.

"So..." he said, trying to force a smile and hide his nerves.

"Right you are," said Madam Pomfrey, rising from her chair and pushing the last of the scone into her mouth. "Sit up on the bed, please, Potter," she said once she had finished.

Obediently, Harry sat on the bed, his legs swinging beneath him. His wand was stashed up his left sleeve and his hands were in his lap, together, where he could get at his wand very quickly and very easily. He had felt it was better to err on the side of caution.

"I shall leave you to it," said Riddle, excusing himself. He left quickly and Harry relaxed slightly.

"Do you have any lasting injuries?" she asked, eying him carefully and picking up her wand from the desk.

"No," said Harry. "Everything I got from the fire has been healed. A few scars here and there from debris, but I'm fine." Madam Pomfrey lowered her wand to near his feet. The tip began to glow blue and she moved it slowly upwards, keeping it six inches from his body. At length she reached his head.

"No broken bones or fractures," she said aloud. "Hand." Harry extended his hand and she lowered her wand to it. There was a tingling sensation and a few drops of blood seeped out through his skin. Madam Pomfrey scooped the small sample into a phial and put a cork in the end. She placed the phial on her desk. Harry stared at it, knowing full well what it could mean. From that Riddle could check his DNA, his magic and only God knew what else. Harry was sure that he was safe, but there was a nagging doubt in the back of his mind that Riddle might be able to get something from his blood. He pushed the worry aside - it was nothing but paranoia.

Unfortunately, blood was only the beginning.

"Right," said Madam Pomfrey. "Get them off."

"What?" said Harry, his jaw dropping. Did he just have a filthy mind or did she mean...?

"Your clothes, take them off," she repeated. Harry didn't know what to say. He opened his mouth to protest, and stood gaping like a goldfish. There was no way he was getting naked for this woman!

"Oh, for Merlin's sake, Potter," she said impatiently. "Get over your embarrassment and take them off, we don't have all day. It's nothing I haven't seen before."

Harry opened his mouth to ask her when she had seen him naked before, but then realised she was speaking generally, or at least, he hoped she was.

"You mean...?" he said, unable to form proper sentences.

"Oh, not all the way, boy," she said rolling her eyes. "Just down to your underwear. Organic fabric, like the wool in your clothes, gets in the way of some more sensitive spells." Taking a deep breath, Harry pulled his jumper up over his head. He kicked off his shoes and, undoing his belt, dropped his trousers, all the while feeling blood creeping to his head. He was blushing and he knew it.

A cool breeze brushed lightly over his skin and he felt goosebumps rise. He stared over Pomfrey's head, staring at a spot on the wall, trying not to focus on his nakedness. Oh, this was awkward. He was so glad Riddle had left. He looked around the room, glancing at the clock, wishing it were over.

Pomfrey on the other hand, acted as though she had all the time in the world. Harry felt a shiver run down his spine as he saw a box of latex gloves. He gulped. Surely not! She tried anything like that and he'd do a runner, Riddle be damned. Harry stood there, almost naked, his arms crossed over his chest, while one extended past his stomach and below his waist, blocking prying eyes. It didn't alleviate the awkwardness of the moment. *Give me a Dark Lord any day*, thought Harry, *just as long as I am not in my birthday suit*.

Harry managed to get his composure back. He realised his heart was pounding, and so took a few deep breaths in an effort to calm himself.

"Right," said Pomfrey, looking him up and down. "Oh, Potter, really, take the hat off, it's not that cold."

"Alright for you to say," said Harry before he had time to think. "Your not in the buff!" She shot him a cold stare, which clearly said 'we are not amused'.

This presented Harry with a problem, if he removed the hat, it would reveal his scar. If he raised a hand to cover it, he could expose something else that wasn't meant for prying eyes. God, he hoped no one walked in at this moment.

Harry took a deep breath, and swallowing his pride, he raised his right hand, and pulled off his hat. He turned as he did to hide his forehead. When he turned back, he brushed his hair forward with his hand, but knew it would not cover the scar. He was forced to keep one hand up there, as if feigning a headache. The trouble was that as a Healer, she could cure the headache in seconds and insist on his arm being moved. He mustn't play it up too much.

Harry stood in the middle of a freezing Hospital Wing, wearing just blue socks and a pair of black boxers, which were a little big and looked like they were about to fall apart. He had one hand on his forehead, the other failing to block the view of his boxers. If it were happening to someone else, it would be laughable.

Pomfrey started to move the wand again, the tip glowing green this time, as it passed near his body.

"Basic toxicology," said Pomfrey to herself, as she made notes. "Negative."

"Before we go on, Potter," she said, fixing him with a piercing stare that made Harry gulp. She knew something was wrong. What had she discovered?

"Where did you get that scar?"

Has she seen it? Had he not covered it? God damn it, he was up the creek now. Riddle would know that he was not their Harry. He would have to leave, go into hiding until he managed to find a way home. He could live...in that cave Sirius had, and steal food in Phoenix form. *The Thieving Phoenix* would make the headlines for out-of-character behaviour, but never mind. Harry just knew that he could never let Riddle know how he was. If Riddle found the Node...it didn't bear thinking about.

"If I didn't know better," said Pomfrey suspiciously, "I would say that it was a stab wound, and it looks deep."

"What?" asked Harry. His scar didn't look like a stab-wound. His confusion must have shown, for she gestured to his shoulder.

Frank Longbottom had once run the Dark Knight through, shattering his collar bone in the process. Harry still carried the scar.

"And as for those," she continued. He had two lines across his stomach, where a young Auror had cut him with his own sword in a dingy basement in Little Hangleton. "They look like cuts with a blade.

"Err..." stammered Harry, thinking quickly. "Well, I'd have thought it was obvious."

She raised an eyebrow.

"I was caught in an explosion at St Mungo's. Flying debris. The cuts on my stomach are surgical, from the Muggles. They said they had to operate while I was unconscious." She looked sceptical. Harry swallowed hard. What if she didn't believe him? What if she knew he was lying? What if she told Riddle? Luckily, after a few seconds, she spoke.

"Butchers," scoffed Pomfrey. She shook her head and turned her attention back to her wand. She seemed to accept His story. She did her traditional "tut tut" at a few of his other scars, but then went back to her tests. Harry breathed a sigh of relief. That had been close!

Over the next half hour Madam Pomfrey carried out all sorts of tests. Some involved her scanning him with a wand, the more embarrassing ones included a urine sample. She also did the basic reflex and sensitivity tests. Having a nurse prodding and poking his almost naked body was not as enjoyable an experience as he had been led to believe, not this nurse anyway.

It was quarter to eleven when, fully dressed once more, Harry sat back down and the psychological evaluation began. Pomfrey had already tested his body, his senses and then his reflexes, and was sure his nervous system was working, but now it was time to evaluate his mind. She had had him cast a spell which created a small ball of light by his head, which changed colour to reflect his emotions. She had then shown him various photos and gauged his emotional reaction to the stimuli. The photos ranged from childhood photos and cute animals to dead bodies, Death Eaters, and other gory pictures. With each one, Madam Pomfrey made her customary 'Hmmm'.

"Well, your tolerance to violent images and death is a little high, but you're not a psychopath," she noted.

"Glad to hear it," muttered Harry, a little more truthfully than she was aware.

"That would come from witnessing what you have seen," she said. Harry froze – how could she know what he had seen? "Near-death experiences tend to have similar effects, and the fire certainly counts as that." Harry breathed a sigh of relief, but kept his face set.

She then began a line of questioning based on his past, testing for his reactions. Harry remained as dead-pan as possible, earning many 'hmmm's along the way.

She went on to basic maths and reasoning problems. Harry wasn't sure why an IQ test was necessary, but he didn't complain. At least he wasn't naked. It was midday by the time she finished. Riddle returned just as they were finishing.

"All done?" he asked politely as he entered.

"Yes," said Madam Pomfrey, much to Harry's relief. "Rest assured, headmaster, the boy is in perfect health. Physically, he has souvenirs of the fire, but no lasting damage. Psychologically, he seems fine, but I believe he may still be in shock, hence the more aggressive persona than we are used to. I recommend—" Harry gritted his teeth, knowing what was coming. "—that he rest for a few days. Only time can cure shock."

Riddle glanced from Madam Pomfrey to Harry, who quickly shook his head. Riddle had better honour his side of the deal, – Harry would turn up for the exam and Riddle would not make him stay here to rest.

Riddle turned back to Pomfrey, "Since lessons have not started yet," he said politely, "I see no harm in Harry being allowed to return to the population."

"But..." protested Madam Pomfrey.

"As a sixth year, Harry is mature enough to alert someone if something is wrong, am I right, Harry?" Harry nodded, thankful that Riddle had kept his end of the bargain. Harry jumped to his feet before Madam Pomfrey could object. He was out the door before another word could be uttered.

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In fact, Harry didn't stop running until he was almost to the Fat Lady. It was New Year's Day and the common room was subdued, possibly due to the fact that a few of the elder students may have had a cheeky drink the night before. Harry wasn't bothered - he had bigger things to worry about than a few hangovers.

He collapsed into a chair by the fire and sprawled out, staring into the flames. He was relieved that he had gotten away with the examination this morning, but only just. His blood shouldn't reveal anything unusual and no one had seen his scar. The whole episode had been demeaning and degrading, but at least he only had to go through it once. It was over now, and with a bit of luck he would never again have to set foot in the Hospital Wing during his time here.

He lay for a few moments letting his heart slow after having run up all those stairs. He gazed absently across at the window and the grey sky outside. Harry began to consider what he knew about this world. He had already had some near misses when it came to not knowing basic information about this world. He had no wish to make Riddle or Katie more suspicious.

*Right,* said Harry to himself. *What do I know for sure?*

He knew that Katie Bell was the Chosen One. Riddle had said that the Dark Lord had fallen because of her. Did Harry assume it had happened along the same lines as his own conflict with Voldemort? It was too much to assume - he would have to find out somehow.

But what of Harry's own past? Harry's parents had been cursed just like the Longbottoms back home. Harry felt no real sadness at the loss of his parents, only regret that anyone had suffered that fate. He had his own family and his own friends spread across two worlds. He wasn't seeking to collect families. He apparently lived with the Dursleys here, but he aimed to be gone long before the end of the summer term so would never have to deal with them. On the whole, he seemed to be pretty obligation-free. He was friends with the Gryffindors, but they didn't seem that close. No matter - fewer distractions meant he could be gone quicker.

His thoughts returned to the Dark Lord, or rather, the lack thereof. Given that Riddle had told him in the past tense that the Dark Lord had fallen and given the state of security, it seemed that the war was over. With no Dark Lord and no security people checking on him every few minutes he could research in peace. No Dark Lord made his life so much easier. Harry wondered what a world with no Dark Lord would be like. He wondered what it would be like to be truly without fear. Not having to look over his shoulder. It would be nice, but ultimately, it was not the place for him. With luck, he could return home, and bring that kind of peace to his own world.

One thought occurred to him, though. If Katie was indeed the *Girl-Who-Lived* - Harry smirked at the name - then, given what he knew about this world, she seemed to have had a much easier time than he had. Voldemort had risen from the grave in his world, but here there was no sign of this having happened. *Ah*, said a nasty voice in his head. *But if she is the same as you, then the Dark Lord is not truly gone.*

If this world was a reflection of his own, then surely the Dark Lord was still alive. However, given that Riddle didn't seem to be on alert and the castle had next to no security, the Dark Lord couldn't have risen again. Anyway, Harry would be long gone by the time he did - Harry didn't consider it to be a problem. This wasn't his world; it wasn't his fight. Let Katie and Riddle deal with it.

But Harry's curiosity had gotten the better of him. Was there a Dark Lord or not? Was he dead? What had happened? He needed to know roughly what was happening if he was to blend in with this world during his time here. Riddle had been suspicious when he had not known about his parents. His fib about his memory seemed to have worked, but it was supposed to be coming back. If he didn't know about the Dark Lord, it would arouse suspicion.

On a related note - who the hell was the Dark Lord? Riddle was here, so it couldn't be Voldemort. Who on Earth could it be?

It was this thought that led Harry down to the History of Magic classroom after lunch that day. Binns taught lessons, but he was also a researcher. The ghost apparently spent his holidays in archives, and still published books, despite the fact that he was dead. He would be the most knowledgeable person to ask, or at least the safest.

The gloomy room seemed more alive when it was empty than it was when full. The sun poured in through the windows, highlighting the dust in the air. The room was in utter silence.

What if Binns wasn't in his office? Where would a ghost go for its holidays? Charter a ghost ship through the Bermuda triangle? Harry entered the room and crossed to the door that led to the History office. He knocked on the door, which rattled noisily. The door was hardly ever used, as Binns normally floated through it as he entered the classroom, droning on in his monotone about goblin rebellions. Flamel had been a considerable improvement to Binns.

There was no answer, so Harry knocked again. He waited another ten seconds before twisting the handle and entering the office. As he had feared, it was deserted. Dusty books lined the shelves and the only movement in the room was the shadows of trees blowing in the wind outside the window.

Harry cursed under his breath. He made a note to come and speak to Binns as soon as he returned.

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As it turned out, it was another week before Binns did return. Harry spent most of the week trying to avoid people. While he had no direct contact with Riddle, he had a feeling that he was being watched wherever he went. He passed McGonagall once or twice during that week, and he was fairly sure that she was not there by accident.

This, he realised, was an inconvenience and was potentially problematic. He didn't want McGonagall seeing the kind of books he was going to be reading, and then to go squealing to Riddle. The headmaster was already suspicious, to put it mildly, so Harry would need to lie low for the next week or so. Once the rest of the students returned on Sunday, Riddle would be too busy to pay much heed to Harry. Then he could speak to Binns and begin his work in getting himself out of this topsy-turvy world.

From what Harry had overheard in the common room, Katie too was not having any direct contact with Riddle. It seemed that these days he didn't seem to have any time for her. Was Harry that much of a distraction that Riddle would turn his back on the one who truly needed his help? Harry, for some reason, felt glad at that. It just showed that Riddle wasn't as good as Dumbledore. Harry felt like waving a finger in Riddle's face and telling him he was rubbish compared to Dumbledore. He was, however, not stupid enough to actually do it, and also, he wasn't sure which finger to wave.

Instead, Harry kept his head down and his ears open. His insatiable curiosity had him ear-wiggling on other people's conversations. From the snippets of conversation he had heard around the room, people seemed to be able to come and go at will and the Ministry was not in a state of alert. Hogsmeade trips were still allowed. Harry could almost believe that this world was one of peace.

It was Saturday morning when Binns returned. Harry had asked Nearly Headless Nick to let him know when the professor floated back in, and Nick had been only too happy to help. Harry went

down to visit Binns in his classroom after lunch. The professor seemed most surprised at the knock on his office door, and when he floated through it and out into the classroom, a look of curiosity and surprise was etched into his translucent features.

"Ah, Mister Potter," he greeted Harry. "Sir Nicholas informed me that you had returned. Welcome back." Harry for one didn't believe in his sincerity. He had rarely spoken to Binns outside of class, but he had always thought the ghost as a rather morbid character who didn't really care. He wasn't a bad man, but he was somewhat lacking in social skills. Harry doubted he would mind if someone died in his lessons, as long as they did it quietly and their ghost paid attention.

"Thank you, professor," said Harry in his most charming voice. He was aware that lying, or acting, as he preferred to think of it, was coming disturbingly naturally to him. "I was wondering if you could help me."

"And what might I be able to do for you?" asked Binns, settling on his desk and staring at Harry.

"Sir, I wanted to ask you something."

"Ask away my boy, ask away," said Binns, not taking his eyes off Harry.

"I was wondering how much you know about the Dark Lord and the Girl-Who-Lived."

"A project?" said Binns cautiously. "Defence Against the Dark Arts, perhaps?"

"Not exactly," said Harry, trying not to look awkward. "Sir, I spent nearly a month in a coma, so my memory is a bit wonky," lied Harry. "I don't want to worry her or waste her time with stupid questions about her past, and there aren't any books about it."

"No, there wouldn't be," said Binns. "Even today, no one dares to write about the Dark Lord, and Miss Bell has certainly never published an autobiography. You'd be very hard-pressed to find a book about them at Hogwarts that would give you details on the Dark Lord."

"But you obviously know all about it, sir," said Harry, cautiously flattering the professor. "I mean a wizard like you, a professor of history, I'm sorry, if you can't tell me, obviously if you can't give out details about a student, I understand but I just knew that if anyone could tell me, you could so I just thought I'd ask." (Rowling, 2006)

Harry was quite impressed with himself. He had kept it casual, appearing hesitant and gentle. He just hoped it had gotten through. He had had to extract information from many reluctant people over the years, and had become quite good at it.

Binns appeared thoughtful for a second, before answering.

"You must appreciate, Potter," said the ghost softly, "that I cannot give out details about a student. Miss Bell's personal details, just like yours, are protected by law and it would be morally wrong for me to give them out to anyone who asked. As for the Dark Lord, yes, I can tell you what I know. He is dead and gone, and even if he were not, he could hardly kill me again."

"Thank you, professor," said Harry politely. Katie's details he could get later, from her or from the grapevine, though he would need to take the information he got from rumours with a barrel full of salt.

"Take a seat, Potter," said Binns. "I do enjoy such historical debates. So tell me, what do you want to know?"

"Who he is would be a good start," said Harry.

If it were possible, Binns seemed to pale even further. His smile faded and he looked, if anything, a tad frightened. "We do not speak his name," said the ghost hurriedly, looking around. "Bad luck. I daren't say it aloud."

"Perhaps you could write it," suggested Harry, realising that he had had this conversation before, with Hagrid. Unlike Hagrid, Binns could spell. The ghost paused for a second, and then picked up a piece of chalk and moved to the board. His fingers shaking, he began to write:

G...R...I...N

"Grindelwald," breathed Harry, his eyebrows flying up beneath the beanie he wore to hide his scar. The effect on Binns was instantaneous. He spun around, white as a sheet, his jaw dropped and his eyes wide.

"You said his name!" gasped Binns. Harry resisted the urge to roll his eyes. He needed to appear curious, not cocky.

"Just testing my pronunciation," Harry said quickly, conjuring a feeble excuse. Binns regarded him cautiously for a few seconds before putting the chalk down. For a second, Harry feared he might decide that this was a bad idea and disappear, but instead he returned to his seat, the wary look never leaving his translucent face. Harry breathed a sigh of relief and made a note to go gently with Binns. It seemed he was easily spooked, which was quite ironic for a ghost.

"You must never again utter that name," he said seriously in the most assertive tone Harry had ever heard the old ghost use. Binns was serious. Harry would need to be careful. In lessons, he droned on. It seemed in private, the old teacher was capable of being more stern. Harry needed his input, so he would have to tread softly.

"Right, sir," said Harry, nodding apologetically. "Never again. I know now." Binns seemed to relax. Harry waited a few seconds before speaking again. "So what do you know about...*him*?"

"Where should I start?" asked Binns, probably more to himself.

"Probably at the beginning," said Harry helpfully, though immediately wished he hadn't. He feared Binns might take it for sarcasm. Luckily, the ghost didn't even blink.

"Right you are," said Binns. "If you wish to study a man, tracing his past is a logical way to start. You would have been a good student for NEWT History, Potter. Methodical thinker."

"Thank you, sir," said Harry, making a mental note that he was apparently good at history. He also realised that this was a testimony to his apparently good acting, as no teacher in his own world would describe him as a methodical thinker; quite the opposite, in fact.

"Unfortunately," the professor began, "Very little is known about his early years. All we have to go on are rumours, as no documents have ever been found. As a historian, I cannot accept rumours as fact. Remember Potter, historians seek fact, not truth. If you want truth, you need only look to philosophy. "

"I understand," said Harry, not entirely truthfully; however, he was unperturbed. Binns had agreed to tell him, so this afternoon would not be a complete waste.

In his head, Harry quickly played over what he knew about Grindelwald, which in truth was very little – just what he had read on the back of Dumbledore's frog card. Grindelwald had been a Dark Lord and Dumbledore had defeated him in 1945. Shortly after that, the Muggle war had ended. Therefore, it was most likely that Grindelwald was German, if not a Nazi, and was involved with World War two. Of course, these were only assumptions.

Then again, Harry couldn't help but wonder about a link between Grindelwald and Voldemort. The first time that the Chamber of Secrets had been opened was fifty years before his second year, which made it 1942. Perhaps Grindelwald had played some part in the creation of Voldemort. The dates lined up. Was he an inspiration at the time? Was Grindelwald as prolific as Voldemort?

"What are the most popular or most reliable rumours?" asked Harry, leading the professor gently into an answer before realising he seemed a little too forward. He decided to back off. "I read somewhere that he was around in Germany during the Muggle war."

"That he was," said Binns, nodding. "We believe he was born around 1915, give or take a few years. His real name is a mystery, as is his exact age. We cannot even verify his nationality. No birth certificate has ever been found and anyone who knew him in his youth is either scared to come forward or dead – some by age, some by his hand. He was always meticulously thorough about eliminating witnesses."

"Then where do the stories come from?" asked Harry.

"You are failing to see the big picture," said Binns a little more firmly. "Because, during his early reign, he made the point of eliminating witnesses, what we have to go on are mostly rumours, not accounts. In fact, the only reliable accounts we have of that time are from the Nuremburg Trials. Also, you shouldn't use the word 'stories'. It isn't a tale with a moral, hero and villain. Rumours started the way they always do. Perhaps an Auror found a body, and then made his assumptions about what had happened. News travels in pubs and bars and embellishments are added along the route. Much of what I am about to tell you, much of it must be taken with a pinch of salt."

"I will, sir," said Harry. He knew how the rumours about him had sprung up; it was basically a giant game of Chinese whispers.

"We know that he was active in Germany throughout the Nazi era," began Binns, leaning back.

"Fact?" asked Harry.

"Yes," said Binns. "By his own confession, by rumour, and of course, by what happens later. I will explain. We know he lived in Nazi-controlled Germany in the pre-war years, though we doubt he is German. He came from, or rather through, the so-called social elite, a wealthy family perhaps, which bought him influence."

"Would that not limit the number of people he might be?" asked Harry. "Couldn't he be traced through family records?"

"Not that simple, I'm afraid," said Binns. "During the war and then the depression, records were poorly kept. Also, he later had enough influence to make sure they were destroyed. That is, if we were even looking in the correct country. Former Death Eaters, survivors, Aurors, and the few who have met him always said that his grasp of English was perfect, his accent near native. However, we have heard the same from the French, Italian, and German Aurors. His features, before his transformation, were Caucasian, most likely European, but again we have no evidence to back this up. In short, we do not know him from Adam."

"I thought you said he killed all witnesses," said Harry. "So how do we know so much about his accent?"

"Ah, I am confusing you," said Binns, sitting up. "In the early years, yes he was. From about the late sixties onwards, his objectives and methods changed. We'll get to that. These observations about him are from reports of the last few years leading up to his defeat. Understand?"

"Okay," said Harry, moving on to his next question. "So, why Germany?" asked Harry. Why would anyone floating between countries and speaking all those languages want to settle in the country that had lost the first world war, whose reputation and economy were in tatters? If Harry had been floating between countries, he would have settled in Australia or Canada.

"How much do you know about Europe at the time?"

"A little," said Harry, thinking back to his primary school history lessons. *Hitler was a bad man, Germany had lost two wars. We won.* That was about all he knew.

"At the Treaty of Versailles, after the first war," said Binns, "Germany was banned from having ships over a certain size, an army over a certain size, and an air force. The reparations plunged the country into chaos and national shame, made worse by the Wall Street Crash in nineteen twenty-nine. Life was hard, which made a perfect recruitment ground for extremists. Extremists are manipulators who feed on fear, anger, and need. The German people needed something to believe in, and the former upper classes were angry at having lost everything. Anger, hate, desire for revenge, and a need to survive. Perfect recruits for someone offering revenge."

"Surely they would know he was a murdering psycho?" said Harry, unable to see how people could trust such a person.

"Perhaps," said Binns. "Bear in mind, though, that it is easy to recruit a foot soldier. Even today, go to the slums, find a tramp, and with a bottle of vodka you could make him do whatever you want. However, to recruit a learned man, you need to appeal to his emotions, his anger and his desire for revenge. Intelligent people are hard to recruit, but the return on them is fantastic. Why do you think that even in the most war torn parts of the world, universities are seldom touched? No fundamentalist would attack a university, as they are recruiting grounds for the next generation of specialists, men who in turn can organise the foot soldiers."

"Okay, I understand that, but I don't see the reference to G...You-Know-Who," said Harry.

"At the time," Binns explained, "Everyone wanted revenge, the rich and the poor alike. If you want an example of how bad it was, take Adolf Hitler for example. He was a charismatic speaker who saw that if he added an anti-Semitic comment to a speech, he received better responses from ordinary Germans. They were looking for someone to blame for the loss of the first war and the current poverty, and he took advantage of that and played to the country's emotions. The next thing the people knew, he was in power, and part of the reason for that was his anti-Semitic comments, and so the people ended up with a country that hated anything Jewish. He used their hatred to unite and then control them, rich and poor alike."

"I don't s...", began Harry, but Binns was not finished.

"If you were looking for someone to bribe to break into the Ministry, what would you do?" asked Binns loudly, cutting Harry off, more animated than Harry had ever seen him before.

Harry froze. Binns couldn't know that Harry had actually done it, except without the bribe. Harry shifted awkwardly. Binns didn't notice and kept on talking.

"You would find a person in the right department," Binns answered his own question. "You would be looking for someone who needs something. Perhaps money – you could find someone in debt. Perhaps a promotion, if this person had been passed over and you had a contact who might be able to give them a job. In short, you need someone who is dissatisfied and resentful. The entire German government was in this position."

"Imagine an entire country with that same vulnerability," continued Binns. "The ultimate secret take-over. You asked 'why Germany' – the answer is that it was a land of opportunity. The Muggles weren't the only ones bitter over the loss of the first war – Wizards had helped out, and been punished in equal standing. We can argue forever and a day about whether the Treaty of Versailles was too harsh, infeasible, or just inadequate, but the point is that both worlds, magical and Muggle, were bitter and wanted someone to blame. He offered people a way to regain their former wealth and pride and to take their revenge on just about anyone they fancied, as long as they did his bidding in return."

"Jesus," said Harry aloud. This scenario echoed a similar situation just a few short weeks ago.

"Initially, his followers were from the former high society, and were few in number," said Binns. "He was selective, recruiting only the learned class – men who legitimately controlled other people, department heads, for example. As I have said, it is more of a challenge to recruit learned

men, but the rewards are greater. You–Know–Who recruited a handful of the upper class, who in turn had influence over the lower echelons. The footsoldiers didn't know whom they were working for, but the Dark Lord was tremendously well–informed and soon had his fingers in all the departments. Can you guess what happened next?"

"Deaths?" said Harry, remember when he had lived through this nightmare.

"Precisely," said Binns. "There are always those who cannot be bought, and so other means were used. It didn't take long before there were mysterious deaths as he removed those who stood against him. You must understand that he was extraordinarily influential. He had all the wealth of his followers, the social elite, at his disposal. He had influence in all departments, and his phenomenal magical ability and intelligence made him a very dangerous opponent."

"Is this all fact?" asked Harry.

"Yes," said Binns. "Do you recall I mentioned the Nuremburg Trials earlier, as being the only reliable records we have? Well, at Nuremburg a jury made up of Aurors from Great Britain, France, Russia and America tried a handful of Death Eaters. From the confessions of the first generation of Death Eaters, we can piece together roughly what happened, though only the Dark Lord himself knew the full extent of his reach. We never knew his ultimate goal, as even the most senior of his followers were never taken into his confidence, but at least we know how he operated."

"You said that people didn't know whom they were working for?" asked Harry.

"The same problem we faced when he fell," said Binns. "Everyone claimed to be a blind or bewitched."

"Blind?"

"They didn't know whom they were working for," explained Binns. "They received false letters claiming to be from superiors, or they did seemingly innocent little favours for powerful people, who in turn were doing their own little favours and so on. It soon accumulated into a lot of information – that kind of thing. It was impossible to tell who was truly a Death Eater and who was being used."

"What about the Dark Mark?" asked Harry.

"Wasn't used until later," said Binns matter–of–factly. "We'll get to that."

"So what happened next?" asked Harry.

"When the second war started, there were many wizards who joined in," continued Binns. "They were as bitter as the Muggles about Versailles and they sought to bring pride back to Germany. Some became highly dangerous, helping the Nazis and German Army in the fight against the British."

"During the Blitz, our own Aurors were all over-worked trying to protect London. We didn't have the resources to fight the Germans on their own soil. The bombings, the fires, the evacuations...we were overrun. Compared to Germany, our magical population is tiny. In the upper echelons of the Ministry of Magic there was at the time a department that dealt with covert operations. It was decided that since we could not fight the Germans ourselves, we would recruit someone who could. Someone in Germany who didn't like the government, who could be convinced to fight for us. We could supply You-Know-Who with weapons, Aurors to train his men, and financial aid, in return for his cooperation."

"He worked for us?"

"Indeed," said Binns. "Bear in mind that he wasn't a threat to us at the time, just the German government were. Don't for a seconds believe that all wizards worked for him. Some were angry and spiteful, or even just patriotic to fight the British for their country under the rule of the government. The Dark Lord provided an output for the frustration of his followers, allowing them to hunt and kill, but neither he nor his Death Eaters were involved directly in the war, instead tried to assume power while the government was so stretched. Once in power, he may have ended the war by choice. We would never know. Since his motives were not patriotic, it was felt he posed no threat to Britain

"We know so from the accounts of the wizards who planned the idea. They died soon afterwards, and the official records were destroyed, but three of them left diaries in Gringotts with instructions to be released to the head of MLE in the event of the author's death. These accounts – declassified as of last year – tell the whole story of the operation. Remember that at this time, hardly anyone in this country had heard the Dark Lord's name. The upper ranks of the Ministry were aware, but the public and the lower ranks knew nothing of the Dark Lord from Europe. Hence any rumours that slipped would not cause such an outcry as no one knew who this man was. Those three diaries tell the story of how the British Ministry of Magic recruited and trained the Death Eaters."

"Surely they wouldn't," said Harry, unable to contain himself. "Surely they saw the danger."

"It was war, Potter," said Binns. "Odd decisions are made in times of war."

"But recruiting a Dark Lord...?" asked Harry, unable to fathom the stupidity. Did they not stop to think? A Dark Lord? The clue was in the name? What madness could possibly have driven them to such a man?

"But he wasn't a 'Dark Lord', or at least known to be one at the time," said Binns. "He was just a shadowy character behind the scenes. He was a gangster at best, an Al Capone."

"Still a murderer, though!" said Harry.

"I agree with you," said Binns. "However, it is academic, as it happened over fifty years ago. Then again, similar things have been done recently."

"They have?"

"When the Russians invaded Afghanistan, the Americans recruited a so-called freedom-fighter called Osama Bin Laden," said Binns. "Ten years later, in 1993, that man's organisation planted a bomb in the World Trade Center in New York."

"What changed him?"

"Probably lots of things," said Binns. "He felt betrayed and turned his attention on his former masters, just like You-Know-Who. However, the point is that he did work for us – he was our weapon. We named the targets and he eliminated them. We spread word into the German underworld of an assassin who targeted the Nazis, as a propaganda campaign – a warning for people not to join the war."

"Isn't that a war-crime?"

"All's fair in love and war," said Binns. "He took out many high profile-targets, magical and Muggle. The trouble was that he became too big for his boots. He started killing targets the government did not set. By the time the government realised they had lost control of him, it was too late. In a last-ditch effort, they tried to terminate him. They missed."

"We made him what he is?" concluded Harry.

"Correct," said Binns. "The British trained his army and supplied him with weapons. However, what we didn't know was that when he killed, he inserted his own men in to replace the deceased. He very nearly took control of what was then the most powerful country in Europe. In fact, I believe that had he not been stopped, he would have taken over Germany. Dark Lords are portrayed as bogeymen, but if one thinks about it, they want one thing: power. They are highly intelligent and don't just kill indiscriminately - there is always a plan, always a motive, and we failed to see that until it was too late. He had his plan, and by masterfully inserting key people into key positions, he nearly took out a country without the country even realising it."

Harry realised how familiar this sounded. In the Unholy Land, Voldemort had taken this basic plan, added to it, improved it and damn near succeeded in doing exactly the same a few short weeks ago. In that world, Harry had stopped him, and in Harry's world, Dumbledore had stopped him, but in this one, there had been no one. Or had there? This was another key point he had to understand. What had happened to Dumbledore? Still, he needed to proceed carefully.

"You said he nearly took over the country. Why did he fail?" asked Harry. He already knew the answer, but deliberately avoided using the name or showing any knowledge.

"He failed because of one man," said Binns.

"Just one?" asked Harry, feigning astonishment.

"Albus Dumbledore," proclaimed Binns.

"Who?" asked Harry, managing to conceal the sudden rush of emotion on hearing the name spoken aloud. He felt a wave of remorse as an image of his old headmaster flowed into his mind.

"He was a headmaster here for a short time," answered Binns, "before leaving to go to Europe. In his day, Dumbledore taught Professor Riddle himself."

"Wow," said Harry, raising an eyebrow and trying to look impressed.

"I didn't think you would have heard of him," said Binns. "Although he does have a Chocolate Frog card dedicated to him." Binns shrugged. "Anyway, where was I? Ah, yes. Shortly after the failed assassination attempt on the assassin himself, several members of our own government went missing on British soil. It was clear to the few who knew of the operation that the so-called Master of Assassins had come to Britain. For a year, the deaths continued. Being war time, there was little publicity - death was so common that no one batted an eyelid when someone disappeared. And so the public on the whole knew nothing of his existence."

"Did he not aim to be noticed?"

"Publicity didn't seem to be his goal at this stage," said Binns. "Later, it did, and we will come to that, but at this stage, no, publicity did not seem to be on his agenda. This is, of course, pure speculation, but I believe at the time, he underestimated the fighting spirit of old Blighty."

"He what?" asked Harry.

"I think that he came here to eliminate those who had betrayed him, and then he planned to return to Europe, his home," said Binns. "The evidence for this is the fact that his Death Eaters didn't come with him. He came alone, killing on British soil without assembling an army. I believe it was a personal vendetta. He probably thought it would be over in a week."

"So why did this...Dumbledore get involved?" asked Harry, trying not to appear as desperate for information as he felt.

"We cannot say," said Binns. "As a Headmaster, though only for two years at the time he left, Dumbledore kept his distance from the Ministry. He was completely uninvolved in the war, but then, for no apparent reason, he joined the hunt. He interrupted the assassin trying to murder a member of the team who organised his operation, in fact that last member of that team. They duelled and the assassin fled. Dumbledore tracked him all over Europe, until he eventually found him in the palace of Versailles a year later."

Harry remembered Dumbledore having spoken about Versailles and his duel there. So in this world, the result of that duel had changed the world. Harry shook his head in remorse.

"Dumbledore's body was found by Professor Riddle in early 1945," said Binns, "Although, he was not Professor Riddle at that time. He did not rejoin the school until later. His first act was to lay Dumbledore to rest at Parkside. Soon after, the war came to an end."

"What happened to the assassin?" asked Harry. This was long before Katie had been born, so something else must have happened.

"He disappeared," said Binns. "Now at this point, Potter, we leave the bounds of what we know. Documents exist which support what I have told you so far. From here, we enter a grey area, where all I can tell you is guesswork based on circumstantial evidence."

"I understand, sir," said Harry. He needed to get Binns to continue, though, and flattery seemed the best option. "But please, do go on. You seem to know it all and I find it all fascinating." Harry saw a small smile creep over the ghost's face for a second before disappearing.

"Before we go on," said Binns, "would you like a cup of tea?" Harry was taken aback. Binns seemed to be enjoying himself now and instead of being a tedious Q and A session, he seemed to be thinking that they would make an afternoon of it, and have a nice little debate.

*Historians, honestly*, thought Harry. However, manners were the way through which he would convince Binns to continue.

"Thank you, sir," he said, nodding. Binns floated over the fire and summoned a House Elf, who appeared a moment later carrying a silver tray topped with tea and a plate of biscuits. But it wasn't the chocolate biscuits that grabbed Harry's attention, nor the fine china. It was the large pile of knitted hats the elf wore.

"Dobby?" said Harry before he could stop himself.

The elf squawked at the mention of his name, wobbling slightly. The china rattled, but the elf kept his balance and set the tray down.

"Sir knows Dobby, sir?" squeaked the elf. Harry couldn't help but grin as Dobby stared up at him with his tennis-ball eyes. Of course he didn't know Harry here, but no matter. Harry wouldn't be calling on him or placing him in danger. Also, Harry would not be the subject of Dobby's attempts to 'help', which usually ended up with Harry being in hospital. Oh well, that was Katie's problem here, not his.

"I've heard of you," said Harry. "Katie often talks about you."

Dobby's tennis ball eyes widened and then began to glisten with tears. "Katie Bells talks about Dobby, sir?" he stammered, his squeaky voice wobbling.

"Err..." said Harry, realising his big mouth had caused him to let more slip than he should have. What if Dobby went to Katie to say thanks? She would know he had been here with Binns, she would know that he knew a lot about her past.

"She's mentioned you," Harry said carefully, trying not to commit to anything. Dobby took off his hats, presumably as a mark of respect, his eyes filling up and his lip wobbling. It was more than the elf could take and he disappeared with a pop.

*Oops*, thought Harry,

Binns seemed not to notice anything odd, and waited patiently while Harry poured himself a cup of tea. He dunked a biscuit and then turned his attention back to the ghost, who seemed to be eager to go on. Professional vanity, Harry guessed.

"Where did we get to?" asked Binns, though Harry had a feeling he already knew. He was testing to see if Harry had been paying attention.

"He had just killed Dumbledore and disappeared," said Harry, sipping his tea.

"Right," said Binns. "No one knows for sure where he went or what he did at this point."

*Great*, thought Harry. Binns had softened him up and given him tea, just to tell him that he didn't know. This wasn't going to be as helpful as he had thought. However, Binns was not finished.

"Even his followers in the German social elite – those who had escaped jail – heard nothing from him," continued the professor, with more energy in his voice than Harry had ever heard. "Even during his reign of terror in England, he issued orders to those in Berlin. Suddenly the orders stopped. He just vanished."

"He must have gone somewhere," said Harry.

"And he did," said Binns. "Where, though, only he can say. Would you like to guess?"

"Hiding?" suggested Harry.

"But why?" asked Binns. "Having just defeated the man acknowledged as one of, if not the, most powerful men in the country, he then goes into hiding? Why? What did he fear?"

"Good point," noted Harry. "What are your theories?"

"Why would anyone hide?" asked Binns rhetorically. "To protect oneself; to be safe. Did he fear anyone else? I would say no, unless he was in a weakened state."

Harry felt a burst of pride in Dumbledore.

"One of the most popular theories was that he had been wounded to such an extent that he was barely alive," said Binns. "There were, of course, suggestions that he didn't walk out of that room. Someone perhaps carried him. Some said he was dead, others that he was biding his time. In truth, no one knew what to think and so the few people left in this country who knew about the operation buried the story, buried the legend of the assassin. As for the assassin himself, we do not know.

"One problem with magical forensics is that magic often leaves little physical sign. Were a Muggle forensic team to look at a location and see lots of blood, they would assume he had lost so much blood that he must have died; whereas wizards know that potions can restore blood quickly. It is not an accurate measure. The signatures of spells were all over the building, but we do not know which spells hit the target and which were blocked. Only those that hit the building itself left traceable magic. We know it was an epic duel and that many rare and powerful spells

were used, but we do not know what state the Master of Assassins was in when he left. Later rumours would say that he spent two years just recovering fully from his wounds," said Binns in conclusion.

"Two years? What could Dumbledore have done?"

"There are many long-lasting spells and curses," said Binns. "Many take a long time to recover, even with medicine. Also, lying in bed does nothing for your fitness, nor your power. Once he was better, he would need to recover his strength."

"Still," said Harry. "Two years seems a long time."

"It does," said Binns. "However, once he was fit again, he still did not make a return. In fact, not a peep was heard until the late sixties. It was around 1964–65 that the disappearances started."

"So where was he in the meantime?" asked Harry.

"Supposedly he travelled far and wide, experiencing all forms of magic in all different cultures," said Binns. "Of course, this was the propaganda spread amongst the Death Eaters: The Dark Lord knows every form of magic, his travels taught him everything, his knowledge of magic runs deeper than any man. You can imagine how impressive it sounds, but the validity of it I cannot say. There are rumours that he was deep in study, working for years to try and find the key to that which has eluded men since the dawn of time."

"Immortality," said Harry, reading his mind. It made sense, for Voldemort too had sought that secret.

"Indeed," said Binns, clearly enjoying himself. "Some say that he promised himself that never again would he come so close to dying, to succumbing to that human weakness of death. He knew that magic must hold the secret to it, and so he began his travels. He reportedly travelled far and wide. The fifties were quiet, and most people in the government thought he was dead. Remember that few people knew who or what he was at this point, just those in the darker corridors of power. Most of whom had retired by this time. The Assassin became an urban legend.

"Hence, when the disappearances started in the mid to late sixties, Britain was completely unprepared. It took another three years before someone realised that these were related cases. Former government ministers disappeared as the Dark Lord – as he had now become known – began removing anyone who knew of his past. There was a fire in the Ministry archives destroying the paper trail that says who he really was. The only reason I know was from privately kept records of Ministry employees. These became very valuable after the fire. Rumours came from Europe of a Dark Wizard coming to power on British soil. Remember, he blamed the British government for making and then trying to break him. He appeared in all his glory in the late sixties."

"What do you mean, 'all his glory'?" asked Harry.

"Remember when I said that publicity was not on his agenda the first time around?" asked Binns. Harry nodded. "This time it was."

"But he'd have been...what...fifty?" asked Harry.

"Don't mistake age for lack of power," said Binns. "Many of the teachers here are older than they appear. Magic does not wither with age, and can sustain a body, preserving its youthful strength if needs be. Magic slows the aging process anyway. Wizards often live to over one-hundred and twenty, if not one hundred and fifty years old, Madam Marchbanks for instance."

On reflection, if Dumbledore was a teacher at the time Riddle opened the Chamber of Secrets, he had to be at least eighty. After his duel with Voldemort that Harry had witnessed in the Ministry last year, he has seen that age had not withered Dumbledore's power. Old as he was, Grindelwald had still been a powerful foe.

"It started with whisperings in the underworld," Binns continued as Harry returned his gaze to the ghost. "A recruitment drive, if you will, but it soon grew. Conspiracy buffs and dodgy newspapers soon started printing stories, and all the while disappearances were becoming more common. Then at last came his moment. During the Quidditch World Cup of 1968, he and his Death Eaters stormed the stadium. For the first time, the country saw the Dark Mark. The Minister of Magic was beheaded in front of the nation. It was a message – no one was above his reach."

"Jesus!" breathed Harry. He couldn't help but think that it was a parody of what he had done. He had beheaded the Minister in front of a nation as a sign. This man was a monster, but that implied that Harry was too.

"Most people didn't know about his past," continued Binns, not noticing that Harry had paled. "They only knew about his current wave of attacks. Over the next five years, the pureblood elite flocked to him in droves. We don't know if he genuinely believed in the purity of blood or if he was just using them, but they flocked to him, becoming the new generation of Death Eaters. Dark times, Potter, dark times – you didn't know who to trust. Professor Riddle, following in his mentor's footsteps, worked tirelessly against the Dark Lord, but nothing could stem his terrorist campaign."

"Terrorism?" asked Harry. "He abandoned his subtle methods?"

"Yes," said Binns. "Do you know what the nature of terrorism is?"

"To kill people?"

"No, that is a method, not the principle," said Binns, clearly enjoying Harry's struggle to find the words.

"To shock people?" he suggested.

"Not quite," said Binns. "The clue is in the name."

"To terrorise," said Harry, not seeing the distinction.

"Exactly, to scare people, to remove the infallibility and credibility of the establishment," said Binns. "To begin with, he wanted to take over the German government but keep the infrastructure intact. This time, his goal had changed. He wasn't out to rule this country, but to destroy those who had betrayed him. He sought one thing - the complete destruction of the British government; both the monarchy and the Ministry of Magic. Remember, he was no story-book villain, bent on destroying for no reason. He wanted to destroy the system of power in this country, and then presumably return to mainland Europe, safe in the knowledge that he had defeated the enemy who made him."

He paused as Harry took a moment to digest that.

"His attacks were designed to cripple this country's ability to function," continued Binns. "He attacked every walk of life. Some attacks were done for show with mass casualties, others were high-profile assassinations, both Magical and Muggle."

"If he was killing specific Muggles, how did the Ministry keep the Muggles from finding us?" asked Harry. "If the Dark Lord was knocking off high-profile Muggles as well, surely they would notice. They were not stupid."

"We had a scapegoat," said Binns. "Ilych Ramirez Sanchez."

"Who?"

"Venezuelan terrorist," said Binns. "Nicknamed Carlos the Jackal."

"I've heard of him," said Harry. "He was caught, wasn't he?"

"After twenty-five years, yes," said Binns. "In fact if you look at his career, it shows both luck and incompetence. It shows impulsiveness and rash decisions. He was not the great assassin he was rumoured to be, but rather clumsy and rash. As a result he was caught in Syria and was handed over to the French in 1994. He did have a few unusual *high points* in his career, the murder of Joseph Sieff in London, for example."

"Who?" asked Harry.

"Joseph Sieff," said Binns, "Vice president of the British Zionist Federation. He was also a wizard and the owner of a few rather special government accounts at Gringotts, accounts so special he was given a security details of Aurors twenty-four hours a day. Do you still believe that he was killed by a Muggle, or that a team of Aurors would be overcome by a man at the door with a gun?"

Harry shook his head.

"Carlos took the rap for his murders," said Binns. "Our world remained hidden, and the Dark Lord remained at large, plotting and scheming."

"We spent so long cleaning up after him, we didn't have the resources to stop him," said Harry, remembering what had happened in the Unholy Land.

"True," said Binns. "He kept on killing, apparently unstoppable. People were terrified. The more Aurors clamped down on people, searching for Death Eaters, the more fear and terror they created, inadvertently fuelling his influence. This only fuelled his recruitment. People turned to him in fear. Since he hated anything British, I can only wonder if he had planned to dispose of them all if he was ever successful. Fortunately, he never was. It seemed he would be, until one night."

"Katie Bell," said Harry.

"Yes," said Binns. "After all the hundreds he had killed, after over a decade of terror from 1968 – 1980, it only took one little baby girl. No one knows why she survived, but she did and his power broke."

"What happened to him?" asked Harry, playing dumb.

"No one knows," said Binns. "All that matters is that he is gone."

"For the second time," said Harry to himself. Once he had gone travelling for nearly twenty years, the other he fell to Katie. But then again, in his world, Voldemort had returned. Could Grindelwald do the same?

"Are we one hundred percent sure he is gone?" asked Harry, unable to think of a subtler way to phrase it.

"As I have said," said Binns, "I am a historian and I deal with fact, not truth, and definitely not rumour and superstition. Some people say he is out there, some say that he is dead, and some people even claim to have seen him shopping for groceries in Sainsbury's. This is hysteria, and it would be stupid to accept this as truth. Since he has gone, there have been no great attacks, and no sign of the Death Eaters."

"So he hasn't risen from the dead?" asked Harry, hoping that history would not have repeated itself.

"No," said Binns. "Well, you will always find people willing to say he has; nutcases, mainly. However, when we look at the facts, not a squeak has been heard in years. We have no proof of his resurrection, but the ramblings of lunatics."

Harry was dubious, but knew that it didn't really affect him. If Grindelwald did have a Horcrux and had survived that night, he could potentially come back. However, the lack of security in the school suggested that this was not the case. Also, there were no signs of him, and no atmosphere of fear. Harry had not seen anything unusual in the *Prophet*, and there seemed to be no cause for alarm.

Even if Grindelwald did rise again, he wouldn't come after poor, innocent Harry Potter. Harry was safe, and that was what mattered. He was not involved, and had no reason to fear. If Grindelwald ever came back, Harry would be long gone.

"Well, that's good to know," said Harry. "I can remember being told certain parts of that story. I think it helped my memory. Thanks."

"You are most welcome, my boy," said Binns. He seemed rather disappointed that it was over.

Thinking along the same lines, Harry racked his brains for any other questions. This was his best chance to get information. A return visit would show unusual interest, and he didn't want to be labelled a Dark Wizard. It was a little too close to the truth.

Suddenly a thought occurred to him. There was no subtle way to ask, so he may as well try.

"You said that when he went travelling, he was deep in study, searching for the path to immortality?" began Harry, but Binns cut him off.

"No," said the professor sharply. "I said he was rumoured to have gone travelling. All we know is that he disappeared. It is one of the more sound rumours, but there is no proof."

"Sorry," muttered Harry. "Okay, so let's assume that that rumour is true and that he was studying. Do we know if he succeeded?"

Binns took a deep breath and sighed – not that he needed to breathe. Harry realised that it was rather rude to talk to a ghost about avoiding death, but Harry didn't let it bother him.

"At the time of his reign of terror," said Binns carefully, "The Death Eaters would have said yes. We accept as fact that he learned a lot of dark magic, hence the slight physical transformation I mentioned earlier. However, this may be propaganda. You must understand that I cannot comment with any degree of accuracy or fact."

"Can't or won't?" asked Harry. He could see that Binns was uneasy. Harry could spot a liar at ten paces, even without Legilimency.

"I suppose that since he's dead and gone, it can't hurt," said Binns. "Although Professor Slughorn knows more than I do."

"About what?"

"How much do you know about immortality?" asked Binns. Harry opened his mouth to comment, but then closed it. He would arouse suspicion if he told Binns everything. As it was, Harry knew of two ways: the Philosopher's Stone and a Horcrux.

"Well, I've heard of the fountain of youth," said Harry lamely. Binns shot him a look that said 'what have I told you about believing rumours and legends?'

Harry couldn't blush on demand, so he just tried to look stupid. Some would say it came naturally to him, but at that moment he found it quite hard.

"The only known way is through the use of a Philosopher's Stone," said Binns. "However, there are none in existence at this time. In addition, you have to regularly use it."

"So he made one?" asked Harry.

"I cannot say," said Binns. "Rumour suggests that he did not like this option, presumably because he would be dependent on the stone. Rumour also suggests that he invented something, a piece of magic so dark that no book in this castle will dare speak of it. Whatever it was allegedly meant that he could never be killed."

*A Horcrux, thought Harry. Grindelwald invented the Horcrux.*

"Apparently he started his research during his time in Germany," said Binns. "The confessions at Nuremburg tell us that he spent a lot of time studying. It would appear that he was forced to put this research on hold once Dumbledore got involved. It seems that after the Dark Lord had come so close to dying, he returned to this research, knowing how precious life was. If it is true, it must have taken him nearly twenty years to get whatever spell it was to work."

Could it be that Grindelwald had invented the damn things? Had Voldemort come across his notes and continued the study during his time out? Did Riddle have the secret here inside this very castle?

"Of course, we know the rumour is not true," said Binns, laughing at Harry's concerned face.

"What?" said Harry. "Why?"

"Because," said Binns, "if he had invented something that stopped him from dying, Kathryn Bell would not have been able to kill him." Binns chuckled softly. "Though it is an intriguing story, and it had you hooked, didn't it, Potter?"

"Yes, sir," said Harry, irritated more at the professor's attitude than at being tricked. He knew that the joke was on the professor, because Horcruxes did exist, and if Harry's suspicions were correct, in a few years, Grindelwald would rise again. Then Binns would be laughing on the other side of his ghostly little face!

Harry took a deep breath and forced himself to calm down. There was another question he needed to ask.

"You said he might not have really cared about purity of blood?" asked Harry, his tone calm.

"He may have done, he may not," said Binns, shrugging. "He provided an outlet for his followers to vent their rage, remember? They hated the Muggleborn community, but that does not mean he did. As long as they served a purpose, he allowed it. In the end, if he was planning on returning to the continent, what did he really have planned for Britain after his victory?"

Harry thought about it for a second. He had no idea, but he certainly had been given a lot to think about.

"Thank you for your time, professor," said Harry, rising to his feet. He had gotten what he needed, and if Binns was making jokes, then it was definitely time to leave. Nothing else useful would come of this meeting.

"You are welcome," said Binns, rising. "It's good to see you again, Mister Potter. If you fancy another little debate, you are always welcome."

"Thanks," said Harry, opening the door to the classroom. "Bye, professor," he added before disappearing out into the corridor.

As he walked back towards the Tower, he replayed the conversation over in his head. So, Grindelwald was most likely still alive. He had beaten Dumbledore, not the other way around, but Dumbledore must have had some effect. Dumbledore scared him so much that he spent years recovering, then spent nearly fifteen more years researching the path to immortality. He invented the Horcrux and then went on to try and kill Katie.

It seemed that this world was similar in some ways. There was a Girl Who Lived and there had been a Dark Lord.

However, Harry remembered, Flamel had said that even the tiniest change could have a major effect on the universe. Just because there was a Dark Lord and there was a Girl Who Lived didn't mean that the worlds were the same. Grindelwald and Voldemort were two different people with different ideas, beliefs, means and motives. Binns had confirmed this - Grindelwald was here to destroy the British government, not to rule it, a stark contrast to Voldemort. Presumably, once he had won, he would have returned to Germany to try and rule there.

All this would have made Grindelwald a more deadly opponent than Voldemort. Riddle had wanted to rule, so he needed to preserve the basic infrastructure of the country, hence, he had inserted people into existing rules. Grindelwald had wanted to destroy, meaning that he would not exercise restraint. Civilians were legitimate targets, though probably not the best phrase to use. He sought to bring the government down, plunge the country that had made and then betrayed him into chaos. Harry was glad he wouldn't be around to see it.

Harry found no reason not to take it on faith that Binns had been right about Grindelwald being gone - if he was gone permanently, or if there was a Horcrux out there, waiting to be activated, Harry didn't know, and, he realised, ultimately didn't care. In this world, he was not the Boy Who Lived and so he had no obligation here. He had tried not to get involved in the Unholy Land, but he had constantly been targeted. Here, he was nobody; he was completely unrelated to the conflict. Even if, by some remote possibility, Grindelwald was still alive, and even if he managed to get the necessary ingredients to be able to return from the dead, he wouldn't come after Harry. He may come back in the future, but Harry was not in danger, and would hopefully be long gone before he managed it. For now, for the next month or so that he would spend here, Grindelwald was for all intents and purposes gone, dead, finished, finito, all done. Harry breathed a sigh of relief.

He had confirmed it - he was not in danger, he was not needed. That gave him time and space to find a way home, something he needed to start on right away. It was time to head to the restricted section of the library. He could do that tomorrow. It was quiet on Sundays, especially since lessons hadn't started yet. He could flame in and nick a book before the old bat even realised he was there.

The next evening, Harry headed up to the library shortly before dinner. He had about an hour until the rest of the students arrived. He wasn't stupid enough to flame to the library directly, in case there was someone there, someone who might see him reappear. He wanted to make sure that no one saw him.

Harry slipped into the library and found the place deserted. It was in darkness, as the sun had disappeared behind the hills, even though it was only just past four in the afternoon. The room was in shadow, the only light coming from under the door to Pince's office. Harry tiptoed across the wooden floor in the direction of the restricted section.

Checking that the coast was clear, Harry slipped in amongst the shelves, not bothering to flame as there was no one around to see him. He lit a faint light at the end of his wand and began to read the titles. Most of them he passed over as being irrelevant, but every now and then he came to one that looked promising. He pulled the book off the shelves and opened it to the contents page. Sliding a finger down the list of contents, his eyes scanned for a few key words.

Harry spent half an hour searching before he found a book that contained a section that was relevant. Harry slipped the book up his oversized jumper and tiptoed out of the library, easing the door closed. Harry grimaced as the door creaked for the last inch as he released the handle.

Harry paused for a second, listening. The only sound he heard was his own heart thumping in his chest and his own breathing. It seemed that Pince hadn't heard. Phew!

Harry breathed a sigh of relief and turned to leave.

"ello, Potter."

Harry jumped out of his skin as he turned straight into the greasy face of Argus Filch. The man stood not a foot from him, his yellow eyes glaring at Harry. He held a lantern in one hand and a stick in the other. Mrs Norris was standing between his legs, staring up at him; her harsh feline eyes seemed to glare as well.

"Er..." said Harry. "Hello?"

"Think you're funny, boy?" asked Filch, his eyes searching for any sign of a troublemaking. Harry knew he had been caught red-handed stealing a book from the library without signing it out. He hadn't wanted to leave a paper trail, and he also knew that he was not even supposed to have this book. His stomach appeared much bigger than normal thanks to the book up his jumper. Still, the other Harry was expected to be fatter than he was. Hopefully Filch wouldn't notice. He wasn't the sharpest knife in the drawer.

"Not as such," said Harry, not sure if he should offer an excuse, or even what he had been accused of.

"What are you doing in the library?" Filch asked, his eyes scanning Harry for any evidence of wrong-doing.

"What do most people do in the library?" asked Harry before he had a chance to think. He was tempted to ask Filch if he could read, but decided against it. He realised after he had made his first retort that he was supposed to be playing down his character, and arguing with Filch wasn't going to help.

"Now look here, Potter," said Filch. "I can smell trouble from a mile away. I just know you are up to something, boy, and this year I can do something about it."

"Really?" said Harry, used to Filch's threats. Filch couldn't do anything more than refer him to McGonagall.

"Oh yes, Potter," said Filch. "Only been back in the castle for a week and already caught my eye."

"Everyone comes back tonight," said Harry.

"Yes," said Filch, a glimmer of panic and then lust in his eyes. Like a hunter before the hunt, he looked manic. "Bringing Dungbombs, and Fizzing Whizzbees and Merlin knows what else. They think the banned items list is a catalogue."

"Heaven forbid," said Harry, trying not to laugh.

"Must prepare," said Filch to himself. "I'll catch 'em before they even get to the feast. Let them know I mean business, make examples." Harry had no idea what Filch was on about, and he didn't believe for a second that this power trip would last.

"Well, good luck with that," said Harry, turning to leave. "Hope you get them."

"Oh, I will," said Filch, a manic look of desire on his face. Harry walked quickly away and around the corner. Christ, everyone in this world was as mad as a brush. Not wanting to get into any more pointless conversations, Harry headed quickly to the kitchens to grab a baguette and then headed back up to the Tower to start reading. He had an hour before the feast, but he was starving. It wasn't as if the elves would be offended if he didn't clear his plate.

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The common room was not empty, but there were so few people that he had plenty of choice of where to sit. He took an armchair in the corner by the window, from which he could see the room, as well as anyone who entered. He also had his back to the wall, so no one could read over his shoulder. He didn't fancy explaining to people what he was doing reading a book about Ancient Greek Dark and Experimental Magic. The disadvantage of his position was that he was a

long way from the fire. Harry kicked off his shoes and pulled his feet up, sitting cross-legged on the armchair, his cloak pulled around him. He opened and book and flicked to the contents page.

Looking down the list, the areas were certainly experimental, and by the sound of it mostly dark. He made a note to conceal the book from prying eyes. If it was found in his possession, he would face awkward questions, as if the Girl-Who-Lived wasn't suspicious enough already. After tonight, with the rest of the students back, he would only be able to read after dark, in his bed with the curtains pulled and charmed. Still, at least Riddle and McGonagall would be too busy to keep an eye on him.

Harry looked down the contents page. The list covered such wonderful topics as human to animal transplants, the uses of human hearts, and the advantages of cannibalism. The trouble with something that grim is it sparks a morbid curiosity, and Harry was famed for his curiosity. It took a great deal of effort not to turn to that page. Keeping his mind focussed on the job at hand, Harry turned to chapter seventeen, entitled Space and Time. He tapped the entry in the contents with his wand and the pages suddenly began to turn in quick succession, as if a strong wind was blowing them. Two seconds later, Harry was staring at page four hundred and thirty seven, the beginning of the space and time chapter. The title was written in black, though it had faded to green over the years. The bold letters were followed by an image of sundial against a starry night.

"Space and Time," muttered Harry. "Very artistic."

The first paragraph was an introduction, explaining the basic philosophy of time. It mentioned Socrates' specks of dust falling through the hands of time, and other Greek philosophers of the time. Harry didn't need to read these metaphors, or the ramblings of the great thinkers magical and Muggle of 5000 years ago. After a few sentences, Harry began to skim, rather than read. He got the gist of the words, but didn't read properly. It was all rubbish about 'what is time'. On the next page was an explanation of time and space.

The book explained that a person can move in time, without moving space and vice versa. A person can be seen to disappear by moving in time, when they haven't really moved, not as we understand the word, at least'. It was all about perceptions, and caused Harry's head to spin. On the third page, he found something more useful. It was an explanation of the Multiverse. It explained how there are other worlds in parallel with our own. It took three pages, complete with diagrams, to convey the entire theory, and that was just the introduction. Harry read it carefully, trying to take in as much of the theory as possible. It wasn't until he got to the final paragraph that he found a reference to travelling.

*Travelling between universes is highly dangerous. Without such travel, the existence of the Multiverse cannot be proved, and will remain just a theory. However, the dangers associated with such travel are so severe that it raises the questions of whether proving the existence of something that cannot possibly affect this world is worth risking destroying it. Would the knowledge gained be worth the risk? Nature exists all around us in a delicate balance. Forcing a rift in the fabric from which nature is made could have a catastrophic effect on the worlds involved. It is this danger that has forced mankind not to pursue this course of travel. Before*

*further research can be carried out, a safe way to travel must be developed, one that does harm the fabric of space.*

Harry looked up. The book wasn't going to tell him any more about it. It was clearly not a common area of magic, nor a well known one. However, there must be a book somewhere, for two reasons: a, Flamel had found one, and b, they had found a safe way to travel - using the Node. Therefore, someone did research, someone built the Node and so someone had to know. However, if it were law that this was not to be pursued as it was too dangerous, then a law-breaker would have done it. This was something to be found in Dark books, not Light ones. Harry closed the book and rose to his feet. He would need to have a closer look in the restricted section.

For the next ten minutes, Harry skimmed the next few pages. Most of it used such long words that it might as well have been in Greek. This was not going to be easy, and none of what he could understand seemed to relate to him. Maybe finding this information wouldn't be as easy as he had expected. He may have over-simplified things. So much for his great plan.

No, that wasn't right. The plan was good; it would just take more time. The plan would still go ahead, but a fortnight to a month may have been a little hopeful. However, he would make the effort, and hopefully get a breakthrough.

*BOOM!*

There was a deep boom outside, and Harry felt a distant rumble. He spun around instantly, looking for the source. Harry dove across the room, heading for the window. He threw it open and peered out. Smoke was rising from a valley in the trees on the far side of the lake. Harry knew only too well what was down there. Hogsmeade, or more specifically, the train station. The Hogwarts Express was under attack.

Harry dropped the book and rose to his feet. He was about to flume to the train when he paused. This was not his fight, or his world. He wouldn't be here long. Did it matter if he did nothing? The Aurors could handle the Death Eaters. They didn't need him. All it would do would be to draw more attention to him, and that was just what he didn't want to do. He needed to keep his head down and weather his time here. Then again, he didn't know how long he would be here. Still, the point remained that he needed to keep out of the spotlight, and he needed to put his full efforts into leaving.

Even if that meant sacrificing students? Innocents? It was a moral dilemma. Could he stand here and do nothing? Could he let Death Eaters kill people and not care? Hang on, Death Eaters? The Dark Lord hadn't risen from the dead yet, so how could there be attacks? Was this really the Death Eaters? Was Grindelwald already back?

Suddenly, a piercing scream rang out over the forest. Harry scarcely heard it, but it still struck him. It was the sound of terror. Someone needed help. He remembered the last time he was on the train, the panic, the trolley witch, whom he had ordered killed. Harry shivered at the memory.

The image only served to reinforce his first instinct. Harry had made up his mind. He sprinted up the stairs into the boy's dormitory, which thankfully was deserted. He ran to his bed and threw open the trunk that lay underneath it. He threw the book in and pulled out a plain black sock. Using his wand, he enlarged it and cut a hole in the side. He pulled his new balaclava over his head. The window was still open, and Harry felt a chill as he stood back up. Taking a deep breath, Harry ran for the window. He jumped, diving head-first through the window and out into the night.

The air was cold and crisp, and the wind whipped against his clothes as he began to fall. Harry plummeted head first towards the ground, which rose quickly to meet him. Concentrating hard, Harry felt his limbs begin to change. Skin became feathers, toes became claws, and the phoenix took over.

Spreading his wings, Harry pulled out of the dive, gliding over the forest towards the smoke.

Help was on its way.

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The tops of the pine trees skimmed beneath his claws as Harry glided over the trees. He could see the column of smoke rising from the station as he neared. The smell of burning filled his nostrils. Harry was aware that he couldn't just appear in the middle of the fray, lest he be attacked by his own side. He swooped down into the forest, coming to a stop fifty metres inside the wood. He turned back into human form a few feet from the ground, dropping and then rolling to protect his legs. Harry stood up, his balaclava protecting him from being seen, and more importantly identified. Harry withdrew his wand as he crept quickly and quietly closer to the orange glow that was lighting the station. As the trees thinned, he could see the station. The explosion had not happened in the train or near it, but in a clearing on the far side of the track. It was an area of muddy grass where no one went, as far as Harry knew. The train was loaded from the near side, not the side where the explosion had happened.

*Who wastes time blowing up nothing?* he wondered briefly.

Harry could see the students in the windows of the train, terrified looks on their faces. The adults on the platform – the station staff and a few commuters from Hogsmeade – were panicking. They were running around like headless chickens, back and forth; no one was sure of who was in control, what was happening, or what to do. There were no teachers to collect the first years, as they went with everyone else in the carriages after Christmas. As such, there was no one in authority here, as far as Harry could see.

To his right, the carriages were waiting, nearly one hundred metres from where the train had stopped. Harry could see the thestrals ready to go, clearly uneasy at the explosion and subsequent fire. It was then that Harry realised that there was something missing.

*Where are the Death Eaters?* wondered Harry. Where were the bad guys? This was their standard approach – the bang to disorientate people, then a mass strike. Where the hell were they? Binns had said that the Dark Lord had gone for good. It seemed that might not be so. Then again, this

didn't need to be Grindelwald. Maybe Harry was just paranoid and this wasn't the work of the Dark Lord. This was something different - it lacked the swift execution and numbers of the Dark Lord. If he were behind it, there would be white masks everywhere. Anyhow, Harry could investigate motive and perpetrator later. For now, he had to get the students out.

Harry also realised that he couldn't be seen, else he would look like the assailant, dressed all in black and skulking around. Until the Death Eaters, or whoever was behind this, moved, he was stuck. Suddenly a station worker ran towards the train. Finally, one of them had pulled themselves together. Harry had been considering shattering the windows with his wand.

Seconds later the doors of the train opened and students began to spill out, running for the carriages. It was pandemonium. A flood of people in black cloaks were running everywhere in panic, screaming, calling for friends, trying to escape.

Suddenly Harry realised what was about to happen. This was a distraction. Anyone could slip in amongst the students now. In the chaos, who would notice an extra person in the fray, or even one too few? Harry turned and glanced around the edges of the station, looking for anything out of place.

There were two people cowering behind a bench. Threat? Minimal - an old couple and their dog. Too frail to act and too far away. Station staff? Harry counted four, all of whom were shouting for the students to run. Threat? Minimal - they seemed to be helping. The man in navy blue robes by the trees? Threat? Possible, but he had a suitcase and looked ready to travel.

*Snap!*

Something moved between the trees behind Harry. Harry ducked into the shadows and turned to face the sound. He stood still, staring into the darkness, his eyes desperately scanning for any sign of movement, his ears pricked for any sound. There was nothing but the sound of the students running and screaming. This was what whoever this was wanted.

Being careful of the roots, Harry made his way quickly but silently deeper into the woods, in the direction he was sure the sound had come from.

Silence. Harry paused, trying to get his bearings in the darkness. His night-vision was improving, but he couldn't see the figure. He cocked his head to listen. He was so far from the station what he could not longer hear the commotion. The only thing that Harry could hear was his own pounding heart.

Suddenly something moved in the darkness, rustling in the icy leaves. Harry froze, his eyes scanning between the trees. The movement of the branches in the wind caused the shadows cast by the lights of the station to dancing, making it seem like there was movement all around him. Harry silently drew his wand.

A shiver ran down his spine. It was like a horror film, as he stood, back to a dying tree in a dark woods in the middle of the night. He knew someone was here, but now where were they?

*Crack!*

He heard it again. Harry whipped his head around to have a look. There!

He saw a movement amongst the trees, a figure in black. Taking care where he put his feet down, making sure to move in utter silence, hardly daring to breathe, Harry moved slowly closer.

As he neared he realised what he was seeing. A man in black, wearing a balaclava – just like Harry's although probably not made from a sock – appeared among the trees, carrying something large and straight over his shoulder. As Harry drew closer, he realised what it was the man was carrying. It was a student, a girl, under the Petrificus Charm, stiff as a board and hoisted over his shoulder. This had been a kidnapping from the start. This wasn't the Death Eaters, just a maniac trying to kidnap a girl. Admittedly, he was a clever maniac; probably an ex-Auror, given the cunning nature of the operation – create mayhem and then disappear into the shadows.

The man walked as quickly as he could with his baggage away from the mayhem and into the woods. He was approaching from Harry's right. Harry stood against a tree, hopefully concealed by the shadows. It was a large tree, meaning that the roots raised the ground. Harry was a few feet higher than the man, and not in his line of sight.

As the man took another step, he moved into a patch of moonlight. Harry cast an appraising stare at the man. He was quite tall and thin, though he appeared muscular. He was cautious, and his movements were catlike. He made next to no sound as he moved. He was dressed all in black, with no cloak, nothing to flap in the wind lest the movement give away his position. His balaclava covered his face, leaving visible only a pair of dark eyes.

Harry took a step closer.

*EEK!*

A fox bolted out of the recess in which Harry had tried to step. The animal streaked out of its hole, spraying crisp icy leaves in all directions as it darted into the clearing and then off into the shadows. Unfortunately, it had alerted the kidnapper to his presence.

The man's wand ignited, straight at Harry, framing him in a spotlight and crippling his night vision. Coloured blobs appeared all over his vision, blinding him in an instant.

"*AVADA...*"

Harry threw himself blindly to the side as the kidnapper finished the spell. He felt the chill as the curse narrowly passed his body, causing the hairs on the back of his neck to stand on end. Harry landed painfully, the gnarled roots digging painfully into his ribs and leg as he landed. He rolled as best he could in an effort to get out of range.

Harry rolled into cover behind a tree and scrambled to his feet. The woods were still around him, and not a sound was in the air. Harry tried to calm his breathing and heart rate so he could hear. The kidnapper had destroyed his night vision, meaning he could hardly see a thing, while the man still had perfect night vision.

Harry peeked out from behind the tree. The darkness was thick and Harry could hardly see five feet in front of him. He ducked back into cover and poked his head out the other side, staring down at where the man had been seconds before.

*Where are you?* wondered Harry.

His heart pounding, Harry moved quickly between the trees, careful to be as quiet as possible and sticking to the shadows. The kidnapper had seen where he had retreated to, and so he needed to move. Harry ducked behind a nearby tree and peered out.

The figure had put the girl down and disappeared. Harry could see her discarded body lying amongst the roots still unconscious and as stiff as a board. What worried Harry was that her kidnapper was nowhere to be seen. However, Harry wasn't stupid enough to believe he had gone. He waited for nearly a minute in stillness, seeing no sign of movement.

*Maybe he has gone,* thought Harry. *No, not likely.*

It was probably best to try and get the girl out of here. No one knew who he was, so he could risk a quick Flame to get her to safety. Harry stepped nearer, moving into cover behind a tree just one away from where the girl lay. Taking a deep breath, he raised his wand, casting one more look around before he dared move.

He had taken one step around the tree when something grabbed him from behind, grasping the hair on his fringe, yanking his head upwards and exposing his neck, just as he felt a blade press against it.

*Christ!* He had never heard him coming!

There was a pause before he felt a pressure in the small of his back as the man pushed him gently. Harry took the hint and stepped forward, careful to avoid the roots as he moved out into the small clearing. The kidnapper kept his blade tight against Harry's throat and a grip on Harry's hair, guiding him. Harry's heart was pounding as the knife pressed against his jugular; the powerful grip had shifted from his fringe to the back of his neck, meaning he couldn't move his neck away from the blade. In silence, the man marched him forward, keeping the knife pressed against him.

*Okay, Harry,* he thought to himself. *Stay calm, breath, relax. You've been in worse than this before. Just relax. Right, focus. What is around you that you can use?*

Trying to slow his breathing, Harry looked around. There was nothing but the trees, and the helpless girl. Harry was on his own, and his attacker was so strong. Harry felt the hand tighten on his neck, as if the man knew what he was thinking. He glanced around desperately, before remembering what he could do. The man must have felt him tense, for his grip tightened even more, but it did him no good, as Harry was suddenly engulfed in flame and then gone.

As he reappeared, he saw the man gasp in surprise at his now empty hands. Harry raised his wand.

*Stupefy!*

His silent spell left his wand as he jumped out from behind the tree. The man turned instantly, conjuring a shield. As soon as the curse hit, he retaliated with another so quickly that Harry was forced to duck. The curse hit just where his head had been a less than a second ago. He dived to the side to avoid another silent curse, rolling behind a tree and out the other side, muttering his own home-made spell. The ring of blue light appeared on his hand as another curse came towards him. Harry scooped it up and spun to gain momentum before hurling the ring back at the man, his own curse contained inside it.

The man raised a shield but as the curse struck it, the ring disappeared along with the shield with a mighty pop. The man's own curse then ran unimpeded into his stomach. The man growled in pain, falling to one knee.

"It came from over here!" shouted a voice to Harry's right. Both he and the kidnapper looked up to see two figures in robes coming through the trees. Harry turned back to the man just in time to see him Disapparate. Cursing, Harry moved back into the shadows.

"Over here!" shouted one of the robed figures. As he stepped into the moonlight, Harry saw that he was an Auror . "We've got another student."

The two Aurors knelt by the girl. Harry heard one say, "You're safe now" to the girl. She was in good hands, and it was time to get out of here. "Search the area," said one of the Aurors. Harry wasted no time in disappearing in a ball of flames.

He had no idea who the man was, who the girl was or why he wanted her, but whatever the reason was, he was gone and Harry could not be caught. He reappeared on the top of the Astronomy Tower, which was thankfully deserted. He quickly removed the sock from his head, and using his wand he fixed the holes and shrank it. No one would liken a boy with a sock in his pocket to a masked figure in the fight - in fact, no one had even seen his battle with the intruder.

Pocketing the sock, Harry raced back to the castle. Once inside, he turned left and then down the stairs at the end of the passage. He came out on the corridor that led up to the library, but turned towards Gryffindor Tower. Should he bump into anyone, he could say he had been heading up to the library, and feign ignorance of the attack. "Well, I heard a slight rumble, but I thought it was just someone playing exploding snap or something," he rehearsed in his head.

He arrived back in the Tower to find it deserted. He got rid of the sock and then changed into his Hogwarts robes. He used his wand to clean the ash, smoke, dirt, and all other evidence of having been in the forest from his trousers, and then put them in the laundry basket. That done, he cleaned himself up and headed back down towards the hall. He needed to get to the hall, and make it look like he had heard what had happened and was as scared as everyone else.

As he walked, his mind raced. Who was that man? He wasn't a Death Eater, as he had no mask, and this wasn't how Death Eaters operated, if they even still existed. Binns may have been right - the Dark Lord may have gone forever. Death Eaters generally went for massive destruction, mass numbers, and mass loss of life. This was just one man trying to kidnap a girl.

Why would he do that? To kill her? Unlikely, since he had tried to take her alive. Was he a paedophile? Maybe, but unlikely, as it seemed like a targeted kidnap, rather than a random event – he had chosen her. Why? Who was she?

Did it matter? The more Harry thought about it, the more he realised that it was over as far as he was concerned. Aurors would take a statement, she was safe in Hogwarts, the investigation would go ahead at the Ministry. There was no Dark Lord involvement, and even if there was, it wasn't Harry's job to sort it out. He had done more than he had needed to in stopping her kidnap. He had done his part, and now it was over for him.

His own curiosity still had him thinking about the girl as he descended the steps towards the Great Hall, but it was only curiosity. He had no plans to do anything else about it. It was over. Just then he was torn from his thoughts.

"Oh, Mister Potter?" said a sickeningly sweet voice.

Harry's blood went cold, and his stomach clamped tight

Harry froze, his limbs tensing and a thousand vile memories coming to his mind. The back of his hand began to itch at the memory.

It wasn't possible.

Surely not...

Harry turned and found himself looking at Professor Dolores Umbridge.

### ~~~~ Chapter III ~~~~

## Toads and N.E.W.T.s

**"God gives man instincts,  
And then, I swear, for his own amusement,  
He sets the rules in opposition.  
It's the goof of all time:  
Look, but don't touch,  
Touch, but don't taste,  
Taste, but don't swallow,  
And while you're jumping from one foot to the next,  
What's he doing?  
Laughing his sick, fucking arse off"!**

**~ The Devil (Al Pacino) - The Devil's Advocate**

As the old toad approached, Harry could see that she hadn't changed a bit. The sound of her heels echoed off the walls as the whole world seemed to shrink around Harry. It almost seemed that the torches were dimming as she passed. She wore a horrid shade of pink, and her hair was done up in a perm. Her wide, toad-like face was pulled into a forced smile and she carried a clipboard under one arm.

*What the Hell is she doing here?* Harry wondered. Had Riddle seriously not been able to find a better teacher?

As she approached, Harry gritted his teeth. He felt his body tense all over, almost involuntarily. His fists were clenched and he felt a sudden desire to go for his wand. The back of his hand itched, despite her blood-quill never having touched this particular body. The phantom itch was just another sign of the mental trauma she had put him through. Harry felt an overwhelming desire to curse her. It wasn't often that he felt a genuine longing to hurt someone, but this was certainly one of them. Before he had a chance to do anything stupid, the Dark Knight's cold, calculating logic poured back into his mind.

He knew he had to stay calm, keep a low profile, and go about his business of finding a way home. He mustn't give her any sign that he was a threat. The last thing he needed was a string of detentions that would delay his escape. *Calm yourself, Harry.*

Before Umbridge got close enough to discern his expression, Harry forced himself to relax. His fists unclenched and he wiped the sweat from his palms on his trousers. He needed to appear weaker, so he slouched slightly and let his shoulders droop, and adjusted the glasses he had been wearing since he had returned. They didn't magnify or anything, but gave him the appearance of the old, weak Harry. He shifted his weight between his feet, giving him a nervous shuffle. As Umbridge came to a stop, Harry summoned all his self control, and smiled in the face of a woman who had nearly put the Cruciatus Curse on him. In a small but polite voice he said, "Good evening, Professor Umbridge."

"You know who I am?" she asked, her smile wavering and a frown taking its place. Her voice was as shrill and girly as the last time they had spoken, and the frown contorted her face so that she looked like she was about to belch.

Harry cursed his stupidity, but managed to hide his panic from his face. He needed to be more careful about what he said. Proving too knowledgeable made people suspicious, and the whole idea of this conversation was to keep a low profile. "The other students told me," he recovered quickly. "They explained what a High Inquisitor does."

"Excellent," said Umbridge, her smile returning and her voice becoming needlessly high in that sick manner that Harry knew too well. At least he was off the hook about knowing more than he should. However, her tone told him that she was trying to be nice, which probably meant that she was about to make an offer or a threat. She beamed down at him in her toad-like manner. "That's wonderful, my dear. It saves me having to explain everything. Do you have any questions, Mr Potter?"

Harry resisted the urge to ask 'why don't you throw yourself out of a window'. He paused for a moment, making it look as if he was thinking. He furrowed his brow and stared up at the ceiling for a second. "None that I can think of at the moment, professor," he replied, looking her in the eye again, but then looking away in case she saw the hatred etched into his retina. In truth his mind was spinning with questions. Why was she here? Why did Hogwarts have a High Inquisitor? Could it be that history was in fact repeating itself, as in literally a carbon copy of his world? But that would mean....

"Well," said Umbridge, interrupting his stream of thought. "If you do have any questions, my office door is always open, Harry, I want you to know that." It seemed to be her attempt at sounding caring, though she was about as convincing as Voldemort was cuddly.

"Thank you, professor," said Harry, forcing a smile and a polite tone. Inwardly, he was becoming even more suspicious. Dolores Umbridge was only polite when she wanted something. What was she after? What did he have that she wanted? And what would she do to get it?

"You are most welcome, my child," said Umbridge. My child? Yuck! Some people just shouldn't procreate. Harry was amazed that his false smile didn't slip. "As High Inquisitor, I want you to feel that you can come to me with any problem, any at all."

"Like if I was having trouble with school work?" asked Harry, testing the waters. He had given her just enough rope to hang herself with, for her answer would have to correct him, and specify more precisely what she wanted to know.

"No," said Umbridge, a glimmer of impatience crossing her face. "That is for your subject tutors. I am referring to bigger problems, bigger concerns, possibly within your own common room." It had worked, and Harry was beginning to see where this was going.

"I thought we were supposed to go to our head of house about house problems," said Harry innocently. "That would be Professor McGonagall."

"My dear," said Umbridge, putting an arm around Harry and beginning to walk with him in tow, which Harry was sure was not on. Teachers were not supposed to touch a student, except to save their life, lest they be accused of molestation. Harry, however, kept his mouth shut, despite feeling rather sick that she was anywhere near him.

"In recent weeks, in your absence, I'm afraid to say that Professor McGonagall has become... unreliable, and you must not forget that she is only *deputy* head, whereas I carry the power of the *whole* Ministry with me. As such, I am always in a position to help. If you, for example, had suspicions about certain students in your house, whom you thought might be engaging in banned or illegal activities..." So that was it! She wanted a spy in Gryffindor, the slimy toad! She wanted him to report on Katie.

It also told Harry something else - she suspected the Gryffindors of something, and Harry had a fairly good idea what.

"...and you felt morally obliged to inform someone, as you should, I might add, then I would be an ideal person to come to. In the case of certain students, teachers like Professor McGonagall, might show favouritism, or bias, and you might feel threatened by the other students. I want you to know, Mr Potter, that I can guarantee your safety. So if you have the slightest suspicion," she said, coming to the end and so adopting an even higher voice, "I want you to come and see me at once."

"I certainly will, professor, thank you," said Harry, his anger kept in check with icy precision. Umbridge beamed at him - the cat that had got the cream.

"And one more thing, Mr Potter," she said, stopping in her tracks. Harry turned to face her, wondering what she wanted now. "I have spoken to Professor Riddle about your absence. We are both happy for you to resume your place at Hogwarts. Now, he has already outlined what has happened to you, however, I know that he can seem like a very... *daunting* man. I was wondering if there was anything else you might wish to tell me about it, anything else you remember?"

Again, Harry paused looking thoughtful: after a few seconds he shook his head. "No Professor, I think I told Professor Riddle everything." Umbridge looked faintly disappointed, but nodded, the girly smile never leaving her features.

"Well, like I said, Potter," said Umbridge. "My door is always open. Now, I have to get to the feast - I wouldn't want to be late." Without another word, she turned and trotted off down the corridor. After a few paces she came to a stop. "Oh, and Mister Potter," she called. Harry nodded. "Kindly remove that bandana. We can't have the standards of uniform slipping can we?" She quickly turned and headed back to the Great Hall, leaving a much relieved and yet very concerned Harry standing alone. He sighed deeply, glad that it was over. He had no desire to spend any more time in her company than he had to. Personally, he felt he should have been congratulated on his performance, and even given a Bafta.

Taking a second to calm himself, he made a mental note to move with all haste to get out of this hell-hole of a world. If his suspicions were correct, then that one conversation had just told him exactly what was happening. Binns had told him that Grindelwald was gone forever, yet Umbridge was here as High Inquisitor. She had said she carried the full power of the Ministry, and the clubs were banned. Was it possible that what had happened to Harry a year earlier was now happening here? Could it be that this world was almost a carbon copy of his own, and that he was now to live through another year just like the last one? But that would mean...the Ministry had only become silent once Voldemort had returned. Did this mean that Grindelwald was back?

*Calm down, Harry, he told himself. Let's think.*

He didn't know for certain that that was what was happening. It could just be that Riddle was such a crap teacher and general bastard that Fudge, being right for once, had elected to keep an eye on him. Harry certainly would in his position. Thinking about what Binns had said about facts, not rumours, Harry elected to find out exactly what was happening tomorrow morning. He

didn't plan to get involved, but he wanted to know. If he now had to avoid Umbridge at every move, it would create more trouble. He needed to be able to move freely.

To that end, he also needed a new way to conceal his scar. His glasses made him look like the old Harry they knew, but the scar was an instant give away. If the bandana was banned, and he wasn't allowed anything in addition to his uniform he couldn't cover it with headwear. He couldn't remove it, which meant he had to cover it up. How? Harry continued down to the Hall, his mind racing ahead, thinking of all the little tricks he knew of how to conceal himself. None for them were any good for this. As he neared the stairs, he passed a pair of girls. As he approached, the whispers became faster and more frantic. He was aware that they were both watching him. Harry quickly raised a hand to his forehead, covering the scar. He smiled at them as he passed, ignoring the fact that they were pointing wide eyed at him. He passed a few feet from them, and in the dim light, he recognised Romilda Vane, another Gryffindor who was perhaps the shallowest person he had ever had the misfortune to meet.

All she cared about seemed to be the cult of celebrity and boys. She got up at six o'clock in order to do her make up according to Ginny. She couldn't bear to be seen without it plastered so thickly that she looked like she was plastic. You couldn't even see her skin beneath all the.....that's it!

Make up. It was so simple! He didn't have to use complex excuses, new charms, or bizarre clothing. He just needed to commandeer some make-up, liberate it from the girl, so to speak. He didn't like stealing, but his time frame was very short. Having walked past one, he pulled out his wand, his back obscuring what he was doing. He stopped and bent forward, tapping his nose with his wand. Fred and George had once explained the mechanics of the nosebleed nougat, and so Harry was able to conjure a quick nosebleed for himself. He quickly turned back to approach the girls, able to smell them from fifteen feet away due to the needlessly strong perfume. He pinched his nose to try to reduce the flow, and to block out the overpowering smell of jasmine.

"Excuse me," he said politely. "Do either of you have a tissue? I've got a nosebleed." Romilda's companion paled slightly at the trickle of blood that seeped through Harry's fingers. Romilda quickly began to rummage in her handbag (stylishly small, which looked good apparently, but meant she had to carry all her books by hand - it summed up the girl, appearance over practicality), searching for a tissue. Harry could see that the bag was not full of useful things, but rather umpteen pots of various...make-upy...things.

It suddenly occurred to Harry that he had no idea which one he needed. He was able to identify lipstick and an eyebrow pencil, but the rest were all the same to him. Which one did he need? He had heard various words in conversation; foundation, concealer, blusher, mascara, but he had no idea which was which or what they did. Concealer was what he wanted - well the name suggested it at least, but given that it was a scientific fact that girls were weird, it might not be. Either way, Harry had made his choice - now, what did concealer look like?

He had no idea, but it didn't matter.

"Ahah!" Romilda produced a tissue from her bag and offered it to Harry. He took it and held it to his nose.

"Thank you," he said, smiling at her. He then adjusted his gaze, looking past Romilda. "Oooo, a mouse,"

"AHHH!" both girls spun around and looked panicking down the corridor, searching for the mystery rodent.

*Accio concealer!*

A small round disk the size of a pocket watch jumped out of the bag, and into Harry's hand. He thrust it into his pocket and released the spell on his nose. The bleeding subsided as Romilda and her friend turned back to face him.

"Must have been a trick of the light," said Harry. "Sorry. Thanks for the tissue." He turned and headed off at speed towards the hall. Around the corner he ducked behind a suit of armour. There, he opened the 'pocket-watch thing. Inside there was a pale powdery thing, covered in a dry foam sponge'. The inside of the lid was a mirror. Quickly, Harry, copying what he had seen in films though the years, padded the powder onto his forehead. As he watched, the scar disappeared. Harry felt an odd tingling and his scar seemed to vanish. Harry got the impression that this was magical make-up as the powder aligned itself to his skin pigmentation. He regarded himself in the mirror. His scar was gone; his false-glasses were perched on his nose: he looked a far cry from the Dark Knight. It was good enough.

Harry pocketed the make-up and hurried down to the Great Hall to find most people already there. The staff were all there, sitting at the head table, the only one out of her seat was Dolores Umbridge. The benches looked fairly full, and it seemed that almost all of the school was already gathered. Every one of them would want to know what had happened to him. Still, he was used to stares by now. He pushed his fake glasses up his nose, and entered the hall. Harry slipped in and slid onto the end of the bench, next to a seventh year called Lindsay, whom he had hardly spoken to in five years of living in the same Tower.

He noticed that a fair few eyes had followed him in. There were people pointing, staring, and whispering all around the room. Harry felt himself blush, and let his head sink. There was no need to appear proud. He was saved from anyone working up the courage to ask him what had happened by Riddle rising to his feet. Harry noticed that he did not look once at Katie. His voice was warm and jovial as he addressed the school, something Harry wouldn't have thought possible.

"Welcome back," he began, "and a happy New Year to all. I hope over Christmas you have all indulged in many turkeys, lots of Christmas puddings, and several slices of cake, all of which are guaranteed to give your brain a wonderful supply of fuel for the coming term. Soon, we shall eat, but first, as you know from your arrival, we have a few things to discuss. Firstly, I am delighted to inform you that one of our number, whom it was believed until recently had left us for good, has returned to us. I would like to welcome Harry Potter back to Hogwarts. I know you will all be curious about Mr Potter's recent whereabouts, but I must stress that he has been through a terrifying and horrible ordeal, and it would be most unfair for us all to demand details he would rather not relive. As such, I would ask that you all give Mr Potter time. He will tell you what happened in his own time. "

Harry grimaced inwardly. If only Riddle would take his own advice and stop being a suspicious git.

At the front, Riddle continued, "Now, on to perhaps the most pressing topic: the incident on the train. I would like to start by..."

*Hem, hem!*

A small girly cough sounded from the direction of Dolores Umbridge. Harry heard a soft groan as the lady in question got to her feet. It seemed from the reaction that she was as popular here as she had been back home. "If I may, Professor Riddle, I would like to make this announcement myself. After all, the Aurors who so quickly responded were from the Ministry, and it was a Ministry team who conducted the investigation. My information may be more up to date than yours, so I think it would be better if I were to do this part."

Riddle stood staring at her for a moment, before his head bowed slightly and he gestured to the school with an arm. "But of course, Professor Umbridge."

The groan rumbled again as Umbridge stepped around the side of the table and adopted her usual poise centre-stage. Harry raised his head, this time determined to listen to every word, as he did not have Hermione to translate Ministry-bollocks into English. Progress for progress' sake and all that - this time he needed to listen himself. He needed to know as much as he could. Knowledge was power.

"The explosion at the station no more than thirty minutes ago was the result of incompetence by station staff. Allow me to explain." She held up a roll of parchment and took a deep breath before continuing. "This is the official report of the Aurors. It says that the recent refurbishment of the station was extensive. Once it was complete, the station staff failed to conduct a complete survey of the tracks. As such, they missed a series of pots of various substances. These were left on the tracks in the path of the Hogwarts Express. As the train arrived, the heat from the steam in the engine ignited these chemicals, causing the explosion. Luckily, the station staff were quick enough to open the doors and to move you all to the carriages."

*Hang on*, thought Harry. Firstly, the explosion was a good twenty metres from the train and the tracks. Secondly, if it was a problem with the tracks, the train would have been damaged. Then there was the matter of the blame. In one sentence she's accusing the station staff, and then in the next she's praising them? That made no sense. It was a bomb, the smell of carbon and sulphur gave it away. That was no chemical or paint explosion. Harry would have known that even without the presence of a masked kidnapper proficient in the Dark Arts.

In absence of white masks, Harry wasn't going to label this a Death Eater incident, but it was certainly an attack. Whatever it was, it was being covered up. The Ministry seemed to be sticking true to form: they were playing down the threat and covering it up. That, combined with Umbridge being in place, led Harry to one very nasty conclusion: Grindelwald was back and history was repeating itself.

Umbridge continued, "Aurors were on the scene within ten minutes and the situation was under control. Once again, I stress that this was an industrial accident."

"How could the Aurors investigate and file a report in less than half an hour?" asked a Ravenclaw boy loudly.

"Mr Morgan, if you have a question, you will raise your hand," said Umbridge coldly. Morgan did so, but she turned instantly away. Harry felt a flash of anger, remembering when he had been treated with similar negligence.

"I want each of you to know that you are in no danger," said Umbridge in a sickeningly sweet voice. "This was an accident and despite the rumour-mongering of a few students, this was not the work of Dark wizards." She shot a dirty look at Katie.

With that, she sank back into her chair. Riddle once again rose, greeted by a silent hall. Harry doubted half of them had believed that pack of lies. Riddle, it seemed, had nothing more to say, or thought that nothing else was worth saying, for he raised his hands,

"Let us eat," he said, clapping his hands. Instantly the tables were full of food, and the excited buzz of chatter sparked up, including a rather loud, 'Oh, I've been waiting all day for this!' from Ron Weasley's direction. Harry grinned: some things never changed.

Harry ate in silence, not talking to any of those around him, nor listening to their conversations. His mind was miles away, on the Node and how to get it started once again. It was simple in theory, but how exactly did one get ahold of rare books? Umbridge would be checking mail if history really was repeating itself. That meant he couldn't just order one, even if he knew where to order one from. If the Restricted Section didn't have such a book, he would have to look elsewhere, and the only place he knew to start was Knockturn Alley, a prospect he did not relish. He would also have to start befriending Hermione tonight. He would need her help, and an odd request from a friend was better than a random one from a stranger. He made a note to try and speak to her. It was Sunday now, so he would try later, and then if at all possible, sit next to her in a lesson tomorrow. That should get him off to a bright start.

Once the food vanished, Riddle rose to his feet once more. It was the customary spiel about not going into the Forbidden Forest, obeying the Prefects, the extension of the banned-list and such like. When he was done, he signalled for the students to return to their common rooms.

The students began to file out. Harry rose to his feet, keeping an eye on the Headmaster. As he watched, Riddle bent over and whispered in McGonagall's ear. She nodded and then Riddle left through the side door. Harry frowned, but decided that it was none of his business. Hopefully it didn't concern him. He turned and made for the exit, wanting to avoid the stares and to get back to the common room before everyone else, just to avoid the rest of the Gryffindors. As he was about to leave, he heard his name being called. Harry turned to see McGonagall making her way through the lines of students towards him.

"Mr Potter," she said as she neared. "You will accompany me to my office." With that she marched past him and out into the corridor.

Harry wasn't sure if things had gotten better or worse. He was not being stared at much, but McGonagall didn't look best pleased. Was it to do with what Riddle had told her? What had happened? Was he in trouble? This didn't scare him in the traditional sense - he could flame out if all else failed. However, he needed to be at Hogwarts to have a reasonable chance of finding the information he needed. He needed to be somewhere safe, somewhere he knew. If he had been rumbled, then he would have to run, which would cut him off from the world. He wouldn't know what was happening and wouldn't be able to use Hogwarts' great resources.

Harry fell in step behind her as she marched up the stairs and along the corridor in the direction of her office. As she arrived, the door opened for her and she stepped into the office. It looked similar, but more organised than he had seen it in the Unholy Land. There was not a full-scale overt war on in this world, for no one had acknowledged the Dark Lord's return. As such there was less paperwork as she didn't have Order work scattered around, or rather, her Order work was hidden - else she would be arrested.

Harry entered the room after her and shut the door behind him. Without thinking, he crossed to the sofa, just as he had during the Animagus classes in the Unholy Land. He didn't feel comfortable enough with this McGonagall to kick off his shoes and sprawl out with his feet up as he had done in Rose's world, but he definitely felt the need to sit down.

Harry turned and was about to sit when McGonagall looked up from the desk behind which she had sat down.

"Potter, no!" she snapped. Harry froze in surprise at her unprovoked anger. "Come here!" she added quickly. Harry crossed the office quickly, wondering what he had done wrong.

McGonagall had recovered her composure now and looked as calm as ever. She bent down and opened a drawer in the desk, pulling out a pair of spectacles and placing them on her nose. She then took a new file filled with parchments off one of the shelves behind her desk and opened it in front of her. McGonagall flicked through the numerous sheets of parchment until she found the one she wanted and removed it from the folder.

"Your timetable, Potter," she said, holding it out to him. Ah, so that was what this meeting was about. Harry breathed a sigh of relief. He hadn't been found out, wasn't in trouble, and didn't need to run. Harry stepped forward and took the sheet. He stared down at it. Charms, Potions, Defence Against the Dark Arts, Herbology, and Transfiguration.

Not a bad set of subjects, Harry noted. It also raised the point that he was going to have to attend lessons and work during his time here. That would slow him down considerably, but he couldn't just up and leave. For a start they would start looking for him and secondly, Hogwarts was a mine of information. He needed to be here. It looked like he was in for these lessons, no matter what. Defence he was fine with, though Umbridge wasn't going to teach them much. Transfiguration he was fine with as well as Charms. Herbology was average, but Potions was a bit of a surprise. He was amazed he had managed to pass that at all, let alone be good enough for a NEWT. Harry blamed Snape's teaching, of course. *If only I had been taught by the Half-Blood Prince instead of Snape*, thought Harry.

He was suddenly aware of McGonagall watching him. She seemed almost to be sizing him up. Harry tensed, suddenly overcome with the feeling that he was being played or manipulated.

"Now, Potter," said McGonagall once she had his attention. "I want to discuss Potions and Transfiguration with you."

"Er...okay," said Harry, stumped by the statement. What was she on about?

"In your OWLs," began McGonagall. "You achieved an Exceeds Expectations in both subjects. However when we consider that the Acceptable to Exceeds Expectations borderline is 65 percent and your marks in Potions and Transfiguration were 68 and 69 respectively, this would suggest that you are liable to struggle, especially having missed over a month of lessons." Ah, *thought Harry. The penny drops.*

"In Transfiguration, your grades have fluctuated over the last few years; at times they have reached well into Exceeds Expectations, while at other times, they have bordered on a fail. Potter, I am going to be honest with you: unless you can guarantee to work at grade E, I see no place for you in my classes. In addition, you have over a month of work to catch up on, and I am not sure that you can handle that. You will have to catch up in all of your subjects, and that is a lot of extra work. Therefore, in light of this catching up, I think it best we keep you to four NEWTS, not five as is standard. In short, I am giving you the option to drop either Potions or Transfiguration, in order that you concentrate on the remaining four."

Harry nodded. His mind was racing. The initial disappointment he had felt on hearing his results had faded away as he reminded himself that these were not his grades. He was aware that back home, he still had to go through this routine, however these grades did not matter - they were not his. On top of that, he was only doing four NEWTS, which gave him even more time in the week to go about finding a way home. This could be a blessing in disguise. He would most likely be ridiculed by Malfoy, but sod him - Harry wouldn't be around long enough to have to deal with it.

"So, Potter," said McGonagall. "Which would you rather continue with, Potions or Transfiguration?" Harry paused, considering his options. Both would be hard work, even if he put in as little effort as possible, he still needed to submit something for each essay. Lessons just seemed so trivial compared to what he was doing in his spare time, that he didn't really care. He was about to pick one at random but then a thought struck him.

"Professor," said Harry, trying to appear nervous. "Could I take a course that I haven't done before?"

"What have you in mind, Potter?" asked McGonagall, surveying him.

"Well, I was thinking," said Harry. "I might like to try Arithmancy." If he could learn a little about the subject, maybe he could do some of the equations needed to get home by himself.

"I see," said McGonagall. "Potter, not having done the OWL, you cannot take the NEWT, as you simply would not be up to it. Professor Vector might be convinced to take you for an OWL in Arithmancy. You could sit in with fourth years and then fifth years next year. This has been

known to happen in the past, but you must bear in mind that it puts strain on the teacher and on you. Again, you have a month to make up. Potter, it is not unheard of, but you still have a lot of catching up to do, and personally, I feel it would be better to concentrate your efforts elsewhere. Also, you would need to see Professor Vector personally, and convince him that you truly are interested and dedicated to his subject."

Harry thought about it. If he was taking an OWL level class, he wouldn't get up to the standard of equations he needed. If they were complex enough for Flamel to make a mistake, it was highly likely that they were above NEWT standard, so chances were that even a NEWT was pointless - on reflection, it had been a stupid idea. Also, he didn't have two years to study; time was against him. For all he knew, his other self was destroying Hogwarts at this very moment and Ron and Hermione could be dead. He shivered at the thought. No, he needed to find a way home as quickly as possible. Hermione or Vector would have to do the equations for him. Harry didn't like the idea of forcing Hermione into doing anything, but if push came to shove, he would have to use force. She is not the real Hermione, he reminded himself. Knowing two Hermiones from two worlds, he knew this was true, but he had to train himself to get out of this mindset. *She is not real*, he said to himself. *She is not real!*

He turned back to McGonagall. "Yeah, it was a silly idea," he said with a small smile. "I think Potions would be better." McGonagall raised an eyebrow as he rejected her own subject. Harry blushed slightly and looked downwards, half in genuine embarrassment and half to look more nervous. McGonagall looked at him for a minute before tapping his timetable with her wand. As Harry watched, the boxes with Transfiguration on them disappeared.

Harry folded it over and pocketed it without looking.

"Is there anything else, Professor?" he asked. He wanted to get back up to the tower, mainly to get some sleep.

Was it his imagination, or did McGonagall look a little...uneasy? She shifted slightly, and looked as if she was wrestling with her conscience.

"Yes," she said softly, sighing deeply and removing her glasses. "Pot...Harry, take a seat." Harry took a few steps towards the sofa. "No," she interrupted him, "here". She gestured to an armchair near the desk. Cautiously. Harry sank into the chair, resting his elbows on the armrests and holding his hands cupped together in his lap. He was reminded of the hours spent in here learning to turn his body into that of a Phoenix. Harry pushed the idea aside and focused on McGonagall and his act. He consciously interlocked his fingers and began to move them back and forth, appearing nervous and fidgety. He tried to make himself small, as if he were afraid. He had spent many years making Uncle Vernon think he wasn't worth the trouble of hitting or locking up, trying to fade into the background. He was rather good at appearing small and weak.

McGonagall finished polishing her spectacles and placed them back on her nose before turning to face Harry, her expression now less severe. Harry was fairly sure she was about to ask him where he had been. Even teachers, it seemed, wanted gossip straight from the horse's mouth. He was, however mistaken.

"Harry," she began, still looking awkward. "I want to apologise to you." Well, he certainly hadn't been expecting that!

"Why, professor?" he asked, trying not to show his relief.

"Harry, when I escorted you to St. Mungos last December," she began, "the day of the...fire, I... it was only then that I had a detailed look at your file." Harry said nothing. In all honesty, he had no idea what to say, as he didn't know what was in that file.

Harry had no idea what she was on about and decided it was best to keep quiet. He continued to stare, waiting for her to make the next move.

"I had read your file," explained the professor. "I knew what it contained, but for some reason, one I cannot name myself, or even understand, I never did anything about it." Harry sat motionless, staring at his head of house. She shifted in her chair, sighed and removed her glasses, placing them on the desk. Using both hands, she brushed non-existent stray hairs back up over her head, the palms of her hands pressing her skull. As they arrived at the base of her skull, they began massaging her neck. She looked rather tired and weary.

"Harry," she said at last. "What I am trying to say is that I am sorry." Again, Harry did not move. Partially because he didn't know what to say, partially because McGonagall's apology had taken him by surprise and thirdly because he didn't know what the Harry of this world would do if he were here.

"It was my duty, as your head of house, to look after your wellbeing," said McGonagall speaking slowly. It is clear to see that I failed in that respect." There was a pause and Harry felt obligated to speak. He just knew that he had to keep his answers short. Every lie he told had to then be true from then on, and he risked contradicting himself or showing knowledge he shouldn't have if he talked too much.

"You couldn't have known about the fire," said Harry at last.

"The fire..." echoed McGonagall. "You know it still haunts me, Potter. The heat, the smell. On occasions, I still have nightmares. It is a miracle that you survived. However, my failure goes back long before the fire, long before this year. In fact, I think it goes right back to the time I came to visit you in Little Whinging, do you remember?"

Harry stiffened. He had no idea what had happened. McGonagall had come to Privet Drive? But he wasn't the chosen one. Why would the Order...Oh! Suddenly he understood. She had delivered his first Hogwarts letter.

"You were so young and so scared," said McGonagall, reminiscing. "I knew that your mother and aunt had not gotten on well. When I saw you, dressed in those oversized jumpers, meek as a mouse, constantly glancing at your uncle before answering, I knew what it meant. They had tried to suppress the magic out of you."

Harry nodded, assuming the Dursleys wouldn't have changed.

"Having seen the kind of upbringing you had had," said McGonagall, "having been shouted at by your uncle for bringing what he referred to as 'unnaturalness' to his house, I should have paid you closer attention, Harry. Now it is not my wish to belittle or insult your family in front of you: however, I believe you to be sufficiently emotionally mature to be able to deal with the fact that you had a rather painful upbringing, and at that the view of you taken by Mr and Mrs Dursley was atrocious and cruel."

"What are you trying to say, professor?" asked Harry.

"That I realise now that I made some serious errors of judgement," said McGonagall. "I wish I could take them back, but I can't. I am hoping, Mr Po...Harry, that you will accept my apology and that we can start again."

"How do you mean, professor?" asked Harry, though he had a feeling that he knew where she was leading him.

"I can appreciate that you are in a unique situation," said McGonagall. "After what you have been through, the world must seem a hostile place." Harry raised an eyebrow. Her words were more appropriate, than she could ever know. "If you ever need any help, if you ever need someone to talk to, then my door is open. If you have any worries, concerns, or suspicions about yourself or any of your fellow students, you can come to me."

"Suspicions?" The word echoed in his mind. This was not the first time that evening that he had heard that word. It was not the first time he had been asked if he had any about certain students.

"These are confusing times," said McGonagall, shifting slightly. Harry's semi-professional eye could see that she was uneasy, though she was doing her best to hide it. "It is important to know who we can trust."

"Ah," said Harry, understanding. This was the same talk he had had with Umbridge just an hour ago. Both parties had already tried to recruit him. She was no better than Umbridge.

Harry didn't feel in any way flattered, for they were recruiting him simply as another spy, another person who could see what Katie was doing. He felt rather insulted that he was being used, but realised that that was how it had always been. Dumbledore had used Harry back home, and then tried to again in the Unholy Land. Harry would have felt better if they were recruiting him as a fighter, not a sneak, but he realised that they knew nothing. Either way, it didn't affect him - he was not on the Ministry's side, nor was he on the Order's side. He was on his own side.

"Do you understand what I am trying to say?" asked McGonagall.

"Yes," said Harry. A thought suddenly occurred to him. He could test how close to his own past this world really was. If he was wrong, the worst that could happen would be he would appear mad - his faulty memory could be blamed for that. It was time to test McGonagall. "Progress for progress's sake must be discouraged," said Harry clearly.

McGonagall didn't move, save for her eyebrows narrowing just slightly. She had tried to hide the reaction, but she couldn't. It was clearly not what she had been expecting. Then again, reciting the Umbridge doctrine would be enough to arouse her suspicions. By her reaction, Harry now knew for certain that Umbridge was here for the same reason she had been in his world, and McGonagall and Riddle's Order were indeed working behind the scenes. Harry now had to make the point that he was not on Umbridge's side either.

"Fudge and Riddle can argue over who is in charge until they are blue in the face," said Harry calmly. "You're not the first to try this, Professor, and rest assured that I have given Dolores Umbridge the same answer as I will give you. This is your fight, not ours. Leave the students out of it." With that, Harry turned to leave. He didn't want to show any more knowledge than he had already. Thus far, he hadn't told her anything that he wouldn't have remembered or been told by the other students.

It seemed from McGonagall's responses that history was indeed repeating itself. She hadn't questioned anything he had said, even the name of the Minster. It was Fudge here, not Crouch. This seemed to be a carbon copy of his own world. That meant that the Dark Lord was alive and well - and plotting. Assuming it was a perfect copy, Katie would be having one hell of an awful time, and there was worse to come. Although it was none of his business, Harry decided to quickly try and help her.

Just before he reached the door, he turned back to his Head of House.

"Instead of trying to get other students to spy for you, why doesn't Riddle just talk to her?" asked Harry, before disappearing out into the corridor.

He paused outside and took a deep breath. Riddle and Umbridge were both trying to get the rest of the students to spy on Katie and her friends. The poor girl was being watched from every side, and didn't know who to trust. Riddle was just as guilty of manipulation and underhanded tactics as Umbridge. Then again, so was Dumbledore.

Harry thought back to what it had been like when he had been in Katie's position. He remembered the slander, the dirty looks he had received. He remembered the detentions, the Blood-Quill, the school under the cloak of tyranny. He shivered at the memory. Only it was no longer a memory, was it? It was happening right here, right now, in this very school. The only difference was that he wasn't the target. Yet he still felt pity for Katie. All those people who didn't feel it for him last year; the thought made him angry again. How could they have given up on him like that? They had known him long enough. How could anyone believe that he would make it all up?

Those same stupid cowards who followed the Ministry like lambs to the slaughter were now casting the same hateful eye at Katie. Admittedly, Harry knew more than most - in fact, more than anyone in this universe - but he still failed to see how anyone could think that someone like Katie would make it all up. Poor girl.

And it would only get worse. In a few months, she would head to the Ministry and have her Godfather killed before her eyes. She would use the curse on Bellatrix and from there...well,

from there even Harry didn't know what would come next - unless she jumped into another universe...oh, that was too confusing to think about.

Harry stood back upright. Poor Katie. Still, it was the way of things. She needed to go through that. The experience would make her strong and give her the will to fight. Knowing the prophecy, knowing the reason why she was in this situation, she could then move on.

It also showed that Riddle was no better than Dumbledore. Harry sighed. Two great minds and both of them managed to overlook the simplest of emotions. On reflection, Harry realised that certain people had to forego the luxury of being able to feel, so that the masses could have it. People like Dumbledore, Riddle, and Harry himself, as a soldier, needed to be able to switch off his feelings and do some ungodly things in order to preserve the happiness of the masses.

*How does God weigh that up?* wondered Harry. Some terrible sins done to protect people? Taking a sin upon oneself to spare the innocent? Would He understand? Harry didn't believe that confession purged the soul, in fact he didn't really believe at all. He had grown up in Muggle England, being told that there was a God, but not really believing it. He sat on the fence. However, having seen more of existence than anyone else, he couldn't help but wonder if something had made it all this way, and if that were true and Harry was ultimately to be judged... what would be the verdict? Could he put his hand on his heart and say that of all the evil he had done, all the lives he had taken, that it was all for a good cause?

He shook his head. He had done some god-awful things in his lifetime. He couldn't help but wonder: if he were in Riddle's place or Dumbledore's, would he make the same choice?

"Is he gone?" came a voice from inside the room.

Harry froze. It was a male voice, and one that he had no difficulty in recognising. It was Riddle. The son of a bitch had been in there through that whole conversation! He had been spying on Harry. Harry felt a surge of anger and a deep-rooted desire to go in there and blast Riddle from here to Kingdom-come.

Suddenly Harry realised that if he was asking if Harry had gone, then McGonagall was about to check. He needed to make himself scarce, but this was a conversation he wanted to hear.

*Two can play at the spying game,* Riddle, Harry thought.

"*Gravitate Invertus!*" he hissed, swishing his wand as Sirius had taught him in the Unholy Land. His feet left the floor and he felt an odd blend of spinning and falling as the world rotated around him. Harry fell upwards to the ceiling, landing gently amongst the rafters and looking 'up' at the door below him. It was disorientating to stand upright on the ceiling with gravity holding you down, which was in fact up. It was confusing.

He recovered quickly from the disorientation and crouched down in the shadows, twenty feet above the floor. The advantage of castles was that they were on such a scale that the ceilings afforded a lot of shadow to move amongst.

Suddenly McGonagall appeared below him, stepping out into the corridor and looking in each direction. She stared in each direction for a few seconds and then, satisfied that they were alone, she turned back to face the door and Harry saw her nod. Harry's body tensed as he watched Riddle appear from beneath an Invisibility Cloak, which he then folded and hung over his arm. Harry's fists clenched as he watched the deceitful bastard. He felt a strong desire to curse Riddle, but managed to keep his calm. That must have been what he had whispered to McGonagall about at the end of the feast. Sneaky conniving tosser!

The bastard had been hiding somewhere in the room under that cloak...the sofa! That was why McGonagall had stopped him from sitting down on it, not once, but twice. How he had failed to pick up on it? He had nearly sat on Riddle! Harry nearly laughed, but his anger stopped him. How dare Riddle try and spy on Harry! In truth, Harry knew that he had been for some time, but he was so frustrated with himself for not realising that Riddle had been in there that he needed someone to blame.

"What do you think?" McGonagall asked. Riddle looked up at her, pausing for a moment. Although the corridor was gloomy, Harry could see the troubled expression on his face.

"Curious," said Riddle, stepping out into the corridor, his voice hushed. What Harry wouldn't have given for a set of Extendable Ears. "His responses to you bringing up his family were shallow, and he maintained a level of calm I would not have expected from him."

"He's too calm," agreed McGonagall. "All that talk about his mistreatment and he brushed it off like water off a duck's back."

"Yet he seemed to understand, to remember," continued Riddle. "He knew exactly what you meant, it just didn't seem to affect him. He is Harry Potter, but something in his mind, his mentality, has changed a great deal." Harry pondered this. So Riddle accepted that he was who he claimed he was, but was suspicious of his change of character. *Must tone down, must tone down*, Harry told himself.

"I cannot help but wonder why he wanted to do Arithmancy, either," said McGonagall. "He has no history or interest in the subject." Harry took a deep breath. Surely Riddle wouldn't be able to link that small fact to what he had planned, would he? It was a hell of a jump.

"That, Minerva," said Riddle, "is the least of our worries." Harry let the breath go. *Phew*. Harry knew that the most important thing was that Riddle must never learn about the Node.

"So what have you found out?" McGonagall asked him. Harry's ear pricked up. This was what he was here for, what he wanted to hear.

Riddle sighed. "I have spent the last two days visiting all the Muggle hospitals in reach of St Mungo's."

*Uh-oh*. Harry's blood ran cold. He froze and a chill ran up his spine. *Christ, what had Riddle found?*

"None of them treated any burn victims matching Harry's description in the whole of December," Riddle announced. "There are no records of any comatose teenagers, either." Christ, he had been found out! Riddle knew he was lying! What now? Would Riddle hunt him down? If he did, Harry would have to run. Where would he go, what would he do? Would he end up on the streets?

"Maybe he wasn't burned; his magic might have..." began McGonagall. Yes, maybe McGonagall could talk him out of it.

"It gets worse, Minerva," said Riddle, shaking his head. God, what else had he pieced together? "The Muggle Fire Brigade were never even called to St Mungo's."

Mary, mother of God. Riddle had proof that Harry had lied to him. Was the Node safe? What would Riddle do? Try and capture him? That wasn't a problem, Harry could Flame out in an instant if needs be, but doing so would cut him off from Hogwarts. It would take longer to get back - he would have to steal resources and become a criminal just to get home.

"But that means that the whole story is a lie," said McGonagall, voicing what Harry and Riddle had each been thinking.

"A lie he was able to tell me to my face," said Riddle, bowing his head and massaging his forehead. He suddenly seemed much older and more tired than he was. "I was not looking for a lie, I grant you that, but he was still able to Occlude his mind. This is very concerning, Minerva. We have no idea what has happened to Harry or who taught him Occlumency."

"Is that really important?" asked McGonagall. "Does it matter who taught him?"

"Yes," said Riddle. "Occlumency is not easy and takes much practice. If you were to spend time teaching or learning it, you can be sure that it was for a very good reason. Why was he taught it? Why does he need it, or think that he needs it, unless to be able to lie and hide his thoughts? What is he hiding? Who wants him to hide whatever it is?"

"I see your point," said McGonagall. So did Harry. He couldn't fault Riddle on his logic. He did have a keen mind, when put to a good use. "Perhaps we should get him to teach Miss Bell," suggested McGonagall.

"No, Minerva," said Riddle, looking up sharply. "I think that putting Kathryn and Harry together is probably the most dangerous thing we could possibly do." Harry made a note - Riddle now considered him a danger. He needed to be doubly careful if Riddle was now to be doubly sneaky.

"You think he might be dangerous?" asked McGonagall.

"His response to your suggestion that he report to you about Miss Bell would suggest not," said Riddle, looking thoughtful. "If anything, he seems to be protecting her. He has told two different people that he will not spy, and suggested I allow myself to come close to Miss Bell."

"He did show a remarkable amount of intuition in realising what was happening," said McGonagall. "He knew you were the one watching her. The boy has a keen mind." Harry grimaced, had he really been that obvious? In hindsight yes. He had thought he was doing the

right thing, staying neutral and casually mentioning helping Katie, but it seemed he had done the opposite, and become more involved. Harry cursed his own stupidity.

"What worries me," said Riddle, "is his advice for me. He said I should get close to her - the one thing that I am trying my best *not* to do. Look at the evidence: he knows more than most people should about the situation and he is tempting me to do what Grindelwald wants me to do."

"You believe he is working for You-Know-Who?" asked McGonagall, outraged. Harry felt an equal rush of outrage at the accusation. He was NOT a Death Eater. He also felt a glimmer of gratitude that McGonagall didn't believe that.

"I do not know," said Riddle. "He doesn't seem to be, but someone has taught him these skills. Harry is a walking, talking contradiction. Ignore the fact that he is hiding something and seems to hate me. If you speak to him, he seems generally a nice enough person; polite, courteous, if a little distant, and seems like he was trying to help Kathryn. However, he arrived armed to the teeth, he can block his mind, and his mind is sharper. In his conflict last week with Mr Malfoy, he seemed more assertive, and yet so gentle. Instant aggressive reaction, but then backs down from any form of a fight. I can't profile him, Minerva. I can't say how he will react in any given situation. My only thought is that he bears no ill will towards the students."

"So what do we do about him?"

"At present, nothing," said Riddle. "I do not feel he poses a threat to the students around him, though we must step up our surveillance. Also, we must insure that he and Kathryn are never left alone together. I fear his effect on her would be most negative, and she will need to stay focused."

McGonagall nodded. "I will endeavour to keep an eye on the pair of them. I think Mr Longbottom could be convinced to ensure that Potter and Bell are never left alone. If he were to overhear a conversation, for example." It was Riddle's turn to nod.

"I shall leave it in your capable hands," he said to her. "As for now, Minerva, we should get some sleep. Good night." He bowed slightly.

McGonagall checked her watch and nodded before retreating into her rooms. Riddle waited until the door had closed before turning on his heel and heading off in the direction of his office.

As Riddle disappeared down the corridor, Harry breathed a sigh of relief. He was gone.

Harry dropped down to the floor and took a moment to steady himself.

Well, that conversation had certainly been enlightening, and was definitely cause for concern. Riddle knew he had never been to a Muggle hospital. He was suspicious enough to set up a meeting with McGonagall and watch it. He also didn't want Harry anywhere near Katie. He was most likely protecting her from Harry. Still, it didn't matter. Katie didn't really concern Harry. She would have to go through the upcoming events in order to learn from them. That was what she was meant to do. It wasn't his fault or his problem.

Still, Riddle was getting more suspicious, and that wasn't good. Katie was suspicious too, but she hadn't the resources to investigate properly. Riddle was more of a concern. Harry had better step up his attempts to find a way home, and quickly. Riddle was hatching a plan to monitor Harry and Katie, possibly using Neville. Harry would need to keep his ear to the ground in order to avoid these little traps. Now the students were back and it was harder for anyone to monitor him, he should have been free to search, but with Riddle, Umbridge, McGonagall, and Katie all watching him, it wasn't going to be as easy as he had first thought. Still, he did need to make a start. Tomorrow, it was time for a quick visit to Borgin and Burkes.

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Katie scuffed her feet as she wandered aimlessly down the endless passages of the East Wing. The sound of her scraping soles echoed off the walls in a rough hiss. The sun had set hours ago and the only light came from the flickering torches. Yet, it didn't matter for she hardly noticed them as she passed, walking onwards with no purpose or destination. Her only objective was time. She wanted to be alone.

*"Kill the spare!"*

Those three words echoed through her mind. He had killed Cormac just for being there. And then, a few hours ago, someone - and she had a fair idea who - had detonated a bomb at the station in Hogsmeade. Then Umbridge had hinted that Katie had made it all up at the feast. Inside, Katie was a turmoil of emotion.

So it had finally begun. He had been back for over six months. The utter silence of the first term had been a nightmare. She had endured the slander, the insults, and the hostile gazes for four months. Now that there had been an attack, albeit a rather small one, now perhaps someone would believe her. That was a rather selfish point of view, but she couldn't help feeling that way.

Another strong pang she felt was guilt. Luckily no one had died, but it was close enough. An attack on Hogwarts, on her friends, was a strong message. Grindelwald was back and he was starting his campaign against Hogwarts. It was odd that he had been quiet so long, but then again, if the Ministry was ignoring him, he was probably taking the time to quietly build an army. She guessed that this attack meant he was now ready. War was imminent. Katie was scared - not that she would admit it to anyone. How many would die before it was over? How many more Cormacs would there be? How many more of her friends would be made to suffer?

*OOF!*

Her foot hit something warm and soft. She stumbled forwards, pressing her hands against the wall to try and steady herself. She managed to regain her balance and, having righted herself, stared down into a pair of heavily magnified eyes.

"Washhhh where you'rrre....hic....gowwwing!" said an indignant voice from the gloom at her feet.

"Professor Trelawney?" said Katie, kneeling down next to her. By the light of the burning torches, she could see the professor slumped against the wall, her shawls falling down over her shoulders, her glasses crooked and her hair a mess. Katie didn't need to see the empty bottle of sherry by her side, as the smell of her breath was enough to alert anyone within half a mile to the fact that she was drunk.

"Are you alright?" asked Katie, not knowing what else to say. The last time she had seen Trelawney, Umbridge had been trying to evict her. Riddle had taken pity on her, though, and she had been allowed to stay. Part of Katie thought that it would be better for her to have gone, but she did pity the so-called Seer. Riddle too seemed to pity her. Although Katie recalled him mentioning that he didn't overly value Divination, and thought that she had made only two correct prophecies in her life, he had still taken pity on her and allowed her to stay in the castle.

Katie hadn't heard a peep from her ever since, until she had literally stumbled across her having passed out in a corridor. Katie grimaced. It shouldn't really be her job to get her back to her rooms, wherever they were. She wasn't even a prefect, but she also knew that she couldn't just leave her alone. Trelawney might wander off again in her drunken state, and there were many things in the castle that could potentially be dangerous in her state, the most prominent of which was Peeves.

"Come on, Professor," said Katie, taking the professor by the hand and pulling the empty bottle free from her grip and slipping it into her own pocket. She hoisted the professor to her feet. As Katie released her, she fell back against the wall for support, though she managed to remain standing. She looked around the corridor, as if having awoken from a daze.

"I'm late for me lesson," she announced, pointing at the setting sun. Lessons hadn't restarted yet, and even if they were running, Trelawney was, in fact, about five hours late, but that didn't seem to bother her. She pushed off the wall, and managed to stagger a few steps in the wrong direction. Katie managed not to laugh and grabbed the Professor by the arm.

"Come on," she said gently, pulling the professor around to face her.

Suddenly Trelawney's head snapped up to face her. With an unheard-of burst of strength, Trelawney grabbed her by the shoulders and forced her back against the wall, any sign of dizziness or incoherency gone. Katie cried out in surprise as Trelawney brutally forced her against the wall, her face inches from Katie's.

When she spoke, the voice was not her own. It was a voice that Katie had heard but once before.

*"He shall come to you on swift wings, a stranger from an unholy land," she rasped, her voice croaky, deep and vacant, "and disaster shall follow in his wake. My last shall be re-written, your future re-cast. But beware your guardians; each will tempt you into their own darkness...choose wisely, Chosen One...Your fate and the Knight's are now entwined. He is not as strong as he appears. His life now hangs in the balance, but it is you who must choose for him, and with your choice, he may forever be lost to this world...choose wisely, Chosen One, choose wisely."*

With that, her eyes rolled upwards into her head and her body went limp, slumping to the floor in a pile. Katie was too shocked to move. She stood shaking for nearly half a minute before coming to her senses, the words playing over in her mind.

*That was the same voice she used when she predicted....oh my GOD!*

It was a real prophecy, just like the one she had made all those years ago! She struggled to remember all that had been said. A stranger was coming, who would tempt her - no, her guardians would tempt her. Her fate was entwined with the night and someone's life was hanging in the balance. She had to protect whoever it was. Katie's head was spinning.

She stepped away from the wall, her mind racing. Katie turned to head back to the common room when her foot came into contact with something warm and soft. She looked down.

Of course! Trelawney. In light of the prophecy, she had completely forgotten what she was doing here and with whom. Not bothering with manners any more, she pulled her wand out of her pocket and muttered the Levitation charm. She had no idea where Trelawney was staying, so the Hospital Wing seemed to be the best choice. Madam Pomfrey could give her some potion and she would be as right as rain.

Katie came out of the passage onto the East staircases.

"BELL!" she turned to see Professor Sinistra coming towards her, darting up the stairs. "What has happened here?"

"I found her drunk, professor," said Katie, holding out the bottle she had confiscated.

"Ah, yes," said Sinistra, taking the bottle. "She was always fond of a drop of sherry."

"She's had a little more than a drop," said Katie, looking down at the unconscious professor.

"Hmmm," said Sinistra. "Very well, Miss Bell, return to your common room. I shall see to it that Professor Trelawney gets to the Hospital Wing."

Katie didn't need telling twice and turned on her heel, heading back to the common room. She needed to write this down.

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"Is this all of it?" asked Hermione, staring down at the parchment in her hands.

Katie nodded. She had written down everything that Trelawney had said. She was now sitting with Ron, Hermione, and Neville in the farthest corner of the common room. Luckily for them, two third years who now were employees of Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes were displaying the latest merchandise courtesy of Fred and George Weasley. A crowd had gathered round the two lads in question, meaning that no one was near where Katie and the gang were sitting and the room was loud enough for them not to be overheard.

Neville and Ron leaned in to read the parchment over Hermione's shoulders.

"Kay," said Neville, looking her straight in the eye. "Sorry, but I have to ask - are you sure this isn't standard home-grown Trelawney BS?" Katie had expected it. Neville had a good mind, although somewhat irrational at times. She knew he or Hermione would ask that question.

"No," said Katie adamantly, shaking her head. "Trust me, I know this is real. She went from drunk to... weird, almost possessed, in an instant and then back again. It was just like a couple of years ago. This is one hundred percent real." She leaned back in the chair, her arms wrapped around her, as she stared defiantly at the group, as if daring anyone to accuse her of being wrong.

"Then you have to share it with Riddle," said Hermione. "He needs to know." This was something else that she had expected, and she had made up her mind.

"No," said Katie firmly, shaking her head again.

"Look, I know he's been ignoring you," said Hermione. "But he needs to see this - it's important."

"He doesn't have time for anyone this year," said Katie. "He comes and goes like the wind, probably up to his eyeballs trying to find out what is happening with Grindelwald - get a grip, Ron - and he doesn't need to be bothered by this."

"But this is important," protested Hermione. "A prophecy, a real one: Katie, we can't just sit on this."

"All he'll do is nod and then tell me to go to bed," said Katie. "And anyway, the prophecy itself says that it's my choice, not his."

"But he could at least give you some advice," said Ginny.

"And help you make an informed choice," said Hermione. God, was everyone against her? Katie grimaced in frustration. Didn't they see that Riddle didn't have time for this? Her anger was so close to its boiling point. The headmaster was always too busy for her these days, and so he was too busy for this.

"He's never here," said Katie, her anger boiling over. "He's always off doing something with the Order. He doesn't need to know! When we have something more concrete, we can go to him. Look, I know you are trying to help, but please, let's deal with this ourselves."

Hermione didn't look convinced and sat glowering for a second before nodding. Ginny exchanged a glance with Neville, who shrugged. Katie got the distinct impression that she was being humoured. Yet, she managed to stop herself objecting and returned her attention to the prophecy. Hermione's eyes had returned to the parchment; she began to read aloud.

"He shall come to you on swift wings, a stranger from an unholy land," she said. "I think we need to keep an eye out for anyone new, anyone we don't know." Hermione looked thoughtful, as if she was scanning her memory for anyone new who had arrived recently, or anyone from an 'Unholy Land'. She evidently drew a blank.

"He could be from Israel or Palestine," suggested Ron.

"Israel is the Holy Land," Katie corrected him. "Not the *unholy* land, though considering they haven't stopped shooting at each other since the second world war...anyway, that's beside the point. I doubt this stranger will be from the Middle East."

"The stranger from the unholy land," said Hermione. "I'm positive I've heard that expression before. Where on earth was it?" She leaned back into her chair, staring into space. Katie could almost see the cogs whirring.

"Whoever he is," said Ron, "he can't be good. Disaster apparently follows in his wake. But what does 'my last shall be rewritten, your future re-cast' mean?" Katie shrugged.

"Beware your guardians; each will tempt you to his own darkness," said Neville, reading the next line aloud.

"I have a feeling it is not talking about my aunt and uncle," said Katie.

"They are all male, whoever they are," Ron pointed out, "*his* own darkness, not *their* own, or *her* own. Also, it says 'his own', not 'the'. These guardians appear to both be dark."

"Could one be Riddle?" asked Neville. "He apparently guards you. And if he is, it's another reason not to tell him about the prophecy."

"He isn't dark," said Katie. "Unless you count his hair, but I doubt prophecies would trouble themselves over hair colour. It can't be Riddle, so who else? Any thoughts, Hermione?"

"No," she said. "There was a book called a Stranger in a Strange Land. It was about a boy who was raised on Mars by Martians. When he was almost grown-up he came to Earth. It was so different from his home world, so strange, and as it turns out he didn't belong there. Hence the title."

"Indiana Jones once said he was a pilgrim in an unholy land," said Neville all of a sudden. "I love that film - one thing Muggles definitely do better than us - entertainment, except Quidditch of course. Anyway, the thing is though, if this is a true prophecy, a message from beyond, it probably wouldn't reference literature or cinema."

"I think we are taking this a bit too literally," said Katie. "I think it is safe to assume that we will meet a stranger from some far distant shore, somewhere we think is evil or Godless. We also know that I have to beware my guardians. Now what about the next bit?"

"Choose wisely, chosen one," said Hermione. "That's pretty obvious. Your fate and the night are now entwined."

"God knows," said Katie.

"He isn't as strong as he seems to be. His life hangs in the balance but it is you who must choose for him, and with your choice he may forever be lost to this world," finished Hermione.

"Whose life hangs in the balance?" asked Ron. "Who is 'he'?" Katie had a suspicion that he was worried it might be him. "And what was that about the night?"

"Whoever it is," said Neville, "it sounds like you will have to choose whether or not he dies."

"Obviously no," said Katie. She wouldn't let anyone else die in this. Cormac would be the last!

"I fear it will not be that simple," said Hermione. "Fate wouldn't have warned you if it was an easy choice. We don't know who this man is or how important he is. We don't know what he has to do with this, though if it is this stranger, he may well be dark. We also don't know what he has to do with the night."

"We won't know exactly what it means until it happens," said Ginny, looking thoughtful.

"Really?" asked Katie, her voice oozing sarcasm. "I never realised..."

"My point," said Ginny, her tone defiantly calm, as if battling her own anger, "was that we can not guess what it means. You have two choices. Basically, you can face it or run from it. You can go searching for all Israelis in this country and make yourself paranoid, or you can wait, let them come to you. If you let things unfold, not tell Riddle, and see what happens, you may discover more."

Katie paused, thinking about what had just been said. She didn't want to live in fear, anymore than she already was. No, Ginny was right - it was better to carry on, come what may.

"You're right, Ginny," conceded Katie. "Sorry." Ginny shrugged. She wasn't entirely happy with Katie's behaviour, but accepted the apology to maintain the peace.

Katie rested her elbows on her knees and leaned forwards. She was exhausted, and this prophecy was as vague as they come. None of it made sense, and it only served to add to her worries. She glanced around the room. The fire was burning, and the WWW salesmen were demonstrating the latest gadgets of the Weasley twins, suitable for Umbridge avoidance. How innocently they all went about their lives. How she envied them.

She glanced at the couple playing chess on the other side of the room. She could imagine herself as one of those pieces, with Riddle and Grindelwald moving them around the board, and her powerless to do anything else. Was she always to be a slave of their game? Couldn't she take charge of her own life? No, it seemed. There were too many others who would get hurt. How many pawns would be sacrificed?

Was she the king? Moving slowly, one step at a time, not being able to venture into check, where the other side might be able to attack her? Was Riddle the queen, darting in every direction, taking pieces and protecting her? The irony of the genders was quite amusing. Hermione would be the bishop, the one who kept her on track with her preaching from the good book, or rather a library full of them. But what of Ron and Neville? Were they the castles, her home who came in straight lines to save her? Were they the knights who moved in strange patterns through other pieces to ride in and save...

"Knights!" she exclaimed, sitting bolt upright. Hermione jumped as she did.

"Your fate and the knight's are entwined!" she repeated, her heart pounding and her face showing her excitement. "Knight with a 'k'. We will meet a knight." She looked around as the others took in her theory.

"Err..." said Ron, glancing at Neville who shook his head. "As far as I know, there are no knights in our world. Wizards don't officially exist, so we can't really be knighted."

"What about Sir Cadogan," asked Katie. "He's a knight."

"A nitwit more like," said Ron.

"He was a Muggle knight who stumbled across a dragon and so into our world," said Hermione. "He was not a wizard."

"But there are suits of armour all over the castle," said Katie, convinced she was right. "They were worn by knights."

"This is a castle," said Hermione, to Katie's ear condescendingly, "They're decoration. What good is a sheet of metal against a curse? With magic we can remove it, melt it, transfigure it, curse it, and God knows what else. They are for decoration, and Peeves' amusement." Katie grimaced in frustration. She was probably right, as usual. But Katie had been so convinced...

"How do we know a Muggle knight isn't going to come into this at some point?" asked Katie, racking her brain for another solution.

"We don't, but it seems so...unlikely," said Hermione.

"About as unlikely as having your parents killed when you were a baby, growing up constantly being stalked by the same man who most people thought was dead, and then being entered illegally into a tournament and your blood being used to bring him back to life, after he killed your friend in front of you. *That*, is unlikely. By those standards, a Muggle knight seems laughably easy to imagine."

Katie was aware of how snappy her tone sounded, but she didn't care. Why was she so stressed these days? Lack of sleep, Riddle's ignoring her, generally Umbridge frustration. Her blood seemed to be boiling all the time now.

"Yeah," said Ron, "but..."

"Heads up!" hissed Neville. Katie turned to see Harry Potter come back into the room. He gave a small nod to a group of second years by the door, one of whom spoke to him, most likely welcoming him back. As Katie watched, Harry crossed the room and headed for the stairs. He was a few feet away when he paused.

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Harry hesitated. What had seemed like a cold and easy decision while all alone on the opposite side of the castle was a little different when he could look into her eyes. He had spotted her instantly as he had stepped into the room; his eyes had been doing the instinctual search for a threat. But then something else had happened. The instincts of the Dark Knight were overruled by someone else. Harry Potter briefly returned.

The cold, calculated thought left him and his mind strayed ever so slightly into the depths of his memory. Seeing her sitting around with Ron, Hermione and Neville, Harry felt a deep pang of homesickness. It should be him seated there with his friends, not her. He should be back home, safe, with his friends. Hadn't he earned it?

It seemed so long ago that he had been with his true friends. After they came back from the Ministry, he had wanted to be alone. Oh, what a fool he had been. He should have valued every second he was with them. But he hadn't known he was about to be torn away from home.

Was Katie destined for the same fate? Would she be forced to see her godfather killed, just before being dragged to another world where she would have to fight her way out of hopeless situations, with no hope of returning home? He stared into her eyes across the room. There was fire in those eyes, a determined desire to go on. Harry saw himself in those eyes. Himself before all of this, when he was still just a student.

She didn't know how lucky she was. It was always the way. You never know how lucky you are until it is gone. In a few months, she would know what it was to suffer. She would know what it was like to be in Harry's shoes. *Poor girl.* Harry had often thought that he wouldn't wish his life on anyone. Now here was someone else, having been through more or less what he had. Yet she was still so... words failed him. Maybe it was his experience in Rose's world that had really changed him, but he saw her as just a child. She seemed so inexperienced compared to him. *Lucky girl.*

Harry looked her up and down, appraising her. The defiance was clear in her posture and her eyes, but there was fear behind them. She was slowly losing it. She was so close to despair. As tough an exterior as she tried to portray, there was fear, frailty, and sadness in those eyes. If it was identical to what Harry had been through: at this point in time, she wouldn't even know why Riddle was avoiding her or why Vold...Grindelwald was after her.

*Poor girl.*

Harry knew exactly what she was feeling. Oh, how he had wanted someone to talk to, someone who knew what was happening, someone who could tell the difference between him and his reputation. It had been Dumbledore's ignoring him that had really been the hardest to take. Now Harry knew that he had been trying to protect him, but at the time, he had hated the headmaster. He still questioned the headmaster's methods, though he no longer doubted his intent.

Was Riddle the same? No - he was a cold-hearted bastard. When Katie found out, he would be as cold as he truly was. The man was only one step away from Voldemort. Harry wondered what had changed him, but realised that it was way down on his list of priorities to find out. He would

take it as read that the man was a bastard and that was enough. He was a suspicious git and was making Harry's life much harder. Harry would need to keep his distance from Riddle.

Then again...

Suddenly a plan popped into Harry's head. There might be a way to keep an eye on Katie. Riddle didn't want him anywhere near Katie, but Harry was smarter than he was and had an ace up his sleeve. What if Harry were to keep her under surveillance? He would then be able to find out exactly what was happening. He may just have found a way to be in the room without her or Riddle realising it. What worked for Katie would in time work with Riddle as well. Harry could catch wind of any of Katie's little plans, or her worries about Harry, as soon as she had them. By her movements and her interactions with teachers, he might be able to find out more about Riddle. It would mean that he could come and go from almost any location at any time without arousing suspicion. However, the main point was that he would get advanced warning of her suspicions or plans for Harry. He could keep himself out of trouble. If he knew her movements, then he could plan his to avoid her. Knowledge was power and this would allow him to keep his ear to the ground.

His plan solidified in his mind. He checked his watch. He would wait until everyone was asleep.

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Harry turned slowly back to face Katie. Uh-oh! She had been caught staring. Her initial reaction was to tear her eyes away, but she held fast, staring into his emerald green eyes. His head sunk slightly, but not into a nod. He seemed to be looking her up and down, appraising her. Something told Katie that he was not assessing her in the way most sixteen-year-old boys did, and she didn't start to blush as his eyes scanned her body. Instead she was positive that he was assessing something deeper, something inside her. His eyes seemed to penetrate her flesh, seeking what lay in her soul. It was a creepy stare.

After a second, he looked down to check his watch and then gave her a small nod. With that he turned and disappeared up the stairs.

"What was that all about?" asked Ron.

"No idea," said Katie. "But he gives me the creeps."

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Katie sat on the windowsill, her back to the wall, her head turned and staring mournfully out of the window. The fires had been put out two hours ago, but on the still winter's night, the smell of burning was still in the air. The mist had come in from the lake, in absence of a wind to clear it. Veiled in a blanket of mist, the valley had an eerie, still appearance, and coupled with the faint smell of burning, the scene brought images of death to Katie's mind. She had seen the Thestrals as the carriages had arrived at the castle, bringing the returning students back. This had only acted to cement the feeling of death and hopelessness in her mind.

She yawned involuntarily as she gazed out over the window. It had been a long day, and in truth she was tired. She turned to glance at her bed, the curtains drawn back, casting shadows over the bed. It looked almost like a cave or a cell. She didn't want to admit it, but she feared sleep these days. She feared being awake, yet she feared going to sleep. It was a sad realisation, but her entire life was spent in fear.

By day she was in danger. Grindelwald was back, and she knew she currently topped his list of thorns in his proverbial side. She constantly had to look over her shoulder, just in case. She had enemies out there, and she didn't know who was working for Him. Anyone she met could potentially be here to kill her.

As if she didn't have enough to worry about with a homicidal maniac on her tail, there was the Ministry who had turned her into a laughing stock. She tried to put on a brave face, but it hurt. It hurt when you stood up for what was right, only to be shunned by the very people you were trying to protect. She was lonely. She could talk to Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Neville, Luna, and her friends, but in truth, she was alone. None of them understood - none of them came close.

A single tear ran down her cheek as she stared out the window over the forest, lit up by the nearly full moon. Above the blanket of clouds the valley was clear, bathed in moonlight with the dark peaks of hills rising from the sea of mist. She shivered in the cold air as another tear began to fall.

The Ministry and Grindelwald had turned her life into a living Hell, a prisoner in her own life. Even Riddle, who had always been there for her, was now not even looking at her. Neville, Hermione, Ron, and Ginny were friends, but none of them had been in the graveyard. None of them could see the Thestrals. There was no one who understood her. Who could she talk to? No one would understand, so she bottled it all up. She knew it had given rise to her newly found temper, but there was nothing she could do, no one she could turn to. What she wanted, now more than ever, was a hug. She wanted her mother to scoop her up in her arms, to protect her from the horrors of life.

That was a fate that had been stolen from her so many years ago, leaving a poor, scared girl all alone. And alone was how she found herself now, with no one to help her and no one to protect her. Now, more than ever. Last year she had been lucky not to be in this situation, but at the time, she had not appreciated it. It was the same the year before that and the year before that, which painted an ill picture of next year - if she even survived that long.

For Katie, it was like a horrible headache, one that kept pounding at her. During the day, she had the constant stares and the Occlumency lessons and then at night she had the dreams. The horrid nightmares of last year, the images of the Tournament, or McLaggen spread-eagled on the ground, the life having been sucked out of him in a flash of green light. And then there was the door, the endless dreams about the door, and the pain that followed. It had saved Mr Weasley, but it was taking its toll on her.

She wished it would end. She wished a guardian angel would appear and take her misery away.

Katie rose to her feet. While she feared her bed, she knew she had to sleep, and that she had to be up early tomorrow morning. She tiptoed over to her bed, cautious not to wake the others. If her dreams were too bad, she would wake them all later anyway. There was no point in making it worse. She climbed into bed and reached up to close the curtains, taking a side in each hand. She was about to pull them closed when there came a gentle tap on the window.

She released the curtain, sitting bolt upright, muscles tense, ready to move. She grabbed her wand and raised it, ready to curse whoever or whatever was out there. It couldn't be Grindelwald, could it? No, a male would not be able to enter the room.

Gently parting the curtains, she stood up, her feet making no sound on the thick carpet. She stepped away from the bed, her eyes doing a lap of the room. She could see nothing out of place.

*TAP!*

Katie spun around to face the sound. Her jaw dropped. On the ledge outside the now closed window sat a beautiful, fiery orange phoenix. As she stared at it, the bird bowed its head low, displaying its beautiful plumage. Katie opened the window, allowing the bird to soar in. It fluttered the short distance to her bedpost, but it still seemed to glide. Katie left the window and returned to her bed, staring at the new arrival.

"Who are you?" asked Katie aloud, albeit as a whisper. She extended a hand, and using the back of her fingers, she gently stroked the magnificent bird. She wouldn't have been surprised to have had it answer her question in plain English. Instead, the bird simply cocked its head, allowing her to stroke its soft, warm body.

Katie found herself smiling as she stroked the animal, its presence somehow soothing. It felt like the first time she had smiled in years. The bird simply sat still, its deep green eyes watching her intently as she stopped stroking it and drew the curtains. It didn't seem the least bit fazed as she drew the curtains; it remained in place, watching her as she climbed beneath the covers.

The phoenix stayed with her, and in its presence, she fell into a deep sleep, thinking that finally she had found a friend.

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*"Erg!"*

Katie opened her eyes as the sound of chattering voices invaded her thoughts. As she was drawn from her dreams, she groaned and rolled over. Voices floated through the curtains; her dorm-mates were up. Katie shot a filthy look at the curtains in their general directions, and slammed her head back down, covering it with another pillow. She was knackered and did not want their bloody interruptions.

*Hang on!*

A thought suddenly occurred to her and she sat bolt upright. Last night, there had been no nightmares, no visions of a door, no nothing, just a deep slumber. What had brought that on? It

certainly wasn't that bloody Occlumency. Truth be told, she had not even attempted to clear her mind the previous night. It must have been the phoenix.

*The phoenix?*

She looked towards the end of her bed where the phoenix had been perched last night. Where was it? Had it left? Had the other girls scared it away? Katie drew the curtains and jumped off the bed, walking barefoot out into the dormitory. She wore pyjama bottoms and a crop-top. She caught sight of herself in the mirror, but ignored her wild hair and general lybedragged appearance. She looked towards the window, which was now closed and locked, though she had been sure it hadn't been her who had closed it.

She was suddenly aware that the other girls were all watching her. She looked over: Lindsay was showing the other two a set of photos which she had had done, hoping to become a model or something like that for Witch Weekly.

"Yes?" asked one of them.

"This is going to sound really odd," said Katie, throwing caution to the wind. "But there wasn't a bird in here when you got up this morning, was there?"

The girl gave her a bemused look, before shaking her head. Katie turned back to the window, wondering what had happened to her visitor. She would have to ask Grubbly-Plank about phoenixes and if it was normal for one to behave like that. With that in mind, she forwent a shower and threw on her uniform. She brushed her hair quickly and splashed water on her face to wake herself up. Katie considered makeup, but decided that time was more precious than pride. Looking slightly improved, she grabbed her bag and darted down the stairs in the direction of the Great Hall.

The others were already there and eating, and she quickly slid into a chair next to them. She was still panting from the run as she helped herself to some orange juice. As she drained the glass, she was aware of the others watching her.

"Rough night?" asked Neville.

"Quite the opposite," she replied, putting the glass down and catching her breath. She was tempted to add that it was the first decent night's sleep she had had in ages, but she didn't want to fuel their worries. The last thing she needed was more pity. Katie took a moment to catch her breath. At length, she spoke.

"Last night," she began, "I was...lying awake." She felt it best not to admit she had been up late, crying and praying for a miracle. "There was a tapping sound coming from the window. I opened it, and a phoenix flew in."

"Ooo," squealed Hermione and Ginny together. "A phoenix...wow, a real live phoenix. What did it do?" Neville and Ron looked impressed, though neither squealed; Neville, as it was unlike

him, and Ron, as his mouth was full of scrambled egg. Ginny, on the other had, was practically bobbing up and down in excitement.

"Nothing much," Katie said. To be fair, it hadn't really done much, just kept her company. But in truth, that was all she needed. "It kind of just sat there, at the end of my bed, until I fell asleep." And a peaceful sleep it had been. Definitely a good influence.

"Awww," fawned Ginny dreamily. "I wish I had a phoenix."

"What do you mean 'had'?" asked Katie. "It wasn't like I owned it." Her feelings towards the animal were slightly mixed. She had felt a connection, but still felt as if it was a wild animal, not a pet and not hers; just a friend who happened to be in the right place at the right time.

"You can never 'own' a phoenix," said Hermione, falling into the tone of voice she used when reciting a passage from a book. "The phoenix chooses to spend time with the witch or wizard. It would have chosen to come to you, not the other way around."

"Is it still there?" asked Ginny excitedly. "Can we see it?"

"It's gone," said Katie, shaking her head. "By the time I woke up, it had gone. Anita bloody Fleming must have scared it off with her fascinating tales regarding the contents of her boyfriend's underpants." She grimaced at the thought of the other girl's stupidity and shallowness. "I lost track of which boyfriend it is these days," she added.

"Woodward," said Ron, through a rasher of bacon. "Apparently he now has the pleasure," he finished, bobbing his eyebrows up and down in a suggestive manner.

"Never on a first date," said Ginny, smiling innocently.

"I must say that sounds a bit odd," said Hermione, her brow furrowed in thought. She had that look that said a trip to the library was imminent.

"You would on a first date?" asked Ginny innocently.

Hermione ignored the comment, though Katie noticed that Ron had coloured somewhat at this talk. Whether it was Ginny's frank use of English or Hermione's response was uncertain. Either way, Katie dismissed it, certain that Hermione was sticking to the important part of the conversation - the phoenix.

Hermione continued: "Phoenixes aren't the sort of creatures to be startled by an idiot girl and her carnal tales. Once they show themselves to a person, they usually stick around, rarely leaving until...the end of the line."

"Till death us do part," added Ginny unhelpfully.

Katie was glad that at least Hermione was sticking to the pressing matter at hand. However, the mood was suddenly broken by the end-of-the-line comment. After the last few years, she would rather not think about death.

"They are also supposed to be mystical," said Neville. "My mum used to tell me about them when I was only yay-high." He held his hand up two feet above the floor. "I don't know if she was just spinning fantasy tales, because I was only a kid at the time, but they are supposed to come when needed, but to be a free spirit. Almost like a higher purpose, a higher being - as if called from the spirit world to guide you."

"That is definitely fantasy," said Hermione. "Romanticism at its worst. There are no other worlds. Phoenixes are not messengers from beyond. We can only assume, Katie, that this phoenix will return when you have need of it. It will be watching over you, rest assured. I am almost certain that you haven't seen the last of the phoenix."

"Thanks, Hermione," she said. It was a weight off her mind. "I'm glad," she continued. "It was relaxing, soothing to have it near me. When I looked at it, those eyes stared back at me with comprehension. I mean, you could see in its eyes that it was thinking. It was like looking into the eyes of another human, another intelligent being. There was something almost familiar about it. And it stopped any nightmares."

"Did it sing you to sleep?" asked Neville, failing to hide a grin. "Sing you a lullaby? Rock-a-bye Katie on the tree top, when the wind blows...."

"I'll knock off your block!" she finished, cuffing him on the arm and shaking her head, but smiling none the less. She had had to resist the temptation to rhyme 'rock' with another part of his anatomy, and hit that instead, but she wasn't genuinely angry. "Seriously, though," she continued. "It was just soothing to have it around, and, well, with all that's happened lately, it's the best thing that has happened in a long time."

"I wouldn't tell too many people," said Ron. "Educational Decree Number twenty-whatever-it's-up-to-now will be that you aren't allowed to own anything that might cheer you up."

"Umbridge couldn't control a phoenix," said Hermione.

"Wouldn't stop her trying," said Katie. Ron was right - she'd try to ban it, try to kill it as well probably. There was no depth that she would not sink to.

"Heads up," said Neville quickly, glancing at the door. Katie turned her head, trying to be subtle. Harry Potter had just entered the room and had slid onto the bench at the end, near the door. As he reached for the cornflakes, he stifled a yawn. His hair was scruffy, and his eyes had bags underneath them. It was clear that he had been up most of the night.

"Someone didn't get a lot of sleep," said Neville, echoing Katie's own thoughts. "I wonder what he was up to. I didn't notice him. Ron?"

"Nope," said Ron. "He went to bed, and we didn't hear a peep from him."

"Above your snoring," announced Ginny. "He could have been playing the bugle all night, and you wouldn't have noticed." That may have been the case, but Katie agreed with Neville. What the hell was Harry Potter up to?

"Hmm," said Katie. "There is something fishy going on with him. He has changed so much, he's secretive, and he was up all night. What was he doing? Are you sure he was in his bed?"

"Well," said Ron. "we saw him head up to bed just after ten. We went up a few minutes later, and he was just getting into bed. He even said good night. I didn't notice him get out, and no one opened the door, I don't think."

"Well, he's up to something," said Katie. "I wonder what?"

"Oh Merlin, she's on the warpath," muttered Ginny, earning herself a glare.

"I'd say he's got bigger problems than just your inquisitive nature," said Neville, staring over her shoulder. "If looks could kill..."

Katie turned to face the direction Neville was looking at. At the Slytherin table, Malfoy was watching Harry like a predator, his steely grey eyes locked on the boy eating at the end of the table. His jaw was set and he looked like he would like nothing better than to throttle Harry. The boy in question sat obliviously eating his cornflakes, staring into space. He seemed completely unaware, but after having seen him and Malfoy last week, Katie was fairly sure that Harry held no fear for Malfoy. This was completely unjustified, as Harry was nowhere near Malfoy's level of magic and a duel would end painfully for Harry.

As odd as the boy had become, he was still the same old Harry, and he still was in need of protection. He was one who would definitely benefit from a little training, but until she knew more, Potter was not setting foot in the Room of Requirement.

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Today was not going to be enjoyable. Harry was to be back in lessons, proper lessons, for the first time in what seemed like an eternity. He had found all the books he needed in the trunk that was apparently his, and was prepared as he was ever going to be. Ever since he had been caught up in this unholy mess, he had given so little thought to lessons. They seemed so...insignificant. What were these lessons worth, when life was teaching him the ways of the world better than Severus Snape ever could? Well, at least Snape wasn't here. Harry didn't know where he was, and he didn't care. Whatever rock he was hiding under, Harry hoped it was never kicked over. *Who would I least like to teach me*, he wondered, *Snape or Riddle?*

Harry hadn't even glanced at the books he now held since he had been back, and so had next to no idea what to expect in these lessons. He had been whisked away before starting his NEWTs, so this would be his first taste. He was going to be thrown in at the deep end. He briefly considered boycotting the lessons, but he did not wish to draw attention to himself. Hence, as nine o'clock neared on Monday morning, Harry threw the books he needed into his bag, pocketed his wand, and headed down towards the dungeons. As sod's law and fateful cock-up would have it, he had ended up with double Potions to begin with, followed by double Defence Against the Dark Arts after lunch. Luckily he had the remainder of the afternoon off.

Any other time or place, having double Defence might have cheered him up, but given the teacher, Harry had a nasty feeling that he was not in for a pleasant day. He would have to concentrate on that free period in the afternoon to pull him through the lessons of the day. The free time would not afford him a rest - he had work to do. Officially he would have to catch up with missed school work. Unofficially, he would be taking a quick trip to London.

Harry had no idea what this Horace Slughorn was like as a teacher, but could not imagine him being any worse than Snape. Then again, as head of Slytherin house, he was hardly going to be nice. From what Harry had heard, he was alright, just very orientated towards his favourites and the so called Slug Club. Harry had no idea what this club was or did, but judging from the name, it had to be about as exciting as a meeting of Flobberworm Appreciation Society, if such a thing even existed.

When Harry entered the room, most of the students were already there, unpacking various supplies and equipment. Harry slid onto an empty desk quite near the front and began to remove his things from his bag. It was quite a novel experience being back in lessons. All the little things like spelling, uniform, homework, and revision all seemed so trivial when compared to saving the lives of millions across two, now three, different worlds. When his entire life seemed to be life or death, how important was homework, really?

Part of him, a part that sounded suspiciously like Hermione, knew that to become an Auror, he needed to study, plus the life skills learned here would carry him through life; but compared to Dark Lords and inter-dimensional travel, it didn't feature high on his list of priorities.

"Hey, Potter," drawled a voice from the back. "What are you going to do for us today then, melt your cauldron or set your pants on fire, perhaps?"

Harry ignored the comment and continued unpacking, having no idea what he would actually need.

"Potter," snapped Malfoy. "I'm talking to you, are you deaf?"

"Pardon?" asked Harry innocently, unable to resist. He felt a glimmer of satisfaction as Malfoy's jaw clenched. Malfoy opened his mouth to speak again, but quickly shut it as Slughorn waddled into the room.

"Ah, here already," he beamed. His eyes passed around the room, coming to a stop on Harry. "Ah, Mr Potter, welcome back." Not knowing what else to do, Harry nodded.

"Right, today we will begin a new section on Jaredain's principles of potency," he announced. "Can anyone tell me the nature of Jaredain's studies?" No one moved. They all looked down, avoiding eye contact and hoping that they were not the one to be asked. Harry glanced around the room, wondering why a certain young witch was not answering.

Slughorn seemed to be thinking along the same lines. "Where is Miss Granger?" he asked the silent class. Harry looked at Ron and Neville. "No idea, sir," said Ron, shrugging.

Just then, the doors flew open and Hermione ran in, panting.

"Sorry I'm late, professor," she managed to say between breaths. "I had to see Professor McGonagall."

"Of course, of course," said Slughorn, looking as though he did vaguely remember that she would be late. "I was just wondering where you had got to. What fortuitous timing. Please take a seat." Harry was suddenly aware that the only spare seat in the room was next to him and sure enough, a second later, Hermione slid onto the bench next to him, and began to unpack.

"I was just saying, Miss Granger," said Slughorn, "that we are now beginning a new section on Jaredain's research." Hermione seemed to understand as she nodded. "Could you please tell the class what Jaredain was researching?"

"He..." she took a breath to steady herself. "He was looking into the correct dosage, and how to calculate it based on the ingredients and recipient," she announced. "Too much of a potion, even an antidote, can be dangerous, so he tried to find a way to calculate dosage based on the recipient's size and weight and the ingredients of the potion, thus making the testing of new potions much safer and reducing accidental deaths in hospitals by assuring safe dosages."

"Excellent," said Slughorn. "Now, unfortunately, this first session will be on the theory and you won't get to start brewing until next time." A collective groan went around the room. Harry instantly regretted having gotten everything out of his bag.

"Now, before we begin, we need some simple ingredients," said Slughorn. "Mr Potter, can you pop into my office and get me some crushed beetles, Ghost-Lily roots, and some giant squid ink? That should be enough to start with."

Harry rose from his seat and walked past Slughorn into the office. He could hear the professor talking in the other room.

"The first thing we shall do when mister Potter returns will be to look at the chemical and then magical properties of the ingredients and their effects on a given measure of human bone marrow. The stems cells contained therein will be enough for us to gauge a potion's effect on any cell in the entire body. From here it is possible to give each ingredient a rating on a standardised scale and then we can begin to compare potions."

Harry opened the supply cupboard and scoured the drawers and bottles for the ingredients. It took him perhaps fifteen seconds to find them all. He turned to leave, both hands full, using his backside to edge the cupboard door shut. As he did so, his eyes fell on the other store cupboard, which was slightly open. In the bottom, staring Harry in the face, was a pile of *Advanced Potion Making* books. Suddenly an idea filled his mind.

He moved to the cupboard quickly and put the ingredients on the floor. He sank to his knees and opened the cupboard. He picked up the first book and opened it. There was nothing but the print. Harry cast it aside and picked up the next - nothing. Again he picked up another book, only to find it empty.

*Come on, where are you?* he thought.

"Are you alright in there, Potter?" called Slughorn.

*Where is it?* Harry cast the next one aside and picked up the sixth book. He opened it again to find nothing but the print. There was a scrape from in the classroom, and Harry's heart began to race. That was a chair scraping the floor. Slughorn had gotten up from his chair and was coming in after him. He needed to hurry.

Another blank! Harry threw it back in the cupboard as the footsteps sounded outside. He picked up another book, and opened it. *Yes!* The inside was covered in neat writing, additions and spells. Harry thrust it up his jumper and pushed the cupboard closed, just as Slughorn's bald head came around the corner.

"Are you okay, Potter?" asked Slughorn. Harry was still kneeling on the floor.

"Er, yes sir," said Harry innocently. "I was just tying my shoelace."

"Well hurry up, Potter," said Slughorn impatiently. "You are holding up my lesson." Harry's heart was racing, but he managed to appear calm. He was relieved, but managed to keep it from his face.

Harry mumbled an apology and stood up, handing Slughorn the three ingredients he had acquired. The professor nodded and disappeared back into the classroom. Harry took a deep breath. He shrunk the book under his jumper and slid it into his pocket before walking back out into the classroom and over to his seat.

At the front, Slughorn was fiddling with the ingredients. Harry sat back down next to Hermione, who had finish unpacking and was unscrewing the top of her pot of ink.

"Morning," said Harry, following suit, getting ready to copy down notes. "You all right? You look knackered." She was still red in the face and breathing quickly.

"I ran from McGonagall's office," said Hermione, avoiding the question. Harry let it go. He wasn't here to find out where she had been. However, there was something she could do for him .He had to move carefully, though. Softly, softly, catchy monkey.

As Slughorn began to drone on about potions, Harry turned to Hermione again. "How have you been?" he asked, keeping his tone light and friendly.

"Fine," she replied in true English fashion. She was glancing from the blackboard to her parchment on which she had already started to make notes. He was mildly annoyed at her answer. 'Fine' was a way to avoid an answer, and also cut the conversation short. It was like 'whatever', the ultimate argument stopper. How does one come back from 'whatever'? Anyhow, Harry needed to drive this conversation forward.

"Really?" he asked. Hermione looked up from her notes and looked him square in the eyes. She hesitated for a second before answering.

"Well, you know Ron's dad was hurt just before Christmas?" asked Hermione. Harry nodded - he hadn't, but he had surmised that it would happen eventually, or something similar to it. Hermione continued, "That was a bit scary, but yeah, generally good, despite Umbridge's best attempts to get us down."

"Tell me about it," muttered Harry, though his mind was elsewhere. So Mr Weasley had been attacked, had he? They had all gone to St Mungo's? But they were all back here before Harry arrived on New Year's Day. It must have happened sooner than it had in his world, before Christmas. It seemed Katie was better than him at Occlumency. Harry grimaced at the thought, but accepted that he hadn't been brilliant at it. Anyhow, it did no good to dwell on the past. He needed to look to his future and to do that, he needed Hermione's help.

"How are lessons?" he asked, gently pushing her in the right direction. Harry knew that this was his chance to size her up for helping him. He needed to be careful, subtly manoeuvre her and let her make the conversation. He needed to give her just enough rope to hang herself with, so to speak.

"What, since you disappeared?" she asked, looking slightly suspicious. Harry nodded. "Well, Defence is still awful, and we don't learn anything. The rest are more or less fine, as long as Umbridge isn't inspecting the teacher - were you around when she started?"

Harry nodded.

"Well yeah, aside from when she's there, the others are fine."

"Even Arithmancy?" asked Harry, making his move.

"Look," said Hermione, rolling her eyes - her tone had turned firm. Harry grimaced inwardly. Had he blown it? "I know everyone says that it's a boring geeky subject, but it is interesting! I don't go around saying what you like is boring, do I? Just let me be!"

"Easy, Hermione," said Harry quickly. "I never said it was boring, I just know that it is hard. NEWT must be nearly impossible. I'm impressed you can cope - I wouldn't stand a chance, even at the OWL." Harry had to move carefully. The gentle flattery should hopefully put her back on track. *Come on, Hermione, bite!*

After a second, she gave him a small smile, "Sorry I snapped," she said. "I'm just very tired."

"I can understand that," he said, nodding. He really could. Having spent several hours in the girls' dormitory last night (and not in the way most boys would like), he was shattered.

"But you're right," said Hermione, seemingly happy to talk about her subject. "It is hard and Professor Vector pushes us at a quick pace." Yes! Harry felt a rush of excitement. She had bitten and was moving the conversation herself. Hook, line, and sinker.

"It must be really useful," said Harry, again using flattery to keep her on track. "I mean, from what I hear, from a drop of blood or a bit of magic, you can work out a person's soul or magical

core or something like that, can't you?" He was practically shaking with excitement. *Come on, Hermione, tell me that you can get me home!*

Hermione smiled and shook her head; it was the look a mother gave her overzealous child. This was not what Harry wanted to see. A chill ran down his spine and it took all his concentration to stop his disappointment from showing.

"Yes, you can," she said, "but that's a little beyond NEWTs, don't you think, Harry?" No, no, Hermione had to be able to help! She just had to!

"Even for you?" asked Harry, struggling to hide the disappointment, or the huge gap that had opened up as his stomach clenched tight. He tried one last stab at flattery, but already knew the answer. A sickening feeling spread through him as he realised that his great plan was in tatters.

"That particular discipline is purely theoretical and highly experimental," Hermione informed him. "The only people who would really do anything like that are the Unspeakables." Harry shivered involuntarily. He had no desire to visit the Department of Mysteries. It seemed that every time he went there, someone was killed in front of him. The Unspeakables gave him the creeps, but it seemed that once again, he would have to brave the Department of Mysteries.

"Oh well," said Harry, smiling outwardly. "At least you are enjoying it." Inside he was screaming. His plan was in jeopardy. If Unspeakables were the only ones who would experiment with that kind of magic, Harry would need to convince one of them to part with their knowledge, and that wouldn't be easy as he didn't know any of them. Also, he needed one lucid enough to use his blood and wand to do the equation. He couldn't control one of them, so he had to convince one. One of them would have to do it voluntarily. This was not going to be easy.

"Potter! Granger! Pay attention," said Slughorn suddenly. Hermione shot Harry a glare, as clearly it was all his fault that they had been caught. Harry grimaced.

"Sorry, sir."

Hermione didn't speak to him for the rest of the lesson, but that wasn't exactly a problem. He had learned what he needed to know and that was enough. She was of no further use to him. He had the problem of the Unspeakable to sort out, but his first priority should still be the acquisition of the key. He would go to London tonight after lessons had finished. The Unspeakable was a problem for another day.

After another two hours of scribbling down notes, Harry's wrist was aching. He could use a sword for what seemed like ages without aching too much, but this much writing was hurting his wrist. He was so unused to using a quill that his muscles ached from the effort and his writing was so untidy it resembled a four-year-old's.

*I might as well have written in crayon,* he noted.

He ended up massaging his wrist for the rest of the lunch break between spooning ratatouille into his mouth. His head was spinning with potions and a measure called a mol (without an 'e'). It was

linked to Muggle Chemistry, apparently, and could be used to work out quantity and subsequently concentration. Harry noted that it 'could' be used to calculate concentration, but not that he could use it. The lesson might as well have been in Swahili. He wasn't looking forward to his real NEWTs back home.

Things didn't get any better after lunch as he headed up to the Defence Against the Dark Arts room, already knowing what he would find. As he took his seat, he could already hear the footsteps approaching down the corridor.

Harry was suddenly reminded of the Star Wars march. He remembered Dudley watching the film and then dressing in black, painting a stick red and then hitting Harry with it, singing the Imperial March. Harry was humming it in his mind as the toad swept into the room. She strutted to the front and turned to address the class, the stupid girly smile on her chubby face.

"Good afternoon, class," said Umbridge in her shrill girly voice.

"Good afternoon, Professor Umbridge," replied the class.

"Wands away." No one moved as no one had taken their wand out. "Right, I want you to read chapter twenty-two and we shall discuss it once you are done. There will be no need to talk."

Harry opened his book and began to read. He had managed three lines when his mind began to wander. On the parchment he had ready, he wrote Dolores Jane Umbridge at the top and beneath it he began to jumble the letters around to alleviate his boredom. The class read in silence for nearly half an hour before Umbridge decided it was time for the debate.

By this time, Harry had read about a page and a half between playing with anagrams. The most interesting thing he had learned from this lesson so far was that 'Dolores Jane Umbridge' was a perfect anagram of 'Burdensome Jailer Dog' which was quite appropriate, and that if he just used 'Dolores Umbridge', it was a perfect anagram of 'Murder Old Bogies'. Harry wasn't sure about the spelling of the last one, but it made him smile in a class that really needed some cheer.

Harry yawned. The class was so boring that his heart rate had slowed right down and he just wanted to go to sleep. The jailer dog had risen from her chair and was standing at the front. When she spoke, Harry didn't take a word of it in. It was the usual drivel, and looking around the class, not even Hermione was paying attention. Reading the text almost verbatim after the class had read it was a poor way of teaching.

It was such a relief when the bell rang. Harry's eyelids had been heavy for the past forty-five minutes and he was on the verge of dropping off. As the bell sounded, he threw his books back into his bag and made for the exit. He had no lesson final period and that gave him the perfect excuse for a trip to London. He just needed to change his clothes, as his uniform would identify him, and Borgin must not learn who he was. It was 16:00 now and at this time of January it was dark by 17:00. Harry had no desire to visit the shop in daylight. He would wait another forty-five minutes or so. That gave him time to get changed and to store the Half Blood Prince's book somewhere safe.

It occurred to Harry halfway up the stairs that Flourish and Blotts would be as good as useless, but it couldn't hurt to check them briefly. However, he was well aware that his best chance of success was Knockturn Alley. Last time he had been there, he hadn't noticed any book shops. In fact, he felt it was most likely that the only place he would get such dark material was from a black marketer. He knew just the shop. However, the shopkeeper was not likely to be helpful. The way Harry saw it, he had two options - masquerade as a Death Eater, or bully it out of him. Since Harry didn't have a Dark Mark, or even knew what Grindelwald's symbol looked like, posing as a Death Eater would be unrealistic. If the conman asked him a question to prove it, Harry couldn't even produce information on this world generally, let alone on the Dark Lord whom he had never even seen. No, he decided, he would need to bully Borgin into compliance.

It was time for a certain shopkeeper to receive a visit from the Dark Knight.

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"Three hundred and seventy-five galleons," said Borgin happily to himself. Gowan was a simpleton, a thug, and a loser, but he was damn good at what he did. He had managed to convince Alison Swinley to part with her family's diamond timepieces for less than four hundred galleons, when he knew full well that they were worth nearer to one thousand. A small smirk crept across his lips. He checked his watch; it was just past five.

The sun faded behind the rooftops, extinguishing the last source of light and plunging the shop into shadow. Borgin raised his wand lazily, and a lamp burst into life, illuminating the room. Borgin loved the way that gold sparkled in firelight at the best of times, and the contents of his till now glistened as he crossed to the door to flip the sign to 'Closed'. He turned back to the till and the diamond timepieces that stood on the counter beside them. In the firelight, they reflected spots of light all over the shop like a disco ball.

It had been a good day, mused Borgin. He would put it all in the safe and then nip down to the pub for a quick drink, and then maybe Hockden's Corner, or hooker's den as it was known. Why should he not treat himself tonight, after such a profitable day?

*Tap! Tap!*

Borgin turned around and stared at his front door. Through the glass he could see a figure in a black cloak and hood. The man was short and thin. His face was completely hidden by the cloak, but he stood unmoving just outside the door.

"For Merlin's sake," cursed Borgin. "CAN'T YOU READ? I'M CLOSED!" he shouted through the glass to the figure in black. Borgin slid the till closed with a bang, and then began to move the diamonds. All the time he was watching the figure in his peripheral vision. After ten seconds, the man had still not moved. As Borgin looked up at the stranger once more, the figure raised a gloved hand and rapped again upon the glass of the door.

Borgin slammed his fist down in frustration. He turned to face the figure and approached the door. The stranger stood motionless as he approached, completely unfazed by Borgin's hostile manner or tone.

"WHAT?" snapped Borgin as he neared the door. "THE SIGN TOO SMALL? I'M CLOSED!"

"You have something I need," said the figure softly, though the whisper seemed to pass straight through the glass. His voice was soft and sounded young - he was barely more than a boy. Borgin could have laughed. Whoever this tosser was, he was hardly intimidating and hardly a threat.

"And I'll still have it tomorrow," said Borgin icily. "Come back then, now piss off!" He pointed through the glass and up the road towards the exit. "Go!"

"Very rude for a shopkeeper," said the figure coldly. "Last chance."

"What are you going to do?" asked Borgin, resisting the urge to laugh at this kid. "Tell mummy?" The boy thought he could threaten and intimidate Borgin? Hardly. Borgin had powerful friends - if this kid did so much as graffiti a window, Borgin would see to it that he spent the rest of the year in agony. Still, better safe than sorry; Borgin reached under his robes, grasping his wand just in case the foolish kid tried something.

To his great surprise, the figure took two steps back into the gloom and disappeared into the shadows on the far side of the narrow street. Borgin stared into the gloom where the boy had stood seconds before. It seemed deserted.

*Ha!* thought Borgin. *I knew he was bluffing.* The kid had run away. If he returned, then Borgin would break his legs, but for now, the kid wasn't worth a second thought. He tucked his wand back into his pocket. Smirking to himself, he turned back to the till.

*OOF!*

He turned straight into the figure in black. Borgin didn't have time to think before the figure hurtled into him, forcing him back against the wall, a forearm pressed into Borgin's neck. The shopkeeper didn't even have the breath to cry out as the figure drove a knee into his stomach. Borgin lost his bearings as the figure pulled him away from the wall. He was vaguely aware of the room spinning before he landed painfully on his back, the impact sending up a cloud of dust.

Borgin coughed feebly as the boot weighed into his chest. The figure stood over him, the black cloak concealing the intruder's face. Borgin stared helplessly up at the kid, no, the man, wishing he could get his hand to his wand.

The intruder lifted his boot and Borgin moved slowly backwards along the floor, his eyes never leaving the stranger. The man took a step closer, towering over Borgin, who was retreating on hands and knees like a crab.

*DONK!*

Borgin's head hit the counter. He cursed loudly and fell backwards, clutching his head. The figure stood over him, staring down, unmoving, unrelenting.

Borgin turned around, grabbing the counter to help himself to his feet. With his back to the stranger, he dusted himself off in a big gesture, disguising the fact that his hand was heading to

his wand. As his fingers grasped the wood, he spun around, his arm coming up to aim at the intruder, but he never made it.

In the whirl of a cloak, the stranger clamped his gloved hand over Borgin's arm, twisting sharply. Borgin felt his wrist snap and the smooth wood slide helplessly through his fingers. He cried out in pain as the stranger withdrew his wand. There was a flash of light and Borgin felt his feet leave the ground before his back slammed into a glass cabinet.

The pane shattered under his weight and his head hit the wooden shelf inside. Crying out in pain, he fell forward, his broken wrist doing nothing to absorb his landing. As he hit the cold hard floor face first, objects from the cabinet began to rain down around him, some of them highly cursed.

Borgin lay covered in dust, bleeding from where the glass had cut his face on its way to the floor. He clutched his useless hand, whimpering in the darkness as the stranger took another step towards him, broken glass splintering under his feet. The crunching of his footsteps echoed around the shop, even drowning out the throbbing of Borgin's wrist and the thundering beats of his heart which pounding in his chest.

The stranger raised a hand and Borgin was yanked up by his collar and dangled helplessly in front of the intruder.

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Harry stood before Borgin, who was secured in midair, unable to move. Harry's cloak was pulled in tightly around him. He had folded his bandana out and wrapped it around the bottom half of his face like the Scarlet Pimpernel. It was enough to protect his identity from the shopkeeper, who in this world would never have met him anyway, but it was best to play it safe.

He hadn't actually wanted any of this. He had been to Flourish and Blotts first, but naturally they didn't stock the sort of books he needed. He had checked Knockturn Alley for any bookshops and had not found one. That left only one option in Harry's mind - the conniving, swindling crook, Borgin. Harry knew what the man was like and the suffering he had caused others, with his dodgy deals and intimidation. As such, he felt no pity for the man now dangling in front of him like a worm on a hook. He hadn't even felt bad as he had felt the man's wrist break under his grasp.

Borgin's eyes were wide as he stared at Harry, his eyes filled with fear and rage. Harry looked around the shop. The shelves were full of various paraphernalia, and at the back he could clearly see a few lines of bookshelves. However, there were too many for him to go through alone. He would need Borgin's help. That meant he needed to convince him to help. He had already built up a Death Eater persona, so it was probably best to continue intimidating Borgin. The man was probably a Death Eater anyway, so if he thought he was working in the service of the Dark Lord, he might be reasonable.

"You have something I need," said Harry, making his voice a hoarse whisper, and much deeper than his own. He wanted to appear both older and completely different from his true self. Hopefully Borgin wouldn't have sussed his youth.

"Go to hell!" spat Borgin. He leaned his head back and then flung it forward trying to spit at Harry. The ball of phlegm landed on Harry's cloak, but he didn't care. Harry flicked his wrist upwards and Borgin rocketed towards the ceiling, slamming his head into the plaster, unleashing a cloud of dust. It seemed that Borgin was not going to play ball.

With that, Harry, twisted his hand in a flicking motion and Borgin fell forward, and hurtled upside down through the air, his back slamming into the far wall. Free from the spell, he crumpled head-first to the ground. He had only a second's pause before once again he was yanked up by his collar.

"You have a book that I need," repeated Harry. "And I need your help to find which one."

"I ain't helpin' you!" sneered Borgin. Harry hesitated; he had hoped it wouldn't come to this. He didn't like deliberately causing pain and highly disapproved of torture, having been on the receiving end himself. However, this was an emergency. He had to get home. His hand shot out and grabbed Borgin's broken wrist, squeezing it hard.

Borgin's head whipped back and his eyes bulged. He screamed in agony. Harry felt the bones move beneath the flesh as he gripped. He felt Borgin tense and begin to shake as the screams echoed in his ears. *Someone will hear this!*

"Hush!" said Harry, concentrating on a Silencing Charm. Borgin's voice left him; he screamed and screamed but no sound came out. After a few seconds, Harry released Borgin, not wishing to cause further suffering. However, he had to keep up the pretence.

"Think carefully about your next answer, Borgin, it may be your last," said Harry, his tone icy cold. It was the Dark Knight speaking. "I need a book. It is Greek, dating back perhaps two millennia. It concerns dark and experimental magic of the time, specifically to do with the nature of the world, time, and space."

Borgin looked up at him and then around the room.

"Look at me, Borgin!" hissed Harry, stepping closer. He grabbed Borgin's chin and twisted his head so that Borgin was looking at Harry, or rather at a pair of eyes visible beneath a hood and above a mask. "Stop focusing on escape. Where is the book?"

Borgin's eyes flicked left and right in panic and then back to Harry. He seemed to have realised that escape was impossible. He took a deep breath. Harry released the Silencing Charm.

"I don't have anything Greek."

"DON'T LIE TO ME!" hissed Harry dangerously, raised his wand to Borgin's arm in the threatening gesture.

"I'm not!" begged Borgin, his body beginning to shake. "I don't have anything Greek." Harry felt the sinking feeling return. First, Hermione couldn't help him and now he was failing to get his hands on the key. This plan was ruined and he would never get out of this world. He felt anger and frustration boil inside him.

"Then I have no further use for you," said Harry icily, moving his wand to Borgin's chest, the tip mere inches from the man's heart. He hoped Borgin would come out with something. This was a deadly bluff. If Borgin called it, this conversation was over. Showing a refusal to kill would undermine his persona.

"Wait!" cried the shopkeeper to Harry's relief. "I don't have anything Greek, but I may have something on time and space." Harry's ears pricked up. He had something useful after all. This day may not have been a complete disaster.

"What?" he asked, stepping closer.

"It's a journal," spluttered Borgin, his mouth now full of blood. Harry must have hit him harder than he had thought. "I came by it a few months back. Some old bird who had the finest pair of..."

"The book, Mr Borgin," said Harry firmly, raising his wand in a threatening manner.

"Anyway, her husband was into all that weird stuff; time, space, the universe, beyond," he continued. "Like a hobby, she said. More like an obsession - the guy was nuts. Anyway, the book catalogues his research." That sounded promising. A scientist doing research into time and space. If he was in the least bit competent, he might have something useful in his diary.

"Where is it?" he hissed.

"It's in the back," said Borgin, gesturing with his eyes to the back room.

Alarm bells went off in Harry's mind. This didn't feel right. The shop front was open, safe, but the back was Borgin's territory. Harry certainly didn't trust him. Dare he risk entering the back rooms? There could be spells, traps, other people, and only God knew what else. Harry hesitated for a second. At worst, he could flame out.

"Show me," he said after a second. It was a risk, but he needed that book. If he left without it, Borgin would have it destroyed, or worse, let someone know that someone was after it. Harry didn't think he had a choice. He released the spell and Borgin fell to his feet. Holding his broken arm close to protect it, Borgin staggered off towards the back.

"Be careful, Borgin," Harry reminded him. "If I smell a rat, you'll be dead before you hit the floor, got it?"

Borgin squeaked in response.

The back of Borgin and Burkes was a complete contrast to the front. The shop floor was dank, dusty, and cold, which created the perfect mood for a shop selling what it did. The back, however, was cleaner and more orderly. There was a large oak desk topped with a sheet of red leather. A lamp was burning, casting flickering orange shadows around the room. There was a pile of parchment on the desk piled high and the shelves above the desk were filled with folders and files. On the far wall were more shelves, this time full of various artefacts. On the desk there was also a metal toolbox and in the middle, various pieces that looked like the inside of clock.

There were various cogs and screws neatly arranged and several small and highly irregular-looking spanners laid around the parts. It was so easy to forget that aside from being a heartless and greedy businessman, Borgin was also highly skilled at what he did. If a mind so bright had a slightly stronger conscience, he would have been a good ally.

"Where?" asked Harry.

Borgin crossed to the far side of the room where there was a low table covered in piles of books. He began to rummage as best he could considering the pain and that he only had use of one arm. Harry kept his wand aimed at him. He silently stepped five feet to his left. If Borgin suddenly turned to try to curse him, his memory would have him cursing in the wrong direction.

"Here," croaked the shopkeeper after a few minutes. He held a small red book out towards Harry. The pages were rumpled and it looked as if it had been in the wars. It did look like a diary, and in that respect, it made Harry suspicious. He remembered the last diary he had come across. He wasn't going to make the same mistake again.

"Open it," he said, aiming the wand at Borgin. The shopkeeper did so without hesitation.

"Read," Harry instructed. Borgin looked puzzled and then began to comply, his eyes zipping across the page.

"Aloud," Harry ordered.

"When one takes into account the colossal power at work, this material would merely crumble to dust. It is not a question of being hard or solid, but being a good conductor of temporal energy. If we take Forendus' second law of magical conductivity to be true, then..."

"Enough," Harry cut him off. If it was cursed, it would have affected him by now. He reached out and plucked the book from Borgin's hand. He slid it into his pocket, his eyes never leaving Borgin. "Any more?"

"Not that I can think of," said Borgin. In that case, there was no reason to stay.

Harry took a step closer. The shopkeeper had outlived his usefulness. It was time to....

The hairs on the back of his neck suddenly pricked up. A feeling seemed to come into his mind. He felt a tingle of magic. He felt...someone was here. A chill ran down his spine.

Harry glanced at the open door that led into the darkness of the shop front and then at Borgin. They were not alone.

"Come here!" he hissed, gesturing for Borgin to approach. The man stepped closer and Harry moved behind Borgin, using him as a human shield. Harry gestured for him to walk out onto the shop floor. Borgin, looking terrified, stepped towards the door, the sound of the floorboards creaking under his steps echoing around the still room. Was it Harry's paranoia, or was there someone else here? He stood behind Borgin with a wand in each hand; one wand was pressed

into Borgin's back, the other, the twin of his original, held in his right hand, pointing out into the room. Harry gave the shopkeeper a poke and he moved out into the storefront.

Borgin stopped as he reached the counter; Harry was a pace behind him. He cocked his head to listen, but it was pointless as the sound of his heart, pounding in his chest, was deafening. His eyes swept the room looking for any sign of movement. There was a glimmer of light coming in through the window as the sun set over the rooftops of Knockturn Alley. In the fast-fading light, Harry could see dust on the air. Something had disturbed it more recently than Harry's own scuffle with Borgin. There was definitely someone here. The trouble was that he couldn't see a thing as the light of the back room had ruined his night vision.

He swept his wand over the room as the light faded. The only thing that lit the room was the reflected light from the back, which cast eerie shadows around the room, the reflected light from the glass cabinets shimmering against the walls. There was no sound, no movement, no breathing. The room was perfectly still.

Suddenly there was a thunderous bang and Borgin hurtled to the side, forced away by a surge of magic. Harry stepped back in surprise, his peripheral vision catching a flash of sudden movement. Harry instinctively ducked, turning as he did. The spell sheared past his head, missing by inches as he sank. Harry sprang back up to his feet, both wands aimed towards the intruder.

Two parallel streams of blue light shot out the tips and rocketed towards the shadows from which the spell had come. In the fleeting light of the curses, Harry saw that the shadows were empty - the intruder had relocated. Harry didn't waste time: he jumped up and over the counter and then, bending his knees as he landed, sprang off sideways and rolled into the shadows, rising back up against the wall, deep in the gloom.

His eyes scanned the darkness, searching for a target. He needed a sign; movement, a sound, anything. The room was still and silent again. The sun had set and the light was gone. Suddenly, he had an idea. Aiming both his wands at the floor in the centre of the room and putting the tips together, Harry muttered the spell.

*BOOM!*

It was only a simple bang, but strong enough for the resounding shockwave to shatter every pane of glass in the room. Harry covered his face as thousands of shards of glass were launched into the air. In the blizzards of razors Harry heard a gasp of pain.

*There!*

He ran forwards, wands aimed.

*STUPEFY!*

The figure in black spun away from the first spell, batting the second away with his shield as he crossed its path. As he came back around to face Harry he unleashed a curse of his and then

another. Harry jumped the first, ducked the second and rose just in time to find a third coming at him. Harry tried to sidestep it, but slipped on the sea of glass. He clattered to the floor as his feet slid out from under him. By a lucky twist of fate, the curse soared over his head. Harry bit back a gasp of pain as he slid on broken glass, but managed to aim another curse at the intruder.

The man calmly batted it away and flicked his wand. Harry was launched backwards into the air. His experience at this was such that he could control his fall. Open his cloak into a sail, trapping air and allowing him to turn. Harry flipped backwards, and as he hit the far wall feet first, managed to kick off, somersaulting in the air and landing on his feet, a curse having already left his wand. The figure was so surprised that he didn't have time to move before the blue bolt of electricity hurtled into his body. He cried out as blue lightening snaked over his body. Harry ran forwards, thinking of a harder spell for a more deadly opponent.

*For enemies....now he had one!*

"*SECTUMS...*"

The intruder had recovered enough to parry to spell, plucking it from his lips. Harry tried again.

"*SECT...*" again the intruder parried, and was back on his feet now. Harry jumped, aiming to plant both his feet in the intruder's chest, enough to force him back into the remains of the glass case. If magic wasn't working, it was time for something simple.

The intruder sidestepped, battling his legs away. As Harry landed he turned back to face the intruder. As the man jabbed his wand at Harry, the tip glowing red with a curse, Harry grabbed the man's arm with his left hand and swung his right elbow up into the man's jaw. It connected, but not as strongly as Harry would have liked. The man grunted in pain before swinging his other arm at Harry's head. Harry ducked; the fist missing by millimetres, skimming over his head, but exposing the man's ribs. Harry drove his right knee hard into the man's ribcage, knocking the air out of him, hopefully. The man cried out in pain and spun away from Harry in a swirl of his black cloak and a flicker of silver.

Harry hissed in pain. He had felt something slide along his left tricep. He turned back instantly, not letting the hostile out of his sight. The man held a silver dagger in his hand. Harry quickly glanced down at his arm to see a hole in the back fabric and a trickle of red blood. Looking back, he could see a drop of red at the end of the dagger.

*NO!*

*Scourgify!* he thought, casting the silent spell. He couldn't leave any DNA behind!

Harry was relieved to see the red disappear, but his use of that spell left him open for one of the intruder's. The jet of muddy brown light hit him in the chest. Instantly he felt his neck and chest tighten, his throat becoming narrower, and his lungs being crushed. Harry tried to take a breath but found his windpipe blocked. The air was being choked out of him.

Without oxygen, his muscles couldn't operate. Harry dropped his wand and clasped his hands to his throat as his legs gave way beneath him. He couldn't breathe and coloured spots were starting to appear over his vision from the lack of air. He was vaguely aware of the intruder stepping closer.

Harry began to panic. *He's got me. It's over.* The Dark Knight held him firm. *Think. Concentrate, what can you use?*

Suddenly, Harry had an idea. He flicked his wrist and a large piece of glass jumped up and streaked towards the intruder, burying itself in his leg.

"AHH!" The man cried out, and Harry found himself able to breathe again as the man lost concentration. Harry ducked away into the shadows as the man pulled the glass from his leg and dropped it to the floor. Harry moved behind the remains of a cabinet, hiding in the shadows.

This guy was good, whoever he was. Harry had a feeling that he was the same person he had fought in the forest. He may not be a Death Eater, but whoever he was, he was dangerous. He was using Dark magic, visiting Borgin at night and could clearly hold his own in a duel. Harry checked his arm. The blood had clotted. He had managed to clean the dagger, so the intruder had no DNA from which to identify Harry.

Harry peered out from the shadows. Where was he? The man had disappeared again. Harry took a step forwards, but his foot landed on something hard. He looked down.

*Of course!*

He had just trodden on the Hand of Glory. Harry picked it up and lit it with his wand. He then aimed it at the back room. With a swish of his wand, the door slammed shut, blocking off the light from within. The shop was in total darkness, except for Harry whose path was lit by the hand.

However, this did not get him off the hook. The other man could still hear his movement. Harry stepped cautiously out of the shadows, one step at a time, looking around and trying to find the figure.

Harry slowly circled the remains of a cabinet. He passed Borgin's unconscious body, which lay against the wall where the intruder had cast him aside.

Suddenly Harry saw him. There was a flicker of movement as a black cloak billowed across the room, its owner making no sound as he glided across the room. For a second Harry thought he might be a Dementor. Harry moved to intercept him, stepping lightly to his left around some shelves and towards where the figure was heading. On his way, he stooped to pick up a piece of glass, an idea having occurred to him.

Harry stepped around the edge of the bookcase to see the man in black with his back to the shelves. He peered cautiously out, looking for his target. Having found nothing, he turned back into the cover. Whoever he was, he was very cautious, meticulously precise and utterly silent.

Harry didn't like the idea of attacking from behind, but with this guy, he had no choice. Harry flicked the piece of glass with his thumb. It soared across the room, landing with a soft tinkle on the other side of the room. The figure instantly turned to look out again, exposing his back just as Harry raised his wand.

*Stupef...!*

Without warning, the figure spun around and his hand locked around Harry's wrist. He was so surprised that the words escaped him. The spell stopped short of being completed. How the hell had the man known he was here? Had he heard him breathing? Had he sensed it was a distraction?

Harry didn't have time to think. There was a flash of steel and a silver dagger was streaking up towards his face. Harry stepped back, shifting his weight to steady himself. Harry used the metal on the Hand of Glory to parry the dagger, dripping hot wax onto the man's skin in the process, then drawing his arm back, he slammed the heel of his palm into the man's chest, concentrating on a blasting charm at the same time. The man was launched backwards off his feet and into the remains of a glass cabinet. He cried out in pain as he landed - definitely a man.

Harry raised his wand and attempted the full body bind - he wanted to know who this was. The figure swept it aside as he rose back to his feet.

*"Sectumsempra!"*

The curse left Harry's wand before the man was upright. He tried to move but was too slow. The curse struck his shoulder, rolling the torso back and to the side, spraying the pale wall behind him with blood.

"AHH!" the man cried in pain. Harry stepped forward, sensing victory as the man cradled his bleeding arm. Harry flicked his wand and several shards glass flew off the floor and soared towards the intruder. The flurry of razors swept up from the floor like a tornado and swept towards the figure in black, who had swapped his wand to the other arm. As the tornado rampaged towards the figure, a green curse erupted from his wand into the swirls of razors. As the curse struck the spiralling shards of glass, they flew in all directions and the tornado collapsed.

Harry didn't waste time, jabbing his wand towards the floor. A stream of red light hit the floor and skimmed along the floorboards like a snake in the direction of the intruder. As it reached his feet, the floor around him exploded. The figure's feet left the ground under the force; he twisted in mid-air and landed on his back.

He grunted in pain and, still cradling his arm which was still gushing crimson, he swept his wand at Harry and flicked it like a whip. The next thing Harry knew, there was a fiery whip wrapped around his ankle. The magic increased the intruders strength, so when he pulled on the whip, Harry's feet were swept out from under him with the force of a freight train.

Harry landed painfully on his back in a sea of glass. The intruder tugged again and before Harry could move, he was pulled forcefully towards his opponent. Harry slid over the broken glass, his thick cloak offering limited protection from the glass. The intruder was reeling him in like a fish on a hook. He had dropped his wand as he had hit the ground and his other while being choked. Where the hell were they?

As he was dragged along the floor, Harry frantically looked around for his wands. His eyes found one on either side of the room. Harry took a deep breath and concentrated hard.

Suddenly the wands flew off the floor and sailed through the air. Harry caught one in each hand. He instantly aimed them at the whip and pressed the tips together, doubling the power of the spell.

A beam of white light shot out of the wands and shattered the whip with a tremendous bang. Harry and the intruder were both blown backwards by the force of the explosion. The intruder was forced backwards against the wall. He bounced off and landed face first on the floor. Harry was not so lucky. As he shot backwards across the floor he felt a sudden blinding pain in his arm.

His whole body tensed. He felt the blood drain from his face and his body break into a cold sweat. He was lucid enough to recognise shock symptoms when he saw them. Looking down, he saw what had happened. A spike from a tribal warrior's mask had gone straight through his arm. As he had fallen back, he had impaled himself.

His entire body shook in shock as the chemicals in his blood assaulted his capacity for rational thought. He looked down at the mask, his bleeding arm and then over to the intruder on the far side of the room, who was climbing shakily to his feet. The figure has a relatively small gash at the top of his arm. Harry was impaled and couldn't move his arm at all. He also couldn't move the mask, which was attached to the remains of the shelves. He was pinned in place.

*I can't win*, Harry realised. *Not in this state*. He tried to twist his body, to look down at where he had been lying. He aimed his wand at the puddle of his own blood.

*Scourgify!*

He couldn't leave anything that might identify him. He had the book he had come for - he could find out about this stranger any other time. For now, his own survival was a more pressing need. He checked one more time that he had not left any blood.

On the other side of the room, the intruder was back on his feet.

"*CRUCIO!*"

The spell shot out of his wand and soared across the room. It slammed into the wall where a second earlier a boy had disappeared in a ball of flames.

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The room came slowly into focus. The first thing that Borgin was aware of was the throbbing pain in his wrist and his head.

"Erg...what?" he managed to stutter.

As his eyes adapted to the dim light, he was suddenly aware that there was a figure in black bending over him. His memory came rushing back.

"Merlin!" he gasped in panic. He was still here! Borgin tried to back away but it was not easy with one hand.

"Peace, Borgin," said the figure softly. That voice! It wasn't the young man who had attacked him earlier. It was an older voice, wiser, colder. He pulled back his sleeve to reveal a mark emblazoned on his flesh: a skull with a snake for a tongue - the Dark Mark. This was someone else. "He's gone."

Borgin stared up at the man. He was taller than the other one, clearly older, and he moved with a different manner. Only the cloaks were similar. Borgin also noticed that the man's left shoulder was bandaged and that crimson blood was starting to seep through.

"Who was he?" asked Borgin sitting up and cradling his broken wrist.

"Let me see it," said the figure, ignoring the question. Borgin held out his wrist. The figure swished his wand and cords shot from the end, binding Borgin's wrist to the splint he held in his other hand. Borgin whimpered in pain as the bone realigned to the splint.

"That will hold it for now. We need to move swiftly. Take this." He offered Borgin a phial of red liquid. Borgin looked suspicious. "It's a painkiller, but it will keep you wide awake. Hurry up, we need to move you!"

"You came to help me?" asked Borgin, confused, as he swallowed the liquid. He felt a cool soothing feeling creep to his arm.

"I came for information," said the figure, his face still hidden. "And I believe our mystery guest had the same idea. That is why we need to move you."

"Who was he?" repeated Borgin.

"I have no idea," replied the intruder, helping Borgin to his feet by his good wrist. "Are you ready to leave?"

"But..."

Suddenly the demeanour of the figure changed. "Borgin," his tone was like ice. "Whoever that was wants you for information you may hold. I do not know what that information might be, but it seems clear to me that he should not have it. That leaves me with two options. I either take you with me, or you never leave this room alive. Make your choice, Borgin."

The shopkeeper gulped. This man was clearly not to be messed with. Few people could really intimidate Borgin, but this was definitely one of them. His eyes never left the figure's wand. Borgin nodded in agreement.

"Good," said the man. "First, let us see if our young friend has left any evidence." As Borgin watched, his guest headed around between the remains of two cabinets. He was bent over and his eyes were scanning the floor.

"What are you looking for?" asked Borgin after a minute. To his horror, the man pulled out a silver dagger.

"Blood," said the man simply. "I cut him, but he made sure to clear it away, even from my knife. Why do you suppose he did that, Borgin? Impress me with your logic."

"He didn't want to leave behind anything that could identify him," said Borgin simply. It wasn't a great stretch.

"Which is precisely why I want to know who he was," said the hooded man.

"How do you know he wasn't just some crazy?" said Borgin, pulling on a coat.

"We've met before," said the figure. "Twice I've fought him and twice he has disappeared in a geyser of flames through an anti-Apparation ward."

"Who is he?"

"What is he would be a better question," said the man. "The very question that led me here tonight, or rather one of the reasons. Is it perhaps too great a coincidence that he too came here? Perhaps he planned to remove you, to remove the one who may know who he is?" The tone was accusing, hostile and cold. His wand was held in his hand, ready to curse Borgin in a second. The shopkeeper gulped.

"He didn't want me," said Borgin. "He wanted a book."

"A book?"

"An old Greek one," said Borgin quickly. "I didn't have it. He wanted something about time and space. I gave him an old diary I got from some old bird."

"Interesting," said the man. "But it does not shed any light on who that was, or how he knew about me at Hogsmeade."

"He must be one of Riddle's men," said Borgin. "Who else would be so cloak and dagger? Why not grab a few of them, kick over a few stones?"

"That, Borgin," scoffed the figure, "is why you were never invited deeper."

"But why...?" began Borgin indignantly.

"Think, moron," hissed the man. "Every body we leave, every theft we make draws the attention of the Aurors. That is why I didn't kill him when I had the chance, and now I am glad I did not - this man fascinates me."

"But we don't need to hide our footprints from the Aurors," said Borgin, trying to sound superior. "The Ministry is ignoring everything."

"The *Minister* is ignoring everything," said the figure. "It is in an Auror's nature to be suspicious. The more evidence we leave behind, the more they have to go on. The Dark Lord appreciates the need for subtlety. For now, our aim is zero loss of life, zero evidence - not until he has what he seeks. Position the pieces, then move to checkmate. Only a complete idiot shows his hand too early."

"What about this?" asked Borgin, gesturing around at the destruction. "This is evidence."

"The disappearance of a cheating, conniving, deceitful conman will be considered karma," said the man. Borgin felt a rush of anger, but was not stupid enough to anger the man. "The Ministry will conclude that you were robbed or taken by someone you had ripped off, and let us be honest, Borgin, the list of suspects will not be small."

"So what happens now?" asked Borgin.

"You return with me to the manor," said the figure. "There, we shall discuss our new friend."

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"ARGH!"

Harry knelt at the shore of the Great Lake. He threw off the cloak as best he could. He was breathing very quickly, and was covered in a cold sweat. His heart was racing, though the beats were shallow. His skin was clammy and he felt sure that if he had a mirror, he would appear pale. Classic shock symptoms. He began to shiver. He had been cut before, often worse than this, but he realised that after having been nearly choked beforehand, his brain was already suffering from lack of oxygen. It was little wonder he was in shock. The trouble was, he wasn't a healer or first-aider.

He reached his right arm across his chest and carefully pulled back the fabric of his jumper. He could see his pale skin through the hole, now caked with blood. Harry gritted his teeth and pulled the fabric, trying to rip it.

"ARGH!"

Pulling it pressed the fabric into the wound and moved the spike that was still imbedded in his arm. Since the mask was stuck to the cabinet in the shop, Harry had severed the spike before he left. Harry released the fabric he was pulling and wiped the involuntary tears from his eyes. He picked up his wand and vanished the fabric around the wound. He then aimed his wand at the spike. He took a deep breath, bracing himself for the pain - this was really going to hurt!

"Win..." he said, but the words failed him. He took a deep breath. *Come on Harry, he thought, you have to do this.*

"Wingardium Leviosa!"

The spike shot upwards in one quick motion, wrenching itself cleanly from Harry's flesh, unleashing a small spray of blood as it did.

"JESUS!" cried Harry, his voice breaking halfway through the word. He clutched his arm as the mask landed with a clatter. Harry gritted his teeth, willing the pain to go away. He had to move quickly. He was in shock and if he didn't get lots of oxygen and blood back into his system soon, he would pass out and then he really would be in trouble.

He gently pulled his hand away to inspect the wound. It had gone right through. There was a steady trickle of free-flowing blood oozing out of the two holes. Harry used his wand to sever a section of the cloak he had been wearing. Gritting his teeth, he wrapped it around his arm, using his teeth and good arm. From there he pulled it tight, swearing loudly as he did. His arm was in agony and he could hardly move it.

He needed to get something for this. Harry picked up the cloak and covered himself, holding his arm close to protect it. Summoning his strength, he managed another trip by flame up to a classroom near the hospital wing. Groggily, he stepped out of the cupboard. The shock had caused his body to slow down as blood was rerouted to his vital organs. He could feel himself weakening.

Harry stumbled into the hospital wing, trying to keep silent. Luckily he found the whole place silent and deserted. There was no one here yet, which was unsurprising considering it had been less than a week since the beginning of term. Not even Harry had ever been that bad. Harry crossed to the office and peered inside. It was dark and empty. Of course, it was dinner time. Pomfrey would be down having dinner. Harry opened the door. He took one pace and then fell to the floor.

*Argh!*

*His body was weakening. He needed to lie down. No! Come on, get up, Harry!*

Harry crawled to the cabinet. He opened the glass doors and began to scan the phials.

He needed Blood-Replenishing Potion for obvious reasons, Pepper-up Potion to help alleviate the shock and dehydration, and something to clean and close the wounds. Painkillers were also a must.

Cleaning was simple; he found a bottle of the anti-septic potion that Pomfrey had used to clean his injuries many times before. He also found a salve that she used on grazed knees. This was a little bit more severe than that, but if it helped the skin grow back over, it would be useful. He judged that since there wasn't that much blood, he hadn't hit a major artery or vein. Tissue

damage was mildly worrying. Once he had cleaned and stopped the bleeding, he would have to see if he had any problems moving it.

With the necessary potions in his pockets, Harry grabbed a set of bandages and pads and stuffed them into his pocket, just as his legs buckled again. His head was spinning and he felt really faint. He didn't have the strength for anything else. His legs were numb and he could feel the blackness coming. He grabbed the bottle of potion in his good hand. His vision was blurring and his head becoming faint. Not caring about dosage or Jaredain's bloody principles, Harry took a gulp of potion.

After a second he felt a wave of strength return to him as the potion replenished his arteries with fresh oxygen-rich blood. His head was still spinning, but he had bought himself time. Oxygen has returned to his body. He was still weak and bleeding. There was more work to be done, but not here. Pomfrey wouldn't be gone forever.

Summoning his remaining strength, he flamed back to the side of the lake. It was deserted and so he had room to work. He didn't want to get his bed covered in blood and couldn't think of anywhere else to go that assured him time alone.

He was unable to stand and time was running out - blood alone would not keep him conscious and he was still losing it quickly. He needed to stop the bleeding. It was amazing how instinct was already in place to save him. When any person cuts themselves, their instinctual reaction is to cover it and hold it firmly. Their natural reaction is to apply pressure to slow the bleeding. Harry didn't need to be a medic to do this. *Come on*, he thought to himself.

He removed the dressing he had made from his cloak and then splashed some of the cleaning fluid all over his arm. He hissed in pain as it bit into him, killing any germs. The liquid was cold and he felt it evaporating, making his arm feel cold. He opened the pot of skin healing salve with his wand and then dipped two cotton-wool pads into a thick viscous slime that looked rather like mucus. Taking a deep breath, he pressed one gently into each side of his arm, using his wand to stick it in place. He then wrapped a bandage around it all to hold it steady and protect it, pulling it tight. He cried out in pain as he pulled it tight, causing the dressing to press into the tender flesh. At least it didn't cut off the blood supply to his arm. He didn't want that amputated. He used his teeth and good hand to tie it off.

That done, he could now focus on the potions. He took another swig of the Blood Replenishing Potion. Hermione's words from the potions lesson came back to him: "too much of a potion, even an antidote, can be dangerous". He didn't care at this precise moment. He didn't have the time or patience to mess around with measuring jugs.

He took a swig of the Pepper-up potion. He felt warmth spread through his body and his strength return. He had stopped shivering and sweating. Lastly he took a swig of painkillers and sighed as icy relief flowed into his burning arm.

Harry waited a few minutes for them to take full effect. The throbbing pain in his arm dimmed and he felt the haziness lift. He was seated on a rock on the shore of the lake, a clear January sky

above him. There was a light breeze that caused small waves to wash up on the shore. It was surprisingly relaxing. Harry's heart was still pounding from the experience.

He had come so close to death. Whoever that man was could have killed him, just like he could have in the Forbidden Forest. And then there was the matter of his injury. This would take time to heal. He was in no fit state to fight anything. Also, his injury needed to remain a secret. He couldn't allow anyone to learn of it. He had very nearly passed out in the hospital wing. That would have been a disaster, needing to explain to everyone what he was doing, how he had been injured. He had had a lucky escape tonight, in fact two. He needed to tread more carefully from now on.

He pulled the red diary from his pocket. "You'd better have been worth it," he muttered, before sticking it back in his pocket. He would inspect it later, when he got a chance. For now he needed food. He looked down at his feet around which were the remains of what he had taken from the hospital wing. Some of it was still yet to be used.

Harry put the leftover potions, pads, and bandages into his pockets. He could use those when his bandages needed changing. He then wrapped the used equipment and bloody pads up in his bloodstained cloak. Using his wand, he set the whole wad on fire, destroying the evidence. He watched it burn for a moment, absorbing the heat of the fire. It burned vigorously for a few moments before going out. Harry cast the remains into the water of the lake. That should stop anyone learning what had happened tonight.

He took a deep breath. Holding his arm close to him, Harry turned from the lake. It was time to head back to the castle. He flamed up to the small cloakroom off the entrance hall that had come in so handy during the vampire attack in Rose's world. He was wearing black trousers and a black jumper. Since one sleeve had been mangled, he removed it entirely and then decided to remove the other one to match. However, this exposed the bandages. Harry scanned the racks of cloaks.

Wizards wore cloaks, which was at this moment inconvenient as he needed something that would cover his arm and not open up. Also something that wouldn't be questioned as he wore it indoors. At the end of the line, Harry found what he was looking for: a fleece.

He pulled on the woollen jacket and stepped out of the cloakroom. There were a few people moving through the hall, though no one had noticed him. It was definitely time for dinner. He was hungry and knew that he needed to replenish his strength. Harry walked towards the double doors and fell into line with the others all heading in to dinner.

As it happened, he ended up behind Cho Chang. Oh, how little she interested him these days.

"...to be fair, it is her own fault," said Marietta, who was accompanying her best friend. Harry noticed that the word sneak was not imprinted in spots on her face...yet. Was she still a Judas in this world, he wondered? Either way, it was highly unlikely that Harry would ever consider her, or any other version of Marietta Edgecombe, his friend. Still, it didn't stop him earwigging on their conversation.

"True," said Cho. "I mean, it's good that someone is standing up to Umbridge, but there's brave and then there's stupid and she crossed the line."

"Just because she can teach..."

"Marietta!" hissed Cho.

"I know," said Marietta, scathingly. "But you have to admit that she is really arrogant. Thinking she owns the school."

"I think you are being a little unfair," said Cho.

"Yeah, well," said Marietta. "Just because I go, doesn't mean I have to like her. I reckon she deserved that detention."

Just then they entered the hall and Harry went a different way than the Ravenclaws. It seemed that Marietta was just as bitchy here as ever, and Cho was just as wet. Katie had had a detention as well, apparently. Poor girl. Harry wouldn't wish a Blood Quill on her. However, it was not his affair. He thrust the thought aside and concentrated on a far more pressing issue: dinner.

Ron and Hermione were sitting with Neville at the Gryffindor table. Harry decided to join them. He crossed the hall and sank onto the bench next to Neville.

"Evening," he said. The three of them returned his greeting. Harry had a feeling that whatever they had been talking about had been put on hold as he had arrived. It was a bit of a clique.

"What've you been up to today?" asked Hermione, making conversation.

"Same old," said Harry. He reached across to help himself to some cottage pie. As he did, he noticed in his peripheral vision that Ron looked at Neville and tapped his watch. Harry was clearly an inconvenience to them at this point. Interesting.

Harry took a mouthful of pie. He felt as if he hadn't eaten in years. He felt the strength return to his body, though he still felt ill. In truth, he was looking forward to dessert. A nice big cake that was high in sugar would see him right, probably.

"So where's Katie?" asked Harry.

"Detention with the she-devil," said Neville, before adopting a German accent. "Ze Führer haz decreed zat thinking und freedom ov speech ist nicht güte, und ist punishable by...detention."

"Riiiiight," said Harry, laughing slightly at Neville's impression of the Waffen SS and taking another mouthful.

"Well," said Hermione, rising to leave. "I have an essay to write for Slughorn. I need to head up to the library."

"Really?" said Ron needlessly loudly. "Can I come? I've been struggling with that one." Harry resisted the urge to shake his head at Ron's acting.

"Sure," said Hermione. "Neville?"

"Go on then," said Neville. "I was going to leave it until tomorrow, but if you insist. See you later, Harry." As he turned to leave, he reached out and gave Harry a friendly slap on the arm, right where the spike had penetrated.

Harry hissed in agony as pain surged through his arm; his eyes bulged as he managed to stifle a cry. Instantly Neville, Ron, and Hermione turned back to face him, surprise and confusion on their faces, which slowly turned to suspicion. They probably thought he had the Dark Mark.

"It's nothing," said Harry. "I was doing catch-up potions with Slughorn and burned my arm. I was an idiot and reached across the flames."

"Has Madam Pomfrey seen it?" asked Hermione, looking concerned.

"No," said Harry. "There's no need. Slughorn gave me some salve to put on when I go to bed. I'll be alright. Go and do your essays."

"Sure you're okay, mate?" asked Neville.

"Happy as Larry," said Harry, looking him in the eye.

"Happy as Harry," corrected Neville with a grin. "Okay, see you later."

The three of them turned to leave. Harry watched them go, cradling his arm close to him. Wherever they were going, it was not the library. Harry spooned some shepherd's pie into his mouth and chewed thoughtfully.

*So the three stooges have disappeared, but not to the library,* Harry thought. He had a fairly good idea where they were going and what they were doing. On reflection, it had never been his idea, so there was no reason that it could not happen without him. He had to admit he was curious to see how it was going, if they were as good as his crew had been.

Still, not a lot would be happening tonight. Katie was in a detention with Umbridge, according to Neville. Harry shivered, the back of his hand beginning to itch at the memory. Umbridge was a vicious and spiteful cow. Harry had done many things he wasn't proud of, but he hadn't ever enjoyed causing pain like she had. Harry was a killer, but he considered himself less of a monster than her. He certainly didn't take his insecurities out on children.

He shook his head. Poor Katie. He would have to drop a hint about the solution that Hermione had had him soak his hand in. Making it himself would draw attention, but dropping a hint, 'maybe Hermione can make you something to ease the pain.' would be fine as it didn't directly involve him. He supposed that easing the pain was the least he could do, as long as it didn't compromise his primary objective.

Getting home was his first priority. He would have a look at the book tomorrow evening if he could get some time to himself and see where that led.

Still in the meantime, he could help out Katie from behind the scenes. Easing the pain in her hand would be enough. Much more and he would become involved, and that was dangerous. He had felt this way before, in the Unholy Land, and he had been sucked into the war there. But he could argue that Harry Potter had been involved in that war to begin with, and the war had sought him out, not the other way around. Here, it was nothing to do with him. It wasn't his world, it wasn't his fight. Here he had a choice and he had chosen. He would not get involved. He liked Katie, sure - well, his Katie, that is - and if he could within reason, he would spare her the pain of these detentions, but it was not in his power. He couldn't exactly march in there and hex Umbridge, however tempting it may be. He'd end up in a right flap.

Then again...

Harry rested his head on hands. He had a way of watching her without her knowing, so he could in theory help her without her knowing. So far, she hadn't seemed to be too suspicious of her new friend; in fact she seemed quite grateful. Harry realised that flying into a girl's room at night and watching her sleep was in fact a rather pervy thing to do, and made him sound like either a vampire or a peeping-tom. Harry cast the thought aside. He was there on a purely professional matter. He had not spent the night staring at her bum or anything like that - he was not there for that. She wasn't even of his world.

In fact, by definition, she was an alien. Not a little green man, but she was not from his Earth. Flamel said that from the Magical Signature, he could tell which world Harry was from - okay, so he had been wrong but if the principle was right, then the same person from two different worlds would have an ever so slightly different signature. Was Riddle here skilled enough to find the difference, he wondered? Another, albeit a rather odd, question popped into his mind. Would the fact that she was from a different world, i.e. and alien, make it bestiality? Harry thrust the thought aside. It was a moot point - he wasn't looking for a girlfriend and he certainly wasn't stupid enough to start now. Acquiring a lady-friend didn't even feature on his list of priorities at this time.

He realised that he had digressed and shook his head. The point was that he had a way to enter without people knowing who he was. He did in fact have the power to intervene and save Katie at least some of the pain. Did that give him the right to? Should he interfere in what was nothing to do with him? He hadn't travelled in time, so it wasn't as if he might affect the future and re-write history. In the end it came down to a simple choice. Did he want to?

He made his choice.

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*I will not tell lies*

The streaks of blood glistened as they formed the loopy writing. Katie clenched her jaw, determined not to give Umbridge the satisfaction of hearing her complain. The pain faded as the

incisions healed, leaving nothing but a pale line. Glaring at her hand and then her captor for the umpteenth time, she took a deep breath and wrote the line again.

*SMASH!*

All of a sudden the window to her left flew open with such force that it hit the wall and two panes shattered, raining jagged glass down to the floor. Katie's head snapped up to look, and her hand moved instantly to her wand. Umbridge was on her feet and moving towards the window, cursing under her breath.

She grasped the iron handle of the window, and muttering to herself raised her wand to the shattered panes, trying to fix the glass that now littered the floor. Katie took the opportunity to use her wand to duplicate her lines, giving her another page of work. The sheet would be burned in front of her long before the spell wore off. Umbridge did that at the end of every detention to remind her that all her pain was for nothing - a reoccurring theme amongst their interactions. At least she didn't know about the RA.

*"ARGH!"*

Katie looked up at the sound of the scream, just in time to see a ball of flame erupt in front of Umbridge. As she staggered back, slipping on the broken glass, the phoenix soared in through the window, its claws narrowly missing Umbridge as she fell. Katie felt her insides leap as the bird swooped around her and then came in to land on the end of her table. Umbridge had landed amidst the glass and was tending to her bleeding fingers from where she had broken her fall. Katie looked down at the phoenix, which seemed to be inspecting her hand. The bird looked from her hand to Umbridge and then up to Katie. She was sure that it understood what was going on, with almost human-like intellect. The bird cawed softly, before cocking its head. A single glistening tear escaped its eye, falling down its beak and on to her hand. She felt a cool soothing sensation as it landed. As another followed, Katie felt her hand begin to tingle as the wound closed itself. The cool tears cast a feeling of freshness through her, like a cool wind after a stuffy room. She felt energy return to her arm.

*WHACK!*

A metre-long ruler used during lessons came crashing down on the desk, narrowly missing the bird, which squawked indignantly. With a flutter, it spread its mighty wings and launched itself into the air, rising near vertically towards the rafters.

"Get away!" snapped Umbridge, raising her wand and attempting to Stun the phoenix, which twisted out of the way and came to perch on the rafters.

"You can't do that!" said Katie hotly, glaring at the teacher.

"I am High Inquisitor!" said Umbridge icily. "I can do what I like!"

"But it's a phoenix!" said Katie. "You can't hit a phoenix any more than a unicorn. They're peaceful, higher beings!"

"Which the Ministry classes as dangerous," snapped Umbridge, firing another hex up into the rafters. "I am not having animals running free over my school. It's not a zoo."

"It's not your school," snapped Katie.

The Phoenix cawed loudly from the rafters. As Umbridge looked up, the creature dived for her, its claws missing her ludicrous perm by inches as she ducked. It turned upwards, flying back up and circling just beneath the ceiling, cawing loudly.

"This is pointless," said Umbridge in despair as her fifth Stunner sailed wide of the circling bird.

"We will continue your detentions tomorrow," she said. "And for your cheek, it will be three hours, not two. Be here at six."

Katie didn't say anything else, but darted out of the room. She heard another shout of 'Stupefy' before the phoenix fluttered out of the room and sailed down to land on her shoulder as she headed back towards the seventh floor - she was very late. She hissed slightly as its claws sank into her robes. She knew it hadn't meant to hurt her, but was just trying to get a grip.

Somehow, its weight was comforting as she walked. She could feel its soft warm feathers against her ear as she walked. It was nice not to be alone. She was glad Hermione had been right, and that it had returned. She didn't in all honesty know where she stood with the phoenix. She knew it wasn't a pet and would be insulted if she asked it to carry a package. She also knew now that Umbridge despised them, and she was fairly sure that they would be banned by another Educational Decree tomorrow morning. Still, the phoenix had shown up two days in a row - this was an encouraging thought. It seemed to come and go when it pleased, or rather when it was needed. She smiled; the thought was comforting. Her white knight, albeit a feathery one, was here.

She looked down at her hand. She had rubbed the tears in, and now the skin was perfectly healed. The scar was barely visible and her hand felt as fresh as ever.

"Thank you," she whispered.

The phoenix gently pressed its head against the side of hers, in what she assumed was a sign of affection. Suddenly with a loud caw right in her ear, she felt a rush of wind as the bird jumped into the air. She staggered back a pace under the force as it lifted from her shoulder. She stood frozen to the spot as the bird soared forward at incredible speed, turned right and flew around the corner.

Suddenly there was a thud that sounded suspiciously like someone falling over.

"Jesus!" muttered a voice.

Wand drawn, Katie stepped around the corner to find Harry Potter in a heap on the floor.

"What are you doing here?" asked Katie, letting her wand arm fall to her side.

"Do you mean here as in a heap on the floor, or here as in the east wing?" he said indignantly, climbing to his feet. He brushed himself off, looking rather put out. "For your information," he continued, "I am heading back to the Tower, or rather I was before this bloody great big bird flew out of nowhere and damn near flew into me. Where'd it go anyway?" He looked around, trying to find the phoenix, which thankfully had pulled another disappearing act.

"What bird?" asked Katie, playing dumb. She didn't want news to spread that she had a phoenix. It was best she keep this knowledge to herself. Tomorrow Umbridge would outlaw unusual pets, and she didn't need any more attention than she would get. In some ways it was fortunate that it came and went when needed.

"A big orange...thing," said Harry, flapping his arms to imitate a bird. Katie rolled her eyes, and turned on her heel. She was late for the meeting, and trading sarcasm with Harry Potter was the last thing she needed. To her great annoyance, the boy fell into step beside her.

"Yes?" asked Katie as they walked.

"Well, we are both going back to the Tower, aren't we?" said Harry. "This is the best way?" It was odd, noted Katie, that he used rhetoric like a teacher. He almost sounded as if he was talking down to her, something she would never have expected from him. She pushed the thought aside, as Harry's use of English was not her main priority. She needed to get rid of him and pronto. They were fast approaching the junction where she needed to turn right to head up to the Room of Requirement and her meeting, and Harry would have to go straight on to the Tower.

She was already suspicious of the boy. Hermione had said earlier that he had quizzed her about Arithmancy of all things, and how she was doing in her lessons, as if he didn't know she was a straight-O student. There was something wrong with Harry, something she couldn't put her finger on, but something that made it clear he could not be trusted.

"Can I ask you a personal question?" asked Harry, after a few moments of silence. The question pulled Katie from her thoughts about the very person who was speaking.

"Depends how personal," said Katie, her mind thinking of a way to get rid of him, rather than listening.

"How do you cope with all the...rumours?"

"What do you mean?" said Katie, her mind coming back down to Earth as his words pierced her mind. Was he just after some gossip? Her jaw clenched in frustration, but then a terrifying thought occurred to her. Was he a spy? Was that why he was quizzing Hermione earlier? Was he Umbridge's stooge? Did the old bag have a spy in the Gryffindor common room? Was nowhere safe?

Katie gritted her teeth, but managed to hide her anger at the thought. Her face remained neutral.

"Well," said Harry, his tone emotionless but gentle. "I had a friend who was kind of in a similar position to you. I mean not exactly, because you are unique, but he was famous for what his

mother did, or more specifically died doing. Everywhere he went he used to get things, have people shake his hand, and then one day for no particular reason, the media turned on him. Overnight he went from being loved to being a laughingstock for no reason other than some madman in a suit behind a desk decided he didn't like him and wanted to break him."

Katie stopped walking and turned to face him. It was a more insightful question than she had heard all term.

"What happened to him?" she asked.

"Well," said Harry, staring ahead into space. "He was fine as long as he had a few good friends, but one day he lost them. He was alone in a world that hated him. He carried on the good fight as best he could...but...eventually..."

"He's dead?"

"Close," said Harry. "Might as well be. Total mental breakdown: locked up in his own little world, unable to escape - a prison for his mind."

Katie stared into those unblinking green eyes. There was a sadness there she had not seen before. He had appeared so calm since he had been back, almost chillingly so, but now there was a deep sadness. Whoever this friend was, it had been someone very dear to him. It also echoed part of her own life. She too had been made a laughingstock for no better reason than Fudge had got it into his head that she was a threat.

"I'm sorry," said Katie. She raised a hand and rested it lightly on his shoulder. She felt him tense as she touched him, recoiling a fraction of an inch, but then relaxing. God, he was so tense. What was worrying him?

"It's okay," said Harry. "Feels like ancient history now. So what about you?" His icy cold mask was back in place.

"Much the same way," said Katie. "There are those who believe me, and those who don't. I refuse to waste time making people believe me. I just want to..." she paused.

"Live your life?" suggested Harry. Strange, they were just the words she had been looking for.

She nodded. "I didn't want any of this. And people think I like this attention, this constant ridicule. Don't they see that I hate it, and I would give it all up for a chance to live with my parents? But it's in the past and I can't change it - I just have to make do. I know I am right, I have friends who will stand by me, and everyone else can bugger off. I don't care about their opinions, they don't matter to me."

Her voice was becoming more shaky, more erratic, so she stopped before she either said something she'd regret or burst into tears.

"You haven't asked me," said Harry. "You haven't asked what I believe."

"I've given up trying to convince people," said Katie.

"And so you should," said Harry. "My opinion, Malfoy's, Betty Jones' from Milton Keynes, and everyone else' shouldn't matter. We cannot understand what it is like to be you, and none of us have the courage to stand up and fight. What right do we have to judge you? None. You have your friends with you - value them, Katie, don't let them go. As long as they are with you, you have all you need."

Katie stared at the boy. The sadness was gone and his eyes were expressionless, staring unblinkingly into hers.

"Strong as you are, you cannot do this alone," said Harry. "They can help you. As with my friend, if you lose those you hold dear, you have nothing left to keep you straight and sane."

Katie stood motionless, unable to speak. Harry paused for a second before he relaxed. His face and eyes softened and looked away. "I just thought I should mention it - you seem a bit down."

"I..." Katie stammered, caught a little off-guard. In all her years, this boy was the closest anyone had come to understanding her. It was something of a shock, as well as a stark warning. He was cleverer than he appeared.

Harry took a step along the passage before turning back to her, "Coming back to the tower?"

"Yes," said Katie absently, thinking about what he had said. "No!" she said, suddenly remembering the situation. "I have to...I forgot my bag. I just need to fetch it from the library. I'll see you up there."

"You want me to come with you?" he offered.

"Thanks, but I can manage," said Katie, struggling to keep the false smile on her face. Harry regarded her for a second, and she was glad he couldn't do Legilimency.

"Okay," said Harry. "See you later."

Katie nodded and then turned on her heel, not noticing the boy behind her. He too turned to leave, but paused a second later, staring back at her with a curious stare. As she rounded the corner, the boy crouched down, and then rose in a flutter of fiery feathers up towards the rafters.

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Harry took off and flapped his way up to the rafters. For some reason his injured arm didn't translate to an injured wing. His flight was not impeded in the slightest. He flew swiftly upward, but he did not land on the rafters, but continued to glide as slowly as possible after Katie, walking beneath him. At this slow speed he had little manoeuvrability unless he flapped, which was noisy. He was lucky she hadn't heard him take off. He had nearly hit a rafter twice, but he managed to keep going, keeping an eye on the girl below.

She was oblivious to her pursuer and walked swiftly on. After a few metres, she checked her watch. He heard her curse aloud and then break into a run. She was not heading towards the library, nor was she heading towards the Tower. Where on Earth was she going? Harry accelerated after her, keeping close to the ceiling, hidden by the shadows despite his bright plumage.

*Why wasn't I a blackbird?* he thought to himself.

With the added speed he could soar between rafters effortlessly in perfect silence, undetectable, unless he crashed or she looked up. Katie came to the south-side staircase and began to climb.

Harry cursed to himself. The staircase was brightly lit and the ceiling was a good hundred feet above them. If there were others near the top, he would be seen. Harry wished he had his cloak with him. He swooped down and turned back into his human form. From there he peered out into the bright staircase. Katie was two floors up and still climbing. Harry watched her climb another, up to the seventh floor.

Thinking quickly, Harry decided on a course of action. Concentrating hard, he disappeared in a ball of flame, reappearing at the same time up near the ceiling. As he began to fall, his arms shortened and the feathers reappeared. In phoenix form, he pulled out of the dive, soaring into the darkness of the seventh floor passage.

He rose up towards the ceiling, having reacquired his prey. Soaring along in silence, he saw Katie stop. She stepped sideways into the shadows against the wall. Harry could still make her out. He dared not land, for she would hear the thud, and he couldn't disappear for the same reason. Had she heard him? She was looking back towards the stairwell. She knew someone was following her.

Harry soared past her and continued for another twenty metres before turning and coming back around. Katie still hadn't moved. She stood in the shadows, eyes fixed on the end of the passage where it joined the stairs. Harry glided silently by far above her and once again came about to fly back. As he passed her she stepped out of the shadows. She stood in the middle of the passage and then continued along the passage for three paces before turning. Had she changed her mind? Suddenly she turned again, pacing back and forth.

Suddenly, Harry realised where they were, and what she was doing. The Room of Requirement. His suspicions had been right: the DA was still running! She was going to give her lesson, albeit a bit late. Sure enough, the door had appeared and opened. He just had time to hear Katie say "Sorry I'm so late, guys," before the door shut and faded into nothingness.

Harry flew down and dropped to the floor, landing on his human feet. Standing up, he walked to the point where the door would appear. He could visualise the room as it had been when they had practiced when he had been in charge. He took one step forward, then froze.

I haven't been invited, he realised. They would want to know how he knew, whom he had told. They would think he was an Umbridge spy. They might even work out that he was not the Harry they used to know. Harry stepped away from the wall. No, he could not enter tonight. He wanted

to see the DA, see how it was going, see if they were as good as his crew had been. Smiling to himself at the memory, Harry turned to leave.

*I could get in, he thought to himself. But it's best to be invited.*

He reached the stairs and began to descend, aiming for a passage that would lead him to the Tower.

*So how do I get invited?* he wondered. He was so deep in thought that he nearly walked into a suit of armour. He had plenty of time before curfew, but didn't want the attention.

"So how do I get an invite?" he muttered to himself. "They have to want me in there." Maybe he should show off - show what he could do. They would surely want to learn from that. Yes, but that would draw attention from Umbridge, Riddle, the Ministry, Grindelwald (whatever he was like) and who knew what else. No, that was not the way to go about it. He could hold back, just use simple spells - that way it would only seem like he was as good as the rest. But then again, that would show that he could take care of himself and not need any training. Hang on, that's it - he had to appear in need of training. He had to appear as if he could not handle himself. He needed to lose a fight!

"Right," he said to himself. "Where's Malfoy got to?"

## ~~~~ Chapter IV ~~~~

### Enigma

**"You're here because you know something.  
What you know you can't explain, but you feel it.  
You've felt it your entire life, that there's something wrong.  
You don't know what it is, but it's there,  
Like a splinter in your mind, driving you mad."**

### Morpheus (Laurence Fishbourne) – The Matrix

#### *BLACK MARKETEEER DISAPPEARS DURING RANSACKING*

Borgin and Burke's of Knockturn Alley was ransacked last night, in an apparent revenge-motivated attack. The shop owner, Mr. Borgin, whose whereabouts are unknown at this time, is believed to have been abducted during the incident, which took place at around 5pm yesterday. Neighbours and passers-by report hearing bangs and curses shortly after the shop closed for business. When Aurors arrived, the shop had been ransacked and there was no sign of its owner.

"We are treating this as suspicious," said a Ministry spokesperson. "Since nothing appears to have been taken from the shop, we have ruled out robbery as a motive. This seems to have been a personal vendetta against Mr. Borgin."

Mr. Borgin's alleged dealings are rumoured to be in the Dark Arts, and his ruthlessness as a businessman have gained him a long list of enemies. The Aurors are not short on suspects. Several cases have been brought against Mr. Borgin over the years, but witnesses more often than not mysteriously tend to withdraw their statements, or worse, meaning that he has never been prosecuted. It is, perhaps, ironic that a man rumoured to be behind several disappearances should now have disappeared himself.

Harry stopped reading and put the *Prophet* down. Using his good arm, he poured himself some orange juice and raised the glass to his lips. As he drank, he was aware of several eyes watching him intently. Further down the table Katie, Neville, Ron, Hermione and Ginny were all deep in conversation. He had a feeling it was about him.

Across the room, Draco Malfoy was shooting daggers at him.

*Perfect*, thought Harry as he glanced at Malfoy. *That should make my job easier*. He hadn't given up on his plan to pick a fight with the Slytherin, hopefully prompting Katie and her group to invite him into the DA.

He buttered a bagel with his good hand, holding it still with his injured left. The salve he had borrowed had replaced the skin over the wound and helped to heal the muscles and tendons below, but it still hurt like hell when he stretched and tensed it too much so he held it close to his body and tried to keep it immobile. Lifting anything more than a bagel was impossible. He supposed he could use a sling, but that would just draw attention. Instead, he just kept the arm bandaged, more to protect it than anything else until the skin had healed over. All in all, he judged the mission to be a success; after all, he had gotten what he went there for in the first place, and he had managed to get away from the man in black, a highly skilled opponent, without needing to consult professional help. That thought brought a small smile to his face.

"Your attention please!" called a magically magnified voice above the chatter. Harry, along with the rest of the hall, turned to look at the speaker, though he already knew who it was and roughly what this was about. Umbridge was walking down the central aisle towards the staff table, dressed from head to toe in pink and wrapped in a fuchsia woollen shawl. The chatter died down in an instant as she spoke, but a groan started to circulate as people noticed what she was holding; a rolled up parchment.

"I have in my hand," she announced, unravelling the parchment with a pompous snap. "Educational Decree Number Twenty-Seven."

The groan swept through the room twice as loud as before, though Umbridge seemed unfazed. Harry noticed a grimace on McGonagall's face as she exchanged a weathered glance with Riddle, whose face was passive. When quiet had returned, Umbridge began to read from the parchment, though Harry had a fairly good idea what it was about before she opened her mouth.

"*By order of the High Inquisitor*," she began in that familiar sickly sweet voice that made Harry want to pull her toenails out one by one. "*All non-sanctioned pets and animals are banned from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Anyone owning a pet not listed on the school's approved animal list, (see School Regulation 367, paragraph C) should be handed to professor*

*Grubbly-Plank for disposal.*" Umbridge stopped reading and looked around, wearing an inappropriate smile, as though she had just given them a treat.

There was a pause as the words set in. Harry noticed Julia Giles, a young second year who had a rabbit called Fidget, looking extremely pale. Harry's thoughts on the other hand, went far beyond a single furball. This was another example of Umbridge stamping down on the students. Like Dumbledore in Harry's world, apparently not even Riddle could stop her.

What concerned Harry the most was that she was going further than she had in his world and it was in response to the phoenix – to Harry's intervention. He was already affecting this world, already making it harder for Katie. Riddle was expending valuable energy and resources that should rightly be spent looking for Grindelwald following Harry around – an utter waste of time. In addition, Umbridge was now trying to find out about the 'mysterious phoenix', in addition to Katie's DA. Just by being here Harry was changing history, although granted it wasn't history yet, exactly. Technically this wasn't the past, this was the present...just an alternate present. He tried to reassure himself that intervening didn't matter. After all, he couldn't very well delete himself from history, could he? All he was accomplishing was making it harder for Katie. Of greater concern was that if he pushed Umbridge enough, she could deviate from what she had done in his world and Harry would no longer be able to predict what was to come. And when it came to that woman, he did not like surprises.

"Excuse me, Professor, but what do you mean by '*disposal*'?" asked a small, terrified voice. Umbridge had been heading up towards the head table when Julia Giles had spoken. "You don't mean to...kill them, do you?"

Umbridge paused and turned back to the students with an icy smile.

"The sanctioned animals list was designed to be an inventory of safe and useful pets," she replied with false kindness. "If they are not on that list, my dear, then they are classed as dangerous or inappropriate. In that case, the Ministry shall proceed accordingly and have them destroyed."

"You mean murdered!" said an angry voice from the Hufflepuff table, but Umbridge ignored it.

"That is all. Enjoy your breakfast."

The argument was at an end and the High Inquisitor's word was final. She headed towards the front of the room and took her place at the head table, completely oblivious to the tears of young Julia and the many other horrified and hostile faces around the room. Even Professor McGonagall was shooting daggers at her, Harry noticed. Unconcernedly, Umbridge calmly helped herself to a pastry, perfectly at ease.

If only he could be there to see her chased away by a herd of centaurs for a second time... However, he planned to be gone long before that happened. Despite the fact that Umbridge was stamping down, there was nothing he could or should do to stop it. He didn't dare visit Katie as the phoenix again – or at least, not where he could be seen. He really needed to keep a low profile.

Fighting his natural instinct, he rose to his feet, holding a bagel in his mouth and turned to leave, his injured arm tucked close to his body as he walked back up to the tower to get his stuff. He had a full day of lessons today and was too exhausted and in too much pain to do anything but comply with the status quo. He wanted to get into the DA sooner rather than later, but he was not an idiot; he knew that it was fool-hardy to go looking for a fight with Malfoy in this state. He would have to wait. He needed to wait. If he managed to find time, he might have a look at the journal later. For now though, it was time for Herbology.

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"That didn't take long," muttered Katie bitterly, as Umbridge finished her announcement. She had known that Umbridge would attempt something of the sort, but it didn't stop her feeling angry at the old bint. She would slaughter all those animals just to drive Katie lower. That was pathetic, but that was Umbridge. Looking around, Katie could see that she wasn't the only one who looked angry. Professor McGonagall also didn't look best pleased. Katie looked over at the Headmaster, but as usual, he was looking elsewhere. Another glimmer of anger pulsed through her. Determinedly, Katie shook the thought aside, not allowing herself the luxury of wallowing in self-pity.

As she scoured the faces in the Great Hall, many seemed to be either livid or upset at Umbridge's latest proclamation. Several people seemed to be in tears while friends tried to comfort them. Although most people did stick to toads, cats and owls, there were a few exceptions – one of which was Hermione. Crookshanks was half cat, half Kneazle. Katie hoped that Umbridge wasn't smart enough to realise this or Crookshanks could very well end up heading for the axe.

Another face Katie had picked out of the crowd was Harry Potter. His neutral expression stood out among the students as he arose at the back at the Great Hall and stood to leave. Curiously, he seemed to be holding his arm close to his body, protecting it. Had he hurt himself? Had someone hurt him? As Katie watched, she recalled their conversation the night before as she had headed up to the Room of Requirement.

*We cannot understand what it is like to be you, and none of us have the courage to stand up and fight.*

*What right do we have to judge you? None.*

How could someone so distant be so understanding? His question had cut her right to the soul. Even Ron, Neville, Hermione and Ginny had no clue as to what it was like to be her. None of them understood how much she hated this fame. Then, out of the blue, someone who she never really took notice of before seemed to get it. Someone who she didn't trust, didn't even like in his current state of mind, could somehow cut to the core of her. For a second, in those emerald eyes she thought that she had seen...understanding.

No...she must have been imagining it.

It was ridiculous. She knew perfectly well that her bumbling friend had never been through anything remotely related to what she had lived – no one had. Yet, she knew what she had seen... Katie sighed. It was just another chapter of the enigma that was Harry Potter.

What was going on with him? His questioning of both her and Hermione was certainly suspicious. She couldn't fight the idea that he was Umbridge's spy. It all fitted –so far he hadn't been in trouble with the toad and he had taken unusual interest in what Katie and her friends had been up to. She couldn't shake the feeling that he had an ulterior motive. Clearly the boy was hiding something.

Then again, it was Harry... only Harry. He didn't have it in him to be a traitor, did he? A few weeks ago, she would instantly have said no, but these days she wasn't so sure.

Still, tonight she had another detention and this one was to be longer than the last. There was no chance of being saved by a phoenix this time. She glowered at the figure in pink sitting at the front table and felt a sudden desire to see her struck by lightning.

*I'm going to be there, she thought bitterly. When you and your stupid Minister are proven wrong and hung out to dry in front of the entire country, I'm going to be there and I'll be laughing.*

Suddenly, Katie's blood was boiling and all her frustration was directed squarely at Umbridge.

*Take a breath Kathryn, calm yourself, she chastised herself. This is just from lack of sleep. The nightmares had returned since the phoenix had not been there last night.*

*Come back to me, she pleaded.*

The dreams were getting more vivid and the classes during the day more brutal. She held on to one thing now, and one thing only. She spent most of her time in daydreams, planning upcoming RA lessons. It was a glimmer of hope, and it was all she had to look forward to.

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Harry's cunning plan did not succeed for some time. It was ironic, he noted, that he found it so hard to get into a fight. Trouble had always managed to find him before, and Malfoy had given Harry so many opportunities over the years to lamp him one that Harry had given up counting. Ironically, now that he actually wanted to get into a scrap he was finding it really hard going.

Due to Umbridge's latest decree banning all non-sanctioned animals, Harry had not been back to visit Katie in phoenix form since rescuing her from the old bint." He watched her from a distance over the next three days and as far as he could tell, there didn't seem to be anything wrong with her. He would check in soon in phoenix form, as a week's absence would make her suspicious. Nothing much, just a quick flap around the room. He made a mental note to do that after classes, but right now he was concentrating on something else: Malfoy.

Although anxious for a fight, Harry forced himself to not make a single attempt over the next few days in order to give his arm time to heal. In the interests of protecting said limb, Harry would rather this upcoming scrap be magical and not physical. He needed to be up to his full strength as

soon as possible and taking a pounding on his already injured arm from any of the Slytherins would set him back days. By the end of Wednesday, his arm, largely thanks to the liberal doses of the lotions and potions he had taken from Pomfrey, was a bit better. Although he could not support much weight on that arm and movement was still a bit painful, the skin had completely healed over. It was now a matter of giving the muscle beneath time to heal. Not being a Healer, Harry thought this was good progress and so made his first attempt the following morning.

His first effort had simply been to track the three of them and then walk past them alone in a deserted corridor while wearing Gryffindor colours, and so giving them every opportunity to have a go. However, the trio of Slytherins walked right past, noses in the air, Crabbe and Goyle's arms swinging like pendulums but fists not clenched. They didn't seem to care. Harry felt strangely annoyed that he wasn't even worth their time. He also felt something was amiss if Draco "Shooting-daggers-at-me-for-the-past-few-weeks" Malfoy was ignoring him.

It was not, Harry soon discovered, as easy as one might imagine, especially as it harmed the desired image of helpless and defenceless if he went in fists and wands blazing. He needed to get Malfoy to make the first move. Getting a bully to make the first move sounded simple, but it just didn't seem to be working. Did Umbridge have her pet on his best behaviour? Harry wasn't sure, but what he did know was that this wasn't going to happen nicely.

That afternoon, attempt number two had taken the form of walking into Goyle as if he had not seen him. He had been aiming for Malfoy, but Goyle had stepped across his path just before impact. Harry had stammered an apology, hoping to be hit, but before Goyle could raise a fist, Malfoy had grabbed his arm and pointed. Professor Slughorn had been waddling towards him.

Goyle had cursed aloud exactly the phrase Harry was thinking in his head.

"Watch where you're going," Goyle grunted rudely, and the Slytherins retreated into the Potions room.

"Careful, mate," Neville, who had been standing nearby with Ron, warned. "I don't reckon he's forgiven you yet."

Harry opened his mouth to protest, but quickly shut it again. He didn't want to seem to be looking for trouble – he needed sympathy. Cursing inwardly, he followed Neville and Ron into the classroom.

Before Potions on Thursday afternoons, he decided, was his best opportunity for another go, as Katie and the finalists had their lessons in a room no more than thirty metres from the one Harry and the sixth years were using. This would give the DA head coach a front row seat. However, it also meant he needed to wait another week.

In the last few days since he had discovered the DA's existence, Harry had been busy. The professors had started sending him notes to attend extra catch-ups lessons, which had taken a majority of his spare time. He had appeared to Katie as a phoenix twice since Umbridge had banned unusual pets, but never stayed long. He just flapped around, let her pet him for a few minutes and then left. In truth it was quite pleasant when her finger gently stroked his golden

plumage and he had had to force himself to leave the second time. These visits, and the additional homework he now found himself faced with meant that he had had very little time to explore the diary. He had skimmed through parts of it each night before bed but had only managed a few pages per night, and it was a long book. The author's tiny writing didn't help, nor the constant use of technical jargon. From the parts Harry understood he seemed to be on the right track, and Harry was optimistic that further down the line he may well encounter some useful information.

As it turned out, it was another week before anything happened, either with Malfoy or the diary. At one-thirty on the following Thursday they were all waiting outside their Potions lesson with the seventh years just around the corner including, Harry noted, the Girl Who Lived. He suppressed a smirk at the title and turned his attention back to his own class. Malfoy was leaning lazily against the wall, apparently lost in thought. Truth he told, Harry was not actually concentrating on Malfoy at the time. Like all great plans, this one came into being almost by accident. Harry had been working out how he could plausibly get close enough to spill the blackcurrant drink he was holding, (guaranteed to stain clothing) all down Malfoy's new robes, when a dreamy voice sounded in the passage.

Harry didn't actually hear what Luna said and had no idea why she would even be here with the sixth years, but the Slytherins promptly burst out laughing. Harry noticed that there were even a fair few from Gryffindor who were laughing as well. Grimacing, he stepped closer to see what was going on, standing on tiptoe to try and see through the forest of students. All he saw was Luna, however, retreating down a passage and disappearing from sight.

As the rest of the Slytherins sniggered, Malfoy spoke.

"That girl was definitely dropped on her head when she was a baby," he said sarcastically. "When she graduates, she wants to go to St. Mungo's, but I'm not sure if she means as a healer or patient. They've got a Wacky Ward there, don't they? It's called the Looney bin for a reason."

Harry felt his blood pressure rise, and his fists tense. He thought back to Neville's parents, to the image of them in St. Mungo's, not even recognising their own son. Their vacant faces were burned into the back of his eyes. Malfoy's Aunt Bellatrix had done that – had he no respect for the departed? Clearly not.

"I blame the parents," Malfoy continued, unaware of Harry's rising temper. "Her father's a few balls short of a snooker set, isn't he?"

It was as if the fog cleared. Harry suddenly saw what he needed to do. He saw how he could get them to trust him, to pity him. In his world, what had made him pity Neville the most had been the truth about his parents.

"If you knew what you were talking about, you'd be dangerous," said Harry loudly, putting the drink down. Silence fell and Malfoy's head turned slowly to face him. He was vaguely aware of the few students standing between them taking a step backwards to clear the line of fire.

"Ah," Malfoy said matter-of-factly. "Makes sense. You would know all about the Wacky Ward, Potter."

Harry stepped forward, not in outrage for his parents of this world, but more for Neville's. How could Malfoy be proud of what his aunt had done? How could he consider it a laughing matter? Harry remembered that this subject had nearly driven Neville to hit Malfoy once, and now he understood what his friend must have been feeling. This was as good a reason as any to hit him, arm be damned.

Harry hadn't managed another step before Neville grabbed him in a bear-hug, clamping his arms to his side and stopping him from moving.

"Cool it, Harry," he said quickly. "He's just trying to get a rise out of you."

"Luckily," said Malfoy even louder, ignoring Neville's interference, "the problem's now solved, isn't it? You could have all gone together, but you are so stupid you couldn't even die properly."

That was enough. Harry's real anger snapped, consuming his acting. He thrust his elbow backwards into Neville's stomach, knocking the air out of him. As Neville doubled up, Harry drew his wand. Malfoy followed suit, having had his ready. As the wands came level, Harry opened his mouth to cast a spell, but suddenly remembered what he was here to do, as the icy control of the Dark Knight took command.

A spell left Malfoy's wand and it took all Harry's self control not to move to the side. Instead he forced himself to hold his ground and waved his own wand clumsily.

"*Stupez...*"

He braced for impact, knowing he was wearing no armour.

The spell hit him in the gut, forcing the air out of him and launching him backward. He felt his limbs go numb as his feet left the ground and then he landed painfully on his back, sliding along the stone floor, his glasses slipping down below his nose. He lost his grip on his wand as he hit the cold, hard stone and the pain consumed him from within. His insides felt like they were on fire. He imagined this was what an ulcer felt like. Every organ felt like it was burning; it was like lemon or salt on a cut, like chilli in the eyes except all over his body. The pain began to grow, burning hotter and hotter, itching, blazing inside where he could never scratch. He broke out into a sweat and could feel himself going red as the heat surged through him. It was unbearable.

Forgetting the pretence, Harry reached for his wand and levelled it at Malfoy.

"*Stupefy!*" he choked. A jet of red light shot from his wand, but his aim was off. The curse shot over Malfoy's shoulder, missing Parkinson by an inch and shooting harmlessly into the wall, which absorbed it without effect. It was enough to cause Malfoy to break the connection.

"What's going on here, then?" boomed a jolly voice before Harry or Malfoy could make another move.

Professor Slughorn had arrived through the crowd and Malfoy had hastily removed his wand from sight. Harry was able to breathe again. He sat on the floor massaging his stomach, still sweating and feeling really hot. The burning pain was gone, but he could feel a dull ache and he was still beet red. As the beefy potion's professor approached, Harry glanced around at the other students. Malfoy was leaning against the wall again casually, trying to look innocent. Neville – who had managed to straighten up after Harry had hit him – and Ron were tucking wands away, hiding the fact that they had been about to intervene. Hermione appeared shocked but sympathetic towards Harry. The rest of the students just looked slightly disappointed, as they always did when a fight was broken up. Through the gap Professor Slughorn had created in the body of students, Harry could see Katie watching him, her face passive but her eyebrows narrowed. Had it worked? Only time would tell, though she didn't seem overly impressed.

"Mr. Malfoy?" asked Slughorn, turning to face the boy.

"Nothing," shrugged Malfoy offhandedly. He shot a dirty glance at Harry, a smug expression on his pale face, "Although it seems Potter is just *burning* to learn more about Potions, Professor. You might want to give him extra lessons, since he obviously needs help."

With that he, turned and strutted off into the classroom, leaving the teacher standing. Slughorn made no move to stop him.

"Potter?"

The walrus turned to face Harry, who was still shaking slightly as the aching slowly receded from his limbs. He still felt light-headed and a bit disorientated, but it was probable only a lasting effect of the spell. Whatever it had done to his organs was leaving him starved for oxygen and feeling faint. Most likely it would pass given time.

"I slipped," Harry lied, climbing shakily to his feet with Neville's help.

"All right, Harry?" Neville asked.

"I'm fine," he muttered, brushing his robes down. "Thanks."

The seventh year's professor had arrived by now and had ushered them into their own classroom further along the corridor. Professor Slughorn seemed satisfied that nothing was amiss and moved into the dungeon followed by the rest of the class, leaving only Harry and Neville out in the corridor. The sound of students unpacking floated out of the class, but the two Gryffindors were alone.

"What was all that about?" asked Neville in a whisper, presumably so that those sat nearest the door would not be able to overhear.

"You heard him," Harry said angrily, picking up his schoolbag, which had slipped off his shoulder in the confrontation. He had expected Malfoy to win – he knew that he was going to get hit before the fight even started – but still, the manner of his defeat angered Harry. He was expecting massive ears, huge toe-nails, something weird...not a near death experience.

*Bloody Malfoys and the bloody Dark Arts.*

Besides that, Harry was still angry that Malfoy could be so heartless and make jokes about what his aunt had done.

Neville didn't seem to get this and just looked puzzled.

"Yeah, something about St. Mungo's," Neville said, his face showing no signs of comprehension.

Harry shot him a piercing look. Neville's face suddenly fell and Harry knew that he had made the connection between the Wacky Ward reference and Harry. He actually felt sympathy for his friend when the guilt surfaced onto Neville's face.

*Oh Neville, thought Harry sadly. It was actually your parents I was thinking of, not mine. Thank God you don't know.*

"Who?" Neville's eyes were wide and he looked a little ashen.

"You never thought it odd that I live with my aunt and uncle?" asked Harry. He immediately felt his own pang of guilt; he had known that Neville lived with his grandmother from the day they had met, but he never asked why until he found out in a Pensieve in his fourth year. Four years it had taken for Harry to care enough for his friend to ask why, to discover why Neville had no mum and dad.

"Your parents?" asked Neville. "I knew they were killed in the blast they thought killed you, but I never realised why they were at St. Mungo's."

"No one does," said Harry, his voice level, unemotional. It took all his control to mask his feelings of pity and anger at the injustice and tragedy of the story, even though it wasn't his own. "Fifteen years they spent there, and the world forgot their names."

Harry turned and walked into the room, sliding on to a bench near the door. He thought back to Frank Longbottom and his wife Alice, wandering aimlessly in St. Mungo's. They had been in the Order, they had known what was happening, what Dumbledore had done with Harry. Two people of such character, even *that* curse could not force them to tell their secrets. The Longbottoms had chosen insanity rather than betrayal, just as Lily Potter had once chosen death in order to protect her son. That was the greatest tragedy...that such honourable people had given their lives.

Harry knew he owed Neville's parents a debt. They didn't tell the Lestranges about Harry, about the Order, or about what had happened to Voldemort. They had been heroes. Above that they had been good parents, judging by how Neville had turned out here. Harry remembered what Frank had been like in the Unholy Land after losing his family – bitter and twisted. But in this world, this was how the Longbottom family should have been all along.

Disgusted at the injustice of it all, Harry made his way into the potions classroom and picked an empty seat near the back. To Harry's annoyance, Neville slid onto the bench next to him, determined to continue with the questions.

"Merlin, what happened?" he asked, unpacking his bag. Luckily the noise of everyone unpacking was enough to cover their conversation.

*Why not?* thought Harry. After all, it had happened to Neville in another lifetime. These weren't his real parents, and the sympathy might aid in his mission to get close to this DA.

He leaned in close so that only Neville could hear. "After *He* fell," Harry said in a conspiratorial tone, "they were caught by the Death Eaters, desperate to know what had happened to their master. They wanted information about who had caused *his* downfall and where that person was. My parents were a pair of Aurors, Riddle's old favourites – the perfect targets. Do you know what happens when you use the Cruciatus Curse for a prolonged period of time?"

"Merlin, they didn't!"

Harry nodded grimly. "If it goes on for long enough," he said keeping his voice emotionless, "it destroys the victim's mind. They have no memories, feelings, nothing. They are empty shells, hollow shadows of their former selves. I went to visit them every week during the Christmas and Easter holidays, but they didn't even recognise their own son."

"Blimey," breathed Neville. "And Malfoy knows this?"

"He knows," Harry growled, his voice harder. "It was his aunt who did it, the woman who escaped from Azkaban last winter, Bellatrix Lestrange. She was the ring-leader that night. Looks like she told her darling nephew everything. Part of me wishes I would meet Bellatrix down a dark alley. Part of me knows that I wouldn't stand a chance, not with my Defence marks," he added hinting towards the DA.

"I'm sorry, Harry. I never knew," Neville breathed almost apologetically.

"No one does," said Harry, turning to Neville, his voice firmer. "And it has to stay that way. I don't need extra attention or pity. I've had enough of those already to last a lifetime." He paused for dramatic effect and even gave a small sigh. "I just wish I knew as much as you and Katie so that if I ever had to defend myself from the likes of her I wouldn't end up like my parents..."

"I...er...", said Neville shiftily. He seemed to be thinking about something and wrestling with his conscience, eventually coming to a hesitant decision.

"I might know of something that could be of help," he said at last. Harry's ears pricked up at the offer. Neville didn't state outright what he meant, but Harry had a fair idea.

"Really?" Harry deliberately tried to sound unconvinced. *Come on Neville... mention the DA*, he screamed inside his head.

"Yeah," said Neville, looking more determined now. "I'll talk to Katie this evening, and I'll get back to you."

"You're being very mysterious," Harry said, raising an eyebrow. It was enough flattery to appear interested without appearing nosy. Harry was convinced he was referring to the DA. Still, he

figured he had better test the water, in case Neville was referring to something else. "This isn't anything illegal or dangerous, is it?"

"It depends on how you define illegal," Neville said with a lop-sided smile.

Harry managed not to look smug. That certainly sounded like the DA to him.

But then Neville suddenly became more wary. He cast a quick glance around the room and lowered his voice to a whisper. "I've already said too much," he added, "Look, I'll get back to you this evening."

"RIGHT, WHEN YOU ARE READY..." boomed Professor Slughorn, waddling over to the board. It was time for the lesson to begin.

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"No, no, and hell no," said Katie firmly. There was no way on earth this was going to happen. Over her dead body!

They were in a deserted classroom where Neville had beckoned her after her Transfiguration class. She stood near the window, hands on hips and an expression of anger on her face.

"Katie," said Neville with strained patience. "Stop to think about this for a second."

"I have," snapped Katie, refusing to be patronised by him. "And I don't trust him."

"He's harmless." Neville looked at Katie as if she was crazy. "Look, we've always tried to keep an eye out for him, right? He's always been a friend, so why have we never invited him before? He clearly needs it."

Katie grimaced with a pang of guilt.

"Look," she said, brushing the hair out of her eyes impatiently. "I admit, that it would have been more friendly of us to have invited him in the first place. If it wasn't for recent events, we probably would have by now. But that doesn't mean I trust him now, and it certainly doesn't mean you can just go up to anyone and invite them without asking"

"Asking who?" asked Neville, angrier now. "Should I beg your permission, Your Highness? Who are you to give orders? Is this Pax Kathriona?"

"No!" protested Katie hotly. She wasn't that arrogant. "And don't use my full name. My point is that the old Harry we would have invited by now, but this *isn't* the old Harry."

"So, he toughened up a bit," he shot back. "You of all people should understand how a shock like that can change a person. One minute he was visiting his parents in St. Mungo's, and the next..." He sighed in frustration. "If you had any idea what happened to his parents you might be a little less of a—"

"A what?" Katie demanded, her temper rising to the surface. She glowered at Neville but there was no fear in his eyes, just anger that matched her own.

"Ice queen," finished Neville calmly, managing to settle himself down a bit. Katie saw him take a strained breath before he spoke again. "If you knew what..."

"I DO KNOW," snapped Katie, before she could stop herself. She had promised Riddle she wouldn't tell anyone, but this was in the interests of everyone. Neville froze on those words. Katie took a deep breath, wishing she was somewhere else. Her temper, which was always bubbling these days it seemed, retreated for a moment as she felt a wave of pity for Harry. "I found out last year," she confessed. "In a Pensive in Riddle's office. I saw the trial of the Lestranges and Barty Crouch Junior. I know why the Potters were in St. Mungo's."

"So you know that he goes to visit them every week when he's at home?" asked Neville in an accusing tone.

Katie knew he was driving his point home.

"Or at least he did," Neville continued. "Did you know that he used to go to see his parents every holiday and that they didn't even recognise him, their own son? Grindelwald took everything from him, and you still think he has it in him to be a traitor? One minute he was visiting his parents, the next he wakes up from a coma to find that his parents are dead. He is all alone in Muggle London and is barely alive. Is it any wonder that he toughened up, that his grief has made him a little out of character? You saw what Malfoy did this afternoon. A little training is just what Harry needs."

Katie took a deep breath, determined not to shout. "Two things. One, Grindelwald may have taken everything from him, but we are fighting Umbridge – a different kettle of fish. Secondly, have you ever considered that the whole thing was set?" she asked. "That Potter staged that fight?"

"Come on, Katie," said Neville with annoyance. "You're reaching!"

"Am I?" she asked, her temper firing up again. "Umbridge knows we are up to something. Her decree banned new clubs the day after we formed. She knows something is going on, she knows it's me, but she doesn't know what we're up to yet. What if she sent Potter to find out?"

"Harry doesn't have it in him," Neville insisted loyally. "Whatever he is, he's not a traitor."

"He doesn't have the strength to stand up to Umbridge," Katie maintained with conviction. "He's been quizzing Hermione about lessons, hovering around the Common room, listening in on our conversations... and that doesn't even touch on his new found habit of wandering around as if he hasn't a care in the world."

"Ever considered that perhaps he is trying to be more friendly?" asked Neville. "He has no parents now. Maybe he needs some friends, people who'll look out for him – you of all people should understand that."

"Of course I do," Katie conceded, leaning wearily against the wall. "Listen, Neville. The best-case scenario is that you're right and he has just grown up. The training would teach him to stand up to Malfoy. However, the worst-case scenario is that I'm right and Umbridge is using him to get to us. He set up the whole fight with Malfoy to get our pity, to make us invite him. Somehow I just know it." No matter what Neville thought she knew she was right. The question was why he had done it. What was his true motivation?

"He wouldn't," Neville said, though he was suddenly less sure. "Anyway, he couldn't – Hermione's parchment would let us know."

"But only after he's betrayed us," Katie pointed out. Hermione's jinx was merely a way to catch the sneak; it didn't stop anyone going to Umbridge. "And only you, me, Hermione, Ron and Ginny know about that anyway," she added.

"But it's Harry," Neville said again. "He wouldn't do something like that. He may not be a fighter, but he's always been honest with us."

"Until now," said Katie. In her mind's eye she could see those deep emerald eyes, that insatiable calm. She didn't understand why she kept finding herself drawn to those eyes. They were allegedly the windows to the soul, and it was through these that she saw the differences to the old Harry. There was something mysterious behind them, perhaps even dangerous, like a great secret. She felt a chill run down her spine, which only served to reinforce her resolve. "Like I said, a few weeks ago no problem, but now I'm not so sure. You have to admit that there is something strange about him. His attitude, manner, even physical appearance has changed slightly."

"You'd lose weight on a liquid diet for a month, too," Neville said defensively. "And then he walked from London to Scotland."

Katie's own temper started to boil again but she managed to hold it down. "He said he hitchhiked and then walked through the Forbidden Forest," she said. "He didn't walk that far."

"But it was through the Forbidden Forest," he said with respect. "You've been in there, we both have. We know what lurks in the darkness. Whatever he saw in there must make the school seem timid. If he was brave enough for that, Umbridge wouldn't scare him that much. Neither would Malfoy - that might explain why he shows no fear."

"Maybe," said Katie, unconvinced. "I just can't shake a feeling that there is something incredibly...*wrong* about him."

"But that isn't a reason to abandon him." Neville crossed his arms. "Now, more than ever, he needs friends. Gryffindors stick together, right?"

Katie stared at him for a long moment. Neville continued to stare back unblinking for the entire pause. She knew she was right, but she could never make him see. She could understand where he was coming from, she really could; it was not as if she was ignoring his argument. She had heard him out and still disagreed. It was something guttural, such a basic instinct that told her

Harry was up to something. Her instincts had thus far served her relatively well and she was inclined to trust them. Logically she would agree with Neville, Harry was very much like her now. He was an orphan who had lost his parents to this war and nearly his own life as well. By his own admission he had grown up where he was unappreciated, and true, he needed friends. But there was something else there...every warning bell in her head went off every time he was around.

The question was, did she rely on logic, her instinct, or on someone else's instincts in this matter? Which of the three was more reliable right now?

"Oh, all right," Katie said, stepping away from the wall. "Me, you, Ginny, Hermione, and Ron makes five. Majority vote. We will abide by the decision, alright?"

It was a compromise, but it seemed fair. Maybe she was just being prejudiced against Harry because of her gut feeling, and perhaps she was wrong. Democracy in action would solve their debate. Neville also seemed to accept the offer.

"Agreed."

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True to his word, Neville got back to Harry right after dinner that evening. Harry had been finishing off a hastily written essay for potions class at the time. Naturally, given his situation, he had put the minimum of effort in, just enough to get Professor Slughorn off his back and enable him to continue his analysis of the diary. However, he wasn't really feeling up to reading the diary either. He'd had a full day of lessons topped by additional charms, then the best part of an hour writing an essay. He was mentally exhausted. In addition, he also had a headache. He had thought that it was due to the long lessons in stuffy rooms, especially the potions dungeon which was sweltering in the heat of the bubbling cauldrons. Then again, he had a sneaking feeling that it was an after effect of Malfoy's curse, whatever that had been. His insides still felt a little odd and he had hardly been able to eat a thing for dinner. He planned to turn in early and sleep it off.

It was quarter past eight and Harry was situated in the Common Room at one of the tables, putting the finishing touches to his essay. It was now a force of habit, but he looked up any time the Portrait opened and someone entered. His peripheral vision was always looking for movement near him, for any sign of the threat. The Dark Knight was on constant alert as Harry worked. This time as the Portrait opened, Neville climbed through into the Common Room. He paused for a second, looking around for Harry. Harry, himself, kept his head lowered as if reading his work, though in truth watching Neville. He did not wish to seem too eager.

Another few seconds passed and then Neville sank into the seat next to Harry and put his feet up on the coffee table Harry had been leaning on to write.

"Alright?" he asked. "How're you feeling?"

"Plodding onwards," replied Harry, placing his quill back in the pot and leaning back in his seat facing Neville. "Malfoy isn't strong enough for the curse to have had any lasting effect.

Professor Slughorn's essays on the other hand...I'm sure there's something in the Geneva Convention about them."

Neville laughed, sounding slightly confused. Harry could see that he didn't really understand the joke, and also that underneath the laughter, Neville was serious and wished to move the conversation on.

"There's no getting around Slughorn," Neville said. "And as for Malfoy, well, he still landed one on you."

"If nothing else, it's curbed his desire for revenge," said Harry, shrugging, though he had noted that Neville was focusing on the fight. This looked promising.

"Oh I doubt it," said Neville with sigh. "The story, along with a rather poor impression of you thrashing around like a fish, is doing the rounds. I heard a couple of Hufflepuffs saying that they heard all about it from Bulstrode."

"Yeah, but no one believes Bulstrode," said Harry with a laugh, remembering her reputation from his own world. "Didn't Malfoy once convince her that when the tide goes out, the sea stays still and the land moves? The guy's a tosser, but I have to admit, that was funny."

"Yeah, well, my point is that these days no one seems to be able to tell fact from fiction," Neville said more gravely this time.

Harry nodded. Neville had hit the nail on the head; lies spread further than ever these days.

"That is why we precious few need to stick together."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked carefully, though he already knew. Neville was talking about the DA. This was it. Harry fought to keep his excitement from his face.

"There are those of us who believe what Katie says," said Neville in whisper, he removed his feet from the table and sat up, leaning forward.

"You mean all that stuff about the Dark Lord being back?" asked Harry, feigning ignorance. *De Niro has nothing on me*, he thought inwardly. He leaned forward in his chair, in close to Neville.

Neville nodded. "What do you think?" he asked pointedly.

Harry paused, choosing his words cautiously. This was Neville's little test, he knew.

"Katie is under a lot of strain, and we've both seen her temper," Harry said. "She is a lot of things, but she is not a liar. I think she's telling the truth, and with all that's happened since and Fudge's reaction...I believe her."

A small flash of victory spread over Neville's face.

"Given the chance, would you help her?" he asked.

"I don't see how I can," Harry replied, his face a mask of innocence. He couldn't make it too easy for Neville.

"He *is* back," Neville said firmly. "And we have to be ready. Umbridge won't let us learn, so we have been forced to find someone else to teach us."

"Really?" asked Harry feigning interest. "Who?"

"Katie."

Harry paused, raising his eyebrows and trying to look astonished. "But she's just a student..."

"With more experience than half the Auror division," said Neville. His tone was firm but not aggressive, as if asserting a fact he really believed in. "Aside from Riddle, she's the only one to ever face the Dark Lord and walk away."

"In that respect she certainly is qualified," noted Harry, though trying to keep his voice sounding hesitant and nervous. "So what do you want me to do?"

"You said earlier that you wished you could do what Katie can," said Neville. "You wished you had the skills so that you would never end up like your parents." Harry nodded, struggling to hide his excitement as he sensed victory. "We can help with that: we have decided to invite you to join the RA."

"I'd lo..." began Harry, relieved that he had finally been invited. He had been about to say that he would love to, but then suddenly he paused. "The what?" he asked.

"RA," repeated Neville, looking quite pleased with himself now. "Not to be confused with the IRA, though Seamus is a member," he added with a grin.

Harry looked blankly at him.

"We had trouble with the name," conceded Neville shrugging. "The 'I Hate Umbridge Society' was suggested, 'Defence Association' was quite popular. Some idiot even wanted to call it the 'Anti-Umbridge League'. Then a third year wanted to call it the Rebel Alliance after a film he likes, and from there we changed the acronym to Riddle's Army. Stopping an army is Umbridge's whole reason for being here..."

"...And you are doing it right under her nose," said Harry, finishing the sentence and grinning. "Ironic."

Harry paused for a moment. Of course it wouldn't be named after a man who had been dead for fifty years. Harry had been foolish not to realise that it wouldn't be called the DA. Still, the name was of no consequence. What mattered was what they learned in the meetings.

"So what do you say?" asked Neville, once again looking around to make sure they were alone. "Yes or no? Ja oder nein? Oui ou non?" He paused for a second.

"Where do I sign?" Harry said, nodding his head.

Neville's poker-face faltered for a fraction of a second before he laughed. Harry was suddenly aware that Neville looked awkward.

"What?"

Neville straightened up, "It's funny you should mention signing," he said in a roundabout way.

Harry suddenly remembered Hermione's contract and the 'Sneak' affect of blabbing.

"Do I have to sign something that will strike me down if I tell?" said Harry lightly, making a joke of it. "Perhaps I should do it in my own blood?" He grinned at Neville watching the other boy squirm.

"Well, personally, I used ink and a quill," said Neville after an uncomfortable pause. "But yes, you need to sign." Neville tried to make light of it, but Harry knew that he had caught him off-guard. He managed to keep the smirk from his face. He was better at this game than Neville.

The other boy reached into his robes and removed a rolled up sheet of parchment. He rolled it out flat and passed Harry a small quill. Harry took it and leaned down to read the paper. Neville shifted in his seat, using his body to block the sheet from the rest of the room.

Across the top of the sheet were the words 'Riddle's Army'. Beneath it was a list of names, topped by Kathryn Bell. Harry paused - he had not realised that Katie couldn't be her full name. It was just something he had always accepted without really thinking about it. Putting the thought aside, Harry scanned the list quickly. Hermione, Ron, Neville and Ginny were at the top, and there were plenty more names. Twenty-six in total, and sure enough Harry found Luna Lovegood etched in swirly writing near the bottom. The names were almost identical to the DA, except for those who had graduated. These had been replaced by several names Harry didn't recognise. He also noted with a grimace that Marietta and Cho were also on the list. Harry sighed before lifting the quill and signing his name at the bottom of the parchment.

"There you go," said Neville. "All done. You just need this." He held out a coin to Harry. Harry took it and examined it, though he already knew what it was. Still, for appearance's sake, he tried to look confused.

"Normally, members pay the membership fee, not the other way around," he said, flipping the coin in his hand.

"It isn't real, so don't spend it," Neville replied, his tone level and serious. "When was the coin made?"

Harry examined the coin turning it so he could read the date stamped into the metal.

"Hang on," he said. Last year had taught him to read the roman numbers easily with all the practice he had had with these coins, however he chose to pretend he was having trouble. "I hate

Roman Numerals. It says...hang on! Apparently it was made tomorrow evening at 7." He scrunched his face up in puzzlement. "Galleons don't have the time on them, do they?"

"Exactly," said Neville, looking mildly smug. "That is the time of the next meeting. Seventh floor, Barnibus the Barmy tapestry. Someone will be there to show you how to get in."

"Cool," said Harry, pocketing the coin. "Hermione's invention I take it?"

"Who else?" asked Neville, standing up and tucking the parchment back inside his robes. He pocketed the quill and glanced quickly around. "Well, I've got to get going. See you tomorrow."

"Oh, Neville," said Harry as the other boy turned to leave. "You don't happen to have anything for a headache do you?"

"Not on me," said Neville. "Malfoy's curse still hurting?"

Harry shrugged, "Might just be from spending the day in hot classrooms and not drinking enough."

"Hmm," said Neville. "Tried Pomfrey?"

"No," said Harry with an exasperated look. "I am not spending a month in bed for a headache. I'll sleep it off."

Neville shrugged and turned to leave. Harry waved as Neville disappeared into the rabble of students and out through the portrait hole. He felt a curious sensation of power at having successfully manipulated Neville and made him squirm. He had given Neville the idea of inviting him and made Neville think that it was his own idea.

"Well Miss Moneybags," said Harry under his breath in his best Sean Connery accent. "I have infiltrated the RA. Time for a pumpkin juice, shaken not stirred." Mission accomplished. Harry saw little point in remaining here, and so decided it was best to have another look at the book before turning in for the night.

Over the last week, Harry had spent an hour or so almost every evening trying to find something useful in the diary, however so far he had drawn a blank. Harry had covered about a third of the book, and had folded down the page where he was reached.

As he entered the dorm he crossed to his bed and drew the curtains. Propping himself up so that he was leaning on the headboard, he opened his Charms textbook and tucked the diary inside it. Should any inconsiderate git open the curtains, they would see him revising.

Harry fluffed up a pillow and put it behind his back and then began to read. As before, it was utter drivel.

This part was all about one experiment that had apparently led nowhere. Harry decided to skip forward a few pages and began to read again.

*Ah, this is more like it.*

He had stumbled across the author's research into the history of the subject, into a list of people who had attempted such research. None of them he recognised, but then again, he didn't expect to. The diary began as far back as ancient Greece, just what Harry was looking for. With renewed interest he began reading the neat script of the paragraph.

Unfortunately, it was just a very longwinded explanation of what he already knew. There was a legend that an order, a sort of cult, had discovered a mineral that conducted temporal energy in sufficient quantities to punch a hole in the fabric of space. While they had failed time-travel, the legend spoke of how they found another world. Apparently a device was made and travel was possible. However, then all travel and use of the device suddenly stopped. The author surmised, and Harry believed that it was complete guesswork, that something had happened...something to scare the creators. The author believed that the cult discovered a world that was utterly hostile, perhaps a bitter reflection of their own or perhaps containing a creature so terrifying that it was deemed unsafe. Either way, this device was buried and hidden, never again to be used. Apparently it was regarded by some as the Holy Grail of time-travel theology. According to the author there had been many expeditions to find this lost treasure over the years.

*Hah, I know where it is... thought Harry to himself. But I don't have the damn key. Where is that?*

Harry continued to read. Apparently the device itself may have been moved several times. Various sightings had been reported over the years but as always with conspiracy theories and myths, none of it could be substantiated. One paragraph that caught Harry's attention said that in the first millennium AD, the device was moved to England. The reason for this apparently was that its previous location had been taken over by a warlord into whose hands the device must never fall, so the descendants of the creators moved the device to England. It was then mixed up in Arthurian legend. Rumours of the doorway appeared throughout the later half of the second millennium. Apparently the 'doorway', as the author called it, appeared in France in the 1600's, allegedly, but was thought to have been returned to England.

The next chapter went into more detail on the Arthurian legends it had mentioned earlier. It almost made Harry laugh as he read how, it was rumoured to be the Node through which Arthur and his Knights had ridden to return at a time of England's need.

*Hardly*, scoffed Harry.

Then again, it did explain what it was doing in England. He didn't believe the Knights of the Round Table had gone through it, but he knew it was in this country. Anyhow, the Node moved space not time, so even if they did go through, they would long since be dead. Still, it made for a good bedtime story.

The next paragraph was less useful. It was a list of seven points over the course of which, the author described exactly why this whole story was not true and how such a device could not exist. Hmm, not so encouraging. Just as Harry was about to admit that perhaps this guy did know what he was on about, he had managed to completely lose his confidence. He very nearly tossed the book over his shoulder and decided to start looking elsewhere, but then he remembered

Hermione once telling him that God was in the details and that if he skimmed, he would miss what really mattered. Nine times out of ten, the answer was staring you in the face, and you just have to open your eyes to see it. Or ask Hermione.

Harry took a moment to stretch being cautious of hurting his arm, and then continued with the book, skipping a few pages here and there if the text was about something else. The story came to a quick end and the author went on to talk about other experiments that were supposed to have been done to attempt to travel through time.

Against his own advice, Harry skipped through the next bit, as it merely listed a load of experiments, none of which had worked. He had flicked through over a third of the book by now, and was losing both faith and patience. Had his trip to Knockturn Alley been in vain? Had the price of hurting his arm been for nothing?

He flicked a few more pages and then something circled in red caught his eye. Harry peered in closer to read the tiny writing.

*Quibbler,  
June 1989,  
Page 63.*

Beneath it was a single word, also in red: 'YES'.

Could it be that Luna's dad had inadvertently stumbled across the story? This was the sort of implausible legend that would make the Quibbler interested. Maybe he was just spilling out the legend, or maybe he had found something more substantial. The author seemed to believe so, but the author had been wrong before. Either way, it was too late to worry about it tonight.

Harry checked his watch – it was gone eleven. Tomorrow he would speak to Luna and try to get his hands on an old copy. The library stored old *Prophets* in the archive, but Harry somewhat doubted that they would stock the Quibbler. He wrote the word Luna on the back of his hand as a reminder of what he needed to do.

That done he decided it was time to turn in. He closed the diary and put it back in his trunk, which he then locked. Removing his shirt he unwound the bandage from his arm and inspected the wound. The skin had healed over, but skin was but the top layer and there was still clearly a lot of damage underneath. Tissue needed to reconnect, muscles needed to heal, blood flow needed to be restored and Harry had no idea what to do. He didn't know how to heal a paper-cut let alone this kind of injury. He had done his best, but it was far from perfect. In the flickering light of the lamp he could see that his shoulder was covered in an ugly purple bruise, spanning from his collar bone to nearly his elbow. It was painful to the touch and sent streaking pain to his entire left side when he stretched it. It was as if newly healed muscle was ripping again. As long as he kept it still, he was alright, and he could carry very light loads. That was about it. To top it all, his insides still ached from Malfoy's curse and his head was still aching.

*You're a wreck, Harry, he told himself. No more fights until you are healed!*

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In all honestly, by the time lessons finished the next day Harry was bristling with nerves and excitement, and feeling rather sick because of it. He knew that it was nothing that he hadn't seen before. He knew that he would be able to do almost everything that they were learning and he knew that it wasn't his lesson to run, but he was definitely looking forward to his first RA meeting. At the same time he was feeling rather nervous as well. He was caught between the desire to impress, and the need keep a low profile, and he was nervous that he might give something away. He was also feeling rather ill...again.

Thankfully, his insides weren't sore anymore, at least not in the way they had been. His stomach still felt a bit odd and had cramped a few times making him feel rather sick at times, but it didn't feel as if his insides were burning like before. His headache had returned shortly after lunch, the night's sleep having done little to alleviate it. Maybe it was Malfoy's curse lasting longer than he had thought or maybe he was just coming down with a cold. Even the great Boy-Who-Lived was not immune to the common cold and if Malfoy's curse had scrambled his insides, it might have knocked out his immune system temporarily leaving him open to the flu. Wouldn't Malfoy love that.

He thrust the thought of a gloating Malfoy aside. It was a scientific fact that Man-Flu was worse than Girly-Flu and gave any man the right to stay in bed all day and complain loudly, but Harry had work to do and it wasn't that bad yet. Besides, he had a meeting to attend.

Part of him wanted Katie's RA to be good, a roaring success, but part of him didn't want it to be better than his DA. There was pride in the DA for Harry, and he didn't want to admit that Katie had done a better job than he had at assembling an army. Still, that didn't mean he would sabotage it. During his daydream in Potions that day, (Dosage calculations were done purely by theory. The Half Blood Prince was of little help and so Harry had spent most of the time daydreaming), Harry had been planning how best to handle his behaviour for the evening.

Naturally, he did not want to draw too much attention to himself so throwing powerful hexes around was not in the cards, but at the same time he didn't want to be so bad that he slowed people down and drew attention that way, either. Then again, being able to do everything would invite the question, where had he learned to do it all? He was in a precarious position. If he was being perfectly objective, he might have realised that this was an inherently dangerous move. It risked showing abnormal ability and even exposing that he was not being entirely truthful with them. The sensible move would have been to avoid this extra contact with these people and keep himself isolated as much as possible. He no longer needed to befriend Hermione; since the Arithmancy needed to get him home was beyond her, she was now obsolete. Luna he could speak to at any time, for his request was not unusual and didn't reveal anything dangerous. In short, he had no real reason to go, except one – his fatal curiosity. It was a good thing that he wasn't a cat.

In truth there was another reason for going, one that he didn't even admit to himself: he was homesick. He had been at war for so long that his desire to be back where he belonged, at Hogwarts with his friends, was almost tangible. He wanted to be a part of it again, to live as he once had before things had gone so wrong. He knew this wasn't his world and knew he mustn't

get too involved, but just being there, surrounded by old friends would make him feel better, he thought. He wanted to feel that wonderful feeling as the light came on for those around him and they finally understood. Even though he wasn't teaching, he just wished he could be back in the DA, and this was as close as he was going to get.

*Harry Potter*, he thought to himself with a silent chuckle as he set off for the meeting. *Are you getting sentimental in your old age?*

At the appointed time, Harry stood waiting across from the tapestry of old Barny on the seventh floor. It wasn't long before Neville appeared. Harry nodded as he joined him. The other boy looked around cautiously and cocked his head, looking for any sign of someone approaching. After a few seconds he faced Harry again.

"Observe," Neville told him. "You walk past three times, thinking that you need to see the headquarters of the RA. You need to concentrate hard and the door will appear...like so."

Harry watched, his expression neutral, as Neville did as he had said, and sure enough, the door appeared. Neville reached for the handle and pulled, opening the door outwards. He gestured for Harry to go inside with a mock bow. As Harry stepped across the threshold, he felt a wave of homesickness wash over him. The room was exactly as he remembered, right down to the lightly scented smell of the cushions. The shelves were full of books and lined with all manner of tools and dark detectors. Over twenty students were gathered around in a horseshoe shape, and at the centre of the group, stood the girl herself. All eyes turned to them as they entered. Harry just stared at Katie.

Katie wore her uniform, except that she had swapped her skirt for some trousers. She had removed her jumper, leaving just her shirt, which was open at the top and the sleeves had been rolled up. Her hair was tied back and she was all business.

*God, I wish I had looked that good*, thought Harry, remembering his nervous jittery manner in the early sessions of the DA.

Katie's eyes swept over Harry, looking him up and down. There was a definite coolness in her face, and Harry had a sudden feeling that it had taken a lot of persuading to get him here. Harry was fairly sure that she didn't trust him. He made a note to keep his head down. He briefly considered warning her about Marietta, but decided it was best to wait. It was not his place to intervene, and she would want to know how he knew. The others stood watching Harry, waiting for someone to explain. After a moment, Katie did.

"You all know Harry Potter," she said, her tone formal and business-like. "He is the latest addition to our group." That was all the introduction she afforded him, for the next sentence was clearly the start of the lesson.

"Now," said Katie, her voice raised so that everyone could hear. Her tone was assertive and confident, the opposite of what Harry had been. "So far we've made good progress on blocking, shielding, and disarming. Today, I want to go on to something a little more...robust." A murmur of excitement floated around the room. As it died down, Katie spoke again, apparently a master

orator. "Before we go any further, I must remind you that you mustn't use these spells outside of this room. If everyone starts throwing these hexes around, Umbitch will start asking questions and sooner or later she is going to realise what we are up to. We need to keep a low profile. I don't care how much of an annoying little git Malfoy is, you do not retaliate with what we learn here, understood?"

"Yes, Ma'am," said someone loudly. A snigger moved around the room, and Katie threw an annoyed glance at someone to Harry's left.

"Right, in that case, over the next month we are going to build up your arsenal of offensive spells," she announced to the general approval of the room. "We will start today with the most common and useful offensive spell. I am talking about Stunning," said Katie.

"No need," said Neville, grinning like the Cheshire Cat. "I'm already stunning. If I get any more handsome...."

"Thanks for volunteering, Neville," said Katie, beckoning him forward. "Hermione, can you get the man a cushion?"

Neville's smile faded as he stepped forward. The crowd around him fell back, giving him more room. Harry was beginning to like this new, confident Neville. He had a weird but funny sense of humour. As for Katie, Harry had to admit he was impressed. She was more abrasive, more aggressive than he had been in her position. As such, she had more of a presence in the room and was proving to be a better teacher.

*Maybe it's because she's a girl,* Harry decided. Girls were swottier and generally made better teachers. Deep down, however, he knew it was his damaged pride being resentful but he felt better thinking it.

As Hermione put a cushion behind where Neville was standing, Harry watched his friend do some melodramatic stretches and jogging on the spot, punching the air, much to the amusement of several of the onlookers and himself.

Katie took out her wand.

"A Stunning Curse does exactly what it says on the tin," she said. "It stuns the victim. Depending on the strength of the curse, this can mean he or she is just fazed and disorientated for a few moments, or it can render someone completely unconscious. What I want is for each and every one of you to be able to stun someone to the point where the victim is completely unconscious. Death Eaters will kill you on the spot, so we need to make sure that when they go down, they do not get back up again...but without killing them," she added quickly.

"Can't a Stunner kill though?" asked someone to Harry's right.

"Not that I know of," Katie answered politely.

"I'm sure I've heard of one killing someone," said the girl more firmly.

"Not in itself," said Harry before he could stop himself, as he had once had a similar conversation in the past.

Several eyes turned to him, including a suspicious looking Katie. He now had no choice but to explain, he just needed to think of a reason why he might know this. "The spell only knocks the person unconscious, it depends what the person lands on. In water for example, they can drown, or if they land on their head..." Harry trailed off before he dug himself a deeper hole. He quickly recovered. "There was a man in St. Mungo's when I visited my parents. He had been stunned and had fallen out of a first floor window and had brain damage. He died a week or so later from the fall, not the curse."

The girl backed down, looked slightly paler.

"We'll take your word for it," said Katie, moving the lesson on after a quick appraising glance. "Anyhow, despite what Harry has said, here we have cushions here to catch you safely, and there is no water to drown in so we are safe to practice. The wand movement is this," she demonstrated the movement with her wand, and the others imitated.

Harry held his wand in his right hand and clumsily copied what Katie was doing.

"The incantation is 'Stupefy'," she announced, speaking slowly and carefully. "Neville, brace yourself." Neville tensed as Katie aimed her wand at him.

"*STUPEFY!*"

The spell hit Neville in the stomach. He rocketed backwards, the force bending him in two, his head and arms, ending up near his legs as he fell backwards into the cushions with a flump. There was a gasp as he did not get back up again.

"Cool!" said someone loudly as Neville landed. There was a short pause as everyone surveyed the fallen Neville. Katie calmly walked towards him and knelt next to his body. She raised her wand and swept it across his face.

"*Enervate*," she said and Neville opened his eyes.

"Ow!" announced Neville with a pained expression. He sat up slowly, and clumsily made to get up.

"Stay down for a second," Hermione said quickly.

"Eh, why?" asked Neville.

"If you get up too quickly you will faint all over again," Hermione informed him. "Trust me. Take a second for your circulation to right itself and then get up slowly."

Katie turned her attention back to the group. "As you heard, the counter curse is *Enervate*. The effect of the Stunning Curse after it's been removed is generally disorientation and confusion. It takes a few moments to get your bearings again. As Hermione has said, in this lesson take a

minute before you jump back up or you will knacker yourself and you'll end up so weak you have no hope of managing the spell. In an actual fight, you'd get your arse into gear and get out of there as soon as you could, but for now take your time and do it right. By the end of the week let's see if we can get everyone stunning and reviving. Okay, find a partner, and I will come around."

This Harry realised was his chance. He slipped quickly to the right, and headed around to where he had spotted a familiar mop of blond hair.

"Would you like to be my partner, Luna?" asked Harry politely as he arrived beside her. The girl turned slowly, her eyes wide and her expression dreamy. Of all the people he had met across all three worlds, the one person who never changed one iota was Luna, a thought which caused an affectionate smile to creep across his features. Whatever people said about her, she was always honest, reliable, and possessed a heart of gold – if a bit vacant and odd.

"Of course, Harry Potter," she replied, her eyes wide and her tone mildly confused – a tone that suited her expression. "People don't usually ask me to be their partners, though. I'm usually the one to go around looking, or just simply do without. It is nice to be asked."

"Well, this is my first time at the RA," said Harry, before realising what he had said could be construed as insulting. "I mean....I didn't mean..." he stammered.

"I know what you meant," said Luna dreamily. "Should we make a start, then? Kathryn does seem to be in an awful hurry tonight. Personally, I think she's got a rather large chip on her shoulder."

Harry managed to hold in a laugh, and just nodded. Luna had the ability to see what was happening and was completely unafraid to voice it, no matter how embarrassing or cringe-worthy it may seem. She was completely unfazed as she voiced awkward truths that most people would not dare bring up, but Harry had to admire her powers of perception. He wondered if Luna had worked out that he was the chip on Katie's shoulder.

Harry took a few steps backwards so that they had room to practice.

"You go first," he offered.

Luna dreamily reached into her robes and removed her wand. She raised it up, adopting a duelling pose. After a second's pause she moved the wand in the way that Katie had indicated, her eyes staring unfocussed at the tip of the wand. She repeated the gesture three times, before looking up at Harry who stood waiting.

"*Stupefy!*" she said, swishing her wand as taught. Nothing happened – the wand didn't so much as glow.

Harry could hear the shouts all around them and a flash of red from the direction of Hermione. Part of Harry wanted to cast a proper one to really show her how it was done, but self-control took a hold of him.

"More aggression," suggested Harry, trying to look like he didn't know what he was talking about. "Concentrate on the spell hitting me, not on the word itself."

It was often the way, at least in his own experience, that he got so bogged down in pronouncing the word correctly that he forgot to concentrate on the spell itself. Yes, the word had to be pronounced correctly, but he often ended up only listening to himself say the word rather than the spell. That way, even if he got the pronunciation correct, nothing would happen.

Luna tried again. "*Stupefy!*"

The wand tip glowed reddish-orange for a second and then faded. Harry opened his mouth to offer further advice, but noticed that Katie had arrived behind Luna and was watching them.

"Good evening, Kathryn," said Luna dreamily to Katie. She then turned, almost in a pirouette, to face Harry once more. "Ready, Harry?" she asked in a sing-song voice.

He nodded, bracing himself.

"*Stupefy!*" shouted Luna.

This time a thin beam of red light shot out of her wand and struck Harry on his left arm. The spell didn't cause him to black out, but rather hiss in agony and clutch the injured arm which had been hit square by the spell. Shivers of pain shot through his body. He staggered back a pace under the impact of the spell and, falling to one knee, hissing in pain. It was all he could do not to cry out. The spell was not strong enough to knock him out but he felt a wave of dizziness wash over him and his arm hurt like hell. Harry gritted his teeth and bit back the pain.

He looked up to see Luna and Katie crouching over him, concerned.

"Did I hurt you?" asked Luna worriedly, her eyes perfectly focused and her tone not at all distant. It reminded Harry of back in the Ministry when she had proved that, despite her bizarre manner, she could be counted in times of need. When the pressure was on, Luna was perfectly capable of focussing.

"Yeah," said Harry. There was no point in denying it as he was clearly in pain. "I hurt my arm last week and it hasn't healed yet. The spell hit it."

"I'm sorry," said Luna, her tone sympathetic and mellow.

"It's okay," said Harry reassuring her. "I should have protected it myself. I think I'd better stand sideways-on next time."

Harry shook his head as the disorientation faded. *Bugger...* his headache was back. He rubbed his forehead for a second with his hands, before looking up. "Right, where were we?"

Katie offered a hand, which Harry accepted. She was surprisingly strong as she helped pull him back up to his feet.

"Are you sure you're okay to carry on?" asked Katie, for the first time looked concerned rather than hostile.

"I'm fine, Katie," he said calmly. "It's just an old injury that's resurfaced." He did however raise his free hand to rub his forehead.

"Not Malfoy's curse?" asked Katie. Harry was mildly impressed that she made the jump.

"Don't think so," said Harry casually, not wanting to alarm her. "That wore off."

"What was it?"

"No idea," he said. "Something nasty. Anyway, that's gone."

"And your head?"

"I think I've just got the flu or something. I'll be fine," Harry insisted.

Katie hesitated and then nodded, much to Harry's relief. "Okay, just be careful with that arm," she said. "Don't hurt yourself. We don't want Umbridge finding mysterious injuries on members. Have you been to see Pomfrey about it?"

"No," said Harry. "It was just a burn from Potions that hasn't healed yet. Professor Slughorn gave me some stuff for it." Katie seemed satisfied and took a step backwards to give him room.

"Injury aside," said Harry to Luna, "the good news is that you nearly did it."

"Nearly," she announced quite proudly. She glanced at Katie who gave her an encouraging nod.

"Now it's your turn, Harry," Katie said, her tone expectant. She briefly reminded Harry of McGonagall.

Harry took a deep breath as if he was nervous. In truth, he was. He had never really attempted to *not* do a spell before, especially one that he had used so often it was almost second nature.

He stood a few feet back from Luna, ever aware that Katie was watching his every move, scrutinising his every action. Harry readied himself. Holding his still painful arm close to his body, he stood sideways-on to Luna, his wand aimed at her chest. He held it loosely, trying to minimise the contact with it.

He tried to let his mind wander, but all the time it seemed to flow back to Katie who stood motionless, watching, waiting. Her blue eyes scanned his entire body, but he couldn't tell what she was looking for. He raised his wand, and trying to concentrate on something neutral, swished it clumsily.

"*Stupefy.*"

A plume of orange sparks fizzled out of his wand like a fountain. It looked like a firework, rather than a crisp beam of light and never even reached Luna. Harry felt like grinning – he had managed to dull the spell down. It hadn't been a proper stunner at all, and it hadn't even been the full scarlet colour. He had been worried he might hurt Luna or get himself noticed, but he had managed it. He breathed a sigh of relief.

Katie unfolded her arms and stepped closer. "You *can* do the spell," she said clearly. She stepped up behind Harry, gently placing her hand over his wrist, adjusting his grip on the wand. "Hold your wand firmly for a start. Now concentrate on the target - focus. Once more, with feeling!"

Harry was both impressed and annoyed that she had seen through his mistake, but managed to smile and keep up his pretence as he adjusted his position. She took a step back and stood there expectantly. Now he was in trouble, as she had corrected him. He would have to do it properly or risk his membership in the group, eliciting Katie's suspicions all over again.

He took a deep breath, "*Stupefy!*"

A beam of red light shot out of his wand, but it was not what he had expected. It was thin and translucent, barely stronger than a red torch let alone a spell. The light connected with Luna's stomach causing her to step back a pace, but as far as he could see had no further discernable effect. She looked just as dreamy as ever.

*What the hell*, thought Harry. He managed to keep the concern off his face. He had been trying that time. Not trying his best, granted, but that spell should not have failed. What had gone wrong?

"I-I nearly did it," he said, recovering quickly for Katie's benefit. "Once more. Ready Luna?"

She braced again and Harry aimed his wand. This time he was going to get it right.

"*Stupefy!*"

The red light again shot towards Luna, but once again it was pale, weak, and did little more than make her stagger back a pace or two. Harry looked around, was someone jinxing him like Fred and George had done to Zacharias Smith? No, there was no one. What was wrong with him? He had been able to do this spell since he was in his fourth year. His head was throbbing again now, which made Harry feel worse and really angry. This wasn't right.

"You're nearly there," said Katie, nodding, but once again, she was not smiling. She raised an eyebrow, but Harry could tell that she was suspicious. She had dropped the distrustful stare in concern for his arm, but now it was back in place. What had he done that had made her hostile again? She didn't say anything else but turned and moved on to the next group, leaving Harry wondering what he had done wrong.

Harry turned back to Luna. "That was really good, Harry," she said sounding impressed.

"Look, Luna," said Harry, deciding not to delay any more. If Katie was suspicious his time at the RA may be limited – he needed to move. "I meant to ask you: I was wondering if you could do me a favour."

"That depends on what you need," she said matter-of-factly.

"I need an old copy of the Quibbler," he replied keeping his voice low. "June, 1989."

"Father keeps a copy of every issue," she replied serenely as if it were a common request. "I could have him print you one off. Why do you need it?"

The very question he was hoping she wouldn't ask.

"Err," Harry stammered before recovering his cool. "It has an interview in it that I'm interested in."

Her eyes lit up. "Oh? Which one?"

Again Harry hesitated. He had no idea what was in that issue. "It's a little embarrassing," he replied meekly, attempting to avoid an answer. Luna on the other hand seemed to understand, which was more than Harry did.

"Oh, *that* one," she said, smiling slightly. "It's nothing to be ashamed of," she assured him. "I'll ask father to send one as soon as possibly. Now, is it my turn to practice?"

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Shadows were dancing over the walls of the office courtesy of the serpent lamp on the desk. The flame was being blown by the light draft coming in from the open window. At the desk in the centre of the room, the owner was pouring over some files. There was a pile to his right and another was lying open in the centre of the desk with a photo of a woman atop several sheets of parchment. In big red letters across the top of the page were inscribed the words Ministry of Magic – Restricted. This didn't seem to bother the man who sat calmly reading the notes on the woman in question and sipping a cup of lemon tea.

Tom Riddle checked his watch and was surprised to see that it was quarter past midnight. He sat upright, wiping the fatigue from his eyes and stretching. He closed the file he had been reading and put it back in his in-tray. Rising awkwardly to his feet, his back protested from having been bent over for the last few hours. After closing the window to the cold night air, the Headmaster crossed the room and headed back towards his living quarters.

*Knock! Knock!*

Riddle checked his watch and then sighing to himself, called aloud "Come."

The door opened and a rather tired looking Poppy Pomfrey stepped into the office.

"Ah, Poppy," said Tom, courteously. "What brings you to my office in the middle of the night?"

It was as she stepped into the light that Tom realised that she looked flustered. Her hair was a mess, but it was no bed-hair for she wore her uniform, not her bed-clothes. She still wore makeup and had clips in her hair, albeit they had slipped. No...she had not been asleep, but had been working. What had shaken her so?

"Well, headmaster," Poppy began, sliding uninvited into a chair in front of the desk. Normally she was courteous and waited for invitations to sit down, but tonight she seemed very much on edge. "I really don't know where to begin," she said quickly.

He had seen her keep her calm during all sorts of situations, but something was worrying her. It wasn't urgent enough to fire-call so there wasn't a dying student or anything that severe. What has scared the nurse so much that it could not wait until the morning?

"I always find it helpful to start at the beginning," said Riddle, moving behind the desk and taking his own seat. "Perhaps some coffee?"

She nodded gratefully. Tom summoned a House Elf who returned seconds later with piping hot pot of coffee and two mugs. He poured Poppy a cup and sank once more into his own chair, ignoring the protests from his sore back.

After having taken a few sips, Madam Pomfrey was ready to speak.

"Do you recall when we gave Harry Potter his physical?" she asked unexpectedly.

Tom did remember, and at the mention of the name his tiredness left him. If she could answer some of the questions surrounding the enigma that was Harry Potter this conversation would not be a waste of time. He grimaced as he realised that this was to be another sleepless night thanks to the boy.

Poppy continued without waiting for a response. "Well, I compared his DNA against a sample we had from before his disappearance – you recall he got stung by Pomona's Viper Vines last November – well I did a call-back session with Potter just before he disappeared to see if all the venom was gone."

"Yes, Poppy," said Riddle, "you told me about that. The DNA matched, did it not?"

"Yes," said Poppy impatiently. "I mean, no. Err...no, I mean yes."

"Was that a yes or a no?" asked Tom, trying to keep the amusement out of his voice.

Poppy shot him an indignant glare, before speaking again. "Yes, insofar as what I was able to test myself with what I had available. I could only do the basic comparison with the equipment available to me."

Tom hoped she was not just here to ask for more equipment. That however was the least of his concerns. Was she saying that she might have made a mistake? Could it be that Harry wasn't really Harry? Tom's concern must have shown, for Poppy immediately shook her head.

"Rest assured, headmaster..." she began, but Tom interrupted.

"When there are no students around please call me Tom," he said gently. Although he was proud of his position, he felt it was rather odd for grown men and women to address him as Headmaster when not in the presence of those to whom an example should be set. Poppy nodded and took another sip of coffee before continuing.

"Rest assured, Tom, that what I did in January was more than enough to ascertain identity. He is Harry Potter...but there are certain irregularities."

"Sorry," said Tom, at a loss as to the point of this conversation. "I'm not following. I thought DNA was unique. If there are irregularities, does that mean that he may not be Harry Potter?"

"It's not that simple, Tom," said Poppy, shaking her head and laughing softly.

Tom didn't see the funny side, and this was anything but a joke. If a complete stranger could come into the school and get that close to Kathryn...Tom managed to keep his frustration in check and gestured for Poppy to continue. She took another sip of coffee and set the mug down on the desk.

"Because you were so rattled about the boy," said Poppy leaning back in her chair and crossing her legs, "after I had done my own comparison I sent a sample of Potter's blood to a friend of mine at St Mungo's. I know there are laws against that, but in the current climate I believed bending them was not inappropriate. They do not know who it is, so my oath is not broken. Anyhow, I digress. I sent the sample to Crystal Merchant, do you remember her?"

"Quite the Gobstones player," said Riddle, vaguely recalling the girl in question. She and Poppy had been in their fifth year when he had returned to Hogwarts a year after Albus' death.

"I only chose her as she is a friend whom I went to Nightingale's with, and she owed me a favour," explained Poppy. "All I wanted was a second opinion, so imagine my surprise when two days later I got a call on my fireplace asking me to pop over in the morning. This was a fortnight ago. Now, I am not sure if you are aware of this, but Crystal is currently St. Mungo's senior researcher into genetics, specialising in cancers and mutations. She had analysed Potter's sample with the latest techniques. The results were...very interesting. Both of us have been trying to make sense of the results, but I thought it best to share them with you."

Riddle was now wide awake. "Okay, Poppy," he said. "Tell me, what is troubling you?"

"How much do you know about DNA, Tom?" she asked. He didn't have time to respond before she ploughed on. "Never mind, I will put it simply: DNA strands are the building blocks of every creature on the planet and every person's DNA is unique. The DNA carries the genetic information of the organism. Think of it as a blueprint. For example, one gene gives you blue eyes another brown hair, with me so far?"

Tom nodded, glad that she was taking it slowly.

"Although microscopic," she continued. "The DNA strand is very long in terms of genetics, as it contains a complete blueprint for an organism. All humans will have the vast majority of their DNA sequence in common, as they are of the same species, with just the last bit differentiating person to person, accounting for gender, of course. There are also parts that not only humans have in common, but every organism on the planet."

Tom was tired. His eyelids had begun to droop before Poppy had even arrived, much less started talking. His exhausted mind was having trouble keeping up. Poppy seemed to guess this, and leaned forward to the desk, grabbing a parchment and quill. She drew a single line across the parchment and then divided the line into three sections.

"To make it clearer," she said, "think of the DNA string as this line. The section on the left, here, is the same for every living organism on the planet whether it be a daisy, a gerbil, a hippogriff or yourself. This middle section, here, is the same for every human being, and this section on the right, here, is unique to every individual person. It is this section on the right that makes you Tom Riddle with dark hair and the rest of it. We use the information in this final section when we are DNA fingerprinting. Understand?"

Tom nodded. He had the feeling that she was simplifying to the point of talking to a four-year old, but he didn't comment. He needed it put simply in his current state.

"In the case of Harry Potter, this is where it gets interesting. These last two sections," – she pointed to the middle and right sections, which defined human beings and individuals – "were perfectly matched to how he was before the fire in St Mungo's. He is definitely Harry Potter. However, when we looked again there were certain differences, but not where we would expect. There were differences in the first section, here."

She jabbed the parchment with her finger on the left hand side.

"But, I thought you said that this section was common to every living organism on the planet?" Tom asked, certain he had misinterpreted.

"Exactly," replied Poppy, looking relieved. "Exactly."

"But..."

"It's no use asking, Tom," said Madam Pomfrey shaking her head and then taking another sip of coffee. "I cannot say what it means. I can give you the facts: there are differences in Harry's DNA compared to every other creature on the planet. These anomalies are in uncharted sections of DNA. Since all organisms have these same elements, little research has been done. I cannot say what the functions of these...*rogue* genes are.

"What are you saying?" asked Riddle. "That he isn't quite human?"

"He's human," said Poppy with certainty. "Or near enough. The differences are not in the part that makes us human, dog, or alligator for example, but in a bit that every single life-form on this planet has in common, and that is magically and scientifically impossible."

"What is he, then?" asked Riddle, his head spinning. He was speaking more to himself than Poppy. The matron shrugged and sipped her coffee. Riddle didn't fully hear her next comment but it sounded like 'damned if I know'. Tom chewed over the conversation one more time in his head, seeing if any pearls of wisdom emerged from the gloom. There was nothing.

"Is it possible that someone did this to him?" he asked. For his part, Tom could not think of any spell that re-wrote DNA. Even Animagus training did not breach the subject. A person's magical core allowed them to take on the form of an animal but their DNA never changed, even in animal form. Transfiguration was the same. The subject may look different depending on the spell, but their DNA never changed. Even...

Tom recalled a time deep in his buried past when he had uncovered a rumour of the Dark Lord's most secret invention. He remembered going to see Horace, asking him about the possibility of tearing his soul asunder. Even that, the darkest magic he knew, would not touch DNA. Tom shivered at the memory, wishing to forget his past. He wished he could have faced his old self and made him see what a monster he had been. *That name*, he thought, *thank Merlin that name would never be uttered again*. Tom buried his emotions under a thick blanket of Occlumency before turning his attention back to the matron.

"If someone has done this to him," answered Poppy after a short pause, "then they are very, very clever. Let me put this into context: causing mutations in cells is disturbingly common and easy. Using a mobile phone for too long or exposure to radiation can cause mutation – we call it cancer. If someone has a mutated cell inside their body, the body rejects and isolates it. The mutated cells continue to multiply and eventually it forms a tumour. The key point is that the body rejects and isolates the mutation. Potter's body is *not* rejecting these cells, because they are not isolated occurrences. His entire body, every cell, carries this pattern. It is not a cancer, it is his normal genetic code."

"Understand, Tom," she continued in a grave voice. "Crystal is regarded as one of the leaders of her field. Her research is on the forefront of knowledge, yet she and her team are still on the verge of identifying specific genes that may cause cancers and leukaemia. The next step, they hope, is to use magic to turn on or off genes that can cause the disease. However, even in theory this can only be done with human sperm or egg cells, or a very, very small foetus – only a few hundred cells in size – because the exact same change needs to be performed to every cell, and even then there is no guarantee that the host body will accept the change. Potter is sixteen – can you imagine how many trillions of cells there are in his body. To change every single one in an instant, without the body rejecting them and not killing Potter himself...it is completely impossible."

"Poppy," said Tom, carefully, the enormity of her words still playing on his mind. "In your medical opinion, who or what is he?"

"I truly cannot say," replied Poppy. "He breaks every rule of genetics what we know." She paused. "There is a little more to it, though."

"More?" echoed Tom in astonishment. Just when he thought the mystery could not deepen, it seemed it would.

"Crystal has a Muggle cousin, Angela," explained Poppy. "Because she already knows about wizards, we felt that it was not a breach of the Statute of Secrecy to ask her about our results. She is a doctor, doing research in the same field, but from a Muggle perspective. Muggles seem to be slightly more advanced in the area of genetics, so we thought she might be able to help. Angela says that our findings are impossible and that we have to have made a mistake. We haven't, Tom. Potter's DNA is an impossibility by Muggle and magical standards."

"We then decided to look into magical method of mapping blood." She took a sip of coffee, before continuing.

"Currently, no real research is being done on the matter," she said, her tone betraying the frustration she had endured because of it. "After that we dug a little deeper into the Medical Archives at St. Mungo's hoping to uncover a magical means to explain this anomaly. Over the centuries, several cultures have had a go at mapping blood, usually rather painfully, but we couldn't find anything of use. We then had an idea. We made discreet inquiries at the Department of Mysteries. One Unspeakable was rather helpful. It seems the department acquired a book about twenty years ago, one that originated from ancient Greece. Granted, parts of this book are obviously suspect as it allegedly deals with alternate realities and parallel worlds."

"Fanciful," said Riddle, raising a doubtful eye.

"Indeed," said Poppy, laughing at the concept. "What's even more laughable is that apparently the Ministry tried to recreate...whatever it was, but failed. Anyhow, the point is that these Greeks, these something-something-Gnosis I think they are called, did quite a lot of work into mapping blood. It is the earliest form of DNA research on record. It also apparently addresses the areas we all have in common in an attempt to answer the question 'what is life?'. I believe this book may hold some of the answers to what is going on with the boy."

"Would it be possible to get hold of this book?" asked Riddle, leaning forward, his eyes sparkling. Although from a suspect source and highly dated, anything that could shed light on Harry Potter was definitely worth a read.

"The Unspeakables only translated the parts they needed for their little experiment twenty years ago," explained Pomfrey. "I have asked that they translate the parts we need, and send over the transcripts."

"And they have agreed?" asked Riddle, surprised. Knowing Cornelius, the answer was probably no.

"Only because they thought that the request was coming from St. Mungo's, not here," said Pomfrey with a sly smile. "If we had used your name, I doubt we would have gotten it. Crystal made up a story about researching into treating Leukaemia and they agreed to help."

Riddle could have kissed her. Her initiative was shining through and she had done so much of the work for him.

"How long..."

"Two weeks I was quoted," said Pomfrey, stifling a yawn. "Crystal just called me an hour ago to tell me it will be a fortnight." She yawned again. "Sorry, I have spent the last day or so at St. Mungo's and then the Ministry, going over and over this little puzzle. It feels like I haven't slept in ages."

"And I am most grateful that you have done all this," Riddle told her, genuinely meaning it. It was the best news he had heard for some time. She smiled at him over her mug which she held in both hands, warming her palms.

"Tom," said Poppy after a pause. "What shall we do about Harry Potter in the meantime?"

Tom hesitated. He was reluctant to alienate Harry further. He seemed to be calmer now and hadn't done anything out of the ordinary for weeks. There had literally been no progress on the Potter front since the medical exam. He had now apparently joined Kathryn's resistance group, so he was fitting in once more. From Harry's point of view, things were looking up. From Tom's viewpoint this was not so good. For a start, Tom knew the boy was hiding something. Clearly there was more to him than they knew at the moment. Secondly, he did not wish for Harry to be alone with Kathryn. He did not need her being corrupted – her mental state was paramount at this point in time, especially since attempts at Occlumency had failed. Was he right to continue to pursue Harry, despite him not having done anything unusual since he arrived? Tom just could not shake the feeling that he was dangerous. The weapons, the Occlumency...something was amiss.

"This isn't dangerous or contagious, is it?" asked Riddle finally.

The matron shook her head.

"In that case I see no need to quarantine or withdraw him from the student population, at least until we have seen this transcript."

"I still have a sample of his blood, so Crystal and I can run more tests and try to isolate exactly which genes are amiss," Poppy said, yawning again more forcefully. "But that's after I have had some sleep...and mopped up after the Quidditch match...and dispensed hangover cure for the after-party...and probably another potion for certain girls...Merlin, by that time the damned manuscript will have arrived and there'll be no point."

"Thank you, Poppy," said Riddle, smiling at her rant. "I look forward to seeing this translation – I feel it may answer many questions. For now, we shall leave Harry, but rest assured I will keep an eye on him."

She nodded and yawned. "I'd better head off," she said. "With all my time at St. Mungo's, I haven't slept in nearly thirty hours."

"Then I bid you good night," said Riddle, removing the remains of the coffee tray with his wand. "Get some sleep, Poppy. We need you fighting fit for the Quidditch game this weekend. There's always one."

She nodded. "With Slytherin playing, there are usually seven," she muttered. Tom raised his eyebrows in mock horror. He saw a tired smile creep across the matron's face as she left.

That had been most enlightening, he thought as he moved into his living quarters through the side door. Harry was fundamentally different from everything else on the planet. He was hardly an alien though, and it was definitely Harry Potter and not an impostor. This was his DNA, not his magic or anything magical. DNA didn't change. Even a transformation like Grindelwald's would not change his DNA, since it was his soul and magic that had most likely been torn in two, in Tom's theory. In truth, he didn't know what to make of this latest development. He would have to wait for the translation to come through, he supposed. However, if the book was as fanciful as Poppy implied then it had to be taken with a pinch of salt.

Tom changed into his pyjamas and then climbed into bed. Just as his eyes were closing, a crazy thought popped into his head.

*What if it is true? he thought sleepily. What if Harry is different because he's not from this world? What if those Greeks really had succeeded?*

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On Friday, the RA held another meeting. Katie arrived early to set up and prepare. It had been the day from hell – no, correction...it had been the week from hell. Umbridge had been on the warpath, determined to catch the RA. Katie knew that Umbridge knew, and she knew that Umbridge knew that she knew, but knew better than to make a point of it. Part of Katie wished she could show the RA off as her crowning achievement. She looked forward to the day when Riddle kicked Umbridge out and took the school back. On that day, as the door hit Umbridge on the arse on the way out, Katie would break the news to her that, despite her best attempts to beat it out of them, they had resisted right under her nose. The horrible woman had been sent here to prevent Riddle forming an army to take on Fudge, but all she had done was to make damn sure that one was created.

*You failed, bitch,* she thought viciously.

"Hello."

Katie jumped out of her skin as the voice sounded in her ear. She turned around, her wand raised, a curse on her lips.

"*STUPEF...*"

The boy quickly grabbed her wrist, forcing it away from him, just as she had seen him do to Malfoy.

"Easy, tiger," said Harry Potter, letting go of her wrist.

"Damn it, Harry," she said angrily, putting her wand away. "Why did you sneak up on me?"

"I didn't mean to," he apologised, his calm face breaking into a lop-sided grin. "I just came in a bit early to practice, and you were there. You seemed deep in thought. Didn't want to disturb, but then I thought you'd jump if I didn't let you know I was here, so I said hello and you jumped anyway..."

"Harry," she cut him off. "You're rambling."

"Oh, right," he said in a sheepish voice.

Katie looked him up and down critically. He appeared a little shaky in all honesty and a bit pale as he removed his robes, leaving just a shirt and trousers. He bundled his robes and tie together, putting them in a pile against the wall. Next, he removed his wand and tucked it up his sleeve. Katie made a mental note that he kept it up there. She wasn't sure why she thought that it was significant or foresaw a time when she would come up against him and such information would be useful, but something about the movement made her take note of it. The action also proved another point; Harry had become more defensive since his return. The old Harry wouldn't have kept his wand up his sleeve, or act so paranoid all the time. Except it wasn't paranoia, exactly. It was more...fieldcraft perhaps? Then again where would he have learned fieldcraft?

As he drew himself back up to his full height, Katie looked him up and down once more. Neville's words came back to her from when he had argued Harry's case for joining the RA. Now that she looked at him, were there really signs of danger all over him?

Harry pulled his collar away from his neck and shook it lightly to let air in. He did seem as if he was hot and if he had the flu as he had said, she could understand that. He relocated his wand to his belt loops and then began to roll up his sleeves. She could see the muscles and tendons moving beneath his skin as he worked. The old Harry was slightly chubby, but he seemed to have shed those extra pounds. His face was thinner now, but his arms had filled out. This alone wasn't enough to make her suspicious. People lose weight and get haircuts all the time. As she watched him, there was only one thing that she could honestly put her hand on her heart and say was worryingly different about him, and that was his eyes. Once again she was drawn inexplicably to those deep emerald eyes, the unblinking stare. They had sparkled with great sadness as he had told her of his friend, and then had glinted with danger as he had faced Malfoy on his first days back. In some ways they were so telling, in others so mysterious.

Suddenly he turned, and Katie was once again caught in his gaze. Sky blue met sea green. This time, there was amusement in his eyes. Katie looked away quickly, suddenly afraid to face him. Harry seemed not to notice.

"Dare I ask how your day's been?" asked Harry matter-of-factly, attempting to make conversation.

His manner was once again courteous, but cool. His calm was absolute, his eyes attentive behind those glasses. He had been embarrassed, shifty and waffling a few seconds ago, but now his attitude had changed completely. His unsettling detached demeanour had returned. Funny, he seemed to switch between the two like Jekyll and Hyde. Did that suggest that it was all an act?

And if it was an act, which was the real Harry Potter? Coupled with an observation she had made recently, it doubled her suspicions.

Last time, he had struggled with a Stunner. Well, not struggled, but had taken a few goes to get it right, making elementary mistakes like holding the wand wrong and such. However, what made her wary was that he had managed the spell perfectly in his little fight with Malfoy earlier. He had missed, but there was nothing wrong with the spell itself. It was bright scarlet and powerful, and he had even been cursed at the time yet still managed to do it. After that, he failed to do it in a safe environment. He was clearly hiding his ability. Why? To what end?

*Damn it, Neville, he should never have been invited,* she thought in frustration.

Harry must have seen her grimace for he spoke again. "That good, eh?"

"Same old," said Katie, guarding her answer carefully, not wanting to give more information that she could help. "I've descended into the seventh circle of hell, thank you very much," she replied, making light of what was definitely pressing on her mind. "How about you?"

"Sick as a parrot," said Harry easily. "But soldiering on."

Katie had to admit he didn't look well. "We could all do with a holiday," she said making small talk. "But we do what we can, I suppose."

"And this is your way of relaxing," said Harry, with a small smile. "Tell me, is it really the desire to give two fingers to Umbridge, or is it that you like teaching? Or maybe you just want others to see you as you are – just a normal girl who's had bad things happen to her, yet survived them."

"What?" asked Katie, completely unprepared for such an insightful question.

"What makes you do this?" elaborated Harry, gesturing around. "I mean, I would have thought that someone in your position would want to keep their head down, not make themselves any more significant."

"I didn't want to at first," conceded Katie, amazed at his powers of perception. "But it's kind of grown on me."

"Ah, you like the feeling of being needed," concluded Harry, nodding.

"Partly," Katie said uncomfortably, realising that it sounded arrogant. "It's a combination of feeling like I am part of something, and partly the teaching. It's odd, but I've found that I actually like teaching. When the little light goes on and someone finally gets it, it's quite a nice feeling. Can you understand that?"

"More or less," he said giving nothing away. "And if it helps us to survive...well, it has to be worth it." His eyes were impassive but something told her he did understand.

"Exactly," agreed Katie. "Every little bit helps."

"And the fact that we are effectively giving two fingers to Umbridge has nothing to do with it," he said in mock seriousness then grinned roguishly. It made his face seem younger, less careworn, with his green eyes twinkling mischievously.

Katie smiled for what seemed like the first time in ages.

"Naturally," she said, pulling her sweetest, most innocent expression and fluttering her eyelashes provocatively.

"Still, you'd be the person to ask about Defence," said Harry, serious once more. He turned away looking around the room instead of at her, as if he was making an effort not to make her feel uncomfortable. "First hand experience and all that. After what you've seen and done...it's both fantastic and horrific at the same time. Although it makes for a wonderful story, to actually live it is different, I suppose. Being completely alone must be a nightmare. Glad it's you and not me."

Katie watched him, trying to give nothing away. Her face was set and her guard was up. Once again the boy was taking words out of her heart, as he had done the last time they had spoken. Katie was too stunned to respond.

"Out of curiosity," he continued, "and you don't have to answer, but do you know why?"

Katie blinked, confused. "Why what?"

He turned back around to face her, to look her in the eye, and what she saw was both frightening and fascinating.

"Why of all the people on God's green earth was it you who was chosen to carry the burden of that scar?"

Katie didn't move a muscle. A chill ran down her spine. The room seemed suddenly very close around them and utterly still. She had asked the question once before and Riddle had refused to answer. It was a question she had asked herself hundreds of times. Why her? Of the 6 billion people on the planet, why her?

"Guess not," said Harry, reading her reaction in that uncanny way of his that Katie found so disconcerting. "But take my advice: ask Riddle."

Suddenly the door burst opened and in came a stream of Gryffindors. Katie was still staring at Harry, his words having crushed her lungs of all air. His voice was echoing around inside her mind, blocking out everything else.

*Why?*

As someone shouted a greeting Katie turned to look at the speaker, dragging her eyes away from Harry's. When she looked back, he was already halfway across the room. As everyone removed excess clothing and dumped their bags against the wall where Harry had left his bundle, Katie noticed that Luna Lovegood had wandered over and was talking quietly to him. After a brief

discussion, she handed him a large brown envelope. Harry thanked her and put it down underneath the bundle of his cloak and tie.

*What is in that envelope*, wondered Katie.

She shook her head. Something was up with him, she could feel it. Was Luna in on it with him? No, surely not.

Katie was drawn out of her thoughts as someone asked what was happening today. Sighing, she shook herself awake and began the lesson. Right... plans for the RA. They would refresh themselves on Stunners and then move on. Tonight she would throw the Impediment Jinx, Incarcerio Charm and the Full-Body Bind into the mix as well, if there was time. If they could get to grips with them all in the next week, that should give the RA quite an offensive arsenal, or at least the beginnings of one.

They practiced for ten minutes with Stunners before Katie introduced the Impediment Jinx. After half an hour's practice on that, Katie told everyone to take 5 and to have a drink. During the quick break, Katie noticed Harry sit down against a wall, take the envelope Luna had provided, and open it. Katie held her breath, her wand at the ready. However, when Harry tipped the envelope all that fell out was a copy of the Quibbler, Luna's father's rag of a newspaper. Katie relaxed, sighing with relief and pocketing her wand. It was nothing dangerous.

Harry regarded the magazine for a second before putting it back in the envelope and put it with his cloak. As he stood up, there was a small smile on his face.

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Back on his bed, Harry lay down on his back and stared at the ceiling. His head was pounding and he felt sick. The room around him seemed to be spinning. With difficulty he moved to the window and opened it, gasping in deep lung-fulls of icy air, which seemed to clear his head a little and make him feel a tad better.

"What is wrong with me?" he wondered aloud. Was it a last effect of Malfoy's curse? Harry didn't know, but what he did know was that he had been feeling ill for three days now, ever since that curse had hit him. It wasn't getting better. Tomorrow he might have to swallow his pride and go to Pomfrey.

Suddenly his stomach decided that it had had enough. He felt it clamp tight and his dinner shoot up his throat as he retched. Harry's head flew forward as he hurled, propelling a stream of hot vomit out of the window into the freezing night. He broke into a cold sweat as his dinner disappeared into the darkness below the window.

Spitting out whatever was in his mouth, he wiped his face with his jumper then walked quickly into the Gryffindor Tower toilets and crossed to the sink. Cleaning his teeth helped to get rid of the acidic taste, but he still felt dreadful.

That was it, no more excuses. Tomorrow he was going to Pomfrey. This was getting ridiculous. Ever since Malfoy's curse had burned his insides, he was constantly feeling hot. Having finished cleaning his teeth, he raised a hand to his forehead. He had a fever, as well as a headache and obvious sickness. He couldn't find a way home if he was suffering from the flu – he had to sort this out before he could move any further. A few potions from Pomfrey and he would be right as rain.

Heading back to his bed, Harry pulled out the envelope Luna had given him. Horrible as he felt, it wouldn't hurt to have a quick look. Harry removed the copy of the Quibbler from the envelope carefully. On the cover was a large picture of a young wizard with blond floppy hair. Harry read the teaser of the article and Luna's words came back to haunt him.

"*Oh, that interview,*" she had said, a smug smile on her lips. "*It's nothing to be ashamed of...*"

Harry grimaced.

"Ousted for being gay, the Quibbler investigates homophobia amongst the Aurors..."

Now Luna thought he was gay. *Great*, he thought sarcastically.

Harry shook his head. It didn't matter – he would be gone soon anyway. Harry opened the Quibbler and pulled the diary out from under his pillow. He flicked to the marked page in the diary and looked for the red ink. Page 67.

Flipping open the Quibbler, he skimmed through to page 67. His jaw dropped and a shiver ran down his spine. The title on the left page read "War of the Worlds", but that wasn't what caught Harry's attention. The page on the right was covered in a single huge picture, inside which a terribly familiar looking blond wizard was waving back at him. Harry cringed remembering the last time he had met the wizard. He gripped the page with sweaty hands as he began to read.

*"Travel between worlds is a popular concept amongst Muggle fiction and may even be supported by their theoretical physics, but is it really possible? The very concept has long attracted a certain breed of wizard, the earliest references to such magic beginning in ancient Greece, but stories pop up all throughout history. Why this fascination? Is it a desire to answer the great question of whether or not we are alone in the universe? For many it is a personal quest, but for one man it is all business. Myth tells us that such inter-dimensional travel was achieved in ancient times, but the secret has since been lost. This month with exclusive coverage from the Quibbler, Gilderoy Lockhart goes in pursuit of another universe."*

Harry paused, the name ringing in his mind and the picture waving stupidly back at him. The award winning smile was constantly being flashed as a very young Lockhart strutted back and forth across the cover. Harry on the other hand sat perfectly still, his mind lost in memory. He remembered the tunnel in which Lockhart, the coward and fraud, had tried to take his memory. He remembered encountering him again years later in St. Mungo's.

This raised another problem: if the man had lost his memory, would he even be able to recall what Harry needed to know?

Harry was aware that Lockhart would not have done it himself, but he would have found the wizard in question and Obliviated him or her. That meant that somewhere out there was a person who knew all about the Node. Harry just needed to find that person and reverse the memory charm. Simple? Not really, he didn't know where to start, or even how to reverse a memory charm.

Well, logically the first step would be to find Lockhart and to see what kind of state he was in. Was there a way of bringing the information out of him? Harry had no idea, but he did know that he needed to get to St. Mungo's to at least make sure Lockhart was there. Today was Friday, so Harry had time to go tomorrow. He could slip out of the castle easily enough, and getting to the hospital should be simple. Once he got there he wasn't sure what he would do, but he still had to try. He would get some potions from Pomfrey in the morning, cure his head, and then pop over mid-morning.

He was slightly further on than he had been yesterday, and that thought brought a smile to his lips.

By tomorrow, at worst, he would have eliminated a useless line of inquiry and, at best, he would have found the way home. Yawning loudly, Harry decided that he'd had enough for tonight. He slid the Quibbler and the diary under his pillow before rolling over and closing his eyes.

*Hopefully, tomorrow I will be one step closer to home.*

...

*Harry!*

*Har-ry!*

"HARRY!"

Harry's eyes flew open. It felt like he had only just closed them, but as he looked at the clock it was already 0825. Shaking his head, he reached for his false-glasses. His mouth was dry, he felt exhausted, his head was pounding, but at least he didn't feel like throwing up. His limbs felt like they were made of lead, though, and his insides as if they were on fire.

He yawned, and as he did his head gave another powerful throb. Groaning, he sat up.

Looking up he saw Seamus and Dean standing over him, his curtains drawn and light pouring in.

"Eh?" grunted Harry, shaking the sleepiness from his mind.

"It's the first of February," announced Dean, grinning broadly.

"Wow," said Harry nonplussed, sitting up. Aside from the fact that he had been here a month, there was nothing special about today, was there? "Pinch punch first of the month. What's so special about today?"

"Slytherin vs. Ravenclaw," announced Seamus. "Get something blue on, grab breakfast, and then to the stadium, Harry."

"Riiight," said Harry, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed. He wondered why Quidditch really didn't interest him these days.

"It doesn't really matter which one wins," said Dean. "As long as neither of them score more than three hundred points."

"Which is pretty unlikely," said Seamus, shrugging. "Both sets of Chasers are apparently on form at the moment."

As Harry pulled on some trousers and a blue t-shirt, Seamus spotted the corner of the Quibbler poking out from under the pillow and immediately made a move for it.

"What've we got here," asked Dean loudly, as Seamus pulled it out. "A dirty magazine?"

Harry froze in horror, remembering what was on the cover.

"Nah," said Seamus. "Just the Quibbler. It's the...oh...something we should know Harry?"

Harry glared at him as he began to read aloud.

"Eamon Barrister, formerly of the Aurors, tells all about the oppression suffered by homosexuals in the Ministry of Magic's finest..." Harry made a grab for it, but Seamus was too quick. "1989, specially ordered. Well this is a turnout for the books."

"For your information," said Harry coldly, "that is not the article that interests me."

"It's nothing to be ashamed of," said Dean, unable to hold in his laughter. He caught Seamus' glance and they both howled.

Harry was becoming impatient. This sleepiness had left him, but his tiredness was making him ratty. He picked up his wand from the table beside him and turned to face Seamus.

"I'm going to ask once more nicely," said Harry, his tone icy and firm. "Give it back."

Settling down, Dean and Seamus exchanged a glance before conceding. Seamus passed him back the magazine which Harry threw into his trunk, slamming the lid in frustration. He was glad he hadn't had to show his power by getting it back by force. While emotional Harry Potter would have been quite happy to hex the hell out of the pair of them, the methodical Dark Knight knew he had to keep a low profile and kept his emotions in check.

"We'll see you downstairs," said Seamus heading towards the door. As the boys went downstairs, Harry heard Seamus pipe up, "They're shite, they're scum, they take it up the bum. Sly-ther-in! Sly-ther-in!"

Harry shook his head in a grimace and then pulled on a cloak, just as his head gave another hard throb. Before he did anything else, he was off to the Hospital Wing.

Wearing jeans, a woolly jumper over his blue t-shirt, a blue scarf, and a plain black cloak without the Hogwarts insignia, as well as his false glasses and hastily re-applied make-up to mask his scar, Harry headed up to the lair of Madam Pomfrey. He headed straight into the hospital wing and crossed the polished floor, heading for the office, nodding to a Hufflepuff boy he recognised who occupied a bed to his left as he passed. The student had what looked like a bite mark on his cheek that had turned violent green.

As Harry arrived at the door he knocked. There was a pause and then Madam Pomfrey emerged, looking mildly surprised and rather tired. For a second Harry thought he saw fear in her eyes, but it was gone a second later.

"Can I help you, Potter?" she asked briskly.

"Yeah," said Harry. "For the last couple of days I've had this constant headache."

"Please tell me that this is not alcohol induced," she said, eying him suspiciously.

Harry gave her an 'oh, please' look. "It isn't," he reassured her. "I just feel awful. It's probably the flu, but have you got something to clear my head?"

She appraised him for a second before speaking.

"Sit up on one of the beds," she said, gesturing around the room. She turned and disappeared into her office.

As Harry hopped up onto the nearest bed, she emerged again carrying a small bag which she placed next to him on the bed. She opened it and removed a small wad of cotton wool, which she held in forceps. Harry watched as she dipped it into a pinkish paste that the matron produced from the bag, coating the cotton wool liberally in the goo. That done, she held the wad up to his mouth.

Harry recoiled, as the paste smelt like paint-thinner.

"Breathe out, please," she said formally.

Harry hesitated for a second before leaning forward and breathing out the pink paste. When his lungs were empty, he leaned back and Madam Pomfrey inspected the cotton wool expectantly.

"Well, it isn't blue," she said, sounding surprised. She vanished the wool with a flick of her wand and returned the forceps to her bag along with the pot of pink paste.

"What does that mean?" he asked.

"There was no alcohol on your breath," she replied, her tone businesslike.

"I did tell you," said Harry impatiently. But as his anger grew his blood pressure increased, and his head pounded harder. He took a breath to calm himself.

Pomfrey then raised her wand to Harry's head and began to mutter various spells. Harry sat still as she moved the wand around his head, muttering to herself the entire time. Her wand emitted various coloured lights several times, and as she continued her brow furrowed in thought.

"Interesting," she said after nearly a minute of spellwork.

"What?" asked Harry, hopeful of a cure.

"No viruses as far as I can see," she said, looking pensive. "It doesn't appear to be the flu, as there are no influenza microbes in your system, but you are symptomatic. Tell me, what other symptoms have you had? Sickness?"

"Not been sick, but felt it," said Harry, unwilling to make it sound bad, as he had no desire to spend a month in bed. He paused for a second but then decided that pride would be his downfall. He needed to recover quickly and get home so he decided to come clean. "Correction, I was sick last night."

"Hmm," said Pomfrey, looking thoughtful. "Cold shivers? Fever?"

"Not really," said Harry. "Bit of a temperature though."

Pomfrey raised the back of her hand and pressed it to his forehead.

"You are hot," she said pensively.

Harry resisted the urge to say 'why thank you, you aren't bad looking yourself' as this wasn't the time for jokes.

"Merlin, you're burning up." She raised her wand to his head again and he saw a small glow of light in his peripheral vision.

"Forty-one point four?" she echoed, her voice raised in upward inflection. "You're hyperthermic, but not symptomatic of hyperthermia."

"I thought hyperthermia was extreme cold," said Harry confused.

"*Hypothermia* is cold," she said. "With an 'o', Potter. *Hyperthermia*, spelt with 'er', is extreme heat. Your body should be thirty-six point nine degrees Celsius, in what we call homeostasis."

"So what's a few degrees?" asked Harry, shrugging. "I've heard my Aunt say Dudley had a temperature of one hundred and two."

"Fahrenheit," said Madam Pomfrey impatiently. "Yours would be one hundred and seven degrees on that scale."

"Oh," said Harry feeling stupid. He felt himself blush, which only served to increase his headache.

"The point is that your body is outside its comfort zone," said Pomfrey, pacing back and forward in front of him. "If you were hyperthermic – that is to say, if you had heatstroke – I would expect you to be dehydrated, erratic, tired, disorientated, weak and incoherent. However, you seem fine. You are not confused, irrational or disorientated, you aren't staggering or weak, your blood sugar level is fine and even the level of water in your body is normal. It's strange. Normally, anything over forty Celsius, is considered to be life threatening."

"Perhaps I just have a high tolerance?" suggested Harry.

"Unlikely," said Pomfrey at length. She paused again deep in thought.

Harry knew that this was the time to offer a potential explanation. There was no use suffering in silence – he needed to get fit quickly.

"Could someone have done this to me?"

"How do you mean?"

Harry hesitated, wondering how much to tell. She would undoubtedly inform Riddle of his condition. It was not that he wanted to protect Malfoy, it was more that he didn't want Riddle snooping around or taking any more interest in him than necessary.

"I think I was cursed a few days ago," he replied. "Just before it started."

"Cursed? Who did it? What curse?" she asked instantly, summoning a quill and parchment.

"I don't know," he replied, aware that she was writing down everything he said. "I didn't see."

He did not want an investigation launched in case it revealed more about him than he wanted to.

"It just made my insides burn," he said. "Made me feel like my organs were on fire, like chillies in my eyes but all over my torso."

"Okay," said Pomfrey, writing rapidly on the parchment. "Who was it?"

"I told you I don't know," said Harry. "Besides, what does it matter? It's over now."

"My dear boy, it is clearly not over," insisted Pomfrey, sounding angry for the first time. "A spell that burns you, and now you have heat stroke? Surely you can see the link? We need to know who did this curse so we can find out what it is and what it has done to you."

Harry began to panic slightly.

"But it's gone now," he argued. "Maybe it just lowered my immune system, allowing this cold or whatever to get in."

"Maybe," she replied doubtfully, "but we still need to know what it was just in case. There are many pain curses in this world, Potter, and none of them are pleasant. Who knows what internal damage you may have. Whatever this is could kill you."

She had a point, except he didn't think Malfoy would have gone so far as that in front of witnesses. "No one is going to commit murder in Hogwarts," he replied.

"Unless they didn't know the full effect of the curse," she shot back instantly. "It's happened before."

"Look, I don't know alright," he replied, deciding to end the argument here. "They came from behind. Could have been anyone, most likely a Slytherin. You can tell Riddle he can start by investigating his old House. He may not find the one who did it but I'm sure his time won't be wasted. He's likely to turn up something with that lot."

Pomfrey paused, looking at him with narrowed eyes. Harry was sure she suspected he was lying, but she had no proof.

"Very well, Potter, be like that," she said. "If you end up back here in a week with this having worsened, don't blame me! I will give you something to treat the symptoms, but if it doesn't clear up in the next two days you *must* come back to see me, do I make myself clear?"

"Crystal," agreed Harry, grateful that he might get something to finally relieve his head.

"I'm dead serious, Potter," she said a little more firmly. "I would expect someone with your temperature to be near death. If things deteriorate we need to get you into stasis as soon as possible, understand?"

Harry gulped, suddenly not so confident. He had no desire to face the reaper this soon; he had so much yet to do. It was amazing how much the threat of death made people see sense and their own humility, and he was no exception. Harry nodded obediently and promised her he would come back if it got worse.

"Right," she said, summoning two bottles from inside her office. One was a liquid, and one contained what Harry initially thought were slugs. She held out the liquid to him and a small cup no bigger than a shot-glass with measuring marks up the side.

"This will take your temperature down," she assured him. "Take two full measures when you wake up and before bed."

She then held out the bottle containing what Harry had thought were slugs but now saw were large pills.

"Take one of these with every meal. That should sort your head out. Chew one for a full minute and then swallow. And for goodness sake, take it easy for a few days. We don't need you dying on us again."

Harry removed the top of the potion bottle gingerly and sniffed it. It smelt like vinegar. He poured a measure from the brown bottle into the clear measuring-cup. The liquid was thin and a deep red colour that looked like the medicine Aunt Petunia had given Dudley for his ear infection when he was eight. Harry took a deep breath and swallowed it.

It tasted like salad dressing. He had embarrassingly scrunched up his face as he had drunk it, and even with his eyes closed he could almost sense Madam Pomfrey smirking at him in satisfaction. He opened his eyes to find that he was right. He quickly took a second cup and then put a pill into his mouth with the same confidence.

"ERG!"

That had been a mistake. The potion was nice, whereas the pills tasted like ink and burned hair. Harry forced himself to chew on the pill under Madam Pomfrey's watchful gaze.

"The pills will work in minutes," she told him, "whereas the potion will take two days to return you to normal."

Swallowing the pill, Harry thanked her and rose to his feet. He wondered why she wasn't keeping him here for observation, which was in itself highly unusual since bed-rest was normally her cure for everything. His thoughts were drawn back to the flash of fear he had seen in her eyes as he had arrived. Did she and Riddle know something he didn't? Hmm. This was troublesome. So as to not arouse even more suspicion, he smiled to Pomfrey and the Hufflepuff on his way out and headed back down to rejoin the school.

As he descended the stairs, one thought repeated over in his mind. *I am ill and my arm is useless and my magic is weak*, he thought. *Am I strong enough to make the trip to St. Mungo's?*

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An hour later, having had a quick breakfast, he headed down to the stands which were already packed even though there was still forty-five minutes before the 10:00 start. Already he was feeling a bit better and all set to face the day.

The crowd was a sea of green and silver at one end, and blue at the other. Those in the middle in their ordinary clothes divided the two groups of supporters. Harry climbed up the steps to the Ravenclaw end and emerged from the top of the thin wooden stairs onto the balcony. There was a rail four feet in front of him over which numerous flags and banners had been draped, displaying the house insignia for all to see. Up behind him, the rows of seats ascended into the stands. A group of seventh years were standing on the seats at the back, leaning against the rear wall on which they would bang their support. Harry noticed the bags from Hogsmeade tucked behind the seats. He was well aware that they contained a copious amount of alcohol which, judging by the singing, (the likes of which Harry would certainly not repeat in front of his mother) some of it had already done the rounds. There were no teachers here yet, so the singing went on.

"GREEN ARMY, GREEN ARMY!" sang the Slytherins with such force that the stadium seemed to reverberate.

A smile crossed Harry's face as he was caught up in the excitement. This was what he had missed throughout this war. He could feel the stamping of feet as the crowd cheered in anticipation long before the players had even taken to the pitch. This banter was what the game was all about. It all seemed so innocent compared to the circles Harry now travelled in.

"Dra-co Mal-foy, wherever you may be," sang Ravenclaw at the top of their voices. "You are the king of porn-o-graph-y!"

The rest of the words were lost amongst the jeers from the green end of the pitch. Harry couldn't quite make out the response, but he doubted it was polite. It certainly made a change from 'Weasley is our King'.

Harry stood at the front of the balcony overlooking the pitch and the lower tier below him. The sun was shining and the air was crisp. It was a good day for Quidditch.

"Good conditions," said a voice over Harry's shoulder as if reading his mind. His whole body tensed instantly, for he knew that voice all too well, and he made certain his Occlumency shields were strong. He turned slowly, his hand near his wand, to find Tom Riddle stood behind him. Harry was aware that the singing was now no longer rude. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed a flash of pink as Dolores Umbridge made her way into the teacher's box, a nasty smirk on her toad-like face.

"Seems like it," said Harry cautiously, knowing that Riddle hadn't sought him out to discuss the weather. "And who's side are you supporting, Professor?" he asked making polite conversation for the sake of the students nearby, but keeping his guard up. His good arm dangled close to his wand, ready to move in an instant.

"As Headmaster, I cannot be seen to be biased in any direction," he said, turning to the pitch. "Though being human, I must confess a small preference for my former house."

"Your great ancestor would expect nothing less," said Harry icily.

"Touché," said Riddle, leaning over the barrier. "I was wondering Harry, if you would like to have tea with me this evening, for a quick chat."

Harry hesitated. It was a show of kindness but he felt uncomfortable with it. He had no desire to step into the dragon's den. Also, he thought back to Pomfrey's behaviour. He couldn't help but suspect that Riddle knew something and was planning to test him. He had this strange feeling that he was being manipulated. This was clearly a fact-finding mission. To refuse proved that he was hiding; to accept meant he could possibly expose himself unduly. Harry stood motionless, weighing his options carefully.

"Sure," he said at last, albeit reluctantly.

"Excellent," said Riddle with an almost kind smile. "Seven o'clock, then."

"I look forward to it," said Harry with a small nod, making sure his eyes never left the Headmaster's.

Riddle returned the nod with a small frown then turned and made his way over to the teacher's box, leaving Harry alone. Harry stood motionless for a moment contemplating Riddle's motives. He had a feeling he was being played, but he couldn't say why or to what end. Still, he would have to be careful this evening.

Just then a roar went up from the crowd as the Ravenclaw team took to the sky for a lap of honour.

*Am I strong enough?* wondered Harry, his thoughts returning to the present and his objective. *Ill, weak magic, and an injured arm...Is it sensible to go?*

No it was not sensible, but then again, he was not a target in this world. He was not on Grindelwald's hit-list. Death Eaters would ignore him, and he didn't think St. Mungo's was a particularly dangerous place. Also, he could Flame out of there easily enough if something went wrong. Harry reached his decision.

*Time to make my move.*

As the balls were released and the game began, no one saw a single figure in black slip away from the stands and disappear in a ball of flames.

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Harry reappeared in central London, inside a tube-station just around the corner from St. Mungo's. Nobody seemed to notice his arrival. He was in the same station in which he had evaded an Auror in the Unholy Land while on the run.

*Hmmm*, he mused. *What goes around comes around.* He hurried up the steps and out into the sunlight.

As he walked along the street in the bright February sunshine he was aware that the potions had worked a bit. His head was no longer pounding, although he still had a bit of a twinge; it had given a harsh throb as he Flamed but generally it was vastly improved from earlier in the day. He couldn't tell about his temperature – he still felt hot, he thought – but she had said it wouldn't work instantly.

The shop window that concealed the entrance to the hospital was no more than half a mile down the road. Harry walked it in less than five minutes and addressed the dummy in the window. He stepped through into the lobby, taking in the sterile smell of the hospital. His last few trips here had not been pleasant. They ranged from as a prisoner where he had accidentally killed a man, to a near death Mr. Weasley at Christmas. No, St. Mungo's didn't hold happy memories for Harry.

He walked across the room to the help desk hoping for some information. It may very well be that the person he was looking for wasn't even here. The cheery sign behind the desk read, *Any question? Our staff will be happy to help.* This message had obviously not been conveyed to the bored looking witch at the desk.

"I'm here to see Gilderoy Lockhart," he said to the clerk politely.

"Up you go then," said the witch without looking up. "Sixth floor."

Harry was going to point out the sign to her, but refrained, unwilling to attract attention. Instead he headed past the witch into the hospital and made for the lift. By luck the lift opened as he approached and he boarded along with two witches who leaned against the side with disinterested expressions on their ordinary faces, gossiping about some wizard named Phil.

"Which floor d'ya want?" said one of them in a brummy accent.

"Six, please," said Harry.

The woman pressed the button for him and then turned back to her mate. Not wanting to earwig, Harry stared into the eyes of his own reflection in the polished door. In no time the doors slid open and the voice announced that this was the sixth floor.

Harry stepped out into another white corridor. In front of him was a wooden topped counter that was so high it looked more like a bar. Behind it sat a witch making notes on some parchment. Behind her were rows of shelves covered in beige files. Every few seconds one of the folders flew off the shelves of its own accord, rolled itself into a scroll and disappeared up a pipe. As Harry looked up he noted that along the roof ran many such pipes. As he watched he could see the shadows of files making their way along to where they were needed. It was like a complex traffic system.

"Clever," muttered Harry to himself, mildly impressed as always by the innovation of magic.

Around him there were people walking along the corridor. Some were in a hurry, some were ambling, and some were wandering around looking lost. Not having a clue where to go and feeling like one of the lost ones, Harry stepped up to the counter and peered over, coughing slightly. The witch looked up with a frown.

"I'm here to see Gilderoy Lockhart," said Harry politely.

"Ward 49," said the witch pointing down the corridor to the right. "Last door on the left."

"Thanks," said Harry, turning to leave.

"Wait!" said the witch suddenly.

Harry turned back, his insides twisting.

"Do I know you? You seem really familiar?"

Harry stared at the witch for a second, not knowing her from Eve.

"I don't think so," he said, and turned to leave before she could answer, just in case he should know her.

As Harry headed down the corridor, he approached a set of double doors on the left. He noted that, as well the smell of antiseptic, there was also the smell of fresh paint. Still, it was hardly something to be concerned about.

He pushed open the heavy double doors and stepped in. The room beyond was pure white and the sun shone in through the windows glistened off the floor, shooting up into Harry's eyes and temporarily blinding him. He blinked as his eyes adjusted to the light. The room was long and quite thin, with seven beds along each side of the ward and a long table with chairs in the middle. Each bed was surrounded by a curtain rail, one of which was drawn closed, surrounding the bed in a veil of turquoise. Harry also noted that there was a small black globe the size of a golf ball embedded in the ceiling a few feet in front of him – a recording orb. He had seen this version of Magical CCTV before at the Ministry when he had been held by the Aurors in the Unholy Land. He briefly considered pulling his hood up, but most likely the orb would have caught him the moment he stepped into the room. Doing it now would look suspicious.

Outside, Harry could see the busy London street and the Muggles running around like ants. He stepped further into the room, looking left and right at the beds, searching for his old teacher. Of the fourteen beds, most were empty. He didn't know if they permanently were, or if the occupants were off elsewhere. The fourth bed along on the left had the curtains partially pulled, blocking much of it off from view. Looking down to conceal his face from the orb, Harry crossed to the bed.

As he stepped through the curtains, a familiar sight greeted him. A nurse was sitting on a chair to the side of the bed, as Gilderoy Lockhart sat cross-legged, madly signing photographs of himself. Some things never changed. He wore cream robes with magenta borders and he was holding a magnificent peacock quill with a large pile of photos yet to be signed to his right.

Harry paused, debating his approach. He had the choice of honesty, flattery, or force. Honest was no good with someone else there, and neither was force for the same reason. Flattery seemed best, as it would hopefully result in Lockhart wanting to help. No choice there; flattery it was, then.

"Hello," he said softly.

Both Lockhart and the nurse looked up.

"I'm here to see Mr Lockhart," Harry added, stepping inside the curtains. Lockhart's smile only broadened.

"Of course you are," he beamed. "After all, who wouldn't?"

"Indeed, who wouldn't?" repeated Harry, forcing a smile.

"And who are you?" asked the nurse warily.

"No one important," said Harry with a shrug. "Just a fan."

"Then for Merlin's sake, boy," said Lockhart excitedly, "pull up a chair. Make yourself comfy. You've travelled far and wide to see me, the least I can do is make my fans comfortable."

"Thank you," said Harry, sliding into the chair that Lockhart offered and trying not grimace at the man's attitude.

The former professor had dropped his quill which was now secreting a nicely sized blob of black into the white linen of the bed sheet. He sat with his legs swinging over the side of the bed flashing that award-winning smile at Harry, which was another way to say he was grinning inanely.

"It's okay, nurse," said Lockhart, dismissing her with a flick of his wrist. "Off you go."

Who did he think he was, royalty? *Not far off, probably*, mused Harry.

"The boy doesn't want to meet his hero with half of Florence Nightingale's School of Medicine leaning over our shoulders," Lockhart told the nurse in an impatient, pompous voice Harry remembered all too well.

The nurse looked slightly abashed, but rose to leave. As she passed she whispered to Harry, "Half an hour, he is not to leave this room. And whatever you do, don't give him sugar."

Harry could only nod. In all honesty, he thought that the sight of Lockhart buzzing off the E-numbers would be rather amusing, but knew that he wasn't here for his amusement. As she left, Harry turned back to face Lockhart only to see a black and white image of the man an inch from his eyes, a loopy signature scrawled all over it. By reflex he instantly recoiled at the invasion of his personal space.

"Err...thanks," said Harry, taking the proffered photograph and moving back a few feet.

"And some for your friends," said Lockhart shoving a pile of at least fifty towards him.

"Wow," said Harry at a loss. Unable to think of anything else, he added, "They'll be thrilled."

"Excellent," said Lockhart happily. "So, you've come all this way to meet me, have you? What do you want to know?" The eagerness in his voice would be almost pathetic had he not known the man before his accident. As it was, it was downright disgusting. Still, it was a good indication that he wasn't all barmy – any more than usual, at least.

"Well," said Harry, grateful that Lockhart had opened the door for him to begin the questions. "I must admit, that in your books – I've read them all by the way – I..."

But Lockhart cut him off. "They are brilliant, aren't they?" he said dreamily. "I even amaze myself, sometimes."

"Yes, well," said Harry, trying to steer him back onto the topic he needed. "I..."

Again he was cut off.

"Which was your favourite?" asked Lockhart enthusiastically.

"Err..." said Harry, panicking, unable to remember a single title. "The Werewolf one?"

"Ah yes," said Lockhart, staring absently at the ceiling, grinning as if reliving a pleasant memory, "My finest work."

Harry breathed a sigh of relief. "I did want to ask you though..." he began again trying to move the conversation forward, but Lockhart was a match for his attempt.

"How I do it?" he finished Harry's sentence with a flourish.

The former professor sat bolt upright and turned to Harry, his eyes wide and wild, his jaw set. When he spoke, his voice was deep and melodramatic, like a Shakespearean actor. "There comes a time when you are in the claws of death, when all hope hath faded, that every man is faced with a choice. Give up and die, or fight to your dying breath. I must be a fighter. I silence the voice of fear and soldier on – defeating tremendous odds, victorious in the face of adversity, never giving up..."

"WOW!" said Harry loudly with a tone of false admiration, cutting him off just to shut him up. "That's impressive."

Despite Harry's best attempt at flattery, Lockhart looked like he had been slapped as Harry interrupted his speech, which if Harry's suspicions were correct, he had rehearsed many times in front of a mirror. Lockhart stared at him for a second before he jerked his head, flicking a golden lock of hair out of his face and practically pouted. "Yes, it was rather impressive of me wasn't it?"

"I was actually going to ask you about an article in 1989," said Harry, trying to be less subtle as Lockhart obviously couldn't take a hint. "It was published in the Quibbler. You went looking for a legend about travelling to other worlds."

Lockhart's face took on that dreamy expression again, not a positive sign. "Did I?" asked Lockhart with renewed gusto.

Harry's heart fell – he had no memory of it at all. *Damn.*

"Sounds like the sort of thing I would have done," smiled Lockhart merrily. There was a pause. "Did I find it?"

"No idea," answered Harry, disheartened. "That's what I wanted to ask you about. Do you remember anything about that?" he asked hopefully. "Anything at all?"

"Not a thing," said Lockhart, looking abashed for the first time. He quickly recovered though and the inane smile crept back onto his lips. "Do you have a copy of the article? I would love to add it to my collection." He pulled a huge scrap book out down the side of the bed. It was about a metre high and over half of one long. It was quite thick and Harry could see the edges of

newspaper clippings stuck in there. Lockhart passed the book proudly to Harry who took it and opened it with trepidation.

As expected it was full of pictures and clippings all of which were about Lockhart. Harry flicked through, encountering nothing but endless pages of articles and hundreds of photos of the git.

"They are helping to bring back my memories," said Lockhart proudly. "That and my journal."

"Your what?" asked Harry, whipping his head upwards to stare at the former professor. A glimmer of hope flickered in his eyes and heart.

"My journal," replied Lockhart as if speaking to a simpleton. "My dear boy, even someone as profoundly brilliant as myself cannot remember every detail. I write things down."

*He made notes*, thought Harry with elation. *The imbecile made notes*. He needed to see that book. If Lockhart had made a note of who he had met, who had done that research, then hope remained.

"May I see it?" asked Harry hungrily. "You see, I want to be a writer too, and I could learn so much from a brilliant man like you. I'd love to see how your mind works."

"Well," said Lockhart in a cagey manner, his eyes darting to and fro frantically. His voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. "Not as such. They take it away. They don't want to give me too much too soon, they say." He glanced at the door and then picked up his quill and frantically began signing photos again, presumably trying to appear to the orb as if he was doing his usual.

Harry however was completely focused on the diary. Did it hold the key?

"How far back does it go?" asked Harry in a soft voice to appease the obviously paranoid Lockhart. Would it go back as far as 1989?

"Since I first started," said Lockhart proudly, suddenly normal again and throwing Harry for a loop. "It expands, so I will never need a new one. Right back to the early eighties."

Harry's heart skipped a beat. It covered the year in question! It would show where he had been. Fantastic!

"Professor, may I see it?" asked Harry again carefully so as to not spook him further. He was taking a chance that Lockhart might go spare again, but he didn't have a choice. He had to see that diary. "Please?"

"I don't have it," said Lockhart looking up with a bored expression. "They keep it. Too much too soon, they say, too much too soon."

He had to get his hands on the diary. Whether that simply meant asking for it, or if it meant breaking into the...wherever it was kept, Harry didn't know, but he had to get his hands on that journal.

"Professor," said Harry gently. "Do you know where it is now?"

"They keep it," he said unhelpfully repeating himself.

"*Where* do they keep it?" asked Harry, a little more firmly.

"Somewhere safe," said Lockhart. "They promised."

"But where, exactly?" said Harry struggling to hide his impatience.

"I don't know," said Lockhart, and then looked around in panic and went back to frantically signing pictures. "I don't know, I don't know, I don't know," he repeated over and over again, rocking back and forth slightly.

Suddenly the doors burst open. Harry's hand shot to his wand. A rather plump nurse stood in the doorway carrying a small bottle of what Harry assumed was a potion for Lockhart, and also a large fluffy blue towel. "Right, Gilderoy, it's time for your medicine!"

A look of horror crossed Lockhart's face as the nurse marched across to him. All thoughts of the diary, the photographs, and Harry seemed to be forgotten. The woman took Lockhart by the hand and pulled him to his feet.

"Just a quick check up," she announced, "and then a bath."

Lockhart's face fell. He began to pull on the nurse's arm, trying to break free like a petulant child. As Harry watched, he realised that Lockhart really was just a child. Harry had seen him learning to write last time in St. Mungo's, but now he saw it for real. Lockhart's mind had been wiped, leaving a blank canvas just like a newborn baby; the nurses were raising a fully-grown child. That was a job and a half. His tantrums must be a nightmare...

Lockhart's frantic protests didn't stop until he had been dragged outside by the witch. Harry sat in silence for a second, watching Lockhart disappear out into the corridor. He didn't need to stop them. Lockhart was no longer useful. All he needed now was that damned diary. Maybe he could ask the nurse for it. Would she give it to him? Unlikely, but she may give away where it was kept.

He rose to his feet and headed towards the door with a rough plan in his head. If he told her that Lockhart just wanted one of his possessions to show him, then the witch might get it, or at least confirm it was in storage. If he could gently push her into telling him where the journal was kept, he could get hold of it. No lock would keep him out.

Harry got to his feet and headed towards the door but he hadn't gone three feet when he froze. He felt a tingle on the back of his neck, a feeling that he was not alone. It was the same tingle of magic he had felt in Borgin and Burkes. Someone had appeared in the room.

Harry spun around, pulling his wand free from the harness.

The turquoise curtains around Lockhart's bed were still drawn, sheltering it from view. Harry crept back to the curtains and then, having braced himself, pulled them open. As he did, he saw a figure in a brown cloak bending over Lockhart's bed. He looked like a monk in the brown robes and hood, and his face was well tanned. His eyes were shining blue, and his expression was one of shock as he saw Harry turn.

"FREEZE!" barked Harry, levelling his wand at the man. The newcomer glanced back and forth looking terrified before his hand moved inside his robes. He was going for a wand!

"*Stupefy!*"

The curse left Harry's wand, but again it was little more than a weak orange sparkle. By the time it reached the man he had disappeared. As he had cast the spell, Harry's head had given another painful throb – his headache was returning.

Cursing loudly, Harry ran over to the bed where the man had been. Hang on...there was an Anti-Apparition ward here. How had he managed to...

*Oh*, thought Harry in sudden understanding. The man must've had a Portkey inside his robes. It was the logical assumption. That didn't answer the question of just what a stranger was doing snooping through Lockhart's stuff, though. Harry didn't know for a fact that he was snooping, but the man had entered when Lockhart was out, and he had run rather than explain himself, which was suspicious at the very least. Harry stood where the stranger had been second before and looked around, perplexed.

"What were you searching for?" he mused aloud.

It had not been the man he had fought in Borgin's or in the forest - that was certain. Who was he, then?

Harry's eyes scanned the area, searching for clues. The bed was unmade and covered in photos of a smiling Lockhart. These even spilled over on to the floor. On the table at the side was a lamp, a box of tissues, a large bowl of fruit, and more stacks of pictures. Harry opened the drawer, hoping to find something useful. Inside were various bits and pieces of Lockhart paraphernalia. Nothing seemed to be of value or importance. He rummaged through and found nothing. Frustrated, he closed the drawer and turned his attention back to the bed. He lifted the pillow, but found nothing underneath.

*Come on*, he thought. People don't sneak into a person's room to look for nothing.

Harry pulled the sheet right off the bed and checked the mattress beneath. No rips, pockets or anywhere to hide anything. He threw the sheets onto the floor and then dropped into a press-up position to look under the bed. Shining his wand up into the frame of the bed, Harry checked the corners. It was there that he found it – a small leather-bound book.

Harry reached up and took it, sliding out from under the bed. Back in the light, he could see a word printed into the front: DIARY. Could it be? Harry opened it and swept through, letting the

pages ripple through his fingers. He came to a stop in 1989, the year of the article. It was Lockhart's alright... a complete log of his trips to Greece and Turkey. Harry grinned to himself. He had the diary. Excellent!

Pocketing it, he stood up and headed back for the door and then froze again. It wasn't due to magic this time, but his own suspicion. Whether it was the Dark Knight or Harry who was suspicious he didn't know, but something felt wrong. Of all the times to try to steal a diary, the man just happened to have chosen the time when Harry was there? Not sixty seconds after he had asked about the diary, a man had broken in to steal it?

That diary had apparently been confiscated by St. Mungo's nurses, but Lockhart had it hidden under his bed all the time? Lockhart hadn't known it was there, or at least hadn't told Harry. Had he known and had deceived Harry, or did he genuinely not know it was there? If Lockhart didn't know it was there that meant he hadn't put it there himself. If he didn't know it was there, how did the would-be thief know it was there? None of it made sense. The timing was too coincidental. Did that make the diary a suspect source? Had it perhaps been planted? Was it a fake? But who would fake a diary? ...Someone trying to stop Harry finding a way home? But no one knew who he was or what he was trying to do, so who would be actively trying to stop him?

It was too confusing, and his head was starting to pound again from the effort of trying to work it out. He did know that he would have to treat the information he got from it very carefully indeed. Deciding that, in light of this intruder, it was definitely time to leave he headed quickly for the door, but something made him stop and forget all about Lockhart, the stranger, and the journal. He had just noticed a golden plaque above the door.

*The Lily and James Potter Memorial Ward.*

To the left of the words, a picture of his mother had been etched delicately into the brass and a similar picture of his father on the right. The pictures were exquisite, the artistry divine. It must have taken someone ages. To the side of the door was a smaller plaque with words engraved. Harry moved closer to read it.

*"The newly refurbished ward 49 is dedicated to the memory of Lily and James Potter who tragically died in a fire here on 7th December 1996."*

Of course! This was the long-term ward, the one on which Harry's parents had died in a fire last December. Presumably, the fire had also killed the Harry of this world. As Harry stared into the eyes of his mother's portrait, he suddenly felt a pang of homesickness. His body suddenly felt so...alone. He could almost sense the air around him and the rough scrape of his clothes. He wanted desperately to feel his mother's arms around him. He didn't want to be in this hellhole of a world. Mum, Dad, and Rose were all waiting for him in one world, Ron and Hermione were waiting in another. At this point in time, he would seriously consider going back to his mother, Voldemort be damned.

Harry shivered, feeling more lost than ever. He had to concentrate on the weight of the diary in his pocket to remind him that there was still hope. Still, it didn't stop a feeling of sickness rising

in his stomach, though that might have something to do with his returning headache. He had to get out of here.

Harry pushed open the doors and stepped out, heading right, back towards reception.

"Good morning, Mr. Potter," said a voice as Harry passed. He froze. Someone knew him.

The voice was female, but not cold or aggressive – if anything it was polite and friendly. Harry turned to see the receptionist he had spoken to earlier standing behind the counter and watching him with a smile on her face.

"I knew I recognised you," said the witch.

Harry crossed to the desk so that they were not shouting across a corridor.

As he arrived at the counter, she spoke again. "I thought you were dead, I thought you had died when..." she motioned towards the ward from which he had come. "Then I read in the *Prophet* about you, and...I'm so glad you're alright."

"Er...thanks," said Harry, forcing a smile. He didn't have a clue who she was but she clearly knew him, probably from his numerous visits to his parents. He had to be polite, but at the same time he had to get out of here quickly. If anyone learned he had been here, especially Riddle, it would raise too many questions.

"Visiting them to say goodbye?" asked the witch, coming around the front of the counter.

"Yeah," said Harry, quickly conjuring a story. "And to see Lockhart. He's an old acquaintance." There was no point denying this as he had asked her earlier where he was. Also, it appeared that he was volunteering information, rather than hiding it.

"Yes, you have visited so many times you would know everyone on that ward," she said sadly. "Gilderoy was the only survivor of the fire, aside from yourself. His infernal habit of wandering off saved his life. He was on another floor at the time."

"Lucky him," said Harry vaguely, not really caring. "Not everyone was so fortunate. Or perhaps, he was the ill-fated one. The others are now at peace."

"Don't think like that," said the witch kindly. "It was a tragedy, and the Aurors will find who was responsible."

"What?"

Harry's head whipped up at the last words. Aurors were involved? There was an investigation? The witch now had his full attention. Riddle had said it was just a fire, an accident, but now he found that it might not have been. Convenient of him to leave that bit out.

"Oh, you know how long these investigations can take," said the nurse offhandedly, shrugging. "Well, actually you probably don't. Anyway, they're always hovering around, taking the

recordings from the viewing orbs and still interviewing staff. Between you and me, part of me wishes they would put it down to an accident and leave."

Two months later and Aurors were still coming and going? That was strange if it was an accident. If it wasn't...well, with Fudge in his current mindset it was no wonder the *Prophet* hadn't mentioned anything.

"They suspect foul play?" asked Harry, intrigued.

"No," said the witch suddenly twitchy. She shifted her weight slightly and began to rotate her wedding ring in a nervous gesture. Harry knew that he had stuck gold.

"We have been told not to talk about it," the witch added in a hushed whisper. She looked around, presumably checking for Aurors or anyone listening. After a few seconds she turned back to Harry and sighed. "Then again, I suppose you of all people have a right to know," she said. "You lost more than anyone in that fire." She took a deep breath and looked around once more before speaking, again in a hushed whisper. "Officially, the Ministry believe it to be an accident and the *Prophet* has published an article to that effect. However an Auror team keeps coming back. It's a small team, supposedly doing some follow-up work as they call it. Part of me has a sneaking suspicion that there is more to it than meets the eye."

"Who are they?" asked Harry. "Did they give names?" He had a sneaking suspicion these weren't ordinary Aurors. If the Ministry had covered it up with a story about a fire, there was only one set of Aurors who would defy the Minister and investigate – Order Aurors.

"They don't offer names," said the witch shrugging. "Top Secret and all that. I did overhear the leader being called...hang on...it's..." she stammered looking puzzled.

Was she confounded or just couldn't remember?

"It's on the edge of my tongue. Locksmith? No...Chain-something? Bolt head?"

Suddenly Harry understood.

"Shacklebolt?" he asked. "Kingsley Shacklebolt?"

"That's the one," said the witch with a relieved look. "Knew we'd get there in the end. Do you know him?"

His suspicions had been confirmed. "We've met," said Harry before realising in this world they had not. He hastily offered an explanation. "I mean, he interviewed me after I came back to Hogwarts."

"Sounds about right," she told him, a hint of bitterness in her voice. "All he does is interview people and get in the way."

"That's the Ministry for you," said Harry with a grin, though inside he was definitely not smiling. "Look, I've got to get going," he said "Got to get back to Hogwarts, you know. Lots of studying

to do. Nice to see you again. Take care." He waved to the witch as he turned quickly and headed for the lifts as she called out her own friendly good-byes.

That conversation had been most enlightening and he knew what he needed to do next. He had no intention of returning to Hogwarts, not until another of his questions had been answered. He pressed the button for the lift and, as he waited, he scanned the board to the side of the lift which housed a directory of the various floors. As the queue for the lift grew and other people bustled past, Harry scanned the list.

"Where are you?" he muttered. Suddenly he saw what he was after. On the second floor was written the words 'Security Office'.

*Bingo!*

The lift doors opened after another few seconds and Harry stepped in and jabbed the button for the second floor with his thumb. Without warning, he was instantly swept to the back by seven other people pushing their way into the cramped compartment after him. With so many people in it, the lift stopped at every floor on the way down. Harry grimaced, but didn't complain aloud or show his irritation. Better to blend in. At last the doors opened to the second floor and he stepped out, grateful to be able to move again. He had been squished up against an old lady who smelled of wet dog. The cramped lift had done nothing to alleviate his headache, which had returned in force ever since he had cast that Stunning Charm.

Harry raised a hand and rubbed his throbbing forehead for a moment before contemplating the sign on the wall in front of him. He turned left and headed through a set of double doors as directed by the sign and began to walk along the deserted passage. Finally, after about another twenty metres he saw a large door. On the outside was marked 'Security'. Next to the door was a window through which Harry could see into the Security Office. There were three desks in the small room, and each was equipped identically with a lamp, filing trays, quills and folders. The only marks of individuality were the brightly coloured coffee cups each of them had on their desk. Behind each desk sat a witch or wizard in navy blue robes who seemed to be working. At the back of the room was a thick steel door, the edges of which were glowing blue. There was a small window in the door and Harry could see another passage through it.

It was time to take a chance. Taking a deep breath Harry concentrated on the window and the other side of the secure door then disappeared in a ball of flames. His jump was accurate and he reappeared in the passage on the far side of the office with the occupants none the wiser.

He instantly crouched down so he couldn't be seen through the window and looked down the corridor, taking in his surroundings as he steadied himself. The Flaming had made him feel sick. Whatever was wrong with him seemed to respond very badly to magic. Making a connection that had not occurred to him before, Harry realised with a glimmer of fear that every time he used magic his condition got worse. Pomfrey's pills and potions had controlled it and let him use magic again temporarily, but they hadn't taken the pain away totally. Now that the potions were wearing off, the pain was returning. Until he was over this...thing, using magic would make him weaker.

He cursed inwardly. That could leave him stuck here if his magic failed from overuse. He made a mental note to use no more magic until he was safely back at Hogwarts.

As he removed the fake glasses, pulled the hood of his cloak up over his head, and secured the scarf up over his chin to block his face, his head gave another powerful throb confirming the point that he shouldn't linger. Carefully he stood up and headed quickly down the corridor, looking at the signs on the doors as he passed. Cautiously he passed the armoury, WC, storeroom, cells, and staffroom before he came to a door marked monitoring station. This should be it.

Harry opened the door and stepped in quietly, calling up the Dark Knight's skills at stealth. Inside a man sat at a control panel. In front of him was a giant window on which many images were shown in variously sized circles of light. The bubbles of images moved slowly about the screen as the guard watched them.

*Creak!*

The door hadn't closed silently. The guard turned instantly to find Harry framed in the doorway. An expression of shock and confusion crossed his face before his hand flew to his wand.

Harry was quicker off the mark than the guard who had no room to manoeuvre in his chair. As the man tried to rise from his chair, Harry surged forward. The guard swished his wand, shooting a jet of red light at Harry who lightly sidestepped. He was so close that the guard tried brute force rather than another spell for his next attack. Going hand to hand with the Dark Knight was a mistake at the worst of times. Even off, Harry was lethal when he needed to be. Harry ducked the blow easily and grabbed the arm as it passed. He swept the man's legs out from under him with his left foot and as he fell, Harry dropped, driving his knee into the man's chest with his full weight. The guard spluttered as the air was forced out of him. Harry grabbed his head by the hair and then slammed it into the hard floor. The man went limp.

Harry checked the fallen guard's pulse to make sure he was alive. Satisfied, he looked around the darkened room again. Aside from the viewing pane, there were rows and rows of shelves with dates printed on the end of them. Luckily, this current year was nearest to them. Harry walked quickly over to last year's shelf and then moved along until he came to December. There were various bottles of what appeared to be a Penseive like substance, except that it was a dull grey colour not silver. Maybe it was because this was magically generated, rather than from someone's mind. Harry moved along the section for December of last year, looking for the date of the fire: the bottle was gone.

Cursing, Harry went back over the guard. He knelt next to the unconscious body and then, using the man's belt, he tied his hands behind his back. He used the man's own shoelaces to bind his feet. It was far from foolproof, but it was the best he could do without magic. Satisfied that the man couldn't move, Harry put the wand he had confiscated from the guard well out of the way. He was fairly sure that the guard couldn't escape.

Harry then picked up the untouched mug of tea, which was stone cold and full to the brim, and calmly threw its contents into the man's face. The cold liquid instantly brought the guard back to

consciousness. The man groaned and opened his eyes a fraction looking groggy, but as the room came into focus and he saw Harry, or rather a hooded figure in black bent over him, and his eyes went wide.

Harry clamped his hand over the man's mouth so he couldn't shout out for help.

"Don't scream," he told the man in a voice muffled by the scarf. "Call for help and the next person who walks through that door will die." He deliberately made his words low and threatening knowing the effect he'd have on the spineless older wizard. "Now, tell me...the records the Aurors took, are there copies?"

Harry released his grip on the man's mouth cautiously as the guard lay gaping like a fish.

"Tell me!" repeated Harry dangerously, gripping the man's collar tightly enough to enforce the threat of strangulation.

"N...no," said the guard in a hurried whisper. "All copies were taken."

*Damn*, thought Harry in frustration. He needed a copy of them. *Surely there must be backups or something?*

"All of them?"

"Yes, all of them!" the guard repeated, his eyes wide with fear.

"No backups, archives, private copies, or anything?"

"I wouldn't be allowed to see them if there were," he said shaking his head and looking terrified.

"What do you mean?" asked Harry. Was he suggesting that there might be copies after all?

"If there were any, the top brass would keep them," said the guard. "In his office."

"Where is that?"

"Next door, to the right," mumbled the guard.

"Thanks," said Harry. He gripped the man's head once more and slammed it into the floor.

As the guard slumped unconscious, Harry checked to make certain he would be alright then slipped out the door and back into the corridor. It was thankfully deserted and only the sounds of muffled voices in the main office were audible. He paused to listen before moving further along the corridor to the next door, which was marked "Brian Carter – Head of Security".

Harry knocked gently on the door.

He waited a few seconds in case the room was occupied. Receiving no response, he opened the door which, thankfully, was unlocked. Once inside, he closed it quietly, not making the same

mistake twice. The room inside was fairly plain. The walls were white and the carpet a caramel colour. A tidy desk containing only a lamp, a pot of quills, a letter opener, and a pile of parchments stood at the far end with a chair behind it. There was a false window like the ones found throughout the Ministry in one wall, beneath which was a wooden cabinet with a vase of fresh flowers on top, an odd thing to see in a man's office. In the far corner was a metal filing cabinet. The entire office was meticulously arranged and so Harry made a note to be tidy. Any movement of items would most likely be noticed.

Crossing to the filing cabinet first, it was, as he had expected – locked. He considered trying to open it with his wand, but it was most likely charmed so that it could only be opened by the wand that had locked it. Harry couldn't afford the noise needed to magically break it by force, if he was even capable of doing the spell properly. Instead he opted for the Muggle approach. It meant he would probably leave traces of his presence, but that couldn't be helped. He would be gone by the time they worked it out.

Harry went to the desk and picked up a quill. As expected it was one of the flashy kind that had the stalk encased in metal, in this instance silver. With a snap he removed the feathers and threw them in the bin, keeping only the metal part.

Moving back to the cabinet, he pressed the tip of the quill into the lock. Then, pulling the diary from his pocket, he put it across the top of the metal so as to not dig into his hand. That done, Harry clenched his fist and brought it down hard on the diary, forcing the metal tip of the quill into the lock. Again he hit the diary hard, driving the quill tip further into the lock. There was a dull thud and a crack. Harry put the book down and, taking the top drawer by the handle, wrenched the drawer open with force. In the top of the drawer resting on the files was the remains of the lock. Harry pocketed the diary and stood back up. He began to flick through the files, but files were all the drawer contained. No bottles, nothing of value. Harry closed it and opened the bottom drawer. Again, there was nothing but files.

Harry reached up into the corner of the cabinet, putting the lock roughly back in place. He gently closed the drawer. It would be enough to satisfy a quick glance, but nothing more. It didn't matter if it wasn't perfect. He didn't plan on sticking around to get caught. Next he crossed to the desk and opened the drawers to that, searching inside. In the top were various items, including a photo of a girl he assumed was the man's daughter and a collection of notes. In the middle drawer Harry came across something more useful. There was a small red lockbox.

Harry picked it up and put it on the desk and as he tilted it he heard something move inside. Laying it down on the desk, he took out his quill again. He was about to jam it into the lock when the sound of crisp footsteps sounded outside the door. Someone was coming. Quickly he thrust the box back in the drawer and closed it.

Harry had two choices Flame out, or stay and force the location of the information he was seeking from the security chief. In an instant he made his choice: it would be the latter. He needed to see what had happened that day when his other self had been killed, although he wasn't exactly sure why. At this point he was being driven by instinct. Something told him it was important.

Crossing to the other side of the room, he hid behind the door. He had only just got there when the door was pushed open and a man in smart blue robes walked into the office carrying a cup of coffee. He was a tall man with brown hair and a thick moustache. As soon as he entered he turned to push the door back closed and caught sight of Harry as he did so.

The man didn't have time to react before Harry grabbed him by the lapels, swung his foot behind Carter's knees and swept him over, slamming his body into the floor. The only sounds were the thuds as Carter hit the floor, followed by the splash of his cup of boiling coffee as it rained down over his chest a second later. To his credit the chief ignored the scald and immediately reached for his wand, but Harry was too quick. He grabbed his wrist, slamming it into the floor and causing the chief to lose his grip on it. Harry twisted Carter's arm ruthlessly into a position where he could break it if he chose to, not that he would.

"Listen very carefully," whispered Harry, twisting the arm roughly to reinforce the point. "I shall say this only once." Harry was grateful that the hood and his scarf, which was wrapped over his face, were enough to hide his identity as the man looked fit to kill. "I need the security recordings of the fire."

The man made a rude gesture. Harry sighed and gave the arm a sharp twist. He didn't dare break the arm, but it would surely hurt. Carter's eyes went wide and were it not for Harry clamping his free hand over his mouth, he would have cried out.

"Answer me," whispered Harry. He raised an arm and concentrated on the letter opener on the desk. The blade suddenly flew across the room. It wobbled in mid-air and landed with a thud a foot short of where Harry was, but it was close enough. Grabbing it, Harry raised the blade to the man's neck. Carter's eyes grew wider, but still he shook his head. A man of principle. Harry didn't like to do this to a good man but desperate times called for desperate measures.

"You are no use to me dead," he said. He raised the knife, placing the tip against the man's crotch.

He paused as the man's eyebrows flew upwards in disbelief. Harry began to slowly apply pressure. It wasn't nice to be doing this, but he needed answers. It took fifteen seconds of slowly increasing pressure before the man began to nod frantically. Harry removed the knife and the chief spoke in an angry but resigned voice.

"Cabinet by the window...inside map of London."

Harry released him, picking up his wand in his right hand as he did and aiming it at Carter's chest. The chief didn't know the situation with Harry's magic, so it was enough of a threat.

"Get it for me!"

Carter shot him a glare and then climbed shakily to his feet. He crossed the room to the cabinet under the window slowly. Kneeling down by the cabinet, he opened the door. Inside on the top shelf were several large, rolled-up maps. Each was labelled with the name of a major city. Carter

picked up the London one and tilted it. Sure enough, out the end slid a small bottle of greyish liquid. *Eureka!*

"I needed it for my investigation," he said, holding up the bottle. "How I can run a security team if I can't learn from my mistakes. They take everything."

"This is the night of the fire?" he asked. "I have been through your desk Mr. Carter, I know where you live. Think very carefully before you try to pull a quick one."

"This is the right night," replied the chief, quickly glancing at the drawer, which housed the picture of his daughter. His eyes became wide as he saw that the drawer had indeed been opened.

"Give it to me," instructed Harry, feeling a bit guilty but sticking to his decision. He'd come too far to back out now, not when the answers were right in front of him.

Harry kept the wand in his right hand aimed at the chief, and extended his left. Carter held out the bottle to him. Excellent. Harry reached for the bottle, but as his fingers touched it Carter's other hand clamped over Harry's left arm, pulling him forward and swinging his other arm in a clothesline. Harry instinctively ducked, but Carter still held his arm. The older man yanked him back, nearly pulling his already injured arm out of its socket. Harry managed not to cry out, but was forced back into Carter's firing line. With an awesome display of strength, Carter's hand clamped over Harry's neck. He picked Harry up and, running forward, slammed him hard against the wall, holding him a foot off the ground by his neck. Harry's hand clamped over Carter's wrist to stop him from choking the life out of him, but he was too strong.

"Now, boy," sneered Carter angrily. "You will answer *me*. Who are you?" He reached up and pulled Harry's hood down, exposing his face. "I said, who are you?" he repeated when Harry didn't answer – not that he could with Carter's hand around his throat.

*At least he didn't recognise me*, thought Harry as he struggled to break free.

It was an underhand move, but it was all Harry could think of to do. With monumental effort, he brought his knee up hard into Carter's groin. The chief roared in pain, but did not let go. Again, Harry's knee assaulted the family jewels and he felt the grip slacken. Reaching up, he grabbed the vase of flowers off the cabinet and raised it high above his head. The vase came crashing down on Carter's head with all Harry's strength, shattering and spilling water everywhere. Lilies rained down on the pair of them. Harry felt his grip slacken as Carter crashed into unconsciousness.

"Sweet dreams," muttered Harry bitterly, stepping over the body and picking up the bottle with the recording in it. He looked back at the remains of the office, every bone in his body aching from the confrontation. *So much for leaving no evidence*, he thought with a groan.

He glanced back down at Carter who was lying in a pool of soaked carpet covered in bits of vase and flowers. Hopefully he'd be okay. Harry pulled the scarf off from around his neck and quickly wiped down where he had laid his hands, removing fingerprints. That done, he turned to leave.

It took another ten seconds to slip back into the monitoring room. Harry stepped over the fallen guard and poured the contents of his bottle into the grey bowl in the centre of the desk. In front of him a new bubble appeared on the viewing screen. Harry reached out and touched it instinctively. Instantly it grew larger, taking up the whole screen.

The screen showed the old Long Term ward, as if Harry was standing above the doors. The old room was similar to the way it was now, but not as bright. What was now white had once been dark stone. There were twelve beds, six on each side of the room and most of them were occupied. The only ones that had their curtains drawn were the two at the end. Lockhart could be seen in the third bed on the left, signing photographs. Just then he looked up, directly at Harry, or in truth, at the orb. He glanced around to make sure that there was no one around and then stood up. He put his hands in his pockets and walked casually, though he looked even more suspicious, away from the bed towards the middle of the room.

Harry almost laughed as Lockhart picked up a potted plant and, holding it in front of him, walked towards the door. *What a disguise*, thought Harry. As he watched, Lockhart disappeared beneath the orb and out into the corridor beyond view. That stupidity had saved his life, Harry realised. Just then, two figures entered the room and headed over to the far two beds on the right hand side. Harry felt a shiver run down his spine and his stomach tense. It was himself! He was actually looking at himself in another universe.

Now he knew why his claim of being from another world had been so hard to accept for those he had told in the Unholy Land. It was just...weird. Also, looking at the other Harry, he could see why Katie was so suspicious of him. Always on the skinny side, this Harry was chubbier than he'd ever been, and his hair was longer and scruffier. But that wasn't the biggest difference though. The main difference that Harry could see was his posture. The Harry on the monitor carried himself with slumped shoulders, his head bowed forward like the world had defeated him. He looked so helpless, so beaten, a complete contrast to how Harry himself walked. If only Harry had seen this earlier, he might have been able to blend in more affectively...

Harry stared at the figure on the screen, a curious shiver running down his spine, as if someone had walked over his grave. Was this the feeling he would get when he finally encountered the Harry from the Unholy Land? This Harry was harmless, not a monster and not the Dark Knight. Harry quickly thrust the thought from his mind. It was not the time to worry about what might happen in the future, he was interested in the past here.

On the screen, Harry was accompanied by McGonagall who walked a few paces behind him. As they parted the curtains to enter, Harry caught a brief glimpse of the beds, but no sign of his parents. Instead another man stepped out, a healer by the look of him, dressed in the turquoise green uniform they always wore. He spoke to Harry and McGonagall, shaking the latter's hand. They held a brief conversation for a few seconds and Harry wished the recording had sound. As it was, he could only guess what was being said. After a few seconds, the healer guided Harry inside behind the curtain. McGonagall on the other hand turned to leave.

Nothing much happened for the next minute or so. There was general movement from those around the ward, but curtains prevented Harry from seeing what was happening with his parents.

Harry's eyes scanned the picture for any sign of anything that might start a fire. He didn't spot anything obviously dangerous.

Suddenly another person entered through the bottom of the image. A figure entered dressed all in black, with a cloak pulled high over his head masking his face. He moved cautiously, like a cat, and carried a box under one arm.

Harry felt another shiver run down his spine. That was the same man he had fought twice, and twice had not come out on top. It was in his manner, the way he moved, the caution of his posture. It was definitely him, though he'd never seen his face. Harry realised that his fist had involuntarily clenched. Forcing himself to relax, he turned his attention back to the screen.

The figure in black placed the box on the table in the middle of the room. A second later, the healer came out from the Potters' area, reading from a clipboard. The figure must have called to the healer, for he looked up and approached the figure in black. Harry really wished there was sound. The figure spoke to the healer for a few seconds before placing one hand on the man's shoulder and gesturing to an empty bed. The man led the healer towards the bed and drew the curtains around them. There was stillness in the room for nearly thirty seconds before the figure in black emerged from the curtains, this time moving at top speed. He crossed to the box he had left on the table and opened it. Harry was suddenly aware that the Healer had not come out of the curtains. As Harry watched, the figure in black finished fiddling with whatever was in the box. Leaving it in place, he quickly headed for the door. There was stillness for a few seconds, and then a flash before sudden darkness. The image disappeared, leaving the room and Harry in darkness.

"The orb was destroyed," he said aloud to no one in particular. "It was a bomb."

Riddle had said it was a fire, but it wasn't, it was an attack. He thought his parents had died in an accident, but they hadn't. It was murder, and to make matters worse, they were murdered by the same person who had twice beaten Harry.

*I had him, he thought bitterly. I had him and I let him go.*

*Murdered.*

The word was repeating over and over in his mind. This was not an accident.

Sudden comprehension dawned. He realised that his parents and his other self had not been murdered for a purpose. They had been collateral damage. The real target was the healer – that was who the killer had been interested in, not him and not his parents. They just happened to be there, in the wrong place at the wrong time. Whoever the man in black was, he had been willing to kill a whole ward of innocents just to remove one Healer.

Harry felt a flush of rage.

This put a new spin on everything, but what made it worse was Riddle. The Order knew all about this incident, knew that it was murder not an accident, because Shackbolt was in charge. Riddle

had sat him down and told him that his parents had died in a fire when he knew all along that it was murder. Why hadn't the son-of-a-bitch told him? They were his parents – he had a right to know.

Harry stood glowering in the darkness, imagining Riddle sitting opposite him, telling him it was all an accident.

Fire? No! It was an explosion, a bomb. Call it what it was: murder. Then again, what did he expect of Lord Voldemort? He knew better than to trust the bastard.

"HEY!"

Harry spun round as the lights came on. Another guard was standing in the door. Harry stood blinking in the light, standing over the unconscious body of another guard.

"Freeze, you son of a bitch!"

## ~~~~ Chapter V ~~~~

### Groundhog Day

**"He drowns in his dreams, an exquisite extreme I know,  
He's as damned as he seems,  
And more heaven than a heart could hold,  
And if I try to save him, my whole world would cave in,  
It just ain't right, lord, it just ain't right.  
He's magic and myth, as strong as what I believe,  
A tragedy with more damage,  
than a soul should see,  
But do I try to change him, so hard not to blame him,  
Hold me, baby, oh hold me.  
Oh and I don't know, I don't know what he's after,  
But he's so beautiful, he's such a beautiful disaster,  
And if I could hold on, through the tears and the laughter,  
Lord, would it be beautiful? Or, or just a beautiful disaster?"**

### **Kelly Clarkson – Beautiful Disaster**

Geoff had worked for St. Mungo's security for seven years. He knew every hallway like the back of his hand, every inch of St. Mungo's, and every one of the other security staff. It was a relatively small team, and everyone knew everyone. More importantly, everyone knew everyone else's way of doing things. For example, on the first Saturday of every month Brian, the chief,

called a meeting at eleven in which they would review absolutely everything that had happened over the previous month and set down guidelines and targets for the upcoming month. The meeting was by and large boring, but given the chief's temper, missing it was not an option.

At eleven, they were all gathered in the Security Office, coffee mugs full, notepads ready, quills sharp and ready to go.

"Who are we missing?" asked Brian, standing up. He checked his watch, and glared at the face of it, clearly anxious to begin.

"Joe's not here," announced Gill, gesturing to the empty chair.

"What shift is he on?" Brian asked her since she was closest to the board to which the schedule had been pinned. Gill twisted in her seat to read the parchment on the wall.

"According to this he's in the Monitoring Station," she replied, turning back to face him. "So you want me to..."

"No, it's alright," said Brian, shaking his head. "I need to fetch some files from my office anyway. I'll grab him on the way back. Sit tight."

As Brian disappeared out through the Security Door and into the restricted section out the back Geoff relaxed. The other six people in the room, did the same, putting notepads down, and yawning. To his right, Dan asked Claire what her plans were for later while Aaron headed over to where the tea was stored to make himself another cup. Geoff just sat staring into space, trying to decide what colour he should paint the walls in his lounge at home. He and his wife were decorating and had been arguing about the choice of colours for the past fortnight.

It was ten-past before anyone commented on the absence of the chief. Geoff's mind had been on various shades of cream, when Claire pointed out that Brian had been gone for ten minutes. Considering his usual knack for conducting these meetings at break-neck speed, this was highly irregular.

"I'll go and have a look," offered Geoff, standing up. He headed through the Security Door and down the corridor towards the chief's office. When he reached the thick wooden door bearing the chief's name, he knocked, and then receiving no reply, pushed open the door.

Geoff stood frozen in the doorway as the gravity of what he was seeing hit him. Brian was lying face down on the floor in a puddle of water, covered in lilies. The cabinet was open and some of its contents had spilled out onto the carpet and there were clear signs of a struggle. Who had done this to him? Were they still here? Geoff was by his side in an instant, rolling him over. He pushed two fingers under his jaw, checking for a pulse, and breathed a sigh of relief as he found the boss to be alive.

*"Enervate!"*

The chief groaned and raised a hand to his head as he opened his eyes. He blinked a few times in the glaring light of the office as the world came into focus and he saw Geoff. A look of confusion appeared on Brian's face as he stared up at him.

"Brian, what happened?" asked Geoff quickly somehow realising time was of the essence.

Brian looked up at him confused for another few seconds, before his eyes went wide as the memories came flooding back. He tried to sit up, but was too disorientated. Opening his mouth, he gaped like a fish for a few seconds before managing to speak.

"Monitoring Station," he rasped.

Geoff understood in an instant and, leaving Brian, ran out of the door as fast as he could, then turned left and headed for the Monitoring Station. Drawing his wand, he placed his hand on the door-handle, took a deep breath, and threw open the door.

As he stood framed in the doorway, his jaw dropped at what he was seeing. Up on the screen, the image of the Long Term Ward exploding repeated over and over. Joe was lying on the floor beneath the monitors, face down, clearly tied up and not moving. Standing above him, looking over at Geoff was a man cloaked all in black, with a hood and scarf covering his face.

"DON'T MOVE!" shouted Geoff, his wand out in an instant. He reached out with his other arm and hit a red button on the wall to his left, sounding the alarm. Instantly the secure door behind him flew open and two other men in identical uniforms appeared, surging towards him, wands ready.

The three of them stood in the only doorway, blocking off any escape and aiming their wands at the intruder. There was an Apparation Ward over the entire hospital, only one door to the room, and three guards. There was no way out for this intruder, whoever he was.

"STEP AWAY FROM THE CONSOLE," Geoff ordered. "ON YOUR KNEES, HANDS BEHIND YOUR HEAD!"

The figure stared at him for a second, probably appraising his situation. He stood motionless, the flickering from the monitors shimmering off his cloak and the eyes all but concealed beneath the hood. The figure moved with slow determined movements as he stooped and picked up the bowl of memories from the table. The screens all instantly went dark as the bowl that powered it was disconnected. Inside that bowl were all the recordings for that day, and probably the evidence of the Stranger's identity. It was a fact that clearly wasn't lost on the intruder.

"HOLD IT!" ordered Geoff as the figure turned back to face them, holding the bowl close to his chest. Geoff stepped forwards raising his wand in a threatening manner. "Put it down on the table, and lie down with your hands behind you head!"

The figure paused for a second, looking around the room. He seemed to realise there was no way out, and turned back to face Geoff. Transferring the weight of the bowl to his left hand, the intruder slowly raised his right and gave Geoff a slow, calm wave goodbye.

*Smartarse*, thought Geoff. "TAKE HIM!"

Instantly the bowl was alight, flames flickering over its shimmering surface like oil on water. Geoff didn't even have time to yell 'no', before the Stranger threw the bowl towards them, a wall of fiery liquid soaring through the air. It almost seemed to happen in slow motion as Geoff fell backwards into the other two, conjuring a shield to prevent the incoming scald. The burning liquid bounced off the shield like rain on a window, cascading down it like lava into a shimmering puddle of fire, but leaving Geoff completely unharmed. As Geoff looked back to where the Stranger had been a second ago, the man was gone.

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As Harry arrived back at the Common Room, having run back up from a deserted stadium, he was greeted by a sombre mood and it didn't take long for him to work out why. According to the snippets of conversation he had picked up, Slytherin had apparently steamrolled Ravenclaw, three hundred and ninety to sixty. That meant that Slytherin was leading by one hundred and ten points going into their final game, but with Hufflepuff and Gryffindor both having a game in hand, this wasn't especially devastating news.

Harry slipped through the Common Room, greeting those he met, but still moving as quickly and unobtrusively as possible towards the stairs. He didn't care about the Quidditch – the word *murder* was still echoing through his head. He fought the urge to take the steps three at a time, in the interests of appearing calm. Running would only make him stand out – another of the Dark Knight's instincts.

Once alone, Harry threw off the cloak and tossed it on his bed. He took a minute to inspect his injured arm which Carter has damn near ripped out of its socket. It still hurt considerably and, to make matters worse, bruising appeared to have spread slightly as well. Cursing, Harry pulled off the bandages and decided to let the air get to it for the time being.

That done, he lay on his bed staring at the ceiling. In his mind's eye, figures in black were leaving boxes filled with explosive in every room he had passed on his way here. All the way back to the tower Harry had thought of nothing but the figure in black, the bomb, the murder of his parents, and Riddle's deceit.

*Riddle knew*, Harry told himself for the fiftieth time since he had arrived back.

Harry sat brooding for a good hour before he was composed enough to do anything else. He had spent a good deal of time planning what he would do when he got his hands on the man who had killed the Potters of this world. He had even gone so far as to plan what he wanted to say to Riddle. Once Harry had found the key and the sequence to get him home, he would march into Riddle's office and give Lord Voldemort a piece of his mind, and probably a fist as well. He sat alone during a late lunch, lost in thought, but by the time he returned to his dorm, he had put it behind him. The winter's sun was low in the sky by the time Harry's anger cooled.

Since he couldn't be bothered with homework, Harry took a seat on the edge of the bed and pulled out Lockhart's diary instead. He took the opportunity to have another of Madam Pomfrey's headache pills then lay back on the bed, book in hand, to think.

His mind thought back to the man in brown, *not to be confused with the figure in black*, Harry noted. He was suddenly of the opinion that wearing cloaks should be outlawed so he could see who he was fighting. Well, actually, he should be allowed to wear them, but no one else. Maybe he should get a mask for such excursions – no, that was too Death-Eater-ish.

The thief in St. Mungo's definitely was not the same man in Borgin and Burkes, Harry reasoned. This one today had been shifty, incompetent and scared, not the calm, precise, meticulous, cat-like man who had attacked him in Knockturn Alley. But it was the timing that worried Harry the most. The man had sneaked in to try to steal the diary on the exact day and time that Harry was there. Lockhart had been there for years, but the intruder had chosen now to strike. Coincidence? Unlikely. What was so special about today? It was fishy to say the least. Still, he had nothing to lose by reading the diary. If it was useless, he could go back and see if there was another one, a real one, in St. Mungo's.

The Quibbler article had been published in June 1989, and talked of his adventures in the spring of that year. Harry opened the diary, his fingers easily finding 1989 amongst the pages. It seemed to be magically enchanted, for when closed there appeared to be only a handful of pages in each year. But as he turned to the year, he found that there was a page for every day. The diary shrank and expanded to keep the overall size of the book small. Harry wondered how far it went, how recent it went. Was there a comment about Katie right at the end before Lockhart had lost his memory? Harry began to flick towards the end, but lost interest before he reached it. It didn't really matter... he needed to focus on the article. He flicked back to February 1989 and began to read.

It was not a diary as such. Lockhart had not begun each page with "Dear diary, today I...", but rather had made notes on his discoveries. For example on the first page there was a note which read,

*"Fortune's Firewhiskey tastes like mouldy orange peel and a troll's bath water.*

*Do NOT buy again, stick to Ogden's."*

Harry didn't consider it to be particularly useful, but made a mental note, just in case.

He continued to skim through the pages, scanning the text. It wasn't until he got to the end of March that he came across something useful. At the top of the page were scribbled the words,

"Order of Ge-Gnosis The Order of Earthly Knowledge"

Beneath it were notes:

*Funding from Galileo School of Experimental Magic (GalSEM) & Quibbler*

*Obj. – investigate validity of Order legends & other worlds.*

*Now, we're cooking*, thought Harry to himself as the pills began to take effect.

The trouble was that he had so little faith in Lockhart's abilities, and with good reason, that he had very little faith in the book as well. With doubt plaguing his mind, Harry began to browse the text, looking for any detail that might help. Apparently Lockhart had found a fair bit about the legend, but no facts at all to back it up. Harry read all the way through to the beginning of May before he found anything useful, but again Harry doubted the validity of the claim.

Harry re-read the passage. Lockhart claimed to have encountered a descendant of one of the people who had actually used the Node over two millennia ago. According to Lockhart's notes, he had been wandering around the Mediterranean and had been washed up on an island. There he had encountered a woman whom he claimed was descended from the people who had invented the Node and later who had hidden it – the so-called Order of Earthly Knowledge.

Between the loopy writing and the infernal short hand, Harry was barely able to discern the story. The Node had been invented by a group of wizards comparable to the modern Department of Mysteries. People had gone through the Node to various worlds and had brought back various bits and pieces, ideas and treasures from other worlds. However, as always the powers that be had become corrupted by this new power. The politicians, the powerful men of the time, began to misuse it, exiling people to other worlds, stealing, using the Node for personal gain and not the greater good. Eventually, the creators took the Node back by force from those who had declared it their own. In an uprising of sorts, they smuggled it out of the country and moved it to a secret location, hidden away from the greed of so-called great men. They buried the key on the far side of the known world, making sure that the gate could not be opened again. Of course the former masters of the Node were furious and the creators had gone into seclusion, creating the Order of Earthly Knowledge to protect the Node and to continue the original work – to discover more about the world around them. The Order, according to Lockhart, was the basis for the many Illuminati legends that had spanned the last five hundred years.

Harry paused, looking up from the book. What had Flamel told him? Harry knew it had been shut down centuries ago out of fear and buried. He knew that the key was hidden somewhere else and that Flamel had found it. Certain facts were true, but there was much more to it. The only way to know for certain would be to talk to this woman himself. Was she still alive? Apparently she had lived in a house on a Turkish island. Lockhart didn't say which one, in the interests of protecting her identity. Even though he was an idiot, he still protected his sources it seemed.

*More likely*, thought Harry with wry humour, *was that he didn't want her telling the world he was full of dung.*

Another, more disturbing, thought crossed his mind. Why wasn't any of this information in the Quibbler article? Lockhart would surely have loved to show this to the world, had he really found the Node. The article was written two years before the great buffoon came to Hogwarts, so it wasn't like he never got around to publishing it. Why had he kept this to himself? What made him put aside his considerable ego and not publish? It was suspicious, to say the least.

Harry re-read the whole story of this woman in the Quibbler and then the diary again, looking for any points that would prove that the diary and article were not related, any glaring

contradictions. Most of it matched up, but the diary went into significantly more detail than the magazine. It seemed like an account that matched the article, which suggested that it truly was Lockhart's diary, but Harry just had a funny feeling about it.

He read it again very slowly, looking for a point of reference from which he might find where this woman was located. Hopefully Lockhart would give a clue as to where he had been when he met her. The diary said he had been somewhere on an island, a Turkish owned island, although thousands of years ago, it was apparently part of Greece. Harry had a vague idea where Turkey was, but no idea about its islands. Lockhart apparently hadn't either and from his notes, it seemed he had arrived there by accident. He found the woman by chance when his boat – what had he been doing sailing? – came ashore in a bay. Desperate, he knocked on the door of a house, and it happened to be hers.

An island with a bay – *well that narrows it down*, thought Harry bitterly. The only real clue he had was a comment Lockhart had made about the bay. "Virgil claimed it was big enough to hide the greatest fleet ever assembled from Trojan eyes. Standing atop the cliffs, I can see what he means." Harry was vaguely aware of who Virgil was, but knew nothing about the Trojans except that they fell for the old wooden horse trick.

*Come on, Harry, think!* He had no idea about the fleet Lockhart referred to or anything like that. This meant he needed another night in the library looking over Greek mythology. If that yielded no results, then Harry would need to speak to Binns again, and if that failed...he would need to get a copy of Virgil's book from Muggle London. Since he had no Muggle money, it was not a prospect he was looking forward to.

Suddenly Harry's stomach gave a loud rumble. Startled, he quickly looked around to see if anyone had heard but luckily there was no one around. However, it was dinner time, as Harry found when he checked his watch. The pills had cured his head for now, and he actually felt up to eating something.

*Looks like I'm over it*, he thought. "Probably just the flu," he said aloud to the empty room. "Malfoy's curse didn't help."

With a groan he remembered that this evening he had a meeting with Riddle. Grumbling, Harry closed the diary and stood up. He was still no closer to getting home and he needed to find a tiny island in the big, wide world. Mission: Impossible.

Grumpily pulling on another jumper as it was getting cold again, Harry made his way down to dinner. He didn't even bother greeting those who said hi as he arrived, sliding into a seat near to Katie and the crew but not directly next to them. As Harry began to eat, Hermione was trying to explain what they had all done in potions yesterday to Ron, who seemed to be still having issues with his homework. Harry had managed a quick essay last night. It wasn't Shakespeare, but it was good enough. It was all about two potions, each perfectly normal, safe and useful, but when combined result in a poison. They had moved on from calculating dosage to improvised antidotes. Before they could do that, apparently they needed a basic introduction to poisons. Composite poisons were not easy, but Harry got the general gist. That was about it. Naturally, the Slytherins were doing rather well.

"No," said Hermione looking exasperated. "The missing ingredients that make it a poison are hidden in the first potion. Let's say there was a poison that used coffee. It's a stupid example, but bear with me. What you could do, is make the poison without the coffee, and then put it in a biscuit. Any poison test would come back negative, as it isn't toxic yet. But if the victim were to dunk their biscuit in the coffee or eat it right after a drink when they have coffee in their stomach, then both elements are combined. They mix in the stomach and become a poison. That is why finding an antidote can be so hard. You have the symptoms, possibly traces of the second potion, but you need to find the first to work out what the whole thing is, and then you can create the antidote. That's what we are going on to next week."

Ron was looking confused still. "But why make a poison in two parts?"

"To get past any poison screening?" suggested Hermione. "Or, because some idiots don't read the bottles. You should never take Dreamless Sleep within twelve hours of having had Veritaserum, because the two combine to create a poison in the blood-stream. Those accidents are where this comes in useful.

"Oooh," said Ron, but Harry doubted he really understood.

"Think of it as a kind of Trojan Horse," said Hermione. "If you..."

But Harry had stopped listening. The word Trojan had brought his thoughts back to the diary. It couldn't hurt to ask Hermione. She hadn't been of any use with the Arithmancy, but she might know a little about Greek mythology.

"Pop quiz, Hermione," said Harry interrupting, not able to see a subtle way of getting the question into conversation. "Speaking of the Trojan Horse... As the horse moved into Troy, on which island did the Greeks hide?"

He wore a cocky smile, as if tempting Hermione to answer. He knew that if she knew the answer she would have to tell him, just to prove she was a match. He felt a glimmer of guilt manipulating his friend, but it wasn't anything serious.

"Why do you want to know?" asked Hermione, raising an eyebrow.

"I don't want to know," Harry bluffed. "I already do. Just testing. Call it Harry's useless fact of the day."

"Have you read the Iliad, or the Aeneid?" asked Hermione, sounding doubtful.

"No, just basic Greek mythology," said Harry shrugging. "So where was it?"

Hermione thought for a minute before answering. "I haven't done anything on the Greeks since Primary School," she said, with a reminiscent smile.

Harry's heart sank.

"However," she said, "the summer of year five I had just done my project on the Ancient Greeks and for our holiday that year we went to the Mediterranean. I was nine at the time. My parents thought that after I had studied it, I might like to visit."

"So you've been there?" asked Harry, trying to keep the astonishment from his voice.

"Oh, yes," said Hermione. "We walked along the beach you refer to."

"Okay, now I'm impressed," said Harry. "I don't feel quite so intelligent now."

"So where is it?" asked Ron, who looked thoroughly confused.

"The island of Tenedos," replied Hermione smugly. "Except now it's called Bozcaada. I have never been so sunburnt since."

"Correct," said Harry, his insides jumping for joy. "It's part of Turkey now, isn't it?" He had to prove he had some knowledge of it or he would look stupid.

"Yes," confirmed Hermione. "Wouldn't mind going back there," she added her eye glazing over. "With Umbridge waddling around like a big pink goose, I really need a holiday."

"We've only been back four weeks," Ron pointed out. "And if Hermione is losing faith, is there any hope for the rest of us?"

Harry grinned as Ron was rewarded by an elbow to the ribs from the girl in question.

"And on that note," said Harry with a flourish. "We will end Harry's useless fact of the day."

"You do realise I'm going to demand a useless fact every day from now on," Hermione said, sounding rather like Professor McGonagall.

Harry wasn't sure if she was joking or not, but smiled innocently at her. "We'll trade off. You go next."

She smiled warmly, her eyes lighting. It seemed her brain was already whirling with possibilities. "Deal."

"So, can we get back to helping me?" asked Ron through a mouthful of mash potato. Hermione shot him a disapproving glare, but did turn her attention back to the subject of potions.

Harry returned to his food, managing to hide the grin on his face. He looked around the hall, careful to conceal his happy mood. He knew where to go. He needed to check on an atlas where Tenedos was, but at least he now knew. He assumed he could Flame that far, though he had never tried it. He would have to wait until his flu passed, though. His head felt fine at the moment, mainly because he had taken a pill less than an hour ago. Still, Harry thought he was over it and his magic would return in a few days. Then he could have an hour or two on holiday in the Mediterranean. Lovely. He was already looking forward to it.

It was then that his eyes fell on Riddle. Harry felt part of his anger return at the sight of him. The image of a sandy beach faded from his mind and was replaced by the vicious face of Lord Voldemort. Harry glared at the Headmaster who sat in place at the Head Table calmly eating his dinner.

*Liar*, thought Harry angrily. He could imagine his mother, wreathed in flame as the ward exploded around her. He could imagine her pain, her fear, and the senseless loss of life. She hadn't been a target. She had been without a mind for years, but still she had died. The figure in black was to blame, but Harry also felt angry with Riddle for covering it up. It was then that he remembered he had a meeting with Riddle at seven. It would take all his self control not to explode in his face: he could destroy Riddle's office more easily than he had Dumbledore's if he really wanted to, but to what end? Would running rampage on Riddle's personal possessions help him, or get him nearer to home? Would it make his life easier? No, it accomplished nothing. He would have to grin and bear it. He knew Riddle was a monster, it was just a shame that Katie did not.

He glanced at Katie laughing with her friends over some joke he hadn't heard. For her sake he needed to expose Tom Riddle and show her that underneath those twinkling intelligent eyes lay the heart of a killer – a killer named Lord Voldemort. Harry knew he could never leave this world in peace until he had accomplished that task, and he would relish it when it came. Of that he was certain.

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Harry knocked on the door of the Headmaster's office at seven that evening, right on schedule. His head was still fine, thankfully – the hideous inky pills were a god-send and he was profoundly grateful he had swallowed his pride and sought out the aid of Madame Pomfrey. He felt a bit more relaxed now he had had time to cool off, and the thought of a holiday to the Med would bring a smile to his face whenever he pictured the sunny paradise. If Riddle pushed his luck, Harry need only think of the beach, of the waves crashing against the shore, just like in his Occlumency. Only this time he'd be picturing the shore of a distant Turkish island where he felt certain the answers to all his problems laid waiting for him.

After a few seconds of waiting, a voice called from beyond the door, beckoning him in.

Taking a deep breath, Harry pushed open the door. He had spent the entire walk from the Common Room to here Occluding his mind, concentrating on the waves he had last heard in the Room of Requirement. As he had reached the gargoyle, he was more or less satisfied that he was prepared. The deep breath was just to reassure himself. After all, tonight he faced not only the man who had killed his parents, but a suspicious and highly devious bastard. A deceitful, conniving, liar.

*But that's okay, Harry reassured himself, I am calm. My mind is Occluded... my emotions and memories are hidden, he cannot touch me.*

As Harry entered, he felt a rush of warm air rush past his face, escaping into the cold night through the now open door. Quickly Harry stepped in and closed the door, a force of habit after

Uncle Vernon's constant lectures about leaving doors open and saving money on the heating. As Harry shut the door, he looked around. The office was warm and the glow from the fire and the oil lamp now burning on one of the shelves, bathing the room in a welcoming orange light.

*Mindtricks*, thought the Dark Knight. *He is trying to catch me off guard.*

Harry took another cautious step into the room. On the desk was a silver tray filled with a tea-pot, cups, saucers, milk and a plate of biscuits. He couldn't help but wonder if they were laced with Veritaserum or something of that ilk. Out of habit he felt in his pocket, checking that his wand was where he could get at it quickly.

"Ah, Harry," said Riddle brightly, entering the office carrying a plate of scones. Harry turned to face him, thinking of nothing but the waves. The Headmaster moved to the desk and placed the tray down before sinking into his chair. He gestured to Harry to do the same. Harry did, his entire body on edge, his eyes not leaving Riddle. There was already a kettle floating unaided above the fire and a pair of cups set out ready for them. Harry was naturally guarded about the drink. He almost laughed at the thought. Was he turning into Moody with all this paranoia? No, he was just in the company of Lord Voldemort. Any suspicion was justified one hundred times over.

"Tea?" Riddle offered, gesturing to the cups.

"No thanks," said Harry bluntly. Riddle raised an eyebrow, before casually pouring a splash of milk into his own cup. Somehow Harry felt it right to justify his rudeness, and perhaps tip Riddle off that he was on to his game. "Too much time in potions – it's made me paranoid about accepting drinks from other people."

Riddle chuckled, but the mirth did not reach his eyes. They remained locked on Harry, appraising.

"Yes, lessons on poisons can do that to a young mind," said Riddle. He pointed his wand at the kettle in the fireplace, which abruptly floated across the room and emptied itself into the tea-pot. Harry smelt the rich aroma of tea wafting out of the kettle. It was somewhat soothing. He didn't detect the smell of any potions, but then again Veritaserum was odourless. Riddle seemed completely unfazed by Harry's caution and stirred the teapot with a silver spoon. He then replaced the lid, leaving it to brew.

"Speaking of fear and paranoia," he continued, looking up at Harry once more. "I remember, back when I was here at Hogwarts as a student, I shared a dormitory with a young man who wanted to become a Healer. He spent hours pouring over books about the symptoms of various conditions. Any symptom you had, he could tell you what it might be, ranging from common colds to tropical diseases. Can you guess what happened to him?"

"No," said Harry flatly, not really caring. He couldn't help but wonder why Riddle was telling him this, what was the point of it all. What angle was he playing?

"He kept seeing terminal illnesses in the slightest symptom," said Riddle, looking almost sad. "He became a hypochondriac and suffered from acute paranoia. One day he was in detention

cleaning out a broom-cupboard, and all the dust made him sneeze. He was up in the infirmary in three minutes flat, telling the matron at the time that he had sinusitis. The boy was committed to St. Mungo's shortly before he was due to take his NEWTs. He was scared to go out lest he contract a disease. He was afraid to have visitors for fear that they contaminate him, and he was scared to eat, in case he got food poisoning. He lived in constant fear."

"There is a difference between that and a potions lesson," said Harry, trying not to sound patronising.

"True," conceded Riddle. "My friend had a history of mental problems, but I think you will agree, Harry, that the principle is the same. Potions lessons on poisons have a similar effect, just as Defence Against the Dark Arts can. Once you move on to the next module, your worries about being drugged or poisoned will fade. It should also serve to remind you why this is not taught until NEWT level, when we hope you have matured sufficiently to deal with it."

Harry gave him an unconvinced look. Riddle looked back with amusement.

"You should never let fear govern your choices, Harry," said Riddle. "And certainly don't let fear force you to give up something you want. Some people do some truly awful things when they are scared, just to be free of their fear. We should never *not* do something solely for the reason that we are scared."

"Are you telling me to be reckless?" asked Harry, his tone mildly teasing, but his mind cautious to a fault.

"Not at all," replied Riddle. "If you do not want to do something, then by all means, decline. But your reason should be much better than the fact you may be scared. My friend, the would-be healer, became so consumed by his fear that he spent so much time running he forgot to live his life. Don't make the same mistake, Harry."

"So what was your great fear?" asked Harry flippantly just for the hell of it. He already knew, but Riddle's response might answer one of his burning questions about the peculiarities of this world – what had stopped him becoming Lord Voldemort?

Riddle regarded him carefully before answering.

"There was one thing that I was scared of," he acknowledged at last. "Something that I spent so long trying to avoid... I did some things I am not proud of to try to protect myself from it. But it was just an illusion, my fear. It took the death of someone dear to me for me to realise how irrational my fear really was, Harry. I came to see that running would not help and that only by facing it could I be free of it."

"Your friend," said Harry. "Was it him?"

He gestured at a portrait on the wall.

Riddle looked sadly at the portrait of Dumbledore hanging on the wall. His head sank slowly into a nod.

"I was there," he said slowly. "Over fifty years have passed since then, but I still feel his influence."

"He shall only truly be gone," said Harry quietly, his eyes locked on the image of Dumbledore snoozing in his frame, "when none who remain are loyal to him."

Riddle regarded him carefully. "Albus told me that once," he said softly, his eyes scanning Harry.

"I read that somewhere," said Harry offhandedly. "Might have been in that book about Hogwarts headmasters, though I could be wrong."

Riddle paused for a few moments before shaking his head and rising to his feet. He crossed to the wall several feet from Harry where a small curtain was covering something. He watched as Riddle waved his hand across it and the curtain opened, revealing a cracked mirror.

"Perhaps this will put your mind at ease," said Riddle softly. "Do you know what this is?" he asked, not turning back to face Harry, but regarding the glass.

"A Foe-Glass," Harry replied, his tone flat. "It shows anyone who means you harm."

"Do you see me in it?" asked Riddle.

"No," he said coldly. "I see you standing in the way of it though." He crossed the office towards the glass for a better look, curiosity getting the better of him.

Riddle turned, a look of amusement on his face. He stepped aside as Harry approached the mirror. Figures swirled in the mist as he stared into the glass. He saw no faces, nothing that for certain was Riddle. He noticed that it was significantly emptier than when he had last seen one. In this world, significantly less people intended him harm.

"If I wished to poison you, Harry," said Riddle, sitting back behind his desk, "You would see me as clear as crystal."

With that he picked up the tea-pot and began to pour two cups of tea. Harry's eyes didn't leave the glass. He stared at the figures moving in the background, but he didn't see them. His mind was contemplating another great question. Did Riddle see Harry when he looked in the Foe-Glass?

"I would offer a sneak-o-scope," said Riddle, "but in a school there is so much mischief going on that they never stop spinning. Sugar?"

"No thanks," said Harry, turning away from the glass. "I'm sweet enough."

He looked along the line of portraits of Headmasters, recognising a couple but only from their appearance. The names on the frames meant nothing to him. As he neared the end of the wall, he came to a set of shelves. On it was a large photo of what appeared to be the entire seventh year from long ago. It was a photo of Riddle's graduation ceremony. Harry picked him out in an instant, a smile on his face that didn't quite reach his eyes. The young Riddle was so alike to the

one that had climbed out of the diary that he had to look away. Harry wondered if Riddle had had any friends at school or if he really was as nasty a youth as he had been in Harry's world.

"What was his name?" asked Harry.

"Who?"

"Your Healer friend?"

"Adam Thicket," said Riddle, absently stirring his tea. "Does the name ring a bell?"

"No," said Harry, shrugging.

"I thought it might," said Riddle, his tone sombre. "He was a resident of Ward 49 for the last few years."

Harry froze, turning back to face the portraits, realising the gravity of that last sentence. He could almost feel Riddle's eyes burning into his back, as Harry realised his mistake. It was a mistake that would not be lost on the headmaster.

"He died in the same fire as your parents," continued Riddle.

Harry felt the anger well up inside him at the words, a reminder that Riddle was lying to him about his parents, about his own friend. Was there no level to which he would not stoop? Could he not honour the dead and let the truth be known? Harry's fists clenched in anger at the deceitful person who before him.

Riddle on the other hand seemed not to notice.

"Can I offer you a Cream Tea?"

The headmaster gestured to a plate of scones, before taking one himself. He began to put jam and cream on his own scone before looking back up at Harry who hadn't moved a muscle.

Through it all Harry managed to keep the anger he felt from showing, though only just. *Calm yourself, Harry. He's trying to flush you out. Stay calm and be careful.*

"Would you care for a scone, Harry?"

"You mean scone, not scones," said Harry correcting his pronunciation just to be annoying. He crossed to the chair opposite Riddle and sat back down. Deliberately he raised the prepared cup to his lips and took a sip of tea since the Foe-Glass suggested he would be okay. Riddle watched him the entire time, and raised an eyebrow at Harry's impertinent correction.

"I will not get into an argument on how to pronounce the word scone," said Riddle, though there was a glimmer of amusement in his eyes. "You can rhyme it with cone or gone, it does not matter one iota to me. You could even rhyme it with done if you wished to be original."

Harry grimaced at the poor attempt at humour. He eyed the plate for a second before he relented and reached out to take one. He remembered once drugging Crabbe and Goyle with that same trick in his second year, but the Foe Glass reassured him that it was safe. As he added the cream and jam, he glanced every now and then across at Dumbledore's portrait. It was several minutes before anyone spoke. This time it was Harry's turn.

"It's funny that Thicket should have died at the same time as my parents," said Harry matter-of-factly. He was staring into the swirling tea in his cup. Having stirred in more milk he watched the spiralling vortex as he spoke, his mind on the waves, occluding his mind. "In the fire and all...an accident."

Riddle paused for a moment. "Accidents always seem senseless. They are by definition without blame. Would having someone to blame make it easier? Would fuelling the darker side of human nature, the desire for revenge, make your suffering any less?"

"No," said Harry. "It only adds guilt. There are always others to blame and all the time you are just running from the truth."

"Very philosophical," said Riddle. "You almost sounded like Albus then."

Harry felt a glimmer of pride at the statement, but managed to keep from blushing. He suddenly had an idea.

"I say it," he said, "But I am not sure I could follow it."

"What do you mean?" asked Riddle, picking up the second half of his scone.

"Well," said Harry, deciding to test the headmaster. "I seem to have invented a faceless person to take the blame."

He looked up at Riddle who was sitting calmly listening.

"It's stupid," Harry continued with a small laugh. "...Inventing a phantom dark wizard, just so in my mind I have someone to blame."

"Such things can be harmful," said Riddle carefully. "It does not do to dwell on blame, any more than a 'what if'."

"I know," Harry said with a secretive smile, determined to get as close to the truth as he could without revealing too much. "It just sort of came to me in a dream. I was back on Ward 49, visiting my parents with Professor McGonagall. We met the healer. Professor McGonagall left us alone for a bit, just before it happened. In my dream, this other man came in, a dark, hooded, faceless man who wanted to speak to the healer. He had a box with him. He spoke to the healer in private and then...then nothing."

Riddle was staring at him, his face emotionless, his appearance calm, but he made no move to speak.

"I know it's stupid," said Harry laughing again. "I mean I never remembered him before. I thought it might be a repressed memory that I had buried because I didn't wish to face it. I thought it might have come back to the surface, but then I thought that was ridiculous. The Aurors, what's his name, Bolt—something—or—other, would have told me if it was murder. Aurors have more honour than to hide something like that. I'm just looking for someone to blame."

Riddle stared at him for another minute before he spoke. "Your reaction is natural, Harry," he said simply. "We would all like someone to blame, and so you invented this character. But it does not do to dwell on dreams, lest we forget to live. You must put aside thoughts of this mysterious figure in black. It is your subconscious trying to avoid having to face the loss of your parents, I think."

Harry had said what he wanted, and heard what he had feared. He had offered Riddle the chance to come clean, but he had failed. On top of that, Harry had never actually said the cloaked figure wore black. Riddle knew. He was a cowardly deceitful bastard after all. Any warming Harry might have felt towards him had evaporated with his lies.

"Did you know your parents?" asked Harry, his tone level.

"No," said Riddle after an awkward pause. "My mother died when I was very young, and my father...I never knew him."

"You never tried to find him?" asked Harry. "Tried to track him down?"

"A long time ago," said Riddle, staring into his cup.

Harry had the feeling he had pushed Riddle too far. This conversation was nearing a rather more abrupt ending than Riddle had planned. Harry was sure Riddle knew this 'chat' was out of control.

"I made peace with my past long ago. It cost me more than I would have liked, but it is over now." He stared absently over his cup at the desk.

"I can begin to appreciate how Katie must be feeling," said Harry, trying to sound casual. "She lost her parents in a senseless way. She has nothing outside these walls. Hogwarts is the only real home either of us has now."

"I once felt that way as well," admitted Riddle. "I would have given anything to live here, and not in the orphanage to which I had to return every summer. You, Miss Bell, and I all find Hogwarts to be our true home. You feel a kinship with her, perhaps?"

Harry shrugged.

"My point," said Riddle, putting his cup down, "is that although you feel that you are in the same boat, she is unique and very different. With all that has happened to her, all that is happening around us now, and all the things that have yet to happen."

"What are you trying to say, Professor?" asked Harry, concentrating on the waves.

"Only that there are others in similar ships to yourself," said Riddle. "But not Miss Bell. I know that you have become friendly with her, Mr Longbottom, Miss Granger, and the others. You must be able to see that she is unique."

"I can," agreed Harry, deciding to push Riddle a little more. "The castle is full of rumours about her. She has fought dragons, Dementors, and the Dark Lord himself. It sounds wonderful when you phrase it like that, almost like something out of a novel or comic-book. The distant, tortured hero – or in this case, heroine –with a dark and troubled past. We see Batman, not the sad little boy who lost his parents when he was a boy. We only see the suit, the legend, not the pain Bruce Wayne feels when he remembers growing up alone. Every time he sees a family, or children playing with their parents, he sees a life he never had. But who cares, because he's Batman and he keeps us safe. Poor Katie. The Girl-Who-Lived, the Chosen One. We never stop to see the girl herself, only the determined face she is forced to present to the rest of us day after day. To have the weight of her past and the Dark Lord bearing down on her... it isn't glorious, it's horrific. How can any of us understand that? Even those closest to her, who think they have her best interests at heart know nothing of what it is to be her, to suffer as she has suffered. I even asked her if she knew why it was her the Dark Lord chose."

He stole a glance at Riddle who managed to keep his face neutral.

"She has no idea why it was her the Dark Lord picked on Halloween all those years ago," said Harry coldly. "All that she has been through, and no one has told her why. Can you imagine being hunted every second of every day for a reason you cannot understand? Glorious? Attention seeker? ...No, Katie is none of those things, and I am very grateful that it is not me who has to suffer this burden."

"You seem to know her quite well," said Riddle, his brow furrowed in thought.

"No," said Harry, shaking his head. "Not really, not intimately. She doesn't seem to like me much, certainly doesn't trust me. I can just...I see the truth in her eyes. I only wish I could do something about it, but I am not the one in the know. So, I'll just stand by her, doing whatever I can so long as she'll let me."

Riddle stared at him for a moment. Harry took the opportunity to pour another cup of tea, his hand as steady as a rock. He was in control now and he decided to wait, to let him sweat a little. It would be interesting to see where the Headmaster took it from here. As it happened, Riddle changed the subject entirely.

"The reason I asked you here today," said Riddle, drawing a file from his desk. "Was regarding your parents."

"What about them?" asked Harry, struggling to keep his voice impassive. If he was going to admit it was murder and not an accident that killed them, why not do it when Harry had brought them up? Did he want to do it on his terms, or was it something else?

"The Aurors who have been investigating since December have finished their investigation," announced Riddle his hand resting on the file.

"Really?" asked Harry, sitting up and leaning closer to the desk. He was not feigning interest now, for he really did want to hear what Riddle had to say. He wanted to know what the lying little snake would come out with this time. Would he acknowledge that it was murder? Unlikely. Would there be any truth in what he said? Probably not. Still, Harry wanted to hear him out.

"I have a full copy of the report here if you wish to see it," said Riddle, offering him the file. "To summarise, the result is accidental death from the fire. If it makes you feel better, St. Mungo's Maintenance Department is being investigated over why the fire—systems did not put out the blaze sooner."

Harry remained silent, merely nodding his head. Inside, he was struggling to conquer his anger. The man dared to sit here and lie to him about his parents, and to pass the blame on to others. The sprinklers or whatever magical equivalent they had may have been too slow, but that did not mean that innocent workers should be tried for incompetence when a blatant murderer was getting nothing. This was not justice.

"Do you want the report?" asked Riddle when Harry did not move to take it.

Harry shook his head. "I'd rather let them rest in peace. If you dig up the past, all you get is dirty."

Riddle nodded, accepting his answer.

"There is just one more thing though," he said, regarding Harry closely. "It seems that earlier today, there was a break in at St. Mungo's. Apparently someone tried to steal security footage from the day of the fire."

"What happened?" asked Harry, trying to look shocked.

"The thief attacked the chief of security," Riddle informed him, his eyes boring into Harry's. "Whoever it was assaulted several of the security team, stole some security footage, and nearly destroyed some of their monitoring equipment."

"Were they caught?" asked Harry, attempted to sound concerned.

"No, alas they got away," said Riddle nonchalantly. "The perpetrator knew enough to destroy the day's security recordings, so the only clue the Aurors have is a description of the assailant which could fit thousands of people. The Aurors continue to investigate the matter, but I felt it best you hear it from me rather than in the *Daily Prophet*."

"Thanks," said Harry. For a second he had been worried Riddle might ask him why he thought someone would steal such a thing. Then again, Harry was not an Auror, not in the Order, and was not in Riddle's confidence. Why on earth would the conjecture of a student be useful? But Harry didn't believe for a second that Riddle was telling him out of kindness. Did he suspect Harry? More importantly did he have evidence?

Riddle nodded, and then placed the file back in his desk. Harry got the distinct impression that tea was over. He glanced down at his watch, which read five past eight. He had been here for an hour, though it had not felt like it.

"Is there anything else?" he asked.

"No," said Riddle, shaking his head. "I have offered you the report that you are legally entitled to, and you are now aware of the incident in St. Mungo's. Aside from that, I merely wished to make sure that you were settling in alright, and that everything was going well."

"It is, thanks," said Harry, eager to be gone.

"Yes, indeed," Riddle agreed. "You have rekindled old friendships, your extra work seems to be going well, and there have been no mishaps, have there?"

Harry didn't respond.

"I trust you are feeling better, though?" Riddle continued, "I understand you had a touch of the flu?"

Harry nodded, while trying to work out an answer. Riddle clearly knew about his illness – so much for the Hippocratic Oath – and probably the irregularity of it as well. Was it another test? Was he looking for an admission? He should know that Pomfrey suspected it to be caused by a curse, and Riddle had just made the comment about mishaps. He was testing Harry, a prospect that caused Harry's anger to boil all over again. Only the icy control of the Dark Knight kept his frustration in check.

"I'm feeling much better now, thanks," replied Harry coolly. The fact that Riddle was becoming less subtle with his tests signalled it was time to leave. Harry had to get out before he slipped. "Well, I think I had better be going," he said. "I need to pop to the library before I go to bed. Curfew and all that."

"Then I shall detain you no longer," said Riddle, nodding, although Harry got the impression he would have liked Harry to stay longer.

Harry nodded and with a half smile rose and headed for the door. He paused for a second, expecting Riddle to make one final comment. When it didn't come, he slipped out of the door and then ran most of the way back to the Common Room. It wasn't until he was safe in his dormitory that he breathed easy once more. His head was beginning to pound again, as the medicine wore off. Despite it being early, Harry changed into his pyjamas and lay on his bed, staring at the ceiling and replaying the conversation in his head, trying to discern truth from the carefully woven lies.

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Come five o'clock on the following Monday, two days after the meeting with Riddle, Harry was again lying on his bed with the curtains drawn, trying to get to sleep. He felt awful. The headache he'd had for the last few days was only getting worse, and now even Madam Pomfrey's pills

were having no effect. His magic was failing because of it. His head had been pounding during Charms and his performance had been abysmal. They had been studying the disillusionment charm, which he was already able to do thanks to the Dark Knight. It wasn't that he knew everything about it or could recite the theory, but when he thought about it for a moment, the incantation just seemed to come to him, and as he said it, the wand movement just seemed natural. Or at least, it would on any other day. Today in Charms, Harry hadn't been able to manage it at all. He hadn't even been able to produce a simple Summoning Charm as his rat scurried off the edge of his desk. In other words, Harry was feeling quite useless, and to top it all he had a RA meeting that evening, in which he was quite certain he would not be able to manage anything.

After dinner, Harry found himself an empty classroom in which to practice. The potions he had been given by Madam Pomfrey were now as good as worthless. He had taken some an hour ago, and they'd had no effect. He was now sweating most of the time he had noticed, which was unusual given that it was February in the Scottish mountains – not the warmest of regions at the best of time. His head was constantly pounding as well, though he no longer felt sick. The point was that it was too much and he needed help – tomorrow he would go to Pomfrey. Before that, he would test his magic.

He found an empty classroom on the third floor and shut the door behind him. He removed his robes and threw them over the chair. Suddenly free from his robes, the air felt so cold against his hot skin. Harry began to shiver. *Ah, great, he thought, too hot with them on, too cold with them off. I can't win.* He chose to ignore the cold, and left his robes off while he removed a quill from the neatly organised pen-pot and placed it on the desk in front of him. He drew his wand from his pocket and aimed it at a quill. How ironic, he thought, that the first spell he had learned in Charms would now be such a challenge. *God damn, Malfoy and his stupid curse. God damn flu. God Damn...whatever the Hell was wrong!*

Forgetting Malfoy and focussing on the spell, Harry swished his wand and then flicked it at the quill.

*Wingardium Leviosa!*

The quill gave a feeble wobble and floated gently a few inches above the desk. It had worked, albeit very weakly. It hovered for nearly four seconds before dropping back to the desk. The small clang sounded like a gong to Harry's already throbbing head. Taking a deep breath to try and relieve the stress, Harry tried again. He aimed his wand at the quill once more, this time saying aloud the incantation as he cast the spell to turn it into a teaspoon. The quill turned a dull colour of silver and the stem became metallic, but the handle of the resulting spoon was rather feathery in appearance. Harry grimaced – this was another spell he had learned during his first year of Transfiguration. He felt angry and frustrated with himself which only served to aggravate his head more.

Gripping his wand firmly, Harry tried again, this time managing to produce a complete spoon. It wasn't as bright and shiny as he had hoped, but the result was good enough to stir his tea. This, of course, was no comfort to Harry who should have been able to do it non-verbally with someone else's wand and using his left hand. Whatever curse or illness he had was draining his magic.

This was getting ridiculous – he would soon be no more than a Squib. Was that Malfoy's plan all along? Had his father found a way to turn a wizard into a Muggle and then told young Draco? For a moment a horrid thought crossed into his mind – what if this truly did leave him without magic for the rest of his life?

This was too serious to put off any longer – the thought of losing his magic completely was too much for Harry. It was time to swallow his pride.

Harry decided that it would be best to forego the RA this evening and head to the hospital wing. He wouldn't be able to do magic anyway, and he needed to get himself fixed as soon as possible – he had a Greek, no Turkish, island to visit after all. He didn't know what to expect on that island and if his magic was on the blink and he couldn't defend himself... it was not an enviable position to be in. No, he needed to be cured first, something that Madam Pomfrey would be able to deal with, he hoped. She would be able to fix his head, this time more permanently, and then she could work out what curse Malfoy had hit him with and a few potions later Harry would be right as rain. Then he could pop over to Tenedos, grab the key or whatever information he could, and pop back before...

*Oh.* That raised another point. If his magic was on the fritz, was his ability to transform or transport himself also not working?

Harry opened the door to the classroom and checked in either direction down the corridor. It was empty, which was lucky as this was a secret that definitely must stay that way. Harry closed the door and then concentrated on the other side of the room. Taking a deep breath, he felt the flames engulf him and the familiar whooshing sensation, like going down a vertical drop on a rollercoaster. He opened his eyes and found himself standing on the opposite side of the room. His head now hurt even more than it had done before, but he had managed it without fault, resulting in a grin appearing on his lips. It had hurt but it was working, which was the important thing.

*Is it even possible to splinch myself doing that?* he wondered, though he had no desire to find out. *I may be as good as defenceless, but at least I can escape if need be.*

Maybe the phoenix was too strong for this virus or curse to affect it. That thought gave Harry hope, for he knew that phoenixes were immune to most diseases, and that they had the power to heal other creatures. Maybe the power of the phoenix would overcome whatever curse this was and cure him. If it was doing that, however, it was taking too long for Harry's tastes – he needed a quicker solution. He pocketed his wand and picked up his robes, throwing them over his shoulders, but did not fasten them up. Leaving the classroom, he began to head up towards the infirmary, rehearsing his story and working out how to avoid subjects he did not wish Pomfrey to know.

On the way up, Harry decided to pay a quick trip to the bathroom to sort himself out. Moving swiftly to the boy's bathroom on the second floor, he pushed open the door. As luck would have it there was no one in there at the moment. He crossed to the sink and leaned over it, staring at himself in the mirror.

His usually pale skin was now looking white and clammy, which was odd given how hot he felt. His eyes seemed much dimmer than usual and he looked tired with bags hanging under them. *You look like Hell*, he told his reflection. Harry turned on the tap and splashed water over his face, trying to wash the fatigue and pain from his head. He wouldn't have been surprised if the water had boiled on contact with his skin, he felt that hot, but the drops merely ran down his face bringing a few seconds of blissful soothing before the heat returned. Feeling marginally more awake, Harry cupped his hands and filled them with water, which he sipped, allowing the icy water to cool his insides. He took two handfuls, before turning off the tap and drying his hands. Replacing his glasses and checking that the make-up concealing his scar was still in place, Harry turned to leave. He headed back out of the corridor, and towards the stairs. However, before he got the end, he heard an all too familiar voice.

"Are you sure, Professor?" asked Malfoy, his voice floating down the corridor. "I've passed it hundreds of times, but I've never seen a door there."

Harry instantly pressed himself into the wall, hiding in the shadows. He was almost at a junction and from the sound of the voices, Malfoy and whoever he was talking to, (though to Harry's mind there was only professor it could be), were approaching from the left, heading towards the stairs. Their footsteps, or rather the clicking of the professor's heels, echoed off the walls, the regular marching beat of her paces growing closer and closer.

"Absolutely," said the familiar voice of Dolores Umbridge, her shrill tones bouncing off the stone walls like an echo in Harry's mind.

He shrank further back into the shadows, making himself invisible from the intersecting corridor, but still able to hear the girly voice floating down the passage.

"I have been informed that the door will appear once you walk past it three times. They are all in there, *all of them*."

Harry's heart skipped a beat – they were taking about the Room of Requirement! The whole RA was gathered in there! Marietta had told Umbridge. Harry felt a sinking feeling in his stomach; they had been betrayed. He had known this was coming but... too soon, this was too soon. Harry cursed himself for not doing something about this, not that he had the faintest idea what he could have done. Secondly, he cursed Marietta for her terrible timing. If only she had chosen a night when he wasn't as useless as a chocolate fireguard!

"How many?" grunted a voice.

It was Crabbe, by Harry's reckoning. As Harry pressed himself into the shadows, he pointed his wand at the torch on the wall which was close enough to perhaps give him away. He silently cast the spell to extinguish the light, but it merely flickered as if caught in a breeze and continued to burn.

*Bugger!*

Cursing, Harry ducked behind a suit of armour. His magic was as good as gone. Whatever he chose to do now, he would have to do the old fashioned way. His head had given another powerful throb as he had tried the spell but he forced himself to think beyond the pain. He had work to do.

"Over twenty," said Umbridge, sounding as if Christmas had come early. "Possibly thirty. Now, the Minister is on the way with Aurors, so we just need to keep them from escaping. Where are the rest of you?"

"I sent Goyle to fetch them," announced Malfoy, as the party appeared at the end of the passage. "He'll be back soon." They passed the intersection without looking sideways, their attention on Umbridge and hers on the corridor ahead. In her mind she was probably rehearsing what she would say when she arrested Riddle. For a second, Harry felt a glimmer of pity for the Headmaster. Harry forced the thought aside, and tried to think beyond the pain in his head, to think rationally as the Dark Knight would. Umbridge was gathering the Inquisitorial Squad together, ready to battle the RA. It seemed that this repetition of the fall of the DA would be more violent than the last. This was made worse since Harry was unable to do anything in his current state. It was almost as if Malfoy had planned this.

*No, that was useless conjecture – focus on the problem at hand,* he told himself.

"Right," said Umbridge as if she were a general. "Draco, you take three and head along past the kitchens and up the east stairs, approaching from the east side. Theodore, if you head up the north with another four, I'll take the south. Those are the quickest ways back to their common rooms. If they head west, they will be trapped in the West Tower and to leave they must pass through the west staircase to rejoin the rest of the castle. Zabini will take two and wait there for them."

"Yes, Professor," chorused several voices.

Harry slipped out from behind the armour, crept to the end of the passage, and peered around the corner to see the group of Slytherins twenty metres on organising themselves.

*Jesus Christ,* breathed Harry. Umbridge was coming. Communal detentions with the Blood Quill, Umbridge in complete control, and the only glimmer of hope removed. *Hell in Hogwarts.* He had lived through it once, and had no desire for a repeat – both for himself and for Katie to live through. He had known all this was going to happen, but he hadn't expected it to happen so soon. He had to warn Katie!

Harry summoned up his strength, to use the only skill still available to him. In a ball of flame he disappeared, reappearing instantly outside the Room of Requirement. Thank God something still worked.

He quickly walked past the door three times, concentrating hard, and then wrenched open the door when it materialised and charged in. The meeting was in full swing and the room was alive with spell work. Coloured jets of light shot around the room like fireworks. Harry looked around, desperately trying to find the leader amid the web of rainbows and the shouts of spells.

There!

"KATIE!" shouted Harry above the din, charging through the middle of a duel, missing the spell by inches. His head pounded with every step but he pressed on, hurtling through another duel. The girl in question was in the middle of demonstrating something to Terry Boot but looked up as he bellowed her name.

"Hi, what kept you?" she asked, matter-of-factly before noticing his sickened face and obvious fluster. Her smile vanished in an instant.

"Umbridge knows," panted Harry, aware that the entire room was silent. The tiredness assaulted every muscle in his body and his lungs felt tight. Harry bent forward, resting his hands on his knees, trying to get his breath. "We're compromised, she's on her way."

Before he could say anything else, there was a wand in his face and he could see several more rising to face him as well.

"What?" he asked, looking Katie in the eyes. She was slowly turning red, and looked livid. Her nostrils flared and her jaw was clenched. In truth, she was quite cute when she was angry, but Harry didn't dwell on it. He rose back up to his full height, raising his palms in surrender.

"You!" she seethed, her wand hand visibly shook with rage as she levelled it at Harry's chest. "You told her!"

Harry was ever more aware that he had no way to defend himself at this point, short of actually punching the girl. There were also several other wands aimed at him. However he didn't want to fight with them, he wanted them to all get out and run. Also, how dare she accuse him of betrayal, him of all people? It was indignity more than fear that prompted his next move.

"Would I come here if I had just betrayed you?" he said angrily. "Who else isn't here?"

Harry looked around, trying to find Marietta amid the mass of students.

"We should never have let you join," Katie snarled looking livid and drawing Harry back from his search. "I knew you were trouble. You've been lying from day one."

Harry grimaced, knowing that there was more truth to this than she was aware. This was not the time to justify his lies, or attempt to convince her he had not been deliberately trying to deceive her. They needed to evacuate the room. Instead of arguing with Katie, Harry turned to another member of the RA who stood nearby.

"Hermione," he said firmly. "Look at my face. I am not the sneak. Tell her it wasn't me!"

Her eyes went wide in surprise as the words. Harry continued to stare as Hermione recovered from her flustered surprise and nodded at him.

"What the hell is he on about?" snapped Katie, looking from Hermione to Harry and back.

"The parchment," Hermione replied, never taking her eyes off Harry. Her eyebrows were furrowed and she looked suspicious. "You know the jinx I put on it. That means anyone who signed it and then told Umbridge would be covered in boils. But not just covered, they would spell a word across their face. It wasn't him, Katie."

Harry breathed a sigh of relief as Hermione backed him up, though it didn't seem to have gotten him off the hook for Katie's wand was still pointed at his chest. It was not her that spoke next, however.

"You tricked us with the parchment!" called out Zacharias Smith angrily. Harry saw that the snooty blond boy was glaring at Hermione.

"Yes," said Hermione shamelessly, "But I never told anyone what the curse actually did. How do you know about 'sneak', Harry?"

Harry opened his mouth to tell her that he was not the issue here, but Smith got there first.

"Never mind that," snapped the Hufflepuff. "You tricked us into signing a jinxed parchment and didn't tell anyone!"

"Well if you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to be worried about," shot back Hermione, folding her arms.

"What right do you have to..." began Smith, his arms crossed and his nose in the air.

Harry had had enough – they had wasted too much time!

"SHUT UP!" he bellowed loudly.

Instantly there was silence as the room froze and stared at him. Harry paused. A wave of nausea had hit him just as he had shouted. He swallowed it down and shook his head to clear the weariness. Part of him wanted to give the order, but this wasn't his army. He turned back to the leader.

"Katie, whatever you think of me we can argue this later, but Umbridge is coming with her Slytherin minions and they are ready for a fight. I heard her on the stairs, which means you only have a couple of minutes. We need to go, now!"

There was no denying that he spoke the truth, and no point in arguing any more. They had to escape. Katie hesitated for a fraction of a second before raising her voice. "You heard him, back to common rooms. MOVE IT!"

Instantly a mad scuffle broke out as everyone tried to recover their belongings and get to the door. There was already a bundle forming as everyone push to get out. The Room was equal to the task; the door stretched before their eyes to allow more people to get out. It was like a cascade of bodies gushing into the corridor, like a tsunami as the door expanded and opened. No doubt Umbridge would hear that racket a mile away and start running. Harry groaned inwardly. They had so little time.

Which way to go? All directions were covered. Which was weakest?

*West*, answered the Dark Knight. It was there best chance, as it only had three people covering a staircase that spanned eight floors. There were more than three people in the RA, so in theory it was more likely they would make it back. That was if they even encountered the Slytherins. There was no telling on which floor the RA would cross the staircase back into the central part of the castle, and so there was a chance that they would never encounter Zabini at all, and even if they did, there was safety in numbers. The west was definitely the best choice.

"TURN LEFT!" shouted Harry above the din. "Into the West Tower! They don't expect you to come from there. Head down to the lower levels then move across and up. Watch out for Zabini and the others. There are three of them covering that route according to what I overheard."

Confident they would escape, Harry's attention shifted back to those who remained. He turned to Hermione as Ron and Neville headed for the door.

"Grab the list. No evidence."

She nodded and darted off to get it. Harry would not make the same mistake he had last time. This time, Umbridge would have no evidence to parade before Riddle.

Hermione had the list, but still they needed a distraction – something to keep Umbridge and the Inquisitorial Squad occupied. They needed every advantage they could get in the escape. His head gave another powerful throb but he shook it off, trying to think past the pain. It seemed to work as an idea formed in his head, courtesy of Fred and George – Harry knew what to do.

He concentrated hard, imagining a large quantity of fireworks. The twins weren't here this year for a fantastic exit, so it was time for someone else to cause a big bang. Looking around, Harry suddenly spied two large boxes of wet-start fireworks. Excellent. He grabbed a jug of water, which has also appeared, and placed it on the shelf above the two boxes dangerously close to the edge. He then opened the lids of the boxes, revealing the fuses.

"What are you doing?" asked Katie as the last of the students left. Harry turned to see Katie, Neville, Hermione, and Ron and Ginny waiting by the door, looking desperately at him to follow.

"Buying us time," he replied. He found some string on another shelf and wrapped it around the handle of the jug of water. Then, uncoiling the string as he went, he crossed to the door making sure not to dislodge the jug. They all slipped out into the corridor except for Harry. He stepped out carefully and closed the door a fraction, leaving enough room for him to reach inside. Fastening the string to the handle of the door, which luckily – or probably because Harry had requested it – opened outwards, he closed the door, confident that his booby-trap would work. As soon as someone opened the door, they would pull the jug off the shelf and onto the boxes. The water would light the fuses and five second later the RA would go out with a bang.

Just as Harry shut the door running footsteps sounded down the corridor. Someone was coming – he had finished just in time.

"Run!" hissed Katie.

The five of them turned and sprinted towards the West Tower. Harry rounded the corner, just as Malfoy arrived outside the room of requirement. He vaguely heard Malfoy shout 'check the room' to his companion before the unmistakable sound of pursuit.

"Keep going!" Harry yelled as they ran. His heart was pounding nearly as loudly as his head as he ran. His energy was drained and he knew he couldn't go on much longer. He had to escape! Digging deeper he found the energy to keep going, hot on Katie's heels.

It was another few seconds before he heard a tremendous bang.

The whole castle shook as two large boxes of fireworks went off at once. The first boom was still ringing in their ears when what sounded to Harry like machinegun fire crackled down the hallways.

The fleeing RA turned another corner and arrived at the stairs, the constant barrage of fireworks still sounding in their ears. Ron immediately jumped up them three at a time, but the others stopped as Katie held out her arms to block them. Harry checked behind them. He couldn't see a pursuer yet, but knew they were not far behind.

"We can't wait," said Ron, noticing that they had stopped. "We have to get back!"

"No!" called Katie, casting a look over her shoulder, checking for pursuers. "We should go down. She will expect us to go up towards the tower."

"Katie's right," said Neville, "it's too obvious".

"If she's going to be guarding the tower, then we have to get there first and plead innocence," said Ron, his face flushed from the running.

"No," interrupted Katie. "They'll have blocked the entrance already."

"Brooms," suggested Neville. "In through the windows."

"We can't fly!" gasped Hermione, looking uneasy. She looked back and forth between Neville and Katie, hoping one of them would say it was just a joke.

"Yes we can," said Katie, nodding. "We have to. We need to get to the broom cupboard by Hooch's office. Quickly."

She shot past Neville, heading down the stairs.

"Harry!" gasped Hermione.

Harry's legs had buckled out from under him. He was covered in a cold sweat despite having a fever, and his head was splitting. His stomach felt tight and bloated making him feel sick, and his vision was blurring in addition to his limbs feeling strangely numb. All his energy seemed to

have drained. Harry had fallen against the wall and slid down it, coming to rest in a sitting position.

"Come on!" said Katie, having run back up to join them. "We can't stay here."

Harry felt hands take hold of his shoulders as she and Neville hoisted him back to his feet. His legs didn't seem to want to work. He stood shakily for a second, hoping his legs didn't give way again.

"Can you run?" asked Ron.

"I can try," said Harry determinedly biting back the pain. This was no flu, this was a curse. What the hell had Malfoy done to him? Did he really think he could get away with this? Maybe he should just change direction and head for the hospital wing. They were near enough.

"THEY'RE DOWN HERE!" called a shrill voice suddenly from above them.

*Well that put a stopper in that idea,* thought Harry. They had to move. The infirmary seemed to be blocked as well by the direction of the shriek.

"Parkinson!" hissed Hermione, glancing up in the direction of the voice.

"RUN!" hissed Katie, taking off down the stairs.

Stumbling after the others, Harry ran as best he could downwards, away from the voice. He descended two floors before heading into a passage, hot on the heels of the person in front. They ran along and Harry struggled to keep up. Neville kept throwing glances over his shoulder, checking that Harry was still with them.

Suddenly they reached a junction in the corridor. Just by listening, it seems that there were people coming from all directions. Harry tried to catch his breath, but he only felt more ill. He had no energy left. Part of him wanted to turn himself in just so he didn't have to run anymore. Katie, on the other hand, was nowhere near submitting.

"Split up," she ordered. "Harry with me, you three go! Get brooms and meet back at the tower!"

Harry gritted his teeth, trying to fight the pain as he followed Katie around to the left as the others turned right. Stubbornly he struggled on, managing to keep pace with Katie but only just. They came to the end of the passage as it opened up into another staircase. To their horror, two Slytherins emerged from the next floor down, wands raised up towards them. Harry reacted quickly, and in absence of magic did the only thing left. He dived at the Slytherins as they charged up the stairs, hurling his body into the air.

One ran straight into a stunner from Katie while the other, Zabini, ran straight into Harry as he hurtled through the air. The boy lost his balance as Harry crashed into him and they both fell backwards, Harry landing awkwardly on two hands, a foot and a knee as the Slytherin tumbled away beneath him. Zabini tried to get back up looking livid and cursing loudly, but he quickly fell to a Stunner from Katie.

Harry glanced up at her and she simply nodded before heading off again. There was no time for thanks or anything – they had to keep going. They charged along a darkened passage, so close to the brooms now. There was no sign of Ron and the others. Where were they?

"*AHH!*"

Harry's legs suddenly locked together as he ran and fell flat on his face. He tumbled to the ground and rolled as Katie charged past him. Harry turned back to look, just as another curse shot past his ear.

Trip jinx! *That's twice!* he thought angrily. Katie had stopped a few paces down the passage and was looking back at him.

"GO!" shouted Harry, turning left into another passage.

The good thing about castles was that they were huge. If you can get lost in one, you can certainly lose someone in one. Harry hobbled up the passage, pausing at the second portrait on the left. It was a secret passage he had discovered from the Marauder's Map. The portrait swung open and Harry was faced with the spiral stairs. He grabbed the banister and began to haul himself up the narrow stairwell as the portrait swung closed behind him. His limbs burned with the exertion, his head pounded from the effort and he felt as if he was going to be sick any minute.

He reached the top of the stairs and burst out of a portrait into a corridor which was thankfully deserted. He headed left for twenty metres and up another set of spiralling stairs towards the Astronomy Tower. His energy was depleted, his head pounded, his stomach was in knots, and his breathing was becoming difficult. What was happening? He felt so hot, so stuffy. He was having trouble breathing. He needed air!

With one final, fruitless effort he crashed against the wooden door that led out onto the roof of the tower. The door held fast, and he fell backwards, cursing loudly as he did. He yanked the doorknob hard, but it didn't move. He pulled again, harder, as hard as he could, but still no avail. The door was not budging. He gave it a kick in frustration.

*Ahh!*

Harry's knees buckled again and he crashed to the floor on the spiral staircase, leaning against the door in the darkness. There was no light on the stairs and he was completely hidden, but also completely alone.

*I'm dying,* he realised.

Oh damn his pride. He should have gone to Pomfrey earlier and then back again when it didn't clear. He should have given it a rest and recovered. His heart was pounding in his chest so loudly he was sure it would lead the Inquisitorial Squad right to him.

His breath was becoming fast and rattling as he gasped for air. Harry's head lopped onto his chest and his eyelids grew heavy. This was it.

Suddenly he noticed something odd. His hands were not only hot, but they were glowing in the dark. Not enough to see by, but a very faint orange glow. He felt so hot. Was he hallucinating? No, his hands, his arms, his skin really was glowing. Without reason his chest suddenly clamped tight as he sucked in his last breath. He felt a surge of power inside him, as if a dam has just burst and then it came rushing out in droves. The power forced its way to every cell in his body, completely consuming him.

And then Harry Potter burst into flames.

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A cool wind swept in through the open window, gently stirring the curtains before sweeping lightly over the skin of the boy in the bed. He was tucked beneath white sheets which came up to just above his waist. Next to his bed was a chair over which clothes had been folded. On the other side was a cabinet with a jug and a glass of water, as well as a small clock and a pair of glasses.

As goose bumps surfaced all over his skin under the wind, Harry Potter became aware of the world around him. He opened his eyes, and the light came flooding in. As the image came slowly into focus, Harry found himself in a sea of white. He was in a bed, one of several beds in the room, three more of which were occupied.

Shaking his head to rid himself of the sleepiness, Harry propped himself up into a sitting position. Looking around he saw that he was in the infirmary. A glance at the clock told him it was ten forty-five in the morning. He was not alone in the room as three of the other beds were occupied. There were groups of younger students around two of the beds, suggesting that some younger kids had gotten hurt in classes. In the bed opposite Harry laid the sleeping bulk of Gregory Goyle. Half of his face was salmon pink rather than his normal pale complexion. Harry instantly recognised it as the later stages of burn treatment. Another day or so and the pink would be gone, but he had clearly suffered burns to half his face, probably due to the fireworks. Harry didn't exactly feel pity for the brute though he was glad he hadn't died or lost a limb.

He turned again to the table next to him; lying next to the clock were his false glasses. *My disguise!*

Harry's hand flew to his forehead and he ran a finger lightly across his forehead. He breathed a sigh of relief as his finger felt only smooth skin without the jagged edge of the scar. He looked at himself in the glass clock-face. Yes, the scar was still covered, hidden beneath the make-up. Harry wasn't entirely sure how it was still covered – surely it would have rubbed off by now. He vaguely remembered hearing Lavender talking about magical make-up remover, and how some stuff would only come off with specific removers, rather than water. Shower-proof make-up. Harry guessed that was what he had nicked, thank goodness.

"Ah, Mr. Potter," said a voice as Harry reached for his glasses. He put them on and looked up to face the speaker. Madam Pomfrey had immersed from her office and was striding over to him. "Did I not tell you to come back to see me if it got any worse?"

"What happened?" he asked, staring at her expectantly.

"Actually, I was rather hoping you would tell me," she said briskly. "You were found unconscious up near the Astronomy Tower."

"I was...?" asked Harry, at a loss as to what she meant.

Suddenly the memories came flooding back – the running, the exhaustion, the locked door to the tower. The last thing he remembered was collapsing, pain beyond pain, and then...light, fire, burning. Images flashed through his mind, but what he saw made no sense. He saw himself as if seen by someone standing next to him. He was wreathed in flame, yet not burning. It was almost as if it was a cleansing fire. Of course, that wasn't possible, was it? He vaguely remembered feeling really hot, and then being consumed by power, and then...nothing.

"You were found by Mr. Filch," Pomfrey informed him, her voice breaking through his vivid flashback.

He blinked and then looked up at her, trying to keep his face neutral.

Pomfrey continued to explain what had happened. "He was going his rounds when he came across you lying unconscious at the top of the Astronomy Tower stairs. Apparently your body was steaming and you were very hot to the touch. He also said you looked 'odd' and 'like you had been up to no good'. It is clear why he is not a healer," she added dryly.

Harry smiled at her joke. "He always was such a poet," he agreed.

"Quite."

Harry sighed and then leaned his head back, resting it on the headboard and staring up at the ceiling. He felt surprisingly wide-awake and the cold, curse, or whatever he had been suffering from last week was gone. It was such a relief not to have his head pounding like a bass drum and to feel sick every few minutes. A small smile crept onto his face, and this did not go unnoticed by the matron.

"So, Mr. Potter, please tell me... what do you remember?" Pomfrey asked, staring at him expectantly.

"Nothing," said Harry, Occluding his mind in case Riddle was around under an invisibility cloak. He smiled, trying to make his face the very picture of innocence. "I don't remember anything since yesterday's dinner. Well, I say yesterday...what day is it?"

"As of today, you have been unconscious for nearly sixty hours," said Pomfrey. "It is now Thursday morning."

Wow, had he really been out for that long? He felt extremely refreshed rather than knackered, as he usually was when he woke up from days of unconsciousness. Of course his body really had no major injuries to recover from this time, so it made sense that he would wake up feeling better than usual. Still it was back to the grindstone now, and Thursday after lunch was...

"Potions," said Harry, reciting his timetable. "Oh joy."

"Yes, speaking of potions," said Pomfrey, her voice accusing.

Harry instantly was on his guard, wondering what 'inconsistencies' she had stumbled across now.

"Have you been taking the potions and pills I gave you?"

He had indeed taken them, though because the headache pills reminded him of slugs he had only taken them when he needed them, rather than at regular intervals as she had advised. Still, he *had* taken them, and they had worked...to begin with.

"Yes," he answered honestly. He was cautious to elaborate as she was clearly suspicious of something – he just didn't know what, and he had no desire to dig himself a deeper hole. "Why do you ask?"

Pomfrey looked at him, her eyebrows furrowed in thought. After a few seconds she answered.

"Because I can find no traces of any of them in your blood," she said, taking a seat on the edge of the bed. "In fact, while we are on the subject, I can find nothing physically wrong with you at all. Well, to be more specific, your arm was in quite a state, but I healed that. My point is on a microscopic level, in your blood, for example, there is nothing wrong at all. You are in perfect health."

If that was so, why was she not happy that she had done a good job? Something was wrong.

"Surely that's a good thing?" asked Harry, trying to flatter her. "It means what you gave me worked, right?"

"Yes, I am glad you are in perfect health," she said, giving him an exasperated look. "But my point is that you are too healthy."

"Is that even possible?"

"Let me explain," she said, adopting her preaching voice that she used every time she explained to someone exactly why they needed a month of bed rest. As soon as Harry heard that tone, he feared the worst.

"Unconsciousness is normally the body shutting itself down to repair itself. It is usually caused and characterised by a lack of oxygen to the brain, i.e. shock. With me so far?"

Harry nodded.

"However, with you, even when you were first brought here, the levels of oxygen in your blood were completely normal. The levels of sugar, water, and every other vitamin were fine. There is no sign of head injury, or any other injuries for that matter. I can find no medical cause for your apparently mini-coma."

Harry relaxed. This wasn't that serious – she couldn't prove he was from another world, after all.

"Not something left over from December, perhaps?" offered Harry, making it up as he went along. An 'aftershock' of his alleged coma following the fire might persuade her.

"Unlikely," said Pomfrey, shaking her head. "However, it goes deeper than that. I thought it might be your cold or flu or whatever it was you came to see me about last week, but I can find no trace of that either. People unknowingly have a few cells of flu and cold with them all the time, but their immune system can deal with that. That is why you are more susceptible to colds away from home, as your immune system is great for the Surrey version of flu, but not of the variant found in Newcastle, for example. Hence the so-called Fresher's Flu that everyone gets in their first year. However, in your case, your anti-bodies and immune system are working normally and there was no trace at all of any viruses or anything, and I mean *literally* no trace at all. There is nothing at all wrong with you."

"Good," said Harry, grinning. "Fit as a fiddle, and you can tell that to Riddle." He didn't have to stay in bed for a month, he was free to go. Now he was fit, he could go to Tenedos, find the key, and then it was a matter of sorting out the Arithmancy. Well, there was no use lying around, it was time to get cracking. Harry swept the covers off and stood up. He was relieved that Madam Pomfrey made no move to stop him. She sat on the end of his bed, her hands in her lap. He noticed for the first time that she looked oddly sad and subdued. Harry hesitated.

"Professor Riddle is no longer here," said Pomfrey, looking up at him, her face neutral. "It is my duty to inform you that Professor Umbridge has taken over the role of Headmistress. Professor Riddle is now a fugitive."

Harry understood at once. Somehow between all the talk of being found, of him being in perfect health, he had forgotten why he had been running in the first place and what was going to happen next. Of course, he had seen it all before. Harry's fists clenched. While he had no love for Riddle, even in his current form, amazingly he had less for Umbridge. Harry had tried to stop this happening, tried to help the RA. He guessed Katie must have been caught somewhere on the way back. The scene played out in Harry's mind of Fudge trying to evict Riddle, of his escape, though this time without Fawkes. Harry shook his head.

"Umbridge kicked him out?" asked Harry, remembering not to show too much foreknowledge.

Pomfrey's lips pursed. "Merlin help us all, but yes... Professor Riddle is now a fugitive."

Harry mulled that over in his mind. He had no love for the man and part of him – the part that had been tormented by Lord Voldemort for years – felt relieved that he was no longer here in the castle keeping tabs on Harry's activities. But a nagging doubt in his mind persisted. Without the balance of Riddle here, where would that leave Katie and the rest of the students? There was no one to protect them from Umbridge anymore. This Riddle seemed to genuinely care about the Girl-Who-Lived and the students of his school. Harry hated to admit it, but Hogwarts needed Tom Marvolo Riddle.

Madam Pomfrey sighed, and when she spoke, her tone was almost despairing, as if she could not be bothered any more. "Get dressed Potter. Since you are in such good health, there is no need for you to take up space in my infirmary. Your clothes are over there." She pointed to a changing area in the corner. Her eyes narrowed. "But if anything changes with your health, anything at all, I expect you to report back to me immediately, understood?" Her tone lacked its usual strength, and it almost sounded like her heart wasn't in it anymore.

Harry nodded. "Yes, Ma'am."

She stood tiredly before dismissing him and returning towards her office. "Off you go then." Harry suddenly felt really sorry for her and the need to offer her a bit of hope.

"He'll be back," Harry called after her. She paused halfway to her office. "It's only a matter of time. Riddle will return and I wouldn't want to be Dolores Umbridge when he does."

She nodded to him with a small smile before disappearing into her office.

As Harry stepped behind the screen to change back into his robes, he felt a sinking feeling in his stomach. A few seconds ago he had been feeling light as a feather and care-free, as if things were moving forwards and he was now able to take the next step. With this knowledge he was back to feeling sick, though it was a different kind of sick. Umbridge was now running the school. Harry didn't know why he felt surprised, or why it sent chills running down his spine. He didn't know why he felt as if his freedom and happiness were under threat, when he knew that he could lie low and avoid this conflict. This wasn't his problem, but it still crushed down on his heart, still made him feel like he had to fight. He had known it was coming, but hadn't dared think it would be so soon. He had become complacent, he realised, suddenly angry with himself. Things were happening much quicker than in his world and it was possible that he had a hand in making it so, but Harry couldn't help but wonder, how soon before Katie went to the Ministry?

*Do I have the right to intervene?* he wondered. Could he grab her, tell her what was to come? *No, of course not.* For a kick off she wouldn't believe him, and she would want to know how he knew everything. That meant telling her who he was and how he had gotten here. If she knew, Riddle would soon know, and if Riddle found out about the Node then Lord Voldemort would have the power to move between worlds. No, that must never happen and if that meant Katie was kept in the dark, then so be it.

Still, he had to find out exactly what was happening. If Umbridge was doing anything that she hadn't done last time, anything that Harry was not expecting, it would limit his ability to move around her. He had an advantage as long as he knew what was coming. As soon as she deviated from her previous plan, Harry's knowledge was void.

*Knowledge is power,* Harry thought.

He realised that, assuming history repeated itself perfectly, once Katie had been to the Ministry, once Fudge acknowledged Grindelwald's return, then they would have reached the end of Harry's knowledge. After that point he was as vulnerable as anyone else. Harry knew he had to get out of

here as soon as possible. He had to get to Tenedos, and then he needed to sort out an Unspeakable to do the Arithmancy for him.

Harry thanked Madam Pomfrey for her help, and then left the infirmary, pausing for a second to look at Goyle's burns. He wouldn't be disfigured, and the brute could do with a dose of pain. Harry just regretted that it was all in vain – Katie had been caught, the RA was dead in the water, and Riddle was gone.

Harry descended the steps and started along the corridor heading back to Gryffindor Tower, still lost in thought. Aside from the changes to Umbridge's position, a lot had happened to him as well in the last few days. He thought back over the escape from the RA. He remembered feeling awful, having no energy, no magic, and feeling near death. He couldn't get rid of the image of his flesh burning, and then...nothing. Then he had just woken up, days later, completely refreshed. Harry pulled out his wand, ready to test a theory.

*Lumos!*

The silent spell lit up the end of the wand, shining a faint flickering beam of light onto the wall. It wasn't as strong as he had hoped, but it was definitely working. He didn't feel drained or sick because of it. Harry was confident his illness was finally over and his magic would return. That was definitely good news.

Now to test something else... Harry looked around and checked he was alone before concentrating on a point several feet to his right. He closed his eyes, focusing on his destination as he had so many times before.

Nothing happened.

He opened his eyes and looked around. He hadn't moved an inch. He tried again, closing his eyes and concentrating hard, imagining himself at the point several feet to his right. After so much practice, he could instinctually call the flames that would transport him anywhere, but not today.

He stared down at his hand, remembering his Animagus training in the very first session with McGonagall. He concentrated on the hand, picturing the feathers of the phoenix, willing his hand to become the wing.

Nothing. He didn't feel the pain as his body condensed itself, nor the hypersensitivity of Phoenix. There was nothing.

*Bollocks!* cursed Harry inwardly.

He continued walking, suddenly angered, though he now had a fair idea what had happened. He was a phoenix, and he had done what all phoenixes do: he had burned, regenerated, refreshed, whatever phrases he wished to use.

The phoenix had drained his power to fuel the burn, leaving him weak and ill. That was why he had felt so awful, why he had been unable to do magic. Then, during his escape, he had burned.

He remembered McGonagall saying that the phoenix was bound to his magical core, not his body. It was his magical core had been burned to a crisp, and then reborn, and was slowly returning to him. This, of course, meant that he had to wait until he was back to normal before going to Turkey. Harry supposed he should be grateful that he didn't completely regenerate his body and become a baby again like Fawkes had. That would be strange. Worse still, he could have ended up naked if his clothes had been burned to a crisp. Not only would that be embarrassing, but finding someone naked and injured, let alone unconscious implied sexual assault, and there was no way Harry could hush that up. He would have been backed right into a corner and everyone would be asking from very penetrating questions. Then he, he reasoned, there was no reason why his clothes should burn. He burst into flame every time he Flamed anywhere, and his clothes thankfully were always unharmed. Come to think of it, he had taken people with him, and they had not been burned either, nor the objects in his pockets. Still, thought Harry, pushing the technicalities aside, he felt refreshed and, like Pomfrey had said, he was in perfect health.

He continued walking, lost in thought. If he could regenerate, did that mean that he couldn't die? He remembered Fawkes swallowing the Killing Curse in the ministry last year and bursting into flames. Harry doubted it, and he certainly wasn't willing to test the theory. The curse had destroyed Fawkes and he was born again from the ashes. Harry's burning didn't revert him back to a baby, just his magical core, leaving his body more or less as it was. The regeneration wasn't as powerful as Fawkes', and he remained biologically human. His magic burned to a crisp and regenerated, not his body.

No, Harry was sure he remained as mortal as the next man.

Harry was also aware that phoenixes burned in cycles. Did that mean that this was to happen again? Did he now have a 'time of the month'?

*Let's think*, he told himself. He had first managed to turn completely in late November. Then again, the phoenix had first brought him back from the dead after the dirty bomb had gone off in the Ministry, which had been in late October. It was now mid February. So it was roughly quarterly, if it followed a pattern. Harry grimaced that meant that every few months he would burn. He would have a week with no magic, unable to defend himself. For one week every three or four months, Harry was as good as useless. He would have a week of feeling like hell. Then again, he thought. He had fought off this...sickness with medicine. Maybe, fighting it off had only prolonged it. Harry would have to wait until next time, and he had no desire for that to come round in a hurry. Another point to consider was Malfoy's curse. Was it completely irrelevant or had it somehow triggered the burn? Perhaps it wasn't so much time, as the amount of magic that affected his burning. Unfortunately a pattern needed to repeat before Harry could spot any traits and that meant waiting months for it to happen again. Harry wasn't overly concerned – it wasn't as if he looked forward to being without magic and feeling like hell.

Then there was the matter of his inability to Flame around. Harry was fairly sure it would return in time as his magic was doing. It was as if the phoenix inside him had to grow up again before it could transport him. Harry quite liked that analogy, as if he had a pet inside him. However, in the meantime he had no way to leave the castle. He was truly stuck here until his power returned.

That meant no holidays to Tenedos. Harry hoped with any luck, it would only be a few days before he was completely back to normal.

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Katie sat in the common room, glowering out of the window. Two days had passed since she had been forced to watch that cow oust Riddle from his own school. She had stood there, unable to help, as Riddle had hexed Dawlish, Umbridge and Fudge, and even poor Kingsley. She had been there as he had been forced to run. She had been there when Umbridge had taken control of Hogwarts. As she saw it, she was there the moment when freedom died. The resulting Educational Decree had been ripped from the Gryffindor notice board and ceremonially burnt in the fire within two minutes of it appearing. However, the image was still in her minds eye and the words repeated over in her head.

*Dolores Umbridge has replaced Tom Marvolo Riddle as headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.*

Katie grimaced as she stared out through the glass. Her breath turned to mist on the icy pane, which was being assaulted from the outside by an icy winter's storm. The droplets running down the outside reminded her constantly of the tears she refused to shed. The last few days had been Hell on earth. Without the RA, without that little bit of resistance, it seemed that all hope had faded from the world. Over the last year, in fact over her entire life, she had never felt as alone as she did now, and the events of three days ago replayed over and over in her mind.

She had been caught by a trip jinx – *a trip jinx*. She cursed her stupidity, clenching her fist tightly, digging her nails into her palm. She deserved it for such a basic error – how could she expect to have people listen to her and learn from her when she herself fell to such a juvenile mistake? Malfoy, of all the people it had to have been Malfoy! She'd had to endure his smug expression all the way up to Riddle's office, Crabbe holding her in a Full-Nelson and Malfoy strutting alongside, twirling her wand in his fingers. She had made a valiant attempt to remove his chances of having children with her foot, but she had missed.

So it was that she had been paraded unceremoniously up to the headmaster's office and thrown roughly to the ground where she came face to face with a pair of pink high-heels. Umbridge had dismissed the Slytherins and then marched Katie at wand-point into the office. Katie had stood helpless as Umbridge and Fudge, backed by Dawlish, Kingsley, and another Auror she didn't know stood victorious in front of the desk. Katie had to endure Umbridge telling Fudge how much of a juvenile delinquent she was, how she had flouted the rules, galvanized dangerous clubs, and told mammoth lies. She had listened in silence while Umbridge charged Riddle with creating an army, essentially high treason. The only saving grace was that there was no evidence, just Umbridge's word. Kingsley has modified Marietta's memory and Harry had Hermione destroy the parchment, leaving Umbridge with mere circumstance and speculation as evidence. Still, it was enough to convince Fudge who was now more paranoid than ever.

Through it all, Riddle sat there, not looking at Fudge, certainly not looking at Katie, but appearing fascinated by his quill. Katie had tried to catch his eye, but he seemed to be inspecting the feather with growing interest, almost as if he was deliberately avoiding her.

Even when he had escaped, even when he had knocked Kingsley, Dawlish, Fudge, and Umbridge to the ground in a single move, he had not so much as looked at her. He had ignored her completely, essentially telling McGonagall to get rid of her, just in fewer words.

What concerned Katie the most was that as she had left, as Riddle had moved past her, for a second, just a second, their eyes had met and something had happened. This deep rooted desire had suddenly flared up. She had felt a powerful desire to kill, to hurt. It had lasted a fraction of a second, but for that time, she could imagine wrapping her fingers around his neck. She had longed to watch the life fade from his eyes as she choked the last of the air out of him. It was as if a beast had reared up inside, ready to strike.

She shivered. Riddle was not in her good books for this year, and when she finally got her hands on him she would give him a piece of her mind. Oh yes, she had things to say and Riddle would damn well listen. She had even rehearsed what she would say to him and she didn't care that it was punctuated with words she would not repeat in front of Mrs Weasley. However, she had no desire to hurt him, strangle him, and certainly not to kill him. So where had this phantom desire come from?

She didn't know, but she couldn't help thinking back to Grimmauld Place. Was she safe to be around her friends? Would the beast return and would she find herself wrapping her fingers around Neville's throat or Hermione's? She cast the thought aside. She had another problem now, of course. Since that night Malfoy was Umbridge's new golden boy, possessing the power to give detentions, take house points, and essentially do what he liked. His influence was on par with the Head Boy now. Ever since that night, there was a smirk curled across his lips whenever he had seen Katie. She had been docked five points this morning by Malfoy for possession of an offensive haircut.

Then there was Harry. He had disappeared once they split up, and had not made it back to the Common Room. Even when McGonagall had delivered Katie back, Harry had not returned. Katie had spent much of the night worrying about him, the only one who had not returned. By some miracle, the others had made it to the brooms and a rather surprised first year had let them in the window. They had been the very picture of innocence as Katie had arrived back. Ron and Ginny were playing chess, while Hermione and Neville, the sixth year prefects, had been berating some first years about leaving litter around – "you mustn't take house elves for granted," Hermione had been saying.

Harry didn't reappear at breakfast either, causing much speculation. When Katie had asked McGonagall during her first period Transfiguration lesson, she had been told that Filch had found him near the Astronomy Tower, unconscious, or 'half dead' as he had phrased it. He had apparently not gotten very far, which was unsurprising considering how ill he had looked. Katie had been to visit him once as he lay unconscious in the Hospital Wing. Although Pomfrey refused to tell Katie what was wrong with him, she was sure that someone must have cursed him for him to spend several days unconscious. One of Umbridge's cronies must have cornered him. With no one around to witness it, no one to protect Harry or to report his attacker, the Slytherin responsible must have seen an opportunity to vent his or her spite. Probably Malfoy, thought Katie. He definitely had a grudge against him. Poor boy. The message was clear though – the

Inquisitorial Squad were now above the rules, and the weaker amongst them like Harry would pay the price.

Truth be told, Katie felt a small pang of guilt as she had sat watching him sleep. As they had found out in Riddle's office, Harry had not betrayed them. As he had said, he had never told Umbridge and it seemed from his attempt at a rescue that he truly was on their side. Were it not for Harry, they would all have been caught and all of them would be in a world of trouble. As it was, Umbridge could prove nothing, though it didn't stop her punishing those she suspected. They all had a lot to thank Harry for, and as she had sat at the foot of his bed listening to his gentle breathing, Katie had found that what she wanted most was for him to wake up. She wanted to see those emerald eyes open, for she needed to speak to him. She had said a lot of things about him that weren't true, and he deserved better than what she had done. He deserved an apology. Even as she lay on her bed the following night, when she closed her eyes the figure in the hospital haunted her dreams.

Katie thrust the thought aside, and glanced down at the fresh scars on the back of her hand.

It had been Marietta Edgecombe all the time. *The lying, deceitful, little bitch*, thought Katie venomously. *Stupid, treacherous...* Her fists were clenched as she glowered out the window, cursing the ground on which Marietta walked. *She'll probably pass her Defence NEWTs because of me*, thought Katie. *And this is how the bitch repays me.*

"You look pissed," said a voice, as Neville flopped into an armchair near the window-seat that Katie occupied.

"Who isn't," said Katie icily. "When I get my hands on that pathetic, two-faced, double-crossing...."

"Woah," said Neville. "Hold your hippogriffs. With Umbridge around, you can't touch her so don't try. Riddle will be back one day and then you can nail her to a cross if it makes you feel better, but right now he needs to be smart."

Katie knew he was right, but the duplicity was so fresh in her mind that she couldn't stop thinking about Marietta and what she wanted to do to her.

"The war council's gathered," came another voice as Ginny arrived with her brother, who evicted a first year from a nearby chair, and Hermione, who evicted Ron and returned the chair to its previous occupant.

"Quite the opposite," said Neville, checking that there was no one close enough to hear. He lowered his voice in light of the first year who Ron had tried to evict. "The RA needs to lay low. No more meetings, but we do need to stick together."

"Vive la résistance," muttered Hermione. Neville turned to her and grinned.

"Now listen very carefully," he said in a French accent that reminded Katie of Fleur Delacour. "I shall say zis only once."

"Good moaning," said Hermione, laughing slightly. The joke was completely lost on Katie but she didn't interrupt. They needed a little cheer these days, and she didn't wish to rain on their moment of joy with her dark thoughts about throttling Marietta – even without the help of whatever had made her want to kill Riddle.

"My point is that we need to avoid trouble," said Neville, serious once more. "Umbridge is in charge and we can't change this from inside the school. Only the Ministry can remove her. We can't do that, but the Order can. But we do need to keep a line of communication open to the Order...oh."

Something caught his eye and he abruptly stopped, his eyes focused on the door.

"What?" asked Ginny.

"Harry's back," answered Neville, his eyes fixed on the new arrival.

Katie's stomach clenched at the words.

Sure enough as they all turned, Harry Potter climbed through the portrait hole into the Common Room. He was looking noticeably healthier than the last time Katie had seen him. His skin was no longer pale and clammy, but a healthy bronzed colour. His eyes were no longer tired with dark shadows, but alert and twinkling. Harry stood framed in the doorway, surveying the room like a predator scanning for its prey and stopping as his gaze came to rest on Katie. She recoiled slightly under the penetrating gaze, but to her surprise, Katie saw the pity deep in the emerald green.

Harry slowly made his way over towards them, his eyes sweeping across the group as he approached. As there were no more seats, so Katie took her legs down from the window seat freeing up space for him. Harry saw the movement and for the first time, he hesitated. He paused for a fraction of a second before sitting down on the arm of Hermione's chair.

*Fine*, thought Katie petulantly, putting her feet back up on the seat.

"ello," Harry said casually, as he perched on the arm. There was a short pause.

Katie didn't want them to appear to be a clique but she couldn't think of anything to say to him. Luckily, Hermione took the initiative.

"How are you feeling?" asked Hermione kindly.

"Better," answered Harry, shrugging. "Fit as a fiddle."

"You looked better," Ginny told him. "You looked like death warmed up at the meeting."

Was it Katie's imagination or did Harry's jaw clench at the words 'death warmed up'. No, she must have imagined it. Then again, it was only the one of hundreds of things he had done or said that made her suspicious. He had saved them from Umbridge, or tried to, but did that mean he was completely trustworthy?

Harry shrugged, looking at Ginny. "Yeah," he admitted, nodding his head. "I was pretty bad. Flu, Madam Pomfrey reckons."

There was another awkward pause before someone broke it.

"Speaking of the meeting," said Neville, his tone accusing, "I think someone has something to say."

He shot a determined look at Katie. She hadn't been paying attention, as her mind had been on Harry's odd behaviour these last few weeks.

"Eh?" she asked.

"You have something to say to Harry?" added Neville, sounding very much like Mrs Weasley.

In truth, she was feeling slightly guilty about some of it, but she couldn't shake the nagging feeling that there was something wrong about him. She took a deep breath, knowing that all eyes in the group were on her. She felt a flash of anger that Neville would force her into this, but deep down she knew that she hadn't been the nicest person to Harry. This wasn't how she had envisioned apologising to Harry. In her mind they were alone, and in her mind he had forgiven her. It seemed that in reality things were going to go differently.

"Harry," she began. "I'm sorry I jumped to conclusions. I know it wasn't you who betrayed us. We should have invited you long before we did."

Harry stared at her, the unblinking, uncompromising stare that seemed to see into her very soul. He definitely wasn't going to make this easy on her.

"What I am trying to say is," she stammered, "is that I haven't been the nicest person to you. You've been through a horrible experience, and all I did was shun you. You deserve better, and I'm sorry." She finished the sentence, feeling strangely drained and nervous, as she stared at him expectantly.

Neville and the others turned back to Harry and, like Katie, waited for a reaction. She had no idea what to expect; anger, disappointment, or for him to shrug it off. Harry was utterly unpredictable these days.

He paused for a second, staring at Katie thoughtfully, the same hard stare that had first made her so mistrustful.

"In your position," he said slowly, his eyes never leaving hers. "I wouldn't have trusted me either. Don't worry about it."

The atmosphere which had suddenly turned cold seemed to melt as a roguish grin spread over his face and his eyes left Katie's. Katie felt an odd tingling in her belly, along with a peculiar sense of relief, as if a great weight had been lifted from her shoulders. However, it was coupled with that nagging doubt, that strange feeling that never left her when Harry was around. The boy in question was now speaking to Neville.

"So, what's happening with Umbridge? Pomfrey told me she's in charge now, right?" The smile had vanished from his lips and he looked around the circle.

"Yes," grimaced Neville then laughed. "Apparently she's Headmistress, but the office won't let her in."

"It only opens to the true Head of the school," said Hermione, "which is Riddle. She spent most of yesterday trying to break in before accepting defeat."

Katie noticed Harry crack a smile, but he didn't seem to react with any form of surprise. It was almost as if he already knew what he was being told. Maybe Madame Pomfrey told him.

"The office won't let her in, but she's still running the school by force, isn't she?" asked Harry. He looked around the group and the grim expressions seemed to answer the question for him. "The RA is dead in the water then?"

"Yes," confirmed Neville before Katie could answer. "It draws too much attention to us."

"And its members?" asked Harry. "Is everyone alright?"

"Well, since Hermione grabbed the list Umbridge doesn't know who was in it," said Neville. "Though she suspects most of us. So far, Katie is the only one she can confirm. I think we should be thanking you for remembering that list too."

Harry nodded. "S'okay. I'm just glad I thought of it." He paused again then asked, "So what did happen that night?"

Katie took it upon herself to explain.

"Riddle convinced Umbitch, Fudge, and the Aurors that it was the first meeting," she informed him. "With no list, she had nothing to go on. The others made it back in through the windows on brooms, so the only ones known to be out of their Common Rooms are you and I, with the exception of the Inquisitorial Squad, of course."

Harry grimaced.

"She'll be round to ask you what you were doing," Ron warned him. "She's desperate to find some evidence. She's randomly searching bags and pockets, breaking up any meetings of more than three students, and as for her Inquisitorial Squad...Malfoy seems to think he's running the school now. Be careful, Harry, the old cow will corner you sooner or later."

"I'll make something up," shrugged Harry, as if Umbridge were nothing to worry about.

Katie couldn't help wonder why he didn't seem to care about Umbridge or his own safety.

Then he said it. "Shouldn't be too hard to convince her. I doubt she's a Legilimens."

Katie froze, her entire body tensing at the words. What the hell did he know about Legilimency and Occlumency? It was a rare art, an 'obscure branch of magic', Riddle had said. Katie only knew about it through her own lessons, and even Hermione had had to look it up. There was no way Potter should know about it unless he had been involved with it somehow. It was one hell of a coincidence that he should be familiar with it just as she was learning it. Was he a Legilimens? Could he do Occlumency? If he could cover his lies so well, how could she ever trust him?

Every time.... As soon as she warmed to him, he said something that made her doubt him all over again. What was up with Harry? How long would she have to wait for answers?

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Harry was curled up in an armchair in the Common Room making notes from his Potions book. It had been two days since his return to Gryffindor Tower, and sure enough, his magic had continued to return. The one exception was his phoenix abilities. When he had tried last night, he had still been unable to Flame anywhere and was also incapable of his Animagus transformation. This he was sure would return in time, but until it did, he could not go about finding the key to the Node. It was a matter of waiting, and with Umbridge in command that was not easy. She had cornered him yesterday, demanding to know what he was doing out of his Common Room on the night the RA had fallen. Since none of the Slytherins could prove his whereabouts, Harry had been able to convince her that he had been up there after dinner to get some fresh air and to be alone when he had passed out. Since this was hours before the RA meeting, he couldn't have known anything about this so-called army. Unable to prove otherwise, Umbridge had begrudgingly let him go. Now it was a matter of waiting for his abilities to return, before he could go to Tenedos.

His classes that morning had been more or less fine, which made a pleasant change, and now he had taken a little time to browse through his Potions book. To the casual observer he was making notes for the quick test that Slughorn would be making them do on Thursday, to make sure they knew what they had covered over the last few weeks before going on to another module. However, if anyone were to get a little closer to Harry, close enough to read his notes, they would have discovered that Harry was not revising for a test, but rather making a note of some of the additions made by the Half Blood Prince. Harry was not stupid however; he had chosen a chair with its back to the wall from where he could see the entire room and no one could sneak up behind him.

He wasn't copying down the updates to recipes, for example adding an anti-clockwise stir here and there, but rather he was noting down the spells that the Prince had invented. Top of his list were the ones he knew, Levicorpus, Muffliato, and also the newly discovered 'Sectumsempra'. Having seen its effect on an enemy in Borgin and Burkes, for which the Prince had apparently intended the spell, Harry made a note to only use it in emergencies, as it seemed to be quite a grizzly spell. He wasn't stupid enough to use it on Malfoy, for example, now he had seen what it could do.

Harry checked his watch. It was twenty-five to one on a chilly Tuesday afternoon in February and he had been reading from the book since his previous lesson had finished at midday. Today

he had a free period after lunch, and then a Charms lesson at half past three. That left him several hours to himself.

Harry closed the book and headed upstairs to his dorm where he placed his Potions book back in his trunk. Since he was alone, he'd decided to test the Phoenix once more. Using his wand, he closed and locked the door, grateful to be able to do magic again. For a moment he sat on the end of the bed to relax himself before raising his hand in front of his face. Starting right back at the beginning of his training, Harry began to inspect his hand, memorising every detail of the fingers. He wouldn't try to get them to become a wing just yet, but rather to try the first simple steps.

He stared at his hand for a good few minutes before attempting to lengthen them. Concentrating hard, he imagined himself with eight-inch fingers, and began willing them to grow. He longed to feel the little place inside him where the Phoenix resided, that little part of him that could make him transform.

Closing his eyes, he imagined the bones lengthening, the flesh extending, and his hand expanding, reaching for the ceiling. He pictured the longer hand in his mind, willing it into reality. Suddenly he felt a twinge in his fingers, a stiffness take hold of them. Harry's eyes flew open to find his fingers now several inches longer than they should be and the darker murky-brown colour that was the phoenix's flesh beneath the bright plumage.

*OWW!*

As he lost concentration, his hand shot back into its original shape, jarring the bones together so quickly that Harry hissed in pain. It was nowhere near as easy or as comfortable as it had been before, but like the rest of his magic it was returning. Harry felt a wave of relief come over him and a smile creep across his lips. It was coming back!

Was his ability to Flame also returning? There was only one way to find out. He concentrated hard on the other side of the room, willing the flames to take him. Since the transformation was returning this should be too, in theory. Harry concentrated for nearly a minute before attempting the jump. He turned on the spot, willing the flames to take him. There was a flash before his eyes as the flames leapt out of his skin, consuming him, but there was no feel of being forced through space. It felt like an electric shock, and as his limb convulsed Harry fell to the floor with a thud, right where he had been to start with.

Grimacing, he decided to call it a day. He picked himself up and brushed down his robes before checking his watch. It was time for lunch, and he had a craving for a Panini. He unlocked the door and headed back down the stairs in a good mood, confident that his full powers would return in a few days.

There were others in the Common Room when he arrived, having returned from their morning lessons to drop off their bags and wait for friends before going to lunch in groups. Harry didn't have this problem, as he normally ate alone. Looking around, he saw that Neville and Hermione were in the corner talking animatedly, and unless Harry was very much mistaken, they were arguing. Their movements were aggressive, they were red in the face, and Harry knew an

annoyed Hermione when he saw one. Harry watched them for a second before starting across the room, making for the door. This was none of his business and he had no desire to argue with either of them. He wanted lunch, and then to sit back and wait until his powers had returned. He had almost reached the Portrait Hole when he saw a movement to his right.

"Neville!" Hermione hissed looking angry.

Harry turned to see Neville heading towards him, a determined look on his face, and Hermione holding on to his arm trying to pull him back. Neville brushed her off and looked over at Harry who had clocked him the second he had moved. As he approached, Harry saw that he was holding a small piece of parchment in his hand. Hermione by this time was on her feet, following Neville, her face a storm.

"Err..." said Harry, looking between them and getting the feeling that he had wandered in on some domestic dispute. "Can I help?"

"Maybe," said Neville. "You were fairly good at Divination last year, right?"

"Err..." stammered Harry, having no idea if he had been or not. "Was I?"

"Well, better than me and Ron at least," shrugged Neville, earning another disapproving look from Hermione. "Anyway, we..."

He was interrupted as Hermione gave a shrill cough that reminded Harry of Umbridge, so much so that several students looked around in panic, ramming Fred and George's sweets and any other contraband into their pockets.

"Okay...I was thinking," continued Neville. "Well, wondering actually, if you could make any sense of this." He held out a piece of parchment.

"What is it?" asked Harry, reaching out and taking the folded sheet.

"Oh, just a poem that Firenze was singing before Umbridge got to him," replied Neville.

"So what's your interest in it?" he asked, foxing Neville with a piercing stare. Harry saw a look of smug victory appear on Hermione's face and she made an 'I-told-you-so' grunt. The smug look vanished as soon as Harry turned his eyes to her, but he knew he had seen it. Did Hermione not want him to see this?

"Firenze said it was important," said Neville, trying to sound casual. "Said it would be worth my while to read it, and something about seeing it in the stars. You know how Seers are – mad as the March Hare."

"Tell me about it," muttered Harry, unfolding the parchment. He cast one glance at Neville, who looked expectant, and Hermione, who looked worried, before turning his attention to the text and reading aloud.

*"He shall come to you on swift wings, a stranger from an unholy land,"* he began aloud.

Then the gravity of his words hit home.

Harry's eye nearly bulged out of his head. He froze, his stomach leaping up into his chest and his throat going dry. He felt the blood drain from his face and his knees go weak. The words echoed around in his head – the Stranger from the Unholy Land – *ME!* It wasn't possible! Surely not!

This was no poem of Firenze's – this was a Prophecy, and most likely by a human since it didn't mention planets. Harry continued to read with a sense of dread, his stomach clenching tighter with every line. It was as if this world had closed in around him. No longer was he no-one, a spectator, for if this was right, he was about to be dragged into this fight.

Taking a deep breath to calm himself, he read it again silently.

*He shall come to you on swift wings, a stranger from an unholy land...*

Swift wings? It was probably a reference to him appearing to Katie as a phoenix to watch over her. If so, that part had already come true.

*...and disaster shall follow in his wake.*

It wasn't hard to fathom what that meant. So far nothing too bad had happened, but disaster would happen eventually he was sure, probably when everyone realised who he was.

*My last shall be re-written, your future re-cast.*

A new future? My last? Had Trelawney given this prophecy? Was the old Prophecy now void, and this one was to take its place? That meant that Harry no longer knew what was to come. He was now in uncharted territory and far from safe.

*But beware your guardians; each will tempt you into their own darkness...*

*Riddle. Ha, I knew it. Even the fates know that Riddle is an evil git,* thought Harry. Katie should be warned about him. Riddle would certainly tempt whoever this was about, Katie most likely, like the evil devil he was.

*Choose wisely, Chosen One....Your fate and the Knight's are now entwined. He is not as strong as he appears. His life now hangs in the balance, but it is you who must choose for him, and with your choice he may forever be lost to this world.*

Harry read the last few lines, and then read them again. It felt as if someone had punched him in the gut and it took all his energy for his knees not to buckle out from underneath him. This was how he had felt when he had heard the first prophecy. It was like seeing the Grim all over again, but this was real; like seeing his own death, and it sent chills up and down his spine. He suddenly felt sick as a wave of fear crashed over him.

"Harry?" asked Neville, looking concerned. "Are you alright?" He exchanged a worried look with Hermione, but Harry barely noticed. His mind was racing ahead.

*Jesus Christ! Another prophecy has been made!* Most of it was for Katie to deal with, but the final line kept repeating in his mind. Katie and the Knight – the Dark Knight: him – were now entwined. Harry's life hung in the balance, but it was Katie's choice. He was in grave danger and it was a danger that apparently he had no control over. Katie, the Chosen One, was going to choose if Harry lived or died. He had always thought that he was in charge of his own destiny, but to hear that he wasn't, that his life was in someone else's hands, was such a shock. He felt alone and vulnerable, and a desperate desire to be with his mother, to be safe at home with his family.

He stood staring at the parchment, the final line repeating in his mind.

"Harry?" asked Hermione laying a hand gentle on his forearm.

Harry jumped as she touched him, his mind being torn from his thoughts and brought back to reality.

"You look...odd."

Harry looked from Neville to Hermione, aware that both were scrutinizing at him with worried expressions. "I'm fine," he said, trying to keep his voice casual. He flashed a smile at them as best he could, and then looked back down to the Prophecy. "Can't really help, I'm afraid," he said. "Makes no sense to me."

"Are you sure you're alright?" repeated Hermione, staring at him appraisingly.

"I'm fine," said Harry. "If you'll excuse me."

Before they could argue, Harry had turned and disappeared up the stairs back into the dormitory. As he left them, he heard a fraction of their conversation.

"Did you get the impression he knows something?" whispered Hermione.

"Something spooked him." answered Neville.

"He looked like he'd seen a ghost," agreed Hermione. "But why didn't he tell us?"

"No idea," replied Neville. "I'll ask him."

As soon as Harry was around the corner he broke into a sprint, surging up the stairs and into their dormitory. Spinning on the spot he aimed his wand at the lock which clicked shut. That done, he ran to his trunk and pulled from the front pocket a sheet of parchment torn from an atlas in the library.

His head was pounding in his chest, and the thought of his own death was at the forefront of his mind. He'd had enough. If his life was in danger then he was getting out of here. He knew what he had to do. It had to work, it just had to. Necessity was the driving force of achievement. Harry had always been able to do spells when he needed them the most.

"Please," Harry said aloud to the heavens. "Please work."

*Thud!*

Neville had arrived at the door outside and was trying to get in.

Harry summoned up all this strength, concentrating as he had never done before. He focused on his destination, trying to relax, to let the growing Phoenix swell from within to take him. Calling forth every ounce of magic he possessed, he turned on the spot and disappeared in a ball of flames just as the door burst open and Neville stepped in to find an empty room.

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The now Turkish island of Tenedos was not as Harry had imagined it would be. It had the classic appearance of the Mediterranean: all houses were white or cream coloured to reflect the heat, roofs were almost always flat and populated by the owner, dozing in the warmth as his or her washing dried in the baking sun. The terracotta tiles appeared all over the town as far as Harry could see, and the residents, all well tanned and many wearing white with various hats and sunglasses, potted slowly about their business. This Mediterranean paradise was not in an inexplicable hurry like the hustle and bustle of London. On his way to the hearing before his fifth year, Harry had been shocked to see Londoners running out in front of four lanes of oncoming traffic, or running up escalators apparently always in a hurry. Here, the way of life was slower, more relaxed and friendlier.

Looking past the end of the street, Harry could see the green fields spanning out before him until a mile away, where they gave way to the magnificent blue sea which sparkled in the afternoon sun. Harry had never been on holiday abroad before. When the Dursleys had gone anywhere more exotic than Bognor Regis, they had always dumped Harry on Yvonne or Mrs. Figg. This was his first real taste of a holiday abroad. He took a moment to relax, to let the tranquillity of the island penetrate his armour.

He was most relieved to find that he was once again able to Flame in and out of places. Harry felt free again, and standing in the sun on an island in the Mediterranean Sea, he truly felt at peace. It was his first holiday abroad ever, and although it would only last two hours, he was determined to enjoy it. Sadly this was not the time for sunbathing or relaxing; he had work to do, but that shouldn't mean he couldn't enjoy the moment.

Harry collected his thoughts for a moment. The diary had described the house being at the top of the cliff, which meant near the sea. A quick glance at the map he had torn from the Atlas in the library told him that he needed to head due west from this town. Luckily the Dark Knight had found a way to remove the Trace from his body, so he was able to check with a quick Point Me spell. Having his bearing, Harry set off along the street with the cliffs in the distance.

He passed a number of houses on the way – small, compact, and oddly enough with doors wide open. Apparently, it was normal not to lock up around here. Harry shrugged. He could see the tiled floors of various rooms and he passed, but didn't stop and look properly as he didn't want to look suspicious. As he passed the last house, he noticed a young girl sitting on the doorstep.

"Merhaba," she said as he passed. Harry didn't speak a word of Turkish and merely nodded, suspecting that she had said hello. As the shelter of the city was left behind him, Harry suddenly felt the full power of the sun which beat down on him.

"Black was a bad decision," he muttered to himself, suddenly aware of how odd he must look to the locals in his wizard attire. He pulled off his cloak and robes, leaving him with trousers and a white shirt. He pulled his tie off as well, curling them all up into a ball. With a quick glance around to check that no one was watching, he shrunk the bundle down and put it in his pocket. That done, he put his wand away and began to roll his sleeves up as he advanced along a dry dirt track, heading for the cliffs. The path was uneven and made of cracked stones and mud which had been baked by the sun, leaving an ornate matrix of cracks. Harry walked on the grass to the side of the path, not wanting to twist his ankle. The grass was thicker and rougher than grass back home for it had to deal with a warmer, dryer climate. Harry couldn't imagine lying down on such rough foliage as he had done countless times as Privet Drive. Such a simple observation about grass was fascinating to Harry, who had never left the country before.

Once he had finished with his sleeves and his hands were free once more, Harry pulled the map from his pocket and checked it. If his navigation was any good, then up ahead should be the bay where Lockhart had landed. He needed to head over there and apparently he should be able to see the house from the top of the cliffs. It should be fairly obvious, as Lockhart had apparently found it at night and he couldn't navigate his way out of a paper bag.

As he neared the sea the smell of salt water invaded Harry's nostrils. He took a deep breath, taking in the sea air.

*So much cleaner than the smog of London,* he thought in amazement

Hogwarts air amid the highlands was fresh as in it was clear and chilled by the snow-topped mountains, but this was a different kind of fresh. Harry suddenly understood why Aunt Petunia had wanted those little blue Sea Breeze smelly things in the upstairs toilet in Privet Drive.

The walk took him nearly twenty minutes to reach the top of the cliffs. As he stood atop the rocks with nothing but open sea stretched out in front of him, a gentle sea breeze swept in, brushing over his body. Harry was grateful, for he was hot and sticky, and the breeze was a welcome relief. He spread his arms and closed his eyes, enjoying the relaxing caress of the breeze for a moment in contrast to the beating sun. He reminded himself that he mustn't spend too long here. Randomly gaining a tan in the middle of February while apparently not leaving Hogwarts would look suspicious, or create rumours that he was a poser who used instant-tan. Neither option was desirable.

Looking down, the waves were gently moving back and forth, licking at the base of the cliff. Harry had no idea about tides or the sea, but it appeared calm and tranquil. He had a sudden urge to go swimming, probably fuelled by the heat. He wanted to submerge himself in the cool waters of the Mediterranean, to wash away the sweat and grim, but knew that he couldn't.

He was standing on an outcrop of rock which divided two bays on the edge of the island. One was tiny and had no real beach, but it did have a relatively flat area of rock pools. He could see a

few children searching for crabs while their parents sunbathed, their mother wearing not quite enough, Harry noticed with embarrassment.

This wasn't the time to stare. He pulled his eyes away and turned to his right, towards the larger bay. This one had a beautiful white sand beach which curved around the bottom of the cliff and stretched out towards the sea. This was certainly big enough to hide an armada. There were various people on the beach, playing and relaxing. Groups of children were running around, playing games or building sandcastles. He could see a group of older lads playing a version of volleyball that looked more like Rugby from where Harry stood. He could see games of cricket and rounders going on, and in the water itself there were loads of people paddling, swimming, and splashing around. From the look of it, there was a kayaking lesson going on at the far end.

As much as he would love to join in, Harry had work to do. He looked up along the cliff top path, which rose with the land towards a hill on top of the cliff, searching for a house. According to the diary, the building should be somewhere along here, but all Harry could see was a small white structure on top of the hill which looked suspiciously like a church.

Was that it? Did Lockhart not think to put that it was a church in his diary? Did the pictures of Jesus not give it away? It was to Harry's eyes the only place around here that could be seen from down in the bay area. He decided to try it. If nothing else, it was a hill from which he would be able to see further than he could from here.

He headed quickly up the grassy hill, ignoring the path, towards the Church. It was made from white stone, pretty and small. The double doors were open, allowing the air to enter the hall. Peering in, Harry could see eight rows of pews with an aisle down the middle. The alter was modest, though the crucifix behind it was made of gold and the stain-glass window looked far from cheap. The sun shone in through the windows creating patches of light, but in contrast, much of the room was in shadow.

Harry stepped inside, his eyes searching for any sign of life. His eyes were used to the bright sun and as he stepped inside, he found he couldn't see a thing. There seemed to be a large, translucent red dot over his vision making it impossible to see in the shadows.

"Yardımcı olabilir miyim?" said a voice.

Harry spun on the spot, his hand flying to his pocket. A young priest was standing in the corner, a duster in one hand and a spray of some sort in another. He looked like Harry had caught him cleaning. The priest wore the traditional black with a white dog collar, and although he looked fine, Harry couldn't help but wonder how he wasn't boiling in that uniform. Realising he wasn't a threat, Harry released the grip on his wand and drew himself up to his full height. He had unfortunately encountered another problem. He didn't speak a word of Turkish. How had he not thought of this earlier? He had just assumed that they would speak English. How arrogant!

"Err...?" stammered Harry, trying to think of a way around this.

The priest repeated his sentence causing Harry to groan inwardly.

"This is a long shot," he said slowly and clearly. "But you wouldn't happen to speak English would you?"

The priest launched into another long sentence in Turkish of which Harry understood nothing. He had no knowledge of translation spells, and he and the priest clearly could not understand each other. This was going nowhere. Would he need to return home and then get someone who knew Turkish to write down his questions on parchment so he could hand it to the priest? Then again, who did he know who spoke Turkish? Harry grimaced, kicking himself internally for not anticipating this glaring flaw in the plan. He decided before he left to make one last-ditch attempt to communicate.

"You don't happen to know of the Order of Ge-Gnosis do you?" asked Harry, reading from the note he had made on the top of map.

Suddenly, the priest's eyes went wide with fear and surprise. He gaped for a second and then dropped his cleaning materials with a clatter. As they hit the ground there was a sudden flash of movement and a wand appeared in his pale, shaking hand.

The spell was thickly accented, but it was still more than enough to do its purpose. Harry reacted instantly, diving to the side, just narrowly avoiding the surge of red light. He withdrew his own wand as he rolled back to his feet, and turned to face the priest. The man had moved to his right and fired another curse as Harry had rolled. Before Harry could adjust his aim, he was forced to duck again by the second curse.

"Damn it," he hissed, as he moved quickly along the back of a pew, crouching down to stay under cover. He poked his head out swiftly to see where his attacker had moved to. The priest had indeed moved again, now standing to Harry's left. Thinking quickly, Harry aimed his wand at the front pew. The priest's eyes grew wide as the bench leapt off the floor and flew towards him. He gasped and managed to duck the incoming object, but this distraction had already given Harry time. As the priest scrambled back to his feet, he was ready with a spell.

*Levicorpus!*

The priest was instantly dangling by his ankle in midair, swinging like a pendulum beneath an invisible pivot, his wand on the floor. Harry cautiously approached the suspended man, his eyes darting around the room in case there were any more. The man was cursing fluently in Turkish by the sound of it. Harry kicked his dropped wand away into the shadows as he approached, making sure the man had no access to a weapon. As Harry neared the priest, he got his first clear look at the man and his jaw dropped.

"You!" gasped Harry. He had seen the priest once before, the last time he had been dressed as a monk. The priest had appeared in St. Mungo's apparently searching for Lockhart's diary, but had Disapparated or Portkeyed out when Harry had confronted him. Whoever this man was, he clearly knew something about the diary and about why Harry was here. He had also been to England, so did that mean that he was pretending not to speak English?

"Now, Father," said Harry coldly, raising his wand to the dangling priest. "Are you going to tell me who you are?"

The priest stared up at him with frightened eyes, his lips shaking and his face becoming red as the blood rushed to his head.

"Quickly Father, before you pass out," prompted Harry.

The priest replied in a long string of Turkish.

Harry grimaced. He had no way to tell if the man was trying to comply, whether he understood in the first place, or if he was trying to convince Harry he knew nothing. Harry hesitated for a few moments, trying to decide what to do. If he left and came back, chances were that the priest would be gone. He had to do something now. The question was what..

"Let him go," said a crackly female voice behind him.

Harry whipped around, drawing his other wand and levelling it in the direction of the voice. He held one wand on the priest still dangling, while the other was aimed at whoever had spoken. His eyes were still unaccustomed to the darkness, but he could see something moving in the shadows. There was the sound of a footstep and then another as someone approached through the darkness.

"Show yourself!" ordered Harry.

A second later, an old woman stepped out of the shadows. She was small and bent with white hair, which contrasted starkly against her bronzed skin. Her face was weathered, but her eyes sharp. She wore white with a woollen cardigan around her shoulders, and she walked with a cane.

"You can release him," she repeated in accented English, pointing to the priest with her stick.

Harry made a note that she could stand without the stick. What appeared to be a walking aid may be a concealed weapon. He wished he had brought his Stun-Baton. He hesitated, wondering whether to trust this new arrival.

The woman then gestured to the wands he held. "And put those away, you have no need of them here."

"How do you know?" asked Harry. "How do you know what I am here for?"

"Because we know who you are," said the woman smiling knowingly. "And where you come from, where you *really* come from."

There was something in the woman's voice and stare that conveyed exactly what she meant. It seemed he had found people in the know. Harry hesitated and then gently lowered the priest to the ground but did not pocket his wands. The woman spoke to the priest in rapid Turkish and he scrambled away, leaving the two of them alone.

"My grandson," said the woman, watching him leave. "You must forgive his rudeness. He did not recognize you, and as a rule anyone looking for the *Order of Ge-Gnosis* are generally those who must never get their hands on our secrets."

"Yet, you seem not to view me as a threat?" Harry pointed out. He placed his second wand back in pocket, but kept his original wand in his hand.

"But I have a different way of seeing things," said the woman, chuckling to herself. Slowly, awkwardly, she turned around. "Come, stranger, come."

"I thought you knew who I was," said Harry, his voice full of mistrust. "Not a stranger."

"I have no idea what your earthly name is," said the woman without turning around. "I know what you are though, and that is more important."

She made her way back towards the shadows, clearly meaning Harry to follow. He paused for a second, staring into the darkness, debating about what to do. There could be more of them in there, it could be a trap. He had no idea where the priest had gotten to either. This old woman didn't seem to be dangerous, but the same could be said for any lure in a trap. After a moment's hesitation Harry decided to take a chance and followed her into the shadows. In the dimness, he was vaguely able to make out that she was heading for a door at the far end of the church.

"You speak as if you knew I was coming," said Harry once he had caught up to her. "As if you expected me. Am I about to find out about a certain prophecy?"

"Circumstantial nonsense," the woman said, waving her withered old hand dismissively. She reached past him and opened the door, revealing a parlour. Immediately she headed over towards the fire, above which Harry could see a kettle boiling. The room was stifling hot, as the day was quite warm. The woman on the other hand didn't seem to notice how hot the parlour was with the fire blazing.

"Did I expect you?" she asked rhetorically as she crossed to the mantle. "Yes, I was, we were. But not because of a prophecy. Simply because I knew you had arrived, and that you need to find a way home. I arranged for you to find your way here by leaving a trail of breadcrumbs that would lead you here. My only problem was setting you on the trail to begin with."

"Anyone could have followed those clues," said Harry. "You could have ended up with anyone coming here." Was she implying that he was a simpleton and they had led him here with a carrot on a stick? He felt a flush of anger at her, but managed to keep calm as he didn't even know if it was true. Besides, how had they led him here? He didn't recall a trail of bread-crumbs, in fact, he had only met the priest once before. "What signs did you leave?"

The old lady turned to face him with knowledge in her eyes before sinking into an armchair by the fire. Her wrinkled face was stretched into a smug smile as she stared at him.

"My boy, did you not find it at all strange that just as you were inquiring about the diary, someone appeared out of the blue and draws your attention to it?" asked the woman.

"Of course," said Harry hotly, angered by the implication that he was that thick. "I knew that grandson of yours was up to no good. I knew whatever was in the damn book was suspect."

"Yet you still came," the woman stated, the fire reflecting in her dark eyes. Harry got the distinct impression she was patronising him.

"I couldn't afford to discard any clue," said Harry defensively.

"Exactly," said the woman, inclining her head. "That is how we knew you would come here. Whether by gullibility or by thoroughness you could not ignore the diary, which would leave anyone with an ounce of intelligence right to our front door. The trouble was getting the diary to you in the first place. We have followed you every time you have left the school. You may think that impossible with your special means of transportation, but people from off-world are surprisingly easy to track, if you know how. It was then just a matter of giving you the diary. We almost succeeded in Knockturn Alley, but someone else arrived before we could make contact, and to top it all, by pure chance, you found another book that put you on the path. That, I believe is called karma."

"You forged an entire diary just to get me here?" asked Harry, stepping further into the parlour. While he continued to make conversation, his mind was racing ahead on another fragment of information. He could be easily tracked by someone who knew how. Did Grindelwald know? Unlikely, and even if he did, he had no reason to track Harry. No, when it came to spying, Riddle was a greater threat than Grindelwald.

"Come in and sit down," said the woman, beckoning him in. "In answer to your question, you never looked at the other dates did you?"

"I had no need," said Harry, suddenly feeling stupid as he crossed the floor. It seemed like such a basic mistake looking back on it. "And stop answering a question with another one."

"As you wish," she said. "There is a mild charm on the diary derived from the Confundus family of spells. It is similar in principle to the anti-Muggle wards that are so often used these days. It makes sure that you see they are full when you flick through, but keeps you from looking closer. If you tried, you would feel as though it was pointless, or unnecessary, and suddenly lose interest."

Harry felt his anger rising again, probably helped by the uncomfortably hot room. He hated the idea that he had fallen for such a basic trick, that he had been lead across the world by an obvious hoax, that he had failed to see it. He felt like kicking himself.

"You tricked me!" he said indignantly. "You manipulated me into coming here."

"You can hardly claim I have kidnapped you, dear boy," said the woman, laughing once more. "I gave you hints, ones which you could follow if you were intelligent or motivated enough. I have made no move to keep you here. If you wish to go back to wherever you've made your makeshift home here feel free to leave. But if you want to get back to your true home, then take a seat."

Harry was still too tense to move any further. He stood behind the sofa that faced the fire. The woman sat in an armchair six feet to his right. The door was only a few feet behind him and still open. He could bolt if he wanted and never return. Then again, this woman did seem to know what she was talking about. Maybe it would be best to hear her out. As long as he was careful and didn't tell her too much of his own past, she couldn't hurt him. What to do? Did he trust her? He just wasn't sure.

"What if someone else had found the diary?" he asked petulantly. "What if you had led the wrong person here?"

"Only someone looking for us could make sense of the story in the diary," replied the woman. "Only someone already on the path to finding us would recognise the clues and realise its true value. Now, please...sit."

Cautiously, and with his hand inches from his wand, Harry rounded the large red settee and sank into it, sitting on the end nearest the lady. As he did so, she waved a hand at the fire. Flames receded into a small flickering glow, rather than the inferno that had boiled the kettle. With a flick of her fingers, the kettle floated out of the fireplace and poured tea into the two bowls on the table before them. It seemed they drank tea black in Turkey, or at least this woman did, and from a bowl no less, not a mug.

"You are being very open with me," said Harry, wary of her hospitality. "How could you know I am not one of those people you mentioned earlier who shouldn't get their hands on the Node?"

"Like I said, I have a different way of seeing things," said the woman chuckling to herself. She raised the bowl to her lips and breathed in the herbal aroma before sipping the hot liquid. Harry was sweating profusely from the hot, stuffy room and dared not touch a hot drink. Instead he sat back, waiting for the old woman to speak.

"Now, let us hear how you came to be lost here," she said, leaning back in the chair and interlocking her fingers. "Tell me how it was that you first left your world."

Harry hesitated. It was undoubtedly a test of trust. Harry considered lying, but then decided it was pointless. She knew more than he did at any rate, and seemed to be able to manipulate and see right through him. Was she in league with Grindelwald? Harry didn't think so. She seemed most unconcerned with the world around her. He decided to be honest.

"I was in a duel," he explained, sticking to the facts. "I had the sword of Godric Gryffindor inside a chalk circle protecting me. It shielded me from my enemy's attacks. But then my attacker tried the Killing Curse. When it hit the shield there was a massive surge of energy. I don't remember much, just a flash, pain and then I woke up in another world in the body of my counterpart."

"Fascinating," said the woman, her brow furrowed in thought. "I would have guessed that The Killing Curse would be involved. That is one of the few magics strong enough to punch a hole in the world as we know it."

"The Killing Curse rips a hole in the world?" asked Harry, sure he had misunderstood.

"Do you know what the words Avada Kedavra mean, or where they come from?"

"The deepest layer of Hell?" suggested Harry, already bored of the woman's riddles.

"Actually it comes from Aramaic and means, 'let this thing be destroyed'," she informed him. "Let a person's life energy be destroyed. What is the first law of physics?"

Harry shrugged, realising it was a rhetoric question.

"Energy cannot be destroyed or created, only moved from one form to another... or more importantly, from one *place* to another. When the curse is cast, where does all that life energy go?"

Harry paused, contemplating her words. He remembered when Cedric had been hit. There was no explosion of energy, no bang or balls of fire, just the sound of rushing death and then nothing. She had a point. Where did that energy go? Maybe, thought Harry, it wasn't the sound of the curse sizzling the air around it, but rather the sound of the life force rushing to go....where?

Then it hit him. What was this woman's area of expertise?

"Another world," breathed Harry, suddenly understanding.

"To heaven or hell," confirmed the woman as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

"Whatever name you give the afterlife, it must be a place and must conform to the rules of physics. If it doesn't, it means we do not possess the level of understanding of physics to explain it."

"So the afterlife is just another world?" asked Harry.

"In a manner of speaking," replied the woman.

Harry grimaced at the annoying vagueness of her answer.

"It is not a world you can reach from the gate, or Node, or doorway, whatever you have come to call it. It is just another plane of existence. Were it not, there would be no communicating with the dead. No séances, no ghosts, and no items such as the legendary Resurrection Stone would not work. Understand?"

"Roughly," said Harry, only catching about half her meaning. He didn't really care how it worked, so long as she knew enough to get him home.

"But I digress," said the woman, shaking her head. She seemed to sense Harry's impatience.

"You were in a duel, and the Killing Curse hit the chalk circle. Oh, how powerful that sword must have been... But for you to trade bodies, rather than to end up transported there in addition to your counterpart, that is truly baffling. To my mind, it would suggest that something happened to your counterpart at the exact moment that the curse hit your shield. There is more to this than meets the eye."

Harry sat in silence, again contemplating her words. The woman was a shrewd as they came, and had already put together more of the puzzle that Harry had in several months. What *had* his other self been doing at the time they swapped? Was it all the other one's fault? Harry sat for nearly two minutes, trying to imagine what his other self might have been doing, though given his reputation, part of Harry didn't want to know. At length, the woman spoke again.

"The world you arrived in, it wasn't this one though, was it?" she asked, her eyes fixed on his.

"How could you..." Was she a Legilimens? Was she plucking thoughts from his mind or was she really that clever she could piece it all together?

"You arrived *here* through the doorway, not by jumping," said the woman, clearly pleased at his shock. She was smiling benignly at him as she continued. "That is how I knew someone from off-world had arrived, and that is how I know who you are. How many worlds have you visited?"

"Two," answered Harry, seeing no point in lying. She would probably know it was a lie before he did. "Mine, this one, and the one I ended up in after the duel."

"I see," said the woman, looking thoughtful. "And what do you want?"

Harry hesitated. What kind of question was that? Wasn't it obvious?

"To get home," said Harry, trying to leap the sarcasm from his voice.

"Of course," said the woman, smiling knowingly. "But what do you want to take with you?"

"Nothing," said Harry, shrugging. He wasn't in this for material gains, or for fame or glory. He only wanted to return home. They needed him there. It was his duty to fight Voldemort, and so he would. He felt angry that she might think he was trying to get rich out of this. "I just want to go home."

"Throughout history whenever the gate has been opened, all that mankind has on the brain is conquest and material gains," said the woman, her tone accusatory.

"Not me," said Harry firmly, trying to keep his temper in check. "I'm sick of other worlds and staring into the faces of friends who don't recognise me. I just want to go back where I belong."

"You would never use the gate again?" the woman pressed.

"No, why would I?"

"There is nothing on either this world or the other that would tempt you to return?"

Harry hesitated. Yes there were things he had liked in the Unholy Land. Part of him had thought that if he could find both keys, he could travel back and forth to visit his mother and family from time to time. Flamel had even suggested he do so, and it had always been part of his long-term plan. Maybe spend his holiday with his family this summer. Dumbledore couldn't argue the fact that it was safe – Voldemort would never find him if he wasn't even on the same planet. It

seemed to Harry like a dream solution. But it wasn't for material gains. He wasn't planning on getting rich or powerful by it, and no one would know of it. Surely there was no harm in it?

"Well, I wouldn't say that," he admitted.

"Then how long could you resist?" she asked. "How long before your temptation leads you to use the Node once more? Is it, by chance, a woman that lure you back there?"

"My mother," said Harry coldly.

The woman nodded, a sad expression on her face, as if she had expected this. "You would turn down a mother's love to return home?" she asked. "You would shut her out forever? There isn't a little boy born who wouldn't tear the world apart to find his mother. You, my dear boy, have the power to rip a hole in the world to find your mother. Home is where the heart is, but you can only have one world, remember. Can you honestly place your hand on your heart and say that once home, you will never use the gate again?"

"Where is this going?" asked Harry, avoiding the question. He knew the answer, and so did the woman.

"My job is to restore balance," the woman announced. "Just by being here, you have tipped the scales. I could solve this by sending you home, but...so many people were seduced in the old days, by the power of it. How can I know you are safe?"

"But you said you had been expecting me," said Harry. "You invited me in, with no fear or anything, then question whether I am trust worthy?" He couldn't handle her jumping from one foot to the next. Would she help or not?

"I had been expecting you because I led you here," said the woman, her voice firm. "I recognised you because I can see that you are not from this world by looking at you. You give off the wrong light. I see that you are a good person, but it is always the best that fall so spectacularly."

"Are you going to help me or not?" asked Harry, his anger getting the better of him.

She hesitated and when she spoke, her words were slow and thoughtful.

"With your mother just a short trip away," said the woman. "How could any child resist? That is how it starts. First it's just to see something, but then you bring something back, some flowers maybe or a toy. Suddenly there are two of an item in one world and the balance is tipped. But soon it isn't just a toy or a flower, it's gold, and money, and power. Soon it is all out of control and it started by the simplest of gestures. My choice will govern the fate of two worlds."

Harry could see the truth in what she said. He already had two identical wands and the other sword of Gryffindor he had seen in Riddle's office. He turned his attention back to the old woman, be she was just staring absently into the fire.

"You spoke of balance," said Harry, his voice almost pleading. "In my world I am linked to another, to the Dark Lord. There was a prophecy, depicting a duel of fates. One of us must die at

the hands of the other. I am the only one who can stop him. With me not there, the scales are already tipped, especially if another version of me, an evil version, was swapped with me. You are denying my world the only chance of stopping the Dark Lord."

"Perhaps your departure was part of your destiny, and the prophecy you speak of was meant to be fulfilled in another world," she suggested. "Remember, prophecies come from another plane of existence, another world. Does your prophecy specify what world it pertains to? Has nothing happened on another world that might be related to the Prophecy?"

"I need to go back," repeated Harry, desperate to make her see. "I need to right what has been wronged. I need to restore my own balance."

His words died out and the only sound came from the crackling of the fire. Harry was sweltering, but the old woman seemed perfectly comfortable. She stared at the flames for what seemed like an age before speaking again.

"Very well," she said after a long pause. "You came by accident, and so you should be returned to your home world."

"Thank you," said Harry, relaxing once more.

"To do so, you will need the key and the seven digits derived from your blood and magic," she explained. "Since you have used the gate before, I expect you know how to use the equations. The key I can help you with."

"Where is it?" he asked, looking around for possible hiding places.

"My dear boy," she said, laughing aloud. "Do you expect me to produce it from my pocket, or reach into a drawer?" She dissolved into laughter for several seconds before regaining her composure while Harry managed to keep his temper in check. "I would not leave the key anywhere as obvious as here. It was safely buried behind many safe-guards. It has been sought by many over the centuries, and has been moved several times. The last move was to a place that at the time, was known as the Hanging Gardens of Babylon."

"Where is that?" asked Harry, thinking of the gardens as nothing but myth.

"In the middle of the country you know as Iraq," said the woman, her face serious.

"You're kidding," said Harry, his mind full of images of the Gulf War. Was he supposed to walk into a warzone to get this key?

"Oh don't look so horror-struck," said the woman dismissively. "You won't have to wander around on the surface. The tomb is underground."

"Oh," muttered Harry, breathing a sigh of relief. The woman gave him a small smile, and she leaned in close, her eyes fixed on Harry's.

"Now listen carefully," she said, her tone urgent. "It is not simply a case of you walking into the tomb and taking the key. The tomb was designed to protect it again those who must not use it."

"Booby-traps?" asked Harry, already thinking about flaming through them.

The woman shot him an impatient look before continuing. "These are not tripwires and false steps designed to stop petty-thieves," she replied, her tone bordering on aggressive. "Remember, we hid it from those who would use it for personal gain. The tests get inside your mind – they test your understanding and your commitment to your goal. I can offer you only two pieces of advice. One, remember why you are there, and what you must do. Do not become distracted. Two, whatever you see in there, it is not real, but, it is solid and it can hurt you – be careful."

Harry gulped as she finished her last sentence. Suddenly he didn't feel so confident.

"So how do I get there?" he asked.

"This Portkey," she handed him a kettle, "will take you to the entrance of the tomb. Remember that it is but the first step. From there, you are on your own, and there are safe-guards."

Harry reached out and took the kettle, slipping it inside his bundle of robes. He didn't have time at the moment to visit Iraq. Once he had the key he still needed the equations, so he still needed to be at Hogwarts. That meant he had to get back to avoid suspicion. Soon, he would use the Portkey, but for now, he had to return to Hogwarts before anyone discovered he was missing.

He rose from his seat and, with one final glance around, he turned to leave, glad to be heading away from the hot fire.

"What's your name, by the way, stranger," asked the woman as he neared the door.

"Harry," he replied without looking back.

"Good luck, Harry."

He turned back to see her silhouette against the firelight, her gaze steady but thoughtful. He nodded curtly and then stepped back out into the main part of the church, which despite the very hot day was refreshingly cool compared to the parlour. The priest was back to the cleaning duties, polishing a table in the corner. He looked up at Harry as he entered. Their eyes met for a second, and Harry's hand instantly went to his wand. The priest however merely nodded and resumed his cleaning. Harry walked the aisle in the opposite direction and headed out into the sunlight and the blissful breeze. He had to shield his eyes from the blinding light. He was so glad to be outside. It was like he could breathe again as the sea breeze washed away the stuffiness of the parlour. He peeled his shirt away from his sweaty back to which it had stuck, and shook it in the breeze. Feeling better, he relaxed for a moment, soaking up the rays. There was not a single cloud in the perfect blue sky, and the sea stretch out before him like a vast shining jewel of pure blue. The grass atop the cliffs swayed gently in the breeze and the smell of salt and sand filled his nostrils. Sadly, he had to leave this behind and head back to dreary old Scotland.

He would allow himself five minutes, and then he would have to return.

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As expected, it was raining as he arrived back on the roof of the Astronomy Tower. He had gone from baking hot and not a cloud in the sky to a torrential downpour, and he was still dressed in just his rolled up shirt and trousers.

"Bugger!" Harry cursed aloud. He quickly pulled his cloak from his pocket, enlarged it, and draped it over his head to keep the rain off. He shivered in the relative cold and wished he was back in Turkey. The back of his shirt that was still wet with sweat was now chilled by the icy Scottish air. Harry shivered as the cold material touched his back. Pulling his cloak tightly around him, he wrenched open the door and stepped inside out of the rain. He took a moment to dry his clothes and charm them to smell lightly of heather, rather than of sweat and salt. Satisfied, though still planning to take a shower as soon as possible, Harry began the journey back up to the Gryffindor Tower.

He now had the location and a Portkey to the place where the key was hidden. He needed one more trip, to Iraq of all places, to retrieve the key and then it was just a matter of finding an Unspeakable to convince to solve the equations, and then he was home-free. Harry suddenly felt a lot further on and a lot more cheerful than he had in some time. The light at the end of tunnel was suddenly closer.

*I'm going home*, he told himself. Wouldn't be hard, wouldn't be long. He was grinning like a Cheshire cat as he headed back up to the common room. The words 'one more trip' repeated over and over in his mind all the way up.

The Tower was alive with chatter as he entered, but Harry was too preoccupied to pay any notice. He crossed to the stairs and hurried up to his dorm, thinking of a nice warm shower and a nice fluffy towel. The dorm was empty as he entered, which was fortunate as he did not want everyone to see what he was up to. He emptied the contents of his pockets, including the map and kettle, into his trunk on top of Flamel's notes, and closed the lid, making sure it was locked. He ate a few sweets to keep his blood sugar levels up, and poured himself a drink from the tap in the bathroom.

*I'm going home*, he said to his reflection in the bathroom mirror. One little trip was all it would take. He was too tired to travel anymore tonight and besides that, he would be missed. His best chance to get away with enough time for Iraq was the weekend. By the way, he mused, what was the time difference for the Middle East? Harry had no idea, but made a mental note to look it up.

He walked back down the stairs and headed for the fire, intending to curl up and relax. Finding an empty chair, he plopped down and to his surprise to see a Daily Prophet discarded next to it. He picked it up and pulled his feet and knees up on the soft cushion, spreading the paper over his lap. It was full of the usual drivel and half-truths, but the fire was nice and warm and Harry was still buzzing off his discovery. He was vaguely aware that the rest of the Common Room was alive with conversation and he couldn't help but hear snippets of it as his mind kept wandering from the Prophet.

"Forget it, mate, she's only got eyes for..." he heard from the direction of some fourth years.

"I don't get it, how can one spell have two..."

Ah, the homework club was in full swing, but it wasn't Hermione giving advice. She was probably off with Katie snooping around. Come to think of it, he couldn't see Ron, Neville, or anyone of that group about. Maybe they were having a little meeting or working out how to contact the Order. It didn't really matter – Harry wasn't their keeper. Also, judging by the latest Prophecy, it would be better to keep his distance. Katie would be fine without him – she was safe as long as she was in the castle.

Then he heard something that made his blood run cold.

"Honestly, she just keeled over and hit the floor, clutching her scar and screaming her damn head off." The voice floated over the conversation through his ears and into his mind, sending shivers down his spine.

Harry's head whipped around, his locking on to the speaker. Lindsay, the seventh year, was sitting with the other two female finalists deep in conversation not far to his right.

Katie had passed out with her scar hurting? That sounded like a Legilimency attack. Suddenly the absence of Ron and Neville made sense. Harry's stomach clenched, his jaw tensed, and chills shot to every nerve in his body. It couldn't be....

"What was that?" he called to Lindsay, nearly shouting to make himself heard. "Who keeled over clutching a scar?" He dived out of the chair, throwing the paper aside, nearly knocking over a pair of gossiping girls as he passed through but he didn't even stop to apologise.

"Who has a scar of note?" asked one of the girls in a patronising voice as Harry arrived before them. He opened his mouth to demand an answer, but Lindsay replied politely before he could. "Bell," she told him. "She just collapsed last lesson."

"What happened?" asked Harry urgently. "Tell me everything." *Tell me I'm imagining it! Tell me it isn't happening again!*

"There's not much to tell," said Lindsay shrugging. "We were in a Charms Lesson and she was dozing, and then suddenly she screamed. I looked around, she screamed again, and fell off her chair. She looked like she was having a fit and wouldn't stop screaming for a few moments and then nothing, she just lay still."

*Yes, it was definitely her scar, definitely Legilimency.*

"Then what?" he demanded in an impatient, harsh voice.

"Flitwick came over," said Lindsay, recoiling at the force of his voice. "Bell woke up before he got near her, though. She sat up, mumbling to herself. She was disorientated, hallucinating probably."

"Why do you say that?" asked Harry quickly.

"She mumbled something about danger, mysteries, and something about it being serious."

"Serious?" echoed Harry, realising how close the word sounded to Sirius. *NO! No, not again!*

"Flitwick sent her to the Hospital Wing. I guess she's still there."

"When was this?" asked Harry, blood draining from his face.

"An hour ago," she said. "Are you alright? You look like you've seen a ghost."

Harry didn't answer. His knees felt weak, as if they would buckle out from underneath him. His stomach was so tight that he felt he might be sick as fear took hold of him. It was the same fear he had felt when he saw Hermione nearly die in that Department of Mysteries, when he had seen Sirius being tortured; it was the fear that he had gotten a friend killed. It was a memory that was shortly about to be relived.

*Jesus Christ, it was happening again.*

Harry placed two fingers in the corner of his mouth and blew. A hissing mess of spit and spluttering followed. He wished he could whistle like that. Cursing himself, he took out his wand and held it up to the ceiling.

*BANG!*

The sudden crack caused everyone to fall silent and face him in an instant.

"Has anyone seen Katie Bell, the Weasleys, Granger, or Longbottom?" he called to the silent room in a hard, aggressive voice.

He watched as various people around the room looked at each other for reference, before shaking their heads.

"Not since last lesson," said a seventh year in a small, timid voice.

"Mary, Mother of God," breathed Harry.

He knew what was happening, he knew where they were, he knew what was about to happen, and he knew who would pay the price. History was repeating to itself and blood would be spilt this night. This was not Harry's world, not his fight, but they were his friends out there and not all of them would come back tonight.

Katie was walking into a trap, and he already knew how it ended. Riddle, the Order, none of them would make it in time. There was only one thing that could save Sirius and Katie...

The Stranger from the Unholy Land.

## ~~~~ Chapter VI ~~~~

### Return of the Stranger

*"I'm calling you a killer – a natural born killer.  
You always have been, and you always will be.  
Moving to El Paso, working in a used record store,  
Going to the movies with Tommy, clipping coupons.  
That's you, trying to disguise yourself as a worker bee,  
That's you trying to blend in with the hive.  
But you're not a worker bee, you're a renegade killer bee.  
And no matter how much beer you drank or barbecue you ate  
Or how fat your ass got,  
Nothing in the world would ever change that."*

*~ Bill (David Caradine) - Kill Bill Vol. 2*

Tom Riddle sank into the comfy sofa by the fire in the living room of his old house in Little Hangleton. He had bought this old mansion back in the fifties just after he was accepted onto the Hogwarts teaching staff as Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher. Despite his horrific past, that was one position he had always aspired to, and after what had nearly become of Tom Riddle, he was certainly knowledgeable in the area of the enemy. He still lived in the castle during term time, but during the holidays he needed a place of his own and back then his father's old house had been up for auction. His first act of restoration on the building had been to commemorate those who had died here. He had brought a large slab of granite up from Dartmoor, which to this day stood in the gardens. Carved into the polished stone were the words:

*In loving tribute to the Riddle family, who died here in 1942.  
From the son who was sorrier than they could ever know.  
May you rest in peace.*

Tom had gone on to restore each and every room to its former glory, or rather how he imagined it would have been, as on his one previous visit to this house before he had brought it, he had not taken time to admire the décor. The living room was now painted a deep shade of red, but the numerous paintings that adorned the walls offered such an array of colours that the room hardly seemed red. The floor was bare wood, stained a dark brown colour and polished to a shine. There was a large white fur rug in the centre of the semi-circle of sofas grouped around the fireplace in which a warm fire was crackling away happily. The firelight glistened off the glass-topped coffee table to the side of the sofa, as well as off the glass panes of the numerous cabinets that lined the walls. The shelves behind the glass were adorned with souvenirs from Tom's travels abroad, artefacts that had come into his possession and gifts from his vast list of acquaintances. While some of them were questionable in origin, Tom kept them solely for their sentimental or aesthetic

value, never to be used. The paintings that covered the walls like a mosaic were a combination of landscapes and picturesque scenes, with the occasional portrait dotted around. It was a room that would not have looked out of place in the Louvre.

Placing his glass of wine down on the table and leaning back in the sofa, Tom removed a large beige package from under his arm and rested it on his knees. He shot a pointed look at a tall lamp, which stood in the corner. The lamp obediently burst into life, and glided out from the corner to stand next to sofa, casting a bright white light over where Tom was sitting, perfect for him to read by. The headmaster opened the envelope he had been carrying and carefully pulled out the manuscript held within. A small movement of his eyebrow betrayed his surprise at the size of the document. It had to be several hundred sheets of parchment, bound together with several brass rings along the left side to form a book. A small slip of parchment also fluttered out from inside the envelope, on which Poppy had scribbled a few words.

They translated a little more than I asked for – they clearly had too much time on their hands. The part you need is the section on blood, pages 146-201. Also see how to break down magic on pages 119-133, as this might also help test our boy. Hope this helps.

PP

Tom made a mental note of the additional chapter she had recommended and then opened the manuscript to the first page, which happened to be a contents page. As his eyes scanned the list, the headmaster felt a glimmer of a smirk make its way onto his lips. Poppy had been right when she had said some of this book was fanciful to the point of being absurd: the early parts of the manuscript seemed to be involved with theories about alternate universes and parallel worlds. As useful as Tom hoped this book might turn out to be, he braced himself for the fact that it could turn out to be nonsense. He had to take whatever it said with a pinch of salt.

Tom continued to scan down the list, looking at the titles of chapters. He would come back to the history of this field of research later, but for now he was more interested in Poppy's recommended section entitled *Deconstructing the Blood*. Tom turned to the corresponding page and after a sip of his wine he began to read the introduction on the first page of the chapter.

Blood is unique to every individual person, not only in this world, but in others as well. Two individuals (even corresponding entities), no matter how similar, will have subtle differences in the composition of their blood and magic. This means that any man can be uniquely identified by his blood. In addition, by studying patterns between participants, it is possible to gain information about a person, family, group, or even world of people by their blood. Now having been able to study the differences between two corresponding entities from different worlds, we have the ability to discern the world of origin from studying a combination of blood and magic. This has been used to further advance the guidance system.

This section details the theory of blood mapping. It details how to break down the blood of a subject, as well as the advanced Arithmancy needed to discern point of origin.

Tom stopped reading the introduction and looked up from the book as an alarm bell went off inside his head. He was instantly drawn to the memory of sitting on Minerva's sofa, concealed

beneath an invisibility cloak, watching as Potter collected his timetable. The boy had specifically asked to take Arithmancy, even though he had no history in the subject and had never shown any interest before. Was this a coincidence? Tom had to admit that Harry hadn't fought very hard to get it when Minerva had explained that it was a highly unusual. It did not appear to be something that was particularly vital to him, but Tom couldn't help but wonder if this subtle link was a clue.

The problem was that if he did accept this to be Harry's reason for wanting to learn Arithmancy, then by implication he had to accept this theory about other worlds, and that was too much of a leap of faith based on this strenuous link. Potter was not an alien and even if he was, he couldn't just work on something like this by doing an OWL in Arithmancy. Even if he was trying to work on this theory, Harry would never get near the level of Arithmancy Tom saw as he flicked a few pages ahead. This was definitely post-NEWT. Some of the finest mathematicians and wizards in the world would struggle with these. If Potter knew anything about the theories in this book, he would already know how advanced it was and wouldn't be asking about an OWL in Arithmancy.

Tom stopped: *there I go again, accepting this as fact.* He pushed the idea aside. It was like the many conspiracy theories he had read. Some of them just sucked the reader in until the voice of reason was drowned out and they could no longer tell fact from fiction. Tom took another sip of wine before continuing to read.

He skimmed over another two pages before he stopped again. This section of the chapter was essentially what Poppy had outlined a fortnight ago as an introduction to DNA. Although, having been written several millennia ago, the translators presumably ran out of comparative words to translate, for the words 'gene', 'genome' and 'DNA' had appeared in the text. Tom guessed that whoever had translated this was cutting corners by adding in new modern words. On one hand this made it easier for Tom to understand, but on the downside subtle, implicit, and superficial links may have been missed. The bureaucracy of the English tongue was bad enough to begin with, let alone when translated from an ancient text.

However, it was not a total loss for it mentioned that in the next section it would detail the spells needed to break down the blood into components using magic, and guide the reader through exactly what to do. As Tom read this, an idea formed in his mind: if he could get Poppy to test Harry's blood with those spells, she might be able to find out more about him. Could she perhaps isolate which genes were different? If, as was likely, it emerged that the rogue genes were not the ones specified in the book, then they would still be at least one step further on than they were at the moment, having eliminated this absurd theory.

Then again, Tom's mind couldn't help but wonder what would happen if it went the other way?

What if the tests did reveal Harry was an alien? What would he do with a boy from another world? The question was so vast that Tom had no real idea.

*Another world, a completely different universe?* he thought to himself. *A world like our own perhaps, but slightly different.*

He could imagine meeting another version of himself, a slightly different one. It was such an odd thing to be considering, especially for a man of logic. Suddenly he felt very small in the universe,

as if his knowledge and the world he accepted was just a minute fraction of what there was to see.

*No!* Tom thrust the thought aside. He was doing it again, accepting this ludicrous theory without any proof. It was a wonderful story, an interesting idea, but it was *just a story*. There was no proof it had happened, and Tom was just fantasising at this point.

Right now he had to base his opinions on facts, and the facts were simply anomalies in Harry Potter's blood and his change of attitude. That was all he had, and so imagining alternate realities was not helping. As far as the blood was concerned, Tom didn't even know if the anomalies in Harry's blood would coincide with the details of this text. If they did not and it was simply different genes that had changed, then the whole book was useless. As for his attitude, that was a different concern altogether. The only really out of character thing he had done since his return that Tom knew about was his recent trip to St. Mungo's.

Kingsley Shacklebolt had been called to St. Mungo's when an intruder had broken into the Security Office, attacked the security chief, and stolen recordings of the fire that had killed Lily and James Potter. His enquiry had begun normally; he had interviewed all staff who had seen the intruder and reviewed the security footage as per the standard protocol. Unfortunately, the intruder's face had been covered and the recordings stolen, meaning the only one to see the intruder's face was the security chief, Brian Carter. The description Mr. Carter had given had been of a young man no more than seventeen or eighteen with dark hair – a description that was not significant in itself.

It was then that things had become more complicated when out of pure chance one nurse had mentioned that Harry Potter had apparently been there that day. Naturally Kingsley did not initially believe her, as Harry had been at the Quidditch match and did not have permission to leave the school. However, the nurse in question, Claire Fenwick, was absolutely adamant it was him.

This raised two problems: Firstly how did Harry get there? Tom himself had seen Harry at the Quidditch game just before it had started and the Gryffindor students had said he had returned to the Tower shortly after the game. He would not have had time to run all the way down to Hogsmeade and then to Floo to London without being seen, do whatever he needed to do at the hospital and then return to Hogwarts again without being seen. The only way to do that would be to Apparate, but Harry could not Apparate and, even if he could, he would still need to sneak off the grounds first. In addition, the trace that was still on Harry since he was underage would have alerted the Ministry in an instant if he had used magic out of bounds. The Ministry of Magic had not detected any underage magic in Hogsmeade or in St. Mungo's. Secondly, Tom seriously doubted that Harry could have overpowered Carter, an ex-Magical Law Enforcement Officer or that he even would try something as aggressive as that. Harry didn't have a reputation for violence. However, even as these thoughts were flowing through his mind, Tom remembered the arsenal of weapons Harry had brought with him when he had returned in January.

It seemed impossible but the nurse was adamant he had been there and had visited Gilderoy Lockhart. Why would he visit the former professor? It made Tom's head spin. He tried to push

these endless questions out of his mind and focus on Harry. He needed to wait for Poppy's results.

In the meantime, it would not hurt to look through some more of this text. He opened the book again, and after taking a sip of wine, began to read. He hadn't gone more than a few pages when he was aware of a light to his right. He looked up just in time to see a ghostly walrus come soaring through the door. The glowing white Patronus swept across the room, coming to a stop in front of Tom's chair. The creature opened its mouth, exposing its large white teeth, and then spoke with Horace Slughorn's booming voice.

*"Tom, Dolores has Kathryn and her friends. She has asked for Veritaserum, which I have not supplied. Kathryn gave me a message. 'They have Padfoot in the place where it's kept'. I think she knows, Tom."*

Tom felt his stomach clench tight as the creature melted into wisps of smoke and then was gone. Dolores had Kathryn and her friends! If she was willing to resort to Veritaserum on children, what else? Surely...no, she wouldn't. Fudge was paranoid, Umbridge was vicious and spiteful, but surely they wouldn't condone... No, Kathryn was safe as long as she was at Hogwarts. She may not be particularly happy, but at least she was safe.

That, of course, was not the most pressing problem. *They have Padfoot in the place where it is kept?* Did Katie know what it was they were protecting? Did she know where? How did she know they had Sirius? There was only one answer to Tom's mind – she must have had a vision. Grindelwald must have sent her a nightmare about Sirius, the one person she would do anything to protect. It seemed that Occlumency had definitely failed with Kathryn. Part of Tom wished he had taught her himself, but to allow her access to his mind with all he knew... no it was too dangerous.

He was digressing again from the most pressing problem. Grindelwald has sent her a vision and she had believed it. Was it real? As far as Tom knew, Sirius was not on duty tonight and so he would be at headquarters. First things first, he needed to check and see if Sirius was okay and that the person who was on duty tonight, Alison Crawley, was safe.

Tom rose from the chair and grabbed his pot of Floo powder from atop the mantelpiece. Hurling a handful into the fire, he called out the destination aloud. Leaning forward, his head disappeared into the grate as he knelt on the hearth. He felt the familiar rushing sensation and then found himself staring out into the gloomy sitting room of number 12 Grimmauld Place. The curtains were drawn and the only light in the room came from the fire over which Tom's head was floating. Sprawled out over the sofa in front of the fire lay Sirius, apparently fast asleep. He was clutching a book to his chest with his left hand while his right hung limply over the edge of the sofa, reaching towards the carpet on which Tom could see an empty port glass on its side.

"SIRIUS!" called Tom loudly after a brief pause.

At the sound of his name the man in question sat bolt upright as if he had been electrocuted. The book that had been on his chest was sent soaring through the air and landed with a loud thud as

Sirius looked around in panic for the source of the voice. As he turned, his eyes fell on Tom in the fireplace.

"Bloody Hell, Professor," he muttered, sliding off the sofa and approaching the fireplace. "You scared the hell out of me. What's up?" he asked once he had recovered.

Well at least Tom now knew he was safe, but his greatest concern was that Kathryn still did not. She still believed he was in danger, as far as Tom could tell. She would do just about anything to help her godfather, even if it meant going to the Ministry herself. For the first time Tom was glad Dolores had restrained Kathryn. At least she could not leave the safety of Hogwarts. Still, Tom needed to work out exactly what was happening before anyone got hurt.

"Sirius, has Kathryn contacted you this evening?" he asked in a clipped tone that did not hide the fact that he was worried.

"No, she hasn't," Sirius said. The lopsided grin on his face melted as he saw the concerned expression staring back at him from the fireplace. Tom watched as it dawned on Sirius exactly why Tom was calling. "Merlin, what's happened?"

"Has anyone here been contacted by her?" asked Tom, ignoring the questions since his own concerns were more pressing. Surely Kathryn would check that Sirius was not here? If she had made no attempt something was wrong.

"Tom, what's happening?" repeated Sirius, looking annoyed that he was being ignored. "She's my Goddaughter and I have a right to know what's happening!"

His voice became louder with every word. Tom could see that arguing was only going to draw out this conversation and they were pressed for time as it was.

"She's fine," said Tom, trying not to sound impatient. Sirius looked slightly relieved but still highly agitated so Tom continued. "She's still at Hogwarts. Relax. Dolores Umbridge has her, but she is in no danger in the castle. Minerva will keep Dolores in check. Now, please Sirius, answer the question: has anyone there been contacted?"

"No," said Sirius shaking his head. "No one's used the fire all day. Kreacher was in here cleaning it half an hour ago, cackling and talking to himself the whole time, filthy little..."

"Sirius!" Tom cut him off. "This is not the time. We have a very serious problem – it seems Kathryn has been sent a vision of you being tortured in the Department of Mysteries."

"Are you sure?" asked Sirius, going pale. "Is she alright?"

"Horace's Patronus has just reached me," Tom explained. "Kathryn believes you are in danger. This is vintage Grindelwald: divide, confuse and pick off the stragglers. You are the one person she would go to the ends of the earth to help."

"But you said she's alright?" argued Sirius.

"She is safe as long as she stays in the castle," repeated Tom. "The point is that he is trying to draw her out...hang on!"

Tom was suddenly aware of a presence behind him in the room at Little Hangleton. He cautiously pulled his head backwards out of the fire, rising to his feet as he did so. As he drew himself up to his full height, Tom turned back to face the room, his hand reaching for his wand.

To his great surprise, there was another Patronus standing just inside the door, its misty eyes staring at Tom as it gracefully trotted up to him. The creature's glow was dimmer than the Walrus had been, almost grey in fact, but it was perfectly corporeal as it marched across the room. He didn't recognise the creature as belonging to anyone he knew and had no idea how it had found him here, or how anyone outside the Order could know the spell. When the animal spoke it was not a voice that Tom recalled. Its voice was calm, precise, and sounded a little cold in Tom's judgement. Its words were not loud, but immediately started banging away at Tom's mind.

*"Riddle, the Dark Lord has planted a false memory in Kathryn Bell's mind to lure her to the Department of Mysteries. She has already left Hogwarts and is walking into the trap. Crawley is already dead and twenty Death Eaters are lying in wait. Hurry. Please remember this when we meet, for I have made a terrible mistake. Forgive me."*

Tom suddenly felt sick. The creature faded into nothing along with Tom's certainty that he had done the right thing. If he had told Kathryn about what lay in the Ministry, warned her that he would tempt her there, she would never have gone tonight. If he had taught her himself, maybe she would have learned Occlumency. So many mistakes had been made.

Tom knew what he had to do now – he just hoped there was enough time. He thrust his head into the fireplace once more.

"Sirius," he said as he reappeared in Grimmauld Place. "Send messages to the others. Kathryn has gone to the Ministry and Death Eaters are waiting for her."

"SWEET MERLIN!" erupted Sirius, jumping to his feet.

"Sirius, calm down," ordered Tom, trying to take control of the loose cannon. "Tell Shackbolt, Tonks, Lupin, Jones, Diggle, and Moody to head to the Department of Mysteries at once. Once they have gone, send an anonymous tip to the Aurors. Tell them to search down there, then wait for the Order members to return."

"You mean for me to stay here?" asked Sirius, his tone accusing. He had obviously picked up that he was not on the list. Tom felt a glimmer of frustration – this was not the time for egos or for him to stretch his legs.

"You are still a wanted man, Sirius," replied Tom, his tone firm. "Swanning into the Ministry of Magic under the noses of the Aurors is just asking for trouble. You can't help Katie from Azkaban."

"But she's my Goddaughter," he protested, looking frantic.

"We can handle this," said Tom, his tone final. "Stay where you are. That's an order."

"In that case, Tom," said Sirius, glaring at the fireplace. "I quit!" With that the man disappeared, leaving Tom alone in the room.

Cursing under his breath, Tom pulled his head from the fireplace and stood back up. Raising his wand, he sent his Patronus soaring out of the door carrying a message for Kingsley, Nymphadora, and Alastor.

Tom knew that he needed to get to the Ministry as soon as possible. If he could bring down the Apparition wards, he could minimize the time taken for the Order to get there. Hopefully it would not be too late.

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*"LOOK OUT!"*

Neville instantly threw himself to the side, his Quidditch reflexes saving his life as the curse shot over his head and into the wall, raining fragments of debris down on top of him. He rolled over again and again, tumbling away from danger. Once he was a safe distance away he scrambled back to his feet and looked around the room.

Aside from the numerous combatants, the room seemed empty except for its central point – an archway covered by a veil, which stood on a raised platform in the middle of the room. There was a balcony up the stairs to his right on which the door they had entered through was still hanging open.

All around him cloaks swirled, wands flicked, and jets of light zoomed through the air in a morbid firework display. The ornate lightshow spelled certain death for anyone unlucky enough to catch a stray curse. Black robes billowed all around him like a storm and the white masks flashed like lightning in the gloom, guiding the aim of the Order towards the Death Eaters. As such, most of the Death Eaters had discarded their masks, revealing the dark faces contorted with rage beneath.

Neville could see his parents in the thick of the battle, both of them battling separate Death Eaters. There were more Order members as well, ones he had never met before, and of course there were the students. Hermione was down, Ron had been attacked by the brain, Ginny was conscious and fighting but her leg was injured. Luna and Katie were still here and somewhere in the fray. Neville's eyes tried to pick them out amongst the movement but the melee was too fast, too aggressive. He saw a flash of blond hair to his right. Was it Lucius Malfoy? Was it Katie? Luna perhaps? He didn't know – the flash was gone in a second.

Suddenly there was a scream. Neville turned to see Luna clutching her leg as dark red blood began to seep through her fingers. She collapsed as a Death Eater stood over her victorious, his wand held high ready to finish the job. Neville didn't hesitate. He ran forward, jumping the fallen body of Professor Moody, and surged towards Luna. A curse shot past his head as he charged but he continued, closing the gap quickly.

*"Stupefy!"*

The Stunning Curse shot out of his wand as he came close enough to guarantee a hit. The Death Eater had seen him coming though and in an instant his shield snapped into place, reflecting the spell straight back at Neville who was moving too fast to stop. He dived to the side in an effort to avoid the curse, landing awkwardly on his shoulder.

"Ahh!"

He cried out in pain as he landed, his arm had bent where it shouldn't and a piece of debris pressing into his flesh as his full weight landed on it. He only had a fraction of a second to recover as a hand grabbed his neck and effortlessly hoisted him up to his feet and slammed him into the wall. Coloured blobs burst over his vision as his head smashed into the solid stone. The icy fingers closed even tighter around his throat, choking the air out of him.

Neville's mind flew into a panic. He tried to raise his wand to defend himself, but his attacker was too quick. He grabbed Neville's arm and thrust his wrist into the wall. Neville cried out in pain as his forearm cracked into the hard stone and lost his grip on his wand as the man choked the life out of him. His arms and legs flailed wildly, kicking, punching, and clawing at anything he could get his hands on in order to get the man off him. He could feel himself going red, and his lungs crying out in protest as the air was choked out of him.

*OOF!*

Suddenly Neville felt an impact in his stomach. He opened his eyes, not even aware that he had closed them. His father had crashed into the Death Eater's back, slamming the man into the wall with his arm bent up behind his back. Neville's father drove his elbow viciously into the small of the Death Eater's back, causing him to cry out in pain. He grabbed the man's head by the hair and yanked it back before thrusting it violently into the wall. Neville was sure he heard a crack as the man's head hit the stone and he fell limply to the floor.

"Come on," said Frank urgently, taking his son's wrist in his hand.

Just as his father was guiding Neville away from the chaos, a thunderous explosion sounded on the far side of the room, launching several bodies into the air. Neville and his father covered their faces to protect themselves from flying debris as chunks of stone hailed down around them. As Neville removed his hands and was able to see once more, a figure in billowing black robes appeared from the chaos just in front of them. Neville didn't have time to think before his father shoved him quickly into cover behind him, just as an arm brandishing a dagger came sweeping down towards him. Frank raised his hands and grabbed the man's wrists, forcing the weapon away from his face. He then drove his knee up into the Death Eater's crotch. The man roared in pain as he fell, but became silent as Neville's father sent a jet of red light into the man's chest.

Neville scarcely had time to climb back to his feet before four more Death Eaters emerged from the chaos and smoke, surrounding them. He didn't catch the incantations being thrown at them as his father rugby tackled him to the floor, desperately trying to avoid the incoming barrage of

curses. Somewhere in the back of his mind he knew his father was using his body to shield him as the volley of curses tore apart the wall behind them, showering them in debris.

"Go!" hissed Frank, pushing Neville into cover in the corner as another volley of curses hit the wall. The Death Eaters were so close that they must have been deliberately missing, shepherding them into the corner. Neville glanced out from his hiding place, but was forced to duck back in under another volley of curses. There was no way out, no escape. At best they could take two, only to be killed by the remaining two...

*CRASH!*

All eyes turned to the ceiling as the glass roof shattered into a million pieces with a tremendous explosion that echoed off every wall in the room. Glass rained down like a shower of razors, tearing apart the poor Death Eater unfortunate enough to have been beneath it.

The Death Eaters, the Order, and everyone else gazed up as a figure in a black cloak fell from the heavens. He landed gracefully on the balcony through which the Order had descended moments before to join the fight. Under the cloak the Stranger wore all white, from his neck down to his hands and feet covered in white gloves and boots. There were holsters on his thighs and a handle visible over his shoulder, as if he had a sword strapped across his back. Neville looked up at the new arrival, and as he landed Neville got a clear view of his face.

It couldn't be... surely not! This was not the quiet and scared boy they had invited to the RA.

"KILL HIM!" screamed a voice from the other side of the room.

Instantly a volley of curses shot upwards towards the newcomer. He reacted in an instant, diving forward off the balcony into a front flip, his black cloak soaring out behind him. The curses blew the balcony to pieces but the figure landed completely unharmed on the floor below, crouching down to avoid injuring his knees. Before anyone could react, the Stranger rose to his feet, a wand in each hand.

No one had time to move before two jets of blue light left the Stranger's wands and two Death Eaters were instantly launched off their feet and propelled through the air as the curses hit them squarely in the chest. They landed ten feet away, blue electricity snaking all over their bodies. The rest of the room was frozen in place with shock gaping at the newcomer, but then someone reacted.

Suddenly, a huge Death Eater appeared behind the Stranger, but he was ready. As the ape swung at him, the figure turned, ducked under the swing and then lashed out with his foot at the man's knee. The Neanderthal crashed to the ground with a roar of pain, just as the Stranger brought his elbow down on the pressure point at the base of his spine, causing the man to cry out. The Stranger spun on the spot, and in an instant there was a glowing beam of red light coming out of his hand. He swung the glow-rod, bringing it down on the man's head and the man collapsed in a shower of sparks. The Stranger then swung the rod around his wrist, extinguishing the light and pushing it back inside his cloak in a single movement.

"Wow!" hissed Neville, words failing him. That was cool.

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As the Death Eater crashed to the floor Harry glanced around the room, surveying the carnage all around him. Everywhere people were duelling, for his interruption hadn't distracted them for long. Bodies littered the floor and the air was thick with curses, shouts, and screams. There were several fires burning, presumably the results of stray curses. This only filled the room with smoke and made it harder to see. He had to get the students out of here – he just needed to find them first. Harry advanced into the smoke.

Nearest him, Alice Longbottom was duelling with Rabastan Lestrage, or at least trying to. It was clear that he had the upper hand and, as Harry watched, one of Lestrage's Bone-Breaker curses caught Alice's wrist. She lost her grip on her wand as her hand, no longer held in place by a bone, flopped unceremoniously into a sickening angle. She screamed and clutched it with her good hand as another curse hit her thigh and her legs buckled beneath her. Alice crashed to the floor, clutching her shattered wrist close to her body, tears running down her cheeks as Lestrage stood over her. He raised his wand for the final blow but luckily for Alice, Harry was close enough to intervene. As Lestrage brought his wand crashing down Harry grabbed his wrist, holding it in place. The Death Eater turned in surprise.

"That's no way to treat a lady," Harry hissed. Lestrage's other hand came hurtling up towards Harry's face like a hammer towards the anvil. The White Knight was too quick and Harry ducked anyway, slipping underneath the incoming arm. He twisted as he did so, jamming his shoulder into Lestrage's ribs, and then tugged hard on the Death Eater's arm. Lestrage was forced into a front flip and landed hard on his back in a classic judo throw. He then twisted Lestrage's arm so that the Death Eater's own wand was pointing into his throat, his hand clamped over Lestrage's so he could use the wand.

"*Stupefy!*" Harry shouted to give the curse added power. Rabastan Lestrage went limp.

"Are you alright?" he asked, rushing over to Alice Longbottom. Her leg seemed fine – perhaps the curse had ended when Lestrage passed out – but her arm was another matter. It was hanging at a grotesque angle and Harry could see the bone pushing the skin from below. Personally he was amazed she had not passed out from shock or pain.

"My wrist is broken," said Alice, she stared at her wrist as if surprised to see it like that. It had almost sounded like a question.

*Okay, maybe she is in shock*, Harry realised. He quickly summoned a large part of the door that someone had destroyed. He pressed it flat against her wrist, causing Alice to whimper slightly, then muttered a binding charm. Chords flew from his wand, binding her wrist to the make-shift splint. He wished he could finish it off by casting a numbing charm over her wrist, but he didn't know how. The best he could do was put her to sleep.

"*Stupefy!*"

Satisfied that she was safe, Harry stood back up, searching for another target.

He grabbed the nearest Death Eater by the arm as the man burst out of the smoke. As Harry spun him around, the man tripped over a fallen body and crashed to the ground. Recovering quickly, the Death Eater rolled over onto his back, aiming his wand up at Harry. A curse shot out of his wand, zooming up towards Harry's face, but Harry casually batted it away. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a flash as someone else sent another curse towards him. With a flick of his wand, Harry hoisted the floored Death Eater up into the path of the incoming curse like a human shield. The man screamed as a bolt of muddy brown light struck him in the chest. Before his cry had even faded, Harry had thrown the body at the Death Eater who had cast the spell. The man collapsed under the weight of his comrade. As the two men hit the floor, Harry looked around for any sign of the students.

Suddenly, he heard something that made his blood run cold.

*"Come on, you can do better than that!"*

His head snapped around in an instant, a chill running down his spine. Every muscle in his body tensed and his stomach clenched tightly as his eyes came to rest on his Godfather. Sirius was duelling with Bellatrix up by the veil, laughing at her, beckoning her to try again. Bellatrix's face was a sickening blend of rage and hysteria as she screamed another incantation. A jet of light escaped her wand and rocketed towards Sirius, who easily sidestepped with a flamboyant skip as if he was enjoying it.

*My God, it's happening again!*

He glanced from Bellatrix to Sirius to the veil. *No*, he thought with determination, clenching his fists tightly. *It can't happen again! I will not watch him die again!*

"NO!" screamed Harry desperately. "SIRIUS! RUN!"

Harry darted across the room towards him straight through the middle of a duel, not caring about the incoming curses. Sirius paused for a second and looked over at Harry, his eyes leaving Bellatrix and a confused expression plastered on his face. He stared at Harry for a fraction of a second before turning back to Bellatrix, but it was too late. Harry had distracted him at the worst possible moment.

The second jet of light hit him squarely on the chest. The laughter had not quite died from his face, but his eyes widened with shock. It seemed to take Sirius an age to fall: his body curved in a graceful arc as he sank backwards through the ragged veil hanging from the arch. Harry saw the look of mingled fear and surprise on his godfather's wasted, once handsome face as he fell through the ancient doorway and disappeared behind the veil, which fluttered for a moment as though in a high wind, then fell back into place. (*Rowling, 2003*)

Harry couldn't move. He stood rooted to the spot, the revelation of what had just happened thundering in his mind. *No, no, no... what did I do?* It was his fault! He had distracted Sirius at precisely the wrong time – just when he needed to concentrate, Harry had foolishly called out to

him. If only he had kept quiet! He had come here to help, not to make it worse! Harry's presence here was what had killed him...again. The image of Sirius falling was burned into his retina. He seemed to have taken an age to fall. Why had Harry not tried to summon him? He felt sick. His legs felt numb and tears were forming in his eyes. *It was my fault!* The thought repeated over and over in his mind. Was it his fault in his own world as well?

*Sirius!* Harry opened his mouth to scream the name out loud, but someone else got there first.

"SIRIUS!"

The name echoed around the cavernous room, but it was not Harry's voice. It was a high-pitched shriek, the cry of a girl. Harry turned to look for the speaker amid the smoke. Suddenly there was a surge of motion and a flash of blond hair as Katie darted across the room towards the archway. She charged through the middle of a duel, knocking both combatants aside. She had almost made it before Remus Lupin emerged from the smoke and grabbed her. His strong arms wrapped around her waist, and he lifted her clean off the ground and dragged her away.

"SIRIUS!" she cried again. "Let go! SIRIUS!"

She was fighting Remus with everything she had. Her arms flailed, elbows hitting Remus, her nails scratched at his hands and her legs kicked out against nothing as she fought him off, so desperate to get to the veil, so desperate to get to Sirius.

*Shut up!* thought Harry viciously. His mind was suddenly full of anger. He was angry with himself, but he felt the need to lash out, to blame someone. He needed someone to blame and in absence of Snape, and he had found his victim. *Shut up you stupid bint*, he thought viciously, glaring at Katie. *He's mine. My Godfather, my friend, not yours!*

An explosion next to him awoke Harry from his guilt-ridden stupor. The flash of heat on the side of his face was tremendous and Harry turned away, crouching and covering himself with his cloak to block out the heat as debris landed all around him. When the danger had passed he rose to his feet and glanced around once more. Katie was still struggling with Remus, but the werewolf was managing to get her away from the danger. She was safe, he realised, which was more than Sirius. The image of him falling flashed over and over his mind.

*FOCUS!* snapped the Dark Knight, impatiently. *You can cry later to your heart's content but for now, pull yourself together. Stop sobbing like a schoolgirl and concentrate on your objective. Get the students the hell out of here!*

Burying the image of Sirius falling, Harry looked around the room. In the corner, he saw Frank Longbottom wrestling with a Death Eater. Neville was cowering in the corner, while his father fought. Frank summoned the man to him and, cupping his fists, swung at the man in mid-flight, breaking the man's jaw and sending him crashing into unconsciousness. He just had time to get off another spell before another volley of curses shot out of the smoke. As Harry watched, Frank's opponents increased in number as four more Death Eaters advanced, stepping over their fallen comrades. Harry hesitated for a fraction of a second on coming face to face with Frank

Longbottom again, but thrust the thought aside. Here he had lived and raised his son, here he was not the bitter old man Harry had met in the other world. However, he was in grave danger.

Harry charged over towards them, withdrawing the Dark Knight's sword, which he had liberated from Riddle's office an hour before. He pulled it free from the strap across his back, though he kept the scabbard attached – enough blood had been spilled today. Frank had moved in front of Neville to protect him, but the Death Eaters were closing in as Harry surged towards them.

Harry burst out of the chaos towards his trapped friend. As he arrived he spun 360 degrees to gain momentum and sank to one knee, scooping the sheathed sword into the back of the knees of the nearest Death Eater. The move swept the legs clean out from under the man, sending his feet high into the air and causing him to land painfully on his head. In the same movement Harry rose back up to his full height, continuing to spin and gathering more momentum before swinging the sword as hard as he could into the back of the head of another Death Eater.

Coming to a stop just as the first two hit the deck, Harry found himself face to face with the two remaining Death Eaters. He threw the sword lightly to the next Death Eater who, on reflex, caught it with both hands, leaving none to use a wand or to defend himself. Harry lifted his leg and, shouting a Blasting Charm as he did, slammed his boot into the man's chest. White sparks erupted from his chest as Harry's boot connected and the spell launched the man backwards, slamming him into the wall. The man lost his grip on the sword in the process and it fell to the floor at Harry's feet. Harry hooked the toe of his boot underneath it and flicked it upwards, catching it at chest height with his right hand. He turned to the last Death Eater, bringing the sword crashing down towards his head. The man reacted instantly, raising a hand and catching the scabbard as it descended. He stood eye to eye with Harry, looking victorious. Harry shrugged and gave the sword a tug. It came effortlessly free from the scabbard. He slashed at the man's leg, cutting a deep but not fatal cut across the man's thigh. The man cried out in pain, clutching his leg with his hands, leaving none to protect his head. Harry raised the sword and brought it down handle-first on the man's head, sending him crashing into unconsciousness.

As the last Death Eater hit the floor, Harry looked up at the Longbottoms. Frank looked cautious and still had his wand aimed at Harry, while Neville stared at him with awe. His jaw was so low it was practically scraping the floor.

"Harry...how...what...wow," Neville stammered as words appeared to fail him. Frank lowered his wand, a look of confusion crossing his face.

"Get the others out, now!" said Harry in a hard voice, his face neutral. He had lost sight of Ron, Ginny, Luna, and Hermione amongst the mass of curses and bodies. God, he hoped they were okay. He had gotten Sirius killed already, he didn't need anyone else dying. What would Katie say when she found out?

*FOCUS!*

"Take your friends and run!" Harry ordered Neville as he thrust him towards the exit. "Frank, make sure they make it!"

Neither father nor son objected to the order and both started to head off to Harry's right, but Neville froze after only a few paces.

"Harry, look!" shouted Neville pointing upwards. "RIDDLE!"

Harry turned just in time to see Tom Riddle come sailing over the top of the stairs and down onto the floor of the room. With a flick of his wand, the Death Eater fighting with Luna was launched off his feet and slammed into a wall. Two of the metal torch-holders wrapped themselves around his arms and stomach, holding him securely in place.

Harry raised his wand instinctively in defence as he recognised the man who had killed his parents. The Headmaster turned to face him, hesitating for a moment as he came face to face with what he had suspected for weeks: there was another side to Harry Potter. But never in his nightmares had he imagined this. Tom Riddle and the Dark Knight stared at each other for what seemed like forever. Harry felt Riddle eyes scanning him, lingering for just a second on the sword, the wand, the armour, and then settle on his eyes. There was a hint of regret behind the wariness in Riddle's eyes but it was gone a second later.

*OOF!*

Something yanked Harry backwards through the air, as if caught by a summoning charm. He lost his grip on his sword as he slammed back first into the wall and then fell to the floor, managing to land on one knee. Ignoring the pain in his back, Harry looked around, searching for whoever cast the spell.

*CRASH!*

Harry only just had time to duck as a chunk of rubble the size of a basketball shot through the air and nearly took his head off. As Harry dodged the incoming Bludger, he saw the Death Eater responsible. Harry raised his wand to attack, but before he could utter a spell, the man Disapparated. He reappeared instantly a few inches in front of Harry and before even the Dark Knight could react, the Death Eater picked him up by the lapels, and thrust him back into the wall. Harry grunted in pain as his back connected with the stone again. The Death Eater was nearly seven feet high and built like a tank. Thinking quickly, Harry rammed his fist into the inside of the man's elbow, forcing the arm to bend. He then grabbed the Death Eater's wrist and twisted, freeing himself from the vice. He had just gotten away when the giant grabbed him again and with a tremendous show of strength thrust him back into the wall.

Again Harry bit back the pain as he collided with the wall.

Suddenly another man jumped on the giant's back and wrapped his arms around the colossal neck. Harry felt his grip slacken as the huge Death Eater released him to contend with the new arrival. The man looked like a Death Eater to Harry, with long black hair, sharp dark eyes and a handsome, if somewhat, pale face. He was also putting up a good fight, for as the giant flailed wildly in an attempt to dislodge him the newcomer adjusted his grip on the man's neck, and then pulled backwards with a sudden heave.

Harry heard the crack above the racket as the giant's neck broke, and his body fell limply to the floor, his killer landing calmly on his feet. Harry raised his wand in response to the white mask hanging loosely around the man's neck. He was clearly a Death Eater, and looked somewhat familiar to Harry though he couldn't place him.

"Go!" hissed the Death Eater impatiently. "Get those damn kids out of here!"

Harry didn't need to be told twice and headed back into the melee, not taking his eyes off or daring to show his back to the Death Eater until the man was gone. Harry's eyes scanned for another student.

A tall blond Death Eater was duelling with Ginny not far to Harry's right. Harry crossed over to them in five paces, arriving just as the man sidestepped Ginny's curse. The man had unknowingly stepped right in front of Harry, who grasped the Death Eater around the neck in the same sleeper hold he had seen used a moment before. Harry, however had no intention of killing the man, he simply held him long enough for Ginny to send a second Stunner straight into his chest. He released the body, which fell limply to the floor like a sack of potatoes.

"Get out of here!" Harry commanded her as she stared wide-eyed at him. "NOW!"

Harry turned back to the veil. The tattered cloth moved gently, as if caught in a light breeze. It was almost as if someone was moving behind it... *Sirius, I'm sorry. It's all my fault.*

*FOCUS!*

He knew from experience that this was a cruel tease and that there was no coming back. Harry had seen it all before – Sirius was gone. Poor Katie – his anger with her had evaporated and was now replaced by pity, for Harry knew what she would be feeling right now. Sirius had been her Godfather this world, or at least someone she cared about deeply, for Grindelwald had chosen him to lure her here. Sirius had been there for her, just as he had been there for Harry in his world, and now he was gone, largely thanks to Harry. He could imagine what Katie was feeling because he had felt it all before. He knew what she was thinking, what she would...*bollocks!*

Harry suddenly realised exactly what was going on, and what was about to happen. What would he do in her shoes? He didn't have to imagine, for he had once been there himself. He knew exactly what she was going to do. He glanced around quickly, his eyes scanning the flurry of movement looking for blonde hair. Where was she? He looked around again, his sharp eyes darting from duel to duel, searching for any sign of the Girl-Who-Lived. He found none. Katie had gone, and Harry knew where: Bellatrix.

"Where's Katie?" called Neville, having also noticed her absence. "She was right here."

The remaining Order members looked around, searching for their saviour. Harry was already a step ahead.

"She's gone after Bellatrix," shouted Harry, picking up his sword and scabbard, but not putting them back in the folds of his robes.

"What?" gasped Lupin, a look of terror on his face. "Bellatrix will tear her apart. How do you know? What are you even doing here? Where did you get that sword?"

Harry blanked out the barrage of questions and looked over at Riddle. He was engaged in a duel with two more Death Eaters. In Harry's world Dumbledore had come to his aid, but it seemed that Riddle was too busy to look after Katie. It was up to Harry.

"I know, because that's what I did," said Harry to Lupin. "The rest isn't important right now."

A look of confusion crossed the werewolf's face as Harry spoke. He opened his mouth to speak again but Harry cut him off.

"Get the students out of here, Moony. I'll take care of Katie." He didn't wait for a response before turning and sprinting off up the stairs.

He could remember exactly what it was like, the hatred that had flowed through him when he had tried *that* curse. He remembered the pain and anguish that had driven him to do it, the anger that had placed him beyond the capacity for rational thought. That was exactly what Katie was feeling at this precise moment. She would try the curse – she would fall to the same temptation he had done. He knew Bellatrix had deserved it, but he also had known that he shouldn't have done it: they were called Unforgivable Curses for a reason. However in a blind rage no moral or rational thought could stop him, just as it wouldn't stop Katie. More to the point, if history was repeating itself, Bellatrix wouldn't be the only one in the Entrance Hall. Last year, Harry had been unable to defend himself, just as Katie would be now. Harry wasn't as powerful as Dumbledore, and Dumbledore had failed to kill Grindelwald – this wasn't going to be easy. Harry thrust the thought out of his mind as he burst out of the Department of Mysteries into the corridor. He just hoped that he was fast enough.

Harry hurtled along the corridor to the lift, but the doors were already closed. He looked up at the half clock above the doors, which showed which floor the lifts were on. One was at L, the lobby, the other was at 2, but was climbing and fast approaching the lobby. Katie was hot on Bellatrix's tail. He paused for a second. Dare he Flame? What if Grindelwald or Bellatrix saw him? He would lose the element of surprise, his secret weapon. Also, the building was full of recording Orbs – if he Flamed, the Ministry would have proof he was an illegal Animagus, and since the Ministry was crawling with spies, if the Ministry knew, Grindelwald knew. No, his Flaming needed to remain a secret for now. Resorting to plan B, Harry kicked open the door to the stairwell, the same one he had climbed during the escape from his trial in the Unholy Land. He sprinted up the stairs three at a time, higher and higher. The exertion stung at his legs but he shrugged it off. He tried to ignore the pain, keep his mind focused, but it was hard work. Higher and higher he ran, up flight after flight. His lungs felt fit to burst and his heart pounded in his chest but he kept going. Breathing was becoming harder and his muscles ached, but he pushed onwards. Every second that passed was a second he knew that Katie was potentially in danger. Every second he delayed could mean the difference between life and death.

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"Never used an Unforgivable before, have you, girl?" Bellatrix screeched. "You have to want to cause pain, you have to enjoy it. Here, let me show you how it's done! *CRUCIO!*"

Katie threw herself to the side, diving out the way of the incoming curse. As she hit the polished floor she began to roll, quickly moving into cover behind the fountain. Once safe, she climbed back up to a crouching position, still covered by the fountain. Peering out she saw Bellatrix advancing, a manic smile on her twisted face.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are!" screamed Bellatrix, manoeuvring around the fountain as she tried to get a clear shot at Katie.

She thought this was a game, but Sirius has paid with his life. She felt yet another pulse of anger directed at Bellatrix. Katie could hear her footsteps echo on the far side of the fountain coming nearer and nearer. She raised her wand, ready for the second when Bellatrix became visible.

Then there was silence.

Why wasn't she moving? Where had she gone? Katie peered out, looking for the Death Eater, her wand raised, ready for the attack.

"GOTCHA!"

Suddenly Katie felt a pair of hands grab her from behind, and throw her roughly to the floor. Ignoring the pain, Katie turned to look up at Bellatrix who stood over her, a smirk plastered across her mad face. She felt an overwhelming desire to wrap her hands around Bellatrix's throat, to choke the life out of her. She deserved it for what she had done to Sirius.

Katie raised her wand, "*Cruc...*"

"*Expelliarmus!*"

Bellatrix was too quick. Katie's wand was plucked out of her hand while she herself was sent skidding across the floor. She had only just come to a stop when Bellatrix was upon her again.

"'Ickle Kitty-Kat..." Bellatrix cooed in a patronising voice, as if talking to a four-year-old, "give me the Pwophecy and I'll pwomise to spare your worthless 'ickle life." For some bizarre reason, Katie found this amusing.

"Well then, you're going to have to kill me," Katie sneered, laughing manically, "because it's gone! It broke as I was helping Ginny up the stairs. It's gone!"

"Liar!" screamed Bellatrix, taking a step backwards. Katie detected a definite note of panic in her voice. This only served to make her laugh harder. She was as demented as Bellatrix, and the fear in the Death Eater's voice was like music to her ears. Her laughter only infuriated Lestrage further, and Katie saw blotches appear on the woman's pale complexion. However, Bellatrix was not giving up that easy.

"No, you must have it!" she bellowed adamantly. "*Accio Prophecy! Accio Prophecy!*" She swished her wand at Katie in sheer desperation. Her eyes grew wider and face paler with each spell as it dawned on her that Katie really didn't have it, that she really had destroyed it.

"Told you so," said Katie smugly as she climbed back up to her feet, a smirk plastered on her face. "It's gone – you failed! Bye, bye, Bellatwix," she added in an imitation of her baby voice, and finishing it off with a sarcastic wave.

"NOOO!" screamed Bellatrix, a high-pitched shriek that would have made a Banshee recoil.

"Aww, ickle baby Bella bwoke master's toy," cooed Katie as she reached down to pick up her wand. "Will Master be cwoss?"

Bellatrix glanced around in panic and then threw her head back and cried out, "Master, I tried, please don't punish me!"

"It's no use!" laughed Katie, advancing on the desperate witch. "He can't hear you!"

"Can't I, Miss Bell?" hissed an icy voice in Katie's left ear.

She spun on the spot, and her jaw dropped open. Grindelwald, the Master of Assassins, had appeared in the middle of the Atrium. He looked as terrifying as the last time she had seen him in the graveyard, only he was not a skeletal as before. He was stronger, and that only served to make him more formidable. He stood on the edge of the fountain, draped in black, a wand hanging limply at his side. Katie held hers up to face him, but he obviously didn't feel she was enough of a threat to raise his own.

Grindelwald stepped down from the fountain and walked casually towards Katie, who stood frozen in fear. Her eyes were wide and she opened and closed her mouth repeatedly like a fish gasping for air. No, he couldn't be here, he just couldn't! She took a step back as he advanced, her eyes never leaving his. He paused a few metres from her, and Katie felt his piercing stare move up and down her body.

"Master, it wasn't my fault," pleaded Bellatrix from somewhere behind her.

Katie glanced back and saw that the Death Eater was on her knees, cowering. Her master didn't so much as look at her.

"Silence, Bella," sneered the Dark Lord, his tone icy. "I have not entered the Ministry of Magic to hear your snivelling apologies. I will deal with you later. Now, girl," he continued, advancing on a petrified Katie, "where is my Prophecy?"

"It's gone," said Katie, trying to keep the fear from her voice.

"She lies," screamed Bellatrix immediately.

Grindelwald stared at her appraisingly for a second before sighing. "No, she is not lying," said the Dark Lord, his tone betraying his disappointment, a disappointment that Bellatrix would most

likely feel later. "I see the truth looking back at me from her worthless mind. Months of preparation, months of effort...and my so-called Death Eaters have once again allowed a mere school-girl to thwart me. It seems that if you want something done right..." He raised his wand, levelling it at Katie. "You have to do it yourself. Good-bye, Miss Bell..."

As he drew the wand back to cast the curse, Katie knew that it was over. She had not even opened her mouth to resist; her mind was blank, her body exhausted, and her wand was pointing uselessly at the floor. She stood rooted to the spot in fear, and the only move she could make was to close her eyes, to try to block out the last two words she would ever hear.

*"AVADA KEDAVRA!"*

Katie heard the words, heard the familiar sound of rushing death that the Dementors so often forced her to relive.

*CRASH!*

She was roughly thrown to the floor by the force of an explosion just in front of her. As she hit the marble floor, her eyes flew open just in time to see the remains of the House Elf from the Fountain of Magical Brethren cascade down to the floor in a storm of debris. Katie had not done that, so who the hell had? The same question seemed to be on the Dark Lord's mind, for they both turned to see a figure standing on the edge of the ruined fountain in the same spot where Grindelwald had stood just a few moments before.

Katie's jaw dropped as she recognised the figure cloaked in black.

*It couldn't be...*

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"It was foolish to come here tonight, Grindelwald," said Harry calmly, quoting Dumbledore as he stepped down off the fountain. He only hoped he could live up to what Dumbledore had done. His mentor had made the statues come to life, whereas Harry had merely levitated one. He hoped he was up to this task, otherwise both he and Katie would end up dead. Would Riddle arrive in time to help? Was he even coming? Harry doubted it.

"The Aurors are on their way," Harry bluffed in a firm voice, keeping his wand aimed at the man people called The Assassin. As he stood in the entrance hall not twenty feet away, Harry got his first clear look at the 'Deadliest Man On Earth'. He wore long black robes with a pointed hood, the shadow of which covered the top half of his face. His skin was deathly pale and his eyes dark, yet sparkling. The Dark Lord lowered his hood, revealing a surprising face. He had long black hair, much as Riddle did, except his face was very different. Grindelwald had a long, pointed face and a long, thin nose. In contrast to an almost white complexion, he had black lips and his eye sockets seemed very dark as well, giving him a haunted look, almost like a skeleton.

The Assassin stared unblinkingly at Harry, appraising his new foe. He was an imposing figure, more so than Voldemort in some respects. The icy feeling of dread one feels in one's stomach in

the presence of Voldemort was there, but without the inhuman face, the glowing red eyes, Grindelwald looked...incomplete. He looked human, and that somehow made him less scary than Voldemort. However, Grindelwald also had an edge about him. Voldemort was cold and calculating, but a very slow presence. Every move was slow and clinically precise, and then suddenly out of the blue he attacked, much like a snake. Grindelwald seemed as though he might snap any minute. His movements against Katie had been quick and fluid, like fire, not the ice of Voldemort. Also Grindelwald was not as thin as Voldemort, with broader shoulders and a bigger build. While Voldemort's fingers were like spiders, Grindelwald's look easily capable of crushing the life out of a man.

"The Aurors will be too late to save you, child," said Grindelwald, his voice no more than a whisper. He spoke not in the high-pitched shriek of Voldemort, but in a lower, softer voice that was almost a hiss. He turned to Harry, raising his wand sharply. "And it is not I who was foolish to come here. There is no hope of saving the girl, or yourself for that matter."

"Harry!" gasped Katie. "No! Run!"

Harry looked over at Katie, lying where she had fallen from the blast, her eyes wide with fear and surprise. He had to get her away from here. Unfortunately he didn't know how to make the statues come to life to guard her. He'd have to improvise. With a banishing charm, Harry caused Katie to slide away across the floor. Another spell sent the statue of the Goblin flying in the same direction. It landed on top of her, pinning her down and shielding her from attack. She couldn't move, but she was in cover.

"The girl is safe enough," said Harry without emotion, turning back to Grindelwald and stepping closer to the Dark Lord. "But saving her was only one of my reasons for coming here tonight. The other reason is on behalf of a man I believe you once knew, Albus Dumbledore."

Grindelwald's eyebrows narrowed. He shot a piercing stare at Harry. "Who are you?" he asked in an icy cold voice that concealed all emotion.

"I've been hearing that a lot recently," answered Harry with a shrug. "My name is Harry Potter."

"Ahh," breathed Grindelwald, a look of comprehension on his face. He looked over to where Bellatrix was cowering by a pillar, watching the exchange intently. "The prodigal son returns. How are your parents?"

"At peace," said Harry with a pointed glance at Bellatrix. With a flick of his wand, Harry sent Bellatrix soaring backwards into the chair behind the guard's desk. The witch lost her grip on her wand, and only just had time to scream before chords shot out of his wand and bound her to the chair.

"Run, Harry!" Katie shouted desperately from her prison in the corner.

"I was told that you too, were dead," continued Grindelwald conversationally, ignoring Katie's interruption.

"I died, certainly," acknowledged Harry. "But dead is not quite right."

"Most people have the courtesy to stay dead," replied the Assassin.

"That's rich coming from you," said Harry, stepping over a piece of statue as he began to circle the Dark Lord. "But you needed a Horcrux to beat the Reaper. I, on the other hand, am just plain brilliant."

At the word Horcrux, Harry saw Grindelwald's eyebrows shoot for the sky. Even the master Occlumens could not shield his surprised reaction. Harry suspected that the Dark Lord's world had suddenly shrunk, and he didn't feel quite as immortal as he had ten seconds ago. Someone else knew about Horcruxes. Right now he would be asking himself if he was sure it was safe, the seeds of doubt had been sown.

This was a potentially dangerous game trying to infuriate the Dark Lord. Harry had one card to play – surprise – and he had to get it right. His eyes darted around, taking in his surroundings as well as watching The Assassin. Grindelwald thought he was dealing with a schoolboy with no experience. Malfoy had thought Harry was a wimp, nearly a squib, and if he reported to his father, who was a servant of the Dark Lord, then Grindelwald would think that Harry didn't know his wand from his quill. The Dark Lord would never consider a schoolboy to be a threat to him, and the lack of concern was clearly visible in the Dark Lord's eyes. Harry knew that Grindelwald's arrogance was something he could use. Grindelwald would never expect him to be as strong or as fast as he was, so it all came down to surprise. Harry's heart was pounding in his chest, his stomach tight, and he was sweating. Somehow, he managed to keep his face neutral, and appear calm.

"And what would you know of such magic?" sneered The Assassin after a lengthy pause. Harry knew he now had the Dark Lord's full attention, but he had to be careful.

"Enough," replied Harry easily, avoiding an answer.

"Then you will also know that I cannot allow you to walk out of here alive," said the Dark Lord, his voice suddenly loosing the hiss and becoming lower and colder as he extending his wand threateningly towards Harry.

"Fine," said Harry in a flippant tone. "Have it your way."

He raised his wand and empty hand, bending his legs slightly, adopting a good fighting stance roughly ten feet from the Dark Lord. Grindelwald made no such move, standing tall, his arm outstretched towards Harry.

"Your move, boy," sneered Grindelwald in a low, gravelly voice. "Sporting chance."

"Too kind," said Harry, nodding. He had a rough plan worked out – now it was a matter of actually putting it into practice. He took a deep breath and prepared to strike. *Here we go.*

***STUPEFY!***

Grindelwald casually flicked Harry's spell aside.

"*Crucio*," he hissed.

Harry instantly sidestepped, flicking his wand as he did.

"*Reducto!*" He took a step forward to close the gap between them.

Grindelwald was not expecting this sudden burst of speed and only just managed to raise a shield in time. Harry didn't even break stride. He sent another Stunner heading towards the Dark Lord who sidestepped, sweeping his wand in an arc, unleashing a wave of purple light towards Harry.

Harry spun out of the way, stepping closer to the Dark Lord now only a few feet from him. Holding back his more advanced magic for just a few more seconds, Harry tried again.

"*Expelliarmus!*"

Grindelwald looked almost bored as he batted the charm away with the back of his hand and lowered his wand to his side. He seemed most unimpressed with Harry. Now was a good time to act.

"*Crucio!*" hissed Grindelwald lazily.

*NOW!*

Harry reacted instantly with all the fury of the Dark Knight. He spun out of the way, raising his right leg, and swept the Dark Lord's wand aside with a parrying kick, then levelled his wand at the Dark Lord's throat before he had even finished spinning.

*Sectumsempra!*

Grindelwald managed to sidestep, but not quite quickly enough. Harry saw a spray of crimson shoot up as the Dark Lord spun away, a look of sheer disbelief on his face. He stopped after two complete revolutions, his face contorted with rage and a line of crimson above his left ear. Harry was ready for him. The ring of blue light was already in his hand, ready to capture the Dark Lord's own spell.

The Dark Lord instantly moved his wand in a slashing motion and a beam of yellow light surged towards Harry. Harry sidestepped, bringing the ring up to meet the curse. His aim was true and the yellow ball of light was trapped inside the blue ring. Harry hurled the ring back at the Dark Lord, curse and all. Harry saw the expression of shock on his face as his own curse zoomed back towards its caster, the blue ring still circling it. Grindelwald raised a shield in time, but it was no use. As the joint curse hit the shield, it exploded in a shower of blue sparks, shattering the shield and sending several smaller beams of yellow light in various directions. One of them grazed across the Dark Lord's thigh. He hissed in pain and surprise as several more drops of crimson fell to the floor.

Harry didn't let up. "*Electrio!*"

A bolt of lightning erupted out of his wand and fifty thousand volts of electricity surged towards the Dark Lord, who this time managed to block it.

This was no childish duel. Not only was Harry throwing back hard curses at the Dark Lord, he had also drawn blood. He had landed a hit on The Assassin, something that only two men had previously managed: Tom Riddle and Albus Dumbledore. Harry saw the look of surprise turn to anger. From the little he knew of Grindelwald, no one did this to the Dark Lord and lived.

*BANG!*

The ground in front of Harry exploded and he was forced backwards, skidding away across the floor. Harry sprung off his shoulders back to his feet, and to his surprise found that the Dark Lord had lowered his wand and was standing motionless, staring at Harry appraisingly. Part of Harry wanted to attack, but something made him hesitate. Was it, perhaps, honour?

"Impressive," hissed Grindelwald, sweeping his wand over his leg. The gash on his thigh closed itself like a zip, shrinking into nothing. He repeated the same movement on his head. "Riddle must be so proud."

"Actually, I'd just as soon as see him hanging from a rope," shot back Harry, "as I would you. Funny old world, isn't it?"

He remained guarded in case the Dark Lord made a move, but somehow he felt sure he wouldn't. Why was he distilling honour onto a man who deserved none? Harry didn't know, but it seemed wrong to attack him.

Lowering his wand, Grindelwald reached up and unfastened the cloak that had been wrapped around his shoulders. The cloak fell to the floor, leaving the Dark Lord free to move about unencumbered. He wore all black, ranging from the boots and trousers to the tunic he wore over the top. Only his hands and face were visible – pale, white flesh which contrasted sharply against the jet-black colour of his attire.

Harry followed suit, removing the black cloak he wore and dropping it along with the sword he was carrying on his back, exposing the glowing white underneath. He noticed that he was similarly dressed to the Dark Lord, except he was covered in white, not midnight black. Before leaving Hogwarts he had pulled out his old combat gear, but turned them all white as they had been the last time he had worn them. This was the White Knight, the one who had defeated Voldemort. He wore a long-sleeved jumper, which concealed his armour beneath, as well as combats held up by a belt from which two wands descended, and finished with white boots and gloves.

Now that both opponents were free of their bothersome clothing, they once again turned to face each other. Harry saw Grindelwald's neck and back arch forward as he sank into a small bow, his eyes never leaving Harry's own. Grindelwald was honouring the old traditions of Duelling, and guided by the Dark Knight, Harry followed suit, bowing ever so slightly. He was not stupid enough to trust The Assassin, and kept his wand arm tense and his eyes glued on his opponent.

"Until death?" hissed the Dark Lord menacingly.

Harry hesitated. While he was mortal, the Dark Lord effectively wasn't, so there was little point. Then again, he couldn't let himself appear as weak. He had one chance – to bluff.

"Since neither of us can die, that seems pointless," he replied evenly.

He was satisfied to see the Dark Lord raise an eyebrow as he debated the possibility of duelling someone who claimed to be immortal.

Slowly a small smirk appeared across the Dark Lord's lips. "Then I give you one last chance, boy. Join me. Stand at my side, and you will live."

Harry managed to keep his face straight and in mock seriousness he spoke again. "Well that does sound fair," he said, sounding pensive. "But I've got a better deal. How about you surrender, and then I don't have to beat seven shades of shit out of you and drag whatever's left off to Azkaban? Sound fair?"

Grindelwald's eyebrows narrowed and Harry saw his body tense in anger and determination. This time Grindelwald knew what was coming. Harry faced The Assassin in a fighting stance, bracing himself for battle, and took a deep breath, psyching himself up.

There was an awkward pause. Was the Dark Lord waiting for him, or should he wait? In chess white moves first, but...

Suddenly The Assassin moved. His wand flicked and a bolt of green light came hurtling towards Harry who dropped instantly to one knee, his wand aimed at the floor. Harry sent a bolt of red light into the marble, which snaked quickly across the polished stone towards the Dark Lord no more than ten feet away. It reached him in half a second. Just as the Killing Curse passed over Harry's head, the floor around Grindelwald's feet erupted like a circle of geysers. Grindelwald's feet left the ground as he sailed gracefully forward and landed three feet in front of Harry, not a scratch on him. Harry rose instantly to his feet.

"*Crucio!*" snapped the Dark Lord.

"*Sanctius!*" shouted Harry, raising his wand up to Grindelwald's as if parrying a sword. The two tips collided just as the spells left them. A massive ball of turquoise and red sparks erupted with a deafening bang, the force of the collision pushing both their hands away. Grindelwald used this momentum to circle his wand around for another strike, this one lower. Again, Harry thrust his wand at Grindelwald's, slamming his shield into the wand. The explosion was bigger this time, and more powerful. Harry felt his feet leave the ground as he was propelled away from the Dark Lord. Throwing his weight backwards, he somersaulted and landed on his feet in the kneeling position, looking up in time to see Grindelwald soar gracefully backwards and land calmly on his feet.

"*Oxrempo!*" shouted Harry, rising to his feet also. He sent a bone-breaking curse at the Dark Lord's neck. The curse would shatter every vertebra in his neck if it hit, but Grindelwald ducked to the side. Harry stepped forward, parrying another curse as he did, and attacked once more.

*SECTUMSEMPRA!*

"*CRUCIO!*"

The two beams of light connected in mid-air, forging a link between Harry and Grindelwald. He felt a wave of heat on his face from the power of the magic. Suddenly the connection was gone as Grindelwald let go and stepped to the side, unleashing another stream of blue light towards Harry.

*Sanctius!*

It was the strongest shield he knew, though it was still small. The blue curse hit the shield with the force of a cannon ball, and Harry only just managed to keep his balance. He felt his feet slide along the polished floor as the force of the curse bore down on him. Grindelwald continued to press, forcing him further backwards under the seemingly infinite weight of the curse. The Assassin stepped forward, increasing the pressure on the shield, which was all that protected Harry from the curse... whatever it was.

Harry felt himself break into a sweat as the force on the shield increased. He knew he had to concentrate for this was his magic, not his physical strength, keeping the curse at bay. If his shield failed then God only knew what that curse might do to him.

*Come on Harry, concentrate! Your will was stronger than Voldemort's in the graveyard. You forced his wand to submit. Concentrate!*

Summoning up all his determination, all his power, Harry pushed against Grindelwald's attack as hard as he could, thrusting his shield forward. The stream of blue light was thrown back towards its creator. With a cry of anger, Grindelwald crossed his arms across his stomach and then threw them outwards, standing in a star-jump position. A wall of red light appeared in front of him, absorbing the curse as if it were nothing.

Before Harry could recover, Grindelwald had sent another Killing Curse in his direction. Quickly Harry summoned a piece of debris, which flew up into the path of the curse, shattering as it collided with the jet of green light. As Grindelwald prepared his next spell, Harry brandished his wand like a whip in a manner similar to what Dumbledore had done last year. The fiery whip sprung out from the end of his wand and wrapped itself around Grindelwald's leg before The Assassin could move. Harry gave it a sharp tug and the Dark Lord was swept off his feet just as another Killing Curse left his wand. As The Assassin lost balance, the curse flew up towards the ceiling, shattering the chandelier, which plummeted to the ground between them. Harry jumped backwards up onto the edge of the fountain to avoid being crushed as the huge mass of flames and crystals crashed onto the polished floor. The falling light may have missed him, but in jumping out of the way he had lost concentration on the spell and the fiery whip had vanished.

As he turned his attention back to Grindelwald, there was already a huge ball of dragon-fire zooming towards him with alarming speed. It was too late to move so Harry did the only thing he could think of – he dived backwards into the icy waters of the fountain with a tremendous splash. Lying on his back beneath the water, he saw the sky turn orange as the fire passed over his head. The freezing water assaulted his skin as he lay there, and he felt his lungs instantly tighten as the cold pierced his clothing. Luckily for Harry the water also washed away the fatigue of the earlier fight and helped to focus his mind. It didn't exactly give him time to rest though, for no sooner had the orange glow faded when he saw the figure of the Dark Lord appear on the edge of the pool looking down at him. Harry couldn't speak as he was underwater, but his concentration was enough.

He fired a blasting curse up at The Assassin from underwater. The glowing orange light burst out of the water like a missile, and the Dark Lord only just managed to conjure a shield at the last moment. Grindelwald, shield and all, were launched high into the air and slammed into the wall fifteen feet away by the force of the curse as Harry immersed from the water once more, dripping wet, but ready. A quick glance around the room showed him that the statue of the wizard was now on fire, and a large section of the fountain was now charcoal black.

Harry quickly climbed out of the fountain back on to dry land and held out his hand to where he had discarded his cloak and tools. The sword obediently leapt from the scabbard into his waiting hand, and Harry crossed the sword and his wand. The incantation seemed to come to him from nowhere, from deep inside the Dark Knight's arsenal, but it was terrifyingly effective. As Harry thrust the weapons towards the Dark Lord, a white bolt of lightning shot out of where the wand and sword joined and surged towards The Assassin. The lightning missed Grindelwald, snaking into the wall behind him, but it did not vanish. Harry moved the wand and sword to his right, and the continuous lightning followed suit, twisting and crackling across the room, along the wall behind Grindelwald, leaving jagged, scorched trails of black on the tiled surface.

As the lightning snaked towards where Grindelwald had climbed back to his feet, The Assassin swept his wand in a large circle at arm's length and a thick green shield formed in front of him. The lightning didn't seem to harm that shield. Harry saw Grindelwald sneer at him from behind the shield before turning his back and holding his arms up high.

Suddenly the tiles on the wall detached themselves from the cement and hovered in midair. Harry realised what was about to happen less than a second before it actually did and he reacted instantly.

*"Accio Centaur!"*

The giant golden centaur statue flew off the fountain and sailed towards Harry, only fractionally quicker than the incoming tiles. Harry dived behind the statue as all around him jagged tiles slammed into the floor and the centaur, like a monsoon of knives. He could feel the continuous thuds of the tiles embedding themselves into the solid stone floor, splitting the stone and turning a once polished floor into a lawn of jagged blades. It sounded like a stampede as the constant thudding continued to assault his ears.

As the hailstorm of tiles subsided, Harry levitated the whole centaur, the far side of which was covered in embedded tiles, and threw the whole thing at Grindelwald. It had gone perhaps halfway when it exploded into a shower of sand. The Dark Lord flicked his wand and another spell was released. Harry didn't see it until a bolt of purple light came zooming through the sandstorm towards his face. He recognised it as the same spell that had put Hermione in hospital for a week the last time he had been here. He dived to the side and rolled.

As he came back up to his feet, he realised his mistake. The very spell he had used earlier was now being used against him. The fiery whip wrapped itself around his wrist. Harry gave it a tug, but he wasn't strong enough. The Dark Lord gave his wand a casual flick; the magic increased the pull one hundred fold. He felt his feet leave the ground as he was violently tugged back towards Grindelwald. Landing painfully on his front, he lost his grip on his wand and sword as sharp fragments of debris dug into his flesh where his armour did not protect him. He had less than a second to register that he had hit the floor before he found himself being dragged helplessly towards The Assassin, who as Harry watched, reached into his robes and pulled out what looked like a torch.

He flicked it as though it were one of those telescopic batons that the Muggle police now carried, and out of the handle shot a shimmering silver blade nearly a metre long. As the sword came sweeping down towards Harry's head, he wandlessly summoned his own sword from where it had fallen and thrust it upwards with his free hand to parry the attack. The blades connected with a thunderous clang that echoed around the room and the whip dissolved into nothing. Harry had just enough time to note the surprise in Grindelwald's eyes before he sprang off his shoulders, landing on his feet just in time to parry another attack. Harry quickly, sidestepped and circled, keeping The Assassin, clearly a skilled swordsman, in his line of sight. The Dark Lord lunged again and Harry made to parry, but The Assassin was too quick. It was only a feint and as Harry raised his blade, he felt Grindelwald's weapon slash across his stomach. Thankfully, his dragon scale chest-plate protected him.

Harry recoiled a few paces and looked down at his chest. There was a large slash across his stomach from which trails of white fabric were hanging. Through the gaping hole, his black dragon-scale armour was clearly visible.

*Idiot!* Harry cursed himself. It was a schoolboy error – he should have seen the feint coming a mile away! *Come on, concentrate; you're better than this.*

The Dark Lord lunged again, aiming to stab this time rather than a slash. Harry kept his hands high and twisted his wrists, sweeping the blade downwards to parry the strike. Guiding Grindelwald's sword away from him and using The Assassin's own momentum to guide him, Harry spun quickly on the spot. As he came back around he slashed horizontally, aiming at Grindelwald's back. The Assassin was a match for this and scooped his blade to the side to block Harry, but the Dark Knight was a dirty fighter. As Grindelwald moved to block, the Dark Knight released his right hand from the weapon and delivered a hard punch to Grindelwald's left cheek. It was The Assassin's turn to recoil in surprise and curse himself for not having seen such a simple move coming.

Harry twirled the sword about his wrist and smirked at the surprised Assassin, mocking him. Since they seemed an even match, he reckoned the best solution was to try to aggravate him and hope he made a mistake in his anger. Grindelwald lunged at Harry once again, slashing first to the left and then the right. As Harry parried, the older man used his strength to push Harry backward. The Dark Lord swung again and again, each time driving him backwards. He was clearly stronger than Harry, but Harry was experienced enough to know that it was not always strength that mattered – it was skill, and an enemy's strength could ultimately be their weakness.

Grindelwald's sword came crashing down towards Harry's head once more and Harry jumped backwards out of range. However, in stepping back he felt his back come up against the cold hard wall: he was trapped.

The Dark Lord thrust the point of the sword, aiming it straight at Harry's stomach. Harry reacted more out of instinct than anything. He jumped, casting a hovering charm on himself as he did, giving himself an extra boost. The sword sank deep into the wall, giving Harry the perfect point from which to jump. He kicked off the protruding sword as he rose and sailed gracefully over the Dark Lord's head in a front flip, landing easily behind the startled Assassin. He turned as he landed, swinging the sword at The Assassin's head before the man had to a chance to defend himself. Grindelwald stepped back out of range with lightening speed and Harry's blade met nothing but air.

Harry saw Grindelwald's wrist move and only just had time to register that something was hurtling towards his head before instinct took over. He swung his sword at the object out of pure reflex. The blade connected with a resounding clang as Harry batted the incoming knife out of the air and launching it across the room at a speed Babe Ruth would have been proud of. He swung again at Grindelwald, who ducked and spun out of reach, moving back into the centre of the room.

Being next to the sword that Grindelwald had left embedded in the wall presented an opportunity to the Dark Knight. Without taking his eyes off the unarmed Assassin, Harry yanked the sword out of the wall. He now had one in each hand and twirled them around his wrists simultaneously. Throwing them both lightly into the air, he swapping them around so that he held his own in his left hand and Grindelwald's in his right. Then in a sudden motion, he lunged with the two points aimed right at Grindelwald's chest. The Dark Lord was ready and moved in a blur of black fabric and steel as he twisted his sword free from Harry's grip and in one fluid motion slashed Harry across the back with it. Harry's armour once again protected him from injury, but his jumper was torn to shreds and was becoming a nuisance. He took the Katana back in his right hand.

Grindelwald lunged again and Harry parried, but the Dark Lord did not withdraw his blade. He continued to press it towards Harry, driving him back again. He had clearly noticed that he was stronger, if not more skilled than Harry, and was pressing his advantage. Harry kept his sword still, using all his strength to keep The Assassin's blade away from his body. Grindelwald moved again, releasing his left hand from the sword, and a split second too late Harry realised that he had summoned his knife back to him. He saw a flash of silver as the blade was thrust towards his face and whipped his head backwards to avoid the attack, but not fast enough. The blade connected with the underside of his jaw, slicing cleanly through the soft flesh. Luckily it missed his throat and jugular, just slicing into the bottom of his chin. He felt a flow of blood as the sticky

crimson liquid oozed out of the cut and down his front. Looking down he saw what had once been brilliant white was now covered in dust, black marks, and most disturbingly, what remained of the jumper's chest was now a bright shade of crimson.

The Dark Lord lunged again, and again Harry parried. This time it was Harry's turn to strike.

"*Conjunctivus!*" he croaked.

The curse hit the Dark Lord in his eyes, who roared in pain and retreated. Harry stepped back, bringing a hand up to inspect his throat. His hand came away red. He was bleeding heavily, and to make it worse the Dark Lord had managed a counter curse and was now able to see again. Harry didn't have more than a few seconds of rest. Every muscle in him ached. Where was help? Riddle should have been here by now.

Grindelwald raised the sword, ready to lunge again.

"*Expelliarmus!*" coughed Harry as best he could as he extended his hand towards Grindelwald. The Dark Lord moved forward into the oncoming charm, and casually threw the sword lightly up into the air. The spell struck him in the chest, but passed straight through without any effect. Once it had passed, he effortlessly caught the sword and brought it crashing down towards Harry's head in one move. Harry stepped out of range and brought his leg up. As the sword missed and headed towards the floor, he brought his foot down hard on the flat side of Grindelwald's blade. The Assassin couldn't hold onto the sword as Harry kicked downwards. He lost his grip as Harry held the sword flat to the ground with his foot. Before Grindelwald could even stand upright again, Harry had spun and thrust a hard sidekick into The Assassin's ribs.

The Dark Lord slid away over the polished floor then jumped back to his feet and wandlessly summoned his wand back to him. He must have realised that his best chance at winning was magic, at which he was clearly more powerful than Harry.

"*AVADA KEDAVRA!*"

The curse came hurtling towards Harry, who quickly dove out of the way, summoning his primary wand back to him as he slid.

"*SECTUMSEMPRA!*"

Harry sprang off his shoulders onto his feet again just as the Dark Lord sent another Killing Curse toward him.

*Gravitae Invertus!*

As he swished his wand, he felt the familiar sensation of his stomach reaching his throat as gravity turned upside down. His body inverted and he 'fell' up to the ceiling, narrowly avoiding the curse which smashed into the wall behind where he had stood, launching a cloud of dust into the air as the plaster exploded. Harry landed gently on his feet on a false skylight, and looked calmly 'up' at the ground. He was standing upright amongst the rafters, with gravity holding him 'down' on the ceiling. Blood was not running to his head, and even his hair was not dangling. He

saw Grindelwald standing on the floor aiming his wand into the cloud of dust where Harry had stood moments before. It was quite an odd experience staring 'up' at the ground.

Harry decided to rest for a few seconds. The duel was tiring and he didn't think he could go on much longer. He was breathing heavily and the bleeding on his jaw had not stopped. He had several other scratches from the storm of tiles, and it was entirely possible that his hip might even have a fragment of tile embedded in it. Blood dripped 'down' onto the ceiling from various wounds including his neck, which was still free-flowing. He bent over, placing his hands on his knees, trying to get his breath back. Below him, or above from his perspective, the dust had cleared. The Dark Lord was still pointing his wand at the dust, wondering where Harry had gone. Harry watched silently as the Dark Lord glanced around, aimed his wand in all directions except the one that was correct, as he was obviously thinking two dimensionally. Harry waited for a few more seconds before acting as he tried to get his energy back, which wasn't easy when suffering from blood-loss. Then, when he was sure the Dark Lord was about to look up, he summoned his second wand and aimed both down at Grindelwald simultaneously to increase the power of the curse.

"*REDUCTO!*" he shouted.

The curse left his two wands and zoomed towards The Assassin who looked up at the sound of his voice. Harry ended the spell that held him on the ceiling and he fell gently back to earth, landing on his feet on the ground. The spells had struck the ground where Grindelwald had stood less than a second earlier, sending up another storm of plaster which made it impossible to see and hard to breath. Harry saw a flash of green through the dust and knew what was coming his way.

He dived to his right, rolling as fast as he could behind the fountain where he could not be seen. He glanced over at Katie who was struggling to get out from underneath the centaur statue. Their eyes connected and in that instance Harry saw a myriad of emotions flicker through her – shock, anger, sadness, relief, and staunch determination. She pointed her wand over towards the other side of the room, presumably where Grindelwald was, and Harry could almost read her mind. He shook his head emphatically, every protective instinct he had aimed at her. She mustn't get involved. He might kill her.

'Stay where you are,' he mouthed to her silently. She shot him an annoyed look that clearly showed her displeasure at being tossed aside, but he couldn't worry about that now. He had a battle to win or they'd both be dead.

"You do not seek to kill me?" called Grindelwald as Harry sat with his back against the edge of the pond. From beyond the fountain he could hear footsteps on the rubble. He judged that the Dark Lord was at his seven o'clock, and coming around that side of the pool.

"There are worse things than death," called back Harry, his voice echoing eerily off the stone walls.

"Then you will not mind this: AVADA..."

*Arachnis!*

"...KEDAVRA."

A thin chord shot out of Harry's wand and adhered itself to the ceiling high above him. Harry held the wand tightly as the chord retracted, pulling him sharply upwards and across the room, out of the path of the incoming curse. Harry swung across the room and once out of danger, released his grip on the ceiling. His momentum carried him into a back-flip before he landed on the ground, rolling to protect his legs.

He turned towards the Dark Lord, brandishing his wand, but Grindelwald was on him already. A powerful arm knocked his wand aside, and Harry saw a glowing green wand surge up towards his face. Harry brought an arm up to force Grindelwald's wand away from his face, pulling free from the Dark Lord's grip. He ducked under the next swing and then tried his own, jabbing his wand at The Assassin. Grindelwald sidestepped, pushing Harry's arm away across his body and driving his elbow into Harry's ribs.

Harry cried out in pain as the other elbow came up towards his face. As Grindelwald's elbow smashed into his face, Harry felt a warm trickle as his left eyebrow burst, and blood began to cascade down his cheek. He managed to jump back, ducking under Grindelwald's next swing. The wand, its tip glowing green, missed his head by millimetres. Harry jumped, thrusting his wand over Grindelwald's guard and driving it towards his neck, a curse already on the tip of the wand.

Grindelwald reacted instantly. He turned, grabbing Harry's wand arm with his left hand and his left lapel with his right. Swinging him around, The Assassin slammed him into the wall hard. Harry lost his grip on his wand as his head rammed into the concrete.

Grindelwald looked livid, and there was a mad gleam in his eyes as his hands closed around Harry's throat and pinned him to the wall, his feet several inches off the ground.

"No wands," Grindelwald seethed, his anger consuming him. "I want to choke the air out of you with my bare hands. I want to see the life leave your eyes and feel your body grow limp as you pass from this earth forever."

Harry thrashed as the vice-like fingers tightened on his throat. He tried to kick, to punch, to hurt Grindelwald in any way he could to make him go, but The Assassin was too strong. Despite his advanced years, his physical prowess far excelled Voldemort's, maybe even the Dark Knight's. Harry lashed out again with his foot. His boot connected sharply where he had cut The Assassin earlier. Grindelwald had healed himself so he hardly noticed. In response, he pulled Harry away from the wall, and slammed him back again, his head connecting sharply with the concrete. Coloured blobs splattered over his vision as the air was choked out of him.

Harry didn't know what made him think of the spell that now came to mind, but it was all he could think of.

*"LEGILIMENS!"*

*Harry was suddenly in a montage of memory. He saw a castle, similar to Hogwarts, but definitely not. The place seemed darker, creepier. There was a chill in the air. There were people moving around, people in robes. He recognised the uniform that he had once seen around the shoulders of Victor Krum. This was Durmstrang.*

*Then Harry saw him. A boy no older than he was wearing the same uniform with a prefect badge glistening on his lapel. He had mousy blond hair and a pointed face. The hair was different, the eyes were lighter, but there was no mistaking him: this was Grindelwald.*

*The image lasted only a second or two before it changed. Images flashed before Harry's eyes in a blurry montage that assaulted his vision. Image after image of lessons, meetings, conversations, and all sorts of seemingly meaningless information flicked past Harry's eyes. An image of a Quidditch match flashed into his mind, and he saw Grindelwald diving through the air on a broomstick, but the image was gone a second later. Harry wasn't a skilled Legilimens and could not control the images. There was no order to the memories. The next image showed Grindelwald duelling with Katie in a graveyard, and then a second later he was back at Durmstrang. The scene changed again. A young Grindelwald was sat at a desk in what Harry assumed was a classroom, and as Harry peered over his shoulder, he found that he was close enough to read the name on the inside of the cover.*

#### *Property of Gellert Gaunt*

*The scene changed again...images came and went, not lasting long enough for Harry to make sense of them all. Next he found himself looking down a lavishly decorated hallway with high arching ceilings, huge French windows down the left side and giant mirrors down the other. Enormous crystal chandeliers hung from the ceiling, and between each window stood a golden candlestick over a metre high with sculpted babies climbing to reach the candles at the top. The image lasted only a second before Harry found himself staring down the same corridor in ruins. Mirrors were shattered, chandeliers were in pieces on the floor, the windows had been blown out, and large chunks of the walls were missing. In the middle of the corridor on the ornate wooden floor lay a bloody figure in magenta robes lying face down in a pool of crimson. Kneeling over him was another familiar figure with flowing black hair and a thin determined face that Harry had once seen rise from a diary.*

*Suddenly the montage froze and Harry's jaw dropped. Surely it wasn't possible. It couldn't be.*

*Grindelwald was walking down the street of Hogsmeade, a young man now, his hair still mousy blond but his eyes seemed darker than in his youth, older, and slightly creepy. He was laughing, smiling, and seemed to be having a good time. What caused Harry's heart to miss a beat was not the man himself, but his companion, a smiling Albus Dumbledore.*

*Suddenly the image vanished and was consumed by fire. The whole vision had not lasted ten seconds, but now the images were blocked and all Harry saw were dancing flames. Occlumency! Grindelwald had regained control.*

Harry opened his eyes to find a pair of black wells boring into his own. If Grindelwald was angry before, that was nothing to how livid he seemed now. His grip tightened on Harry's throat, the exertion evident on the Dark Lord's sweating brow.

*CRASH!*

Suddenly a large piece of debris slammed into Grindelwald's back, forcing him into the wall. He lost his grip on Harry who, no longer supported, fell to the floor in a heap. The debris landed next to him with a thud. Grindelwald hissed in pain and turned on the spot.

Behind the Dark Lord stood Katie, her jaw set and her face a mask of grim resolve. She had slammed that chunk of concrete into his back saving Harry's life, but she was now defenceless. Grindelwald glared at her, a look of pure malice, before raising his wand to strike her down.

"*Excalibus!*" Harry cried.

Instantly, a spike appeared at the end of his wand. It was silver in colour and about six inches long. It was only one centimetre thick at its base but the point was razor sharp. As The Assassin raised his wand to strike Katie, Harry thrust it into Grindelwald's side just under his ribcage. The Assassin screamed in pain as Harry wrenched his wand out of Grindelwald's abdomen and the spike disappeared. Harry's hand was covered in blood, but not his own. The Dark Lord dropped his wand and clasped his hands to his side, blood flowing between his fingers. Harry wasted no time in sending a banishing charm towards him at point blank range, thrusting him to the side so as to not hit Katie.

The Dark Lord was propelled off his feet. He landed hard on his wounded side and slid along the polish floor now littered with debris, coming to a stop in one of the many fireplaces that lined the wall. Harry had an idea and summoned both his wands back to him, and placed both tips together to double the intensity of the spell.

"*Reducto!*" he shouted, pointing both wands at the inactive fireplace.

*CRASH!*

The curse blew apart the whole fireplace and debris rained down the chimney, burying the Dark Lord beneath a ton of rubble.

When the avalanche of plaster and concrete had ended all that was left behind was a pile of rubble and an ominous cloud of dust. Harry could hardly see the fireplace at all. Had he succeeded, was Grindelwald dead? There was nothing moving amongst the rubble.

"Harry?" came a strong but confused voice.

He looked up to see Katie standing a few feet away from him brandishing her own wand in his direction. Her face was a mixture of terror, shock, and awe. She stared at him for a moment, her eyes scanning his body, before she settled on his eyes again. He didn't turn away from her steady gaze, but met it with one of his own that mirrored the bundle of mixed emotions he saw behind

her eyes. After a moment she seemed to come to some conclusion, but Harry had no idea what that meant.

"Is he...?" she trailed off as she turned away and looked towards the carnage that had been the fireplace.

"Dead?" offered Harry, stepping towards her hesitantly. He paused to consider the question. "I doubt it," he answered truthfully. Suddenly a chill went down his spine.

"Get down!" he hissed to Katie, withdrawing his second wand again. He pointed them in opposite directions, his arms out to the sides like a crucifixion, a wand in each. His eyes darted around rapidly, determined not to let Grindelwald sneak up on him again.

"What is it?" whispered Katie. She had crouched down into a kneeling position, her back to him and her wand ready, searching the empty room for signs of trouble.

Harry's mind barely had time to register that she was attempting to cover him from the rear while he covered their front and sides with his duel wands, a good tactical move on her part.

"Does your scar hurt?" Harry whispered.

He remembered what had happened next when he was in her position, but he didn't know if Grindelwald would do what Voldemort had done. The Assassin had a link to her just as Voldemort did to Harry, but would he think to use it? He had detected the truth when Katie had told him the Prophecy was destroyed, which meant he was a Legilimens. If he saw Harry watching her, he might reappear and curse Harry. He didn't know what to do. Was this what Dumbledore had felt? He seemed so calm about it, but Harry was so unsure of himself. He kept turning, looking for any sign of the Dark Lord.

Suddenly Katie screamed.

Harry spun to face Katie who was writhing on the ground, her face contorted with pain and droplets of blood having appeared along her scar. Harry felt a flush of pity for her, remembering what it had felt like, remembering the pain as Voldemort has forced his way into his mind. He hoped she had the sense and strength to think of Sirius, to drive him out as Harry once had. Then again it hadn't been sense, he was praying for an end when he had thought of Sirius. He just hoped she could do it. He levelled both wands at her, or rather at Grindelwald, but he knew he couldn't do a thing because he would only end up killing Katie. It was all up to her now.

"Kill her, Potter," sneered Katie, her face a mocking smirk then abruptly contorted in pain.

He knew what it felt like, he wanted to help her end it but he couldn't do a God-damned thing.

"If Death is nothing," Katie hissed, "then kill the girl!"

Katie's hands grabbed the lapels of her jacket and tore them apart, revealing her bra-clad chest and exposing her heart. Harry felt compelled to avert his eyes for Katie's dignity, but he dared not turn his back on the Dark Lord.

"Come on, Potter, do it! Kill her...end her suffering! She wants you to do it. She's begging for it to end..."

Katie screamed, a high-pitched wail that confirmed the agony Harry knew she was in. His heart twisted with a similar agony but one born of compassion and pity. He had to do something... anything.

He took a step closer and levelled the wands helplessly, knowing he couldn't do it. He also knew that Grindelwald knew he couldn't do it, which made him weak in the Dark Lord's eyes – a weakness that could be exploited later.

*Your compassion will always be your Achilles' heel*, the Dark Knight sneered.

Then something happened. A look of surprise appeared on Katie's face, which quickly turned to panic as she looked down at her body. Suddenly she threw her head back,

"SIRIUS!"

Her voice echoed around the deserted room, a cry of pain and anguish, but to Harry it was hope. That was Katie; she was still in there.

*Yes*, thought Harry, *Come on Katie. Think of Sirius, think of your parents, drive him out!*

Katie clutched at her temples, her face contorted with pain. Harry hoped that that was Grindelwald in pain and not Katie. *Come on, concentrate on Sirius*, thought Harry, forgetting his anger at her for loving him. *You can do it!* Suddenly Katie's hands flew to her heart, clutching her chest in what appeared to be agony.

"SIRIUS!"

Her head shot up and she stared at Harry desperately.

"What is this magic?" she cried in desperation as Grindelwald struggled to remain in control. She screamed once more and suddenly there was a flash of blinding white light and a tremendous bang. Harry covered his eyes and recoiled under the force of the eruption of magic. When he opened them, Katie and Grindelwald were both lying on the floor struggling to move.

"Freeze!" yelled Harry, aiming at Grindelwald. "*INCARCERUS*".

Bonds shot out of Harry wand as The Assassin shakily got to his feet. Grindelwald raised a hand and the ropes disintegrated in midair. With a flick of his wrist, a knife was flying towards Harry, who tried to move but was not fast enough. The blade stuck point first into his armour, but thankfully did not penetrate. Suddenly the doors to the atrium burst open and in poured no less than ten Aurors, Dawlish and Kingsley amongst them, and Fudge standing to the rear of the charge. Grindelwald glared at the Minister for a second before summoning his wand back to him. He then grabbed Bellatrix and with one final glare at Harry Disappeared.

"Don't move!" ordered a voice. "You... hands in the air!"

Harry turned to see Dawlish and a squad of Aurors pointing their wands at him. He grimaced but complied, dropping his wand and the sword he had just picked up. The clang echoed around the remains of the entrance hall as the Aurors encircled Harry and Katie. Standing there with his hands in the air, he took a moment to assess the damage. The room was in ruins. Every tile had been ripped from the wall; the chandelier and one of the fireplaces had been demolished along with the fountain of the Magical Brethren. There were vast chunks missing from walls and the floor where curses had hit, and the floor was littered with debris. The place was a mess.

"Dawlish?" called Fudge's shaky voice as he pushed his way past the Aurors. "What's going on?"

Harry glanced up to see the Minister of Magic looking around in amazement, his jaw hung low and a mournful, gobsmacked expression on his withered face. His countenance suggested that he was hoping this was all a hoax.

"Minister, it was him, it was You-Know-Who!" answered one of the men Harry had never seen before dressed in the scarlet robes of the Aurors. "I saw him with my own eyes, Sir. It was him!"

"I know," stammered Fudge reluctantly, looking from Harry, to Katie, to the chaos around the room. He let out a short whimper as his eyes fell on the remains of the fountain. "Merlin's beard..." he muttered to himself. "The Dark Lord, in the Ministry of Magic..."

"Is it really so hard to believe, Cornelius?" came another steady voice just as Tom Riddle appeared behind the Minister.

Fudge spun around at the sound of the familiar voice, his eyes wide and his jaw shaking. He instantly recoiled two paces in panic, crashing into two Aurors and pulling them in front of him as a barrier. For the first time ever, Harry was glad to see the Headmaster, though he was far too late in his opinion. Where was he when Harry needed some support?

"Riddle!" Fudge gasped from behind the Aurors. "What...I...seize him!"

Dawlish and the other Aurors raised their wands to comply, but Riddle only looked bored.

"And watch him!" added Fudge pointing at Harry angrily. He seemed to have recovered his confidence now he was behind Aurors, and Riddle was not trying to get him. Harry instinctively raised his own wand to protect himself as several Aurors turned to him, following the Minister's command. Riddle on the other hand made no move to defend himself.

"Cornelius," said Riddle calmly, gesturing for the Aurors to step aside. To Harry's surprise, they did. "We have been in this position once before," the Headmaster continued. "I am willing to fight your Aurors again if I must, but I think we can both agree that the time has come to see sense. You have seen with your own eyes that Kathryn and I have been telling the truth for six months. He is back."

Fudge stood gaping like a goldfish as the gravity of these words hit home.

"Furthermore," continued Riddle, pretending not to notice. "If you look in the Department of Mysteries you will find that there are several of your missing Death Eaters, held captive down there by an anti-Apparition jinx. Is this proof enough for you that we are not just troublemakers?"

"I...well...you see...it's just that..." stuttered Fudge, as the fact that he was in a hole dawned on him. He appeared to recover slightly, however, as he barked out an order. "Dawlish, go to the Department of Mysteries. Arrest the Death Eaters."

Dawlish gestured to a few of his fellow Aurors and they moved off to comply with Fudge's orders.

Fudge turned back to face Harry and Riddle. "And the boy?" he asked Riddle, gesturing to Harry.

"You have just witnessed him nearly defeating the Dark Lord single-handedly," said Riddle with a smile that Harry might have mistaken for pride, were it not on the face of Lord Voldemort. "Do you really want to place him under arrest?"

"But he can't be Potter," protested Fudge. "He's dead. You, yourself, testified to that. Not to mention the fact that Harry Potter was by all accounts a mediocre wizard at best."

Harry felt a glimmer of annoyance, but he didn't have the strength or patience to try to argue the point with Fudge.

"Whatever has happened will make for a fascinating tale," Riddle said. "One I hope Harry will share with me upon our return to Hogwarts." He placed a comforting hand on each of Harry's shoulders then turned and spoke to Harry directly. "Could you please check on Miss Bell, Harry? I think she needs to see a friendly face right about now."

Harry nodded, grateful that Riddle had given him an excuse to leave.

As much as he would like to see Fudge sweat and suffer, Harry was relieved as he walked away from the conversation. He had more important things to take care of right now rather than dealing with an idiotic politician. Katie was still lying where she had fallen staring up at the ceiling, her arms held limply out to the side, one leg straight and the other bent with her body twisted slightly. She looked half dead. A medi-witch and an Auror were crouching next to her, attempting to help her. Harry knew from experience that they could do no good.

"Back off," he ordered, standing over the pair. They both looked up and their jaws dropped. Harry realised that he must look a sight. His hands were covered in blood and his jaw housed a deep cut, which was bleeding down his once-white front. He had a knife protruding from his chest, or so it seemed since his armour was hidden beneath his robes. He wrenched this out now and dropped it on the floor with a clatter.

"I said back off," said Harry again, this time more firmly. "There is nothing wrong with her that you can fix. There are injured people in the Department of Mysteries. Go on... they need you, she doesn't."

They exchanged uncertain looks before the Auror nodded. The two of them scurried out of the room. Harry watched them go and then, after a quick glance at Riddle who was still arguing with Fudge, he knelt next to Katie, noticing that she was on the edge of consciousness. Her eyes were unfocused, her breathing shallow, she could hardly move. Harry removed his gloves and then slowly reached out and took hold of her torn robes, pulling them gently together to cover up her exposed chest, averting his eyes in the process. With some of her dignity restored, Harry raised his hand and gently laid it on her forehead, covering the infamous scar. A thin film of sweat and blood covered her skin, and she was very hot. Her breathing became faster at his touch and she groaned softly.

Her head rolled over to face him, her eyes coming into focus.

"Harry," she managed to say, her broken voice no more than a whisper.

Harry smiled kindly down at her.

"Shhh," he whispered, brushing the hair away from her eyes. "It's over now. He's gone."

A look of fear and then relief crossed her face as she gave a small nod. Harry felt such a wave of pity for her as he stared into her glistening blue eyes. She had a soft, kind face beneath the stony mask she was forced to present day after day. Such was her exhaustion this evening that any form of mask had vanished. There was no sign of the teacher of the RA, not a trace of the warrior destined to face the Dark Lord. This was pure, naked, Kathryn Bell.

*Poor Katie*, he thought. He remembered losing Sirius, nearly getting his friends killed, discovering his fate... and all of that after being ignored for a year. She didn't deserve this. If Harry had known a way to spare her this torment, he would have done so. He stared into those deep blue eyes for what seemed like an eternity, wishing he could have protected her from all that pain. Maybe he had been wrong not to tell her about this in advance. Maybe he should have warned her, maybe even told her the truth from the very beginning. Maybe he'd had a hand in tonight's events – maybe this was his failure as much as anyone else's.

Just like Sirius.

He had died all over again, and this time it really was Harry's fault. He had managed to convince himself that the first time hadn't been his fault, but undeniably, this time it was. If only he had kept his mouth shut, if only he had done something to help him. The image flashed across his mind, and a shiver ran up his spine.

*It's my fault.*

Katie groaned again, shifting her head slightly, and diverting Harry's thoughts from Sirius. She was shivering despite having a fever. Her eyes darted around the room before coming to rest on Harry once more.

"He was in my head," she croaked, barely able to speak. "It was him. I could feel...so much pain."

"Shhh," said Harry kindly. "I know. You wished you were dead and that you would see your parents and Sirius again, didn't you?" he asked, gently stroking her cheek with the back of his fingers.

The smallest smile appeared on her lips, and ever so slightly she nodded.

"That's what defeated him," whispered Harry. "Your love for Sirius, your parents, and your friends drove him out. He can never take that from you."

Katie's eyebrows narrowed and for a second the suspicious RA mistress was back, but then she dissolved into the despairing, defeated girl she had been seconds before. "What's happening?" she asked, trying to sit up and look around. She managed to raise her head and shoulders before the exertion became too much and she sunk back down.

Harry caught her, and slipping a knee behind her back, he held her into his chest. Her body was soft and warm, yet trembled constantly. Her limbs were limp, as if there was no strength left in her. Harry remembered how defeated he had felt, how he hadn't had the strength of will to go on fighting. He also remembered what came next. He wished he could protect her from it, but it was something that she needed to know.

"Shhh, it's okay," he whispered again, gently rubbing her other arm as her head lopped against his shoulder. "It's over. Riddle is just saying 'I told you so' to Fudge."

"What about you?" asked Katie, raising her head with tear-stained eyes and looking him in the eye. "Who...what are you?"

Harry sighed, tensing slightly.

"I will tell you the truth when we return to Hogwarts," he promised. "You have my word."

Harry saw a glimmer of frustration cross her eyes, but she was obviously too tired to argue. He gently released her from his grip, laying her back down.

"I'll just get us a Portkey."

He wasn't ready to show Fudge or Riddle that he could Flame through any anti-Apparition ward on the planet – that information was to be kept as a surprise for later if he needed it. He picked up the discarded dagger which he had pulled out of his armour moments ago and headed over to Riddle, who was still arguing with Fudge.

"Professor," he said, interrupting the Minister's conversation without any thought for manners. "We need to get Katie back to Hogwarts. We need a Portkey."

He held out the dagger to Riddle, who took it with a nod and tapped it sharply with his wand. "*Portus!*"

"Now see here, Riddle," blurted out the Minister as the dagger glowed blue. "That's an unauthorised Portkey. You can't do that in front of the Minister of Magic!"

"He just did," said Harry rudely, taking the dagger back and glaring at Fudge. "Now stop the petty politics and do something useful for a change. Tell the world that Grindelwald is back, take steps to protect households, and have the Aurors kick over a few stones. First, though, you will remove the old hag, Dolores Umbridge, from Hogwarts by tomorrow morning or I will remove her by force."

"You can't speak to me like that, young man!" seethed Fudge, his face magenta with rage.

"While Harry's manners leave a lot to be desired," said Riddle calmly. "His point is certainly valid, Cornelius. I will give you perhaps half an hour of my time this evening to cover the relevant points of what has happened here tonight. If you need further assistance, you can contact me at Hogwarts. Letters addressed to Headmaster shall find me."

Harry turned on his heel and marched over to Katie. Kneeling down, he scooped her up in a bridal carry, her head resting against his chest. She was heavier than she looked, but not too much to carry. Her whole body trembled as he held her, and he could feel her rapid breathing even through his armour. Harry held the Portkey in one hand, and moved his hand to make sure it was touching Katie.

"Is it really over?" asked Katie softly, raising her head from his shoulder and staring at him once more.

"No," sighed Harry with regret, shaking his head sadly. "I'm so sorry, Katie. There's more to come tonight, I'm afraid. This nightmare isn't over yet. There are things you need to know, and I'm going to make sure Riddle tells you everything. *Activate!*"

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Harry felt a familiar tug behind his naval as he was yanked out of the Ministry and shifted five hundred miles north to the lakes of Scotland. He was completely unsurprised as he reappeared in Riddle's office, just as he had last year when it had been his turn. The lamp and the fire burst to life in response to a human presence, illuminating the cold office. The portraits on the walls stirred, including the large painting of Albus Dumbledore, presumably hopeful for the Headmaster's return. Harry nodded to the portrait of his former Headmaster before moving to the window-seat, which was long enough for him to lie Katie down on. The moonlight shone in through the window, bathing her in pale light and glistening off the tears on her cheeks as she lay there, staring unseeingly at the ceiling. Were it not for the devastated expression on her face and the staining of tears, she would have looked almost angelic. She was beautiful Harry noticed, as if seeing her, really seeing her, for the first time. Unfortunately, it was all buried under the despair.

Leaving Katie alone for a moment, Harry removed the Dark Knight's sword from his back and propped it up against the wall from where he had retrieved it a few hours ago. He tore off the remains of his jumper and threw them over the sword, then unclipped the armour and gently peeled it off his torso, trying not to disturb the base-layer t-shirt underneath which was caked to his skin by dried blood. Dropping it next to the sword, Harry debated how to deal with the t-shirt. He crossed to a mirror to inspect the damage. There was a deep gash in the bottom of his jaw,

millimetres from his windpipe which was covered in crimson. Thankfully a crust had formed, stopping the bleeding, but it still looked pretty horrific as if his throat had been slit and blood had flowed down his front, giving him a scarlet bib. He knew that if he disturbed it too much, it would start bleeding again and he had already lost a lot of blood.

Carefully, Harry raised his wand to the neckline of his t-shirt. *Scourgefy!* The spell was only gentle, and as Harry moved his wand-tip along the hem of the t-shirt, the caked blood disappeared as if his wand were a vacuum cleaner. It took nearly a minute to remove enough dried blood to let him remove the t-shirt without tearing the wound. He then picked up the dagger that had been a Portkey and began to cut away the t-shirt, peeling it off his chest to which it had become stuck with sweat and blood. With a disgusted sigh, he rolled it up into a ball and dropped it unceremoniously on the floor at the foot of the mirror.

Noticing a coat-stand just inside the door on which several cloaks and robes were hanging, he picked out a long black coat with silver cuffs and trim along the hems. The liner was soft and would not scrap his wounds but still keep him warm. Harry pulled on Riddle's coat, trying not to move his neck in the process. He buttoned it up, stopping a few inches below his neck. Picking up his t-shirt again, he rolled it up into a bandage and wrapped it around his neck covering the wound, then tied it off with the sleeves and buttoned the remains of the jacket.

Satisfied that he wasn't bleeding to death and that he didn't look like a zombie, Harry crossed back over to Katie and perched on the edge of the window seat. Katie didn't move and continued to stare up at the ceiling steadfastly as Harry sat next to her, his eyes searching hers, trying to read her emotions. On impulse he gently raised a hand and swept a stray lock of hair out of her eyes. At his touch she startled and looked straight at him.

"Harry..." she groaned weakly, surveying the room in confusion.

She managed to sit up unaided, her eyes immediately focusing on the sword and armour propped up against the wall, topped by his bloody clothes. Harry realised he looked like an odd highwayman with a long black coat and the fabric of his t-shirt obscuring the bottom part of his face. She looked back up at him, but instead of her eyes rising to scan his scar as he was used to people doing, her line of vision sank to inspect the makeshift bandage on his neck. She stared at it for a second before looking up at him curiously.

"Why aren't we in the hospital wing?"

"Because you need to understand some things," said Harry, standing back up restlessly. "Madam Pomfrey doesn't have anything that can help you, anyway. Your scar and head should be alright in a day or so, trust me."

"That's just it, Harry... or whoever you are: How can I trust you when you lie to me all year?" Her eyes had turned hostile and her tone accusing. "I don't even know you."

"What do you want to know?" Harry asked her. The time of reckoning had come, and he knew he had a lot of explaining to do.

"For starters," Katie said, "Who are you really, and where do you fit in all this?"

Harry wasn't sure she was ready to hear the answer to that yet so he said, "I'm here to make sure Riddle tells you the truth."

"Yeah, right," Katie scoffed, angrier now. She swung her legs off the seat and sat upright, resting her elbows on her knees and her head in her hands. The anger was coming now, taking the place of the despair. Harry remembered it well. He remembered smashing various instruments for the hell of it, hoping the destruction would make him feel better. Would Katie be able to control her anger, or did Hell really have no fury like a woman scorned?

"What would you know about truth?" she demanded. "All these weeks you pretend nothing has happened to you, and all the while you're hiding...what we saw tonight."

"I'm sorry," said Harry sincerely, knowing that she was right. He stood up and pulled a nearby chair around to face her, giving her enough room to move. "I thought I was helping you by staying out of the way. Evidentially I was wrong. If I had been with you earlier today, I..."

"You could have what?" snapped Katie. "Stopped me from going?"

"I could have warned you not to trust those visions," he said quietly, his voice full of the regret that he felt.

Her eyebrows shot up as she realised what he meant. "You knew this was going to happen, didn't you?" Her face was thunderous as she glared at him.

"I suspected something like this would happen," admitted Harry. "I should have known that sooner or later he would try to get you to go there."

"Why didn't you tell me?" demanded Katie, her voice a mixture of fury and pleading. "If I had known beforehand, I never would have gone. Sirius would never have..." she trailed off, her whole body shaking with anger.

Harry hesitated. He couldn't tell her the truth, could he? He couldn't say that he had been hoping to have left by this time, leaving her to face this danger alone. He couldn't make her see, not in the state she was now, so cut up over Sirius. And somehow he knew that she blamed him. She already thought it was his fault Sirius was dead and she didn't even know that he had distracted him tonight, most likely causing his death. He *was* guilty, just not in the way she imagined.

*Get over it*, the Dark Knight snapped impatiently. *He was dead either way, so stop snivelling about it and move on!*

"I'm sorry you had to go through that, Katie," Harry said stiffly, avoiding an answer. "I know how hard this is and what Sirius meant to you."

"NO YOU DON'T!" she shouted at him. Her shrill voice pierced his ears as she bellowed, her face red with rage as tears continued to stream down her face. "You don't know what it was like.

He was the closest thing to a father I have ever known. He was everything to me, and now he's gone!" She burst into tears.

Harry had never been good at this sort of thing but he managed to keep the grimace from his face. He gently rested his hand on her shoulder in what he hoped was a comforting gesture but she immediately shook him off, glaring at him in the process.

"Okay..." he said hesitantly, taking a step back and raising both palms in surrender. "I'm just trying to help."

"Help?" she snapped. "You lie to us and then suddenly want to help. You don't know anything!"

"I know more than you might imagine," said Harry dryly, his voice as calm and as soothing as he could make it without being patronising – he hoped.

"Oh," she said angrily, oozing sarcasm. "So you know what it's like to have the closest thing to a father you have ever known murdered in front of you? You know what it's like to be hunted every hour of every day because the Dark Lord is after you? You know what it's like for the whole world to think you're mad and a liar?"

"Yes," he snapped back, trying, but failing, to remain calm and not get angry at the irony of those accusations. "I know you can't understand this right now, but I'm probably the only one who can understand what you've been through. I know what drove you to succumb to the rage that made you cast that curse tonight. I've been through it all."

Katie's head shot up and she stared into his eyes.

"How...?" she stammered, tears still flowing down her cheeks.

Harry ignored the question and stood up. "You have many questions, and you definitely deserve answers. Tonight, you are going to learn everything. I am going to make sure Riddle tells you what he should have told you seven years ago. I am going to tell you everything."

"Everything?"

"Everything," confirmed Harry. "Why you were attacked when you were a baby, why he is after you now, what was in the Ministry tonight, and most importantly where we must go from here."

"How do you know all this?" asked Katie. Her rage seemed to have gone, and her voice was now pleading, on the verge of tears once again.

"Because I once sat where you are now," said Harry honestly, looking her in the eye. "You are not alone."

"I don't..." began Katie but she was cut off as the fireplace erupted into green flames and Riddle stepped out into the office. He smoothed his robes down and unconcernedly swept soot from his shoulder, as if it were a normal day.

Harry's hand had instantly moved to the wand in his pocket, just in case. He ached all over, was still bleeding in places, and wanted nothing more than to go to bed, but he needed this to be done. Harry stepped away from Katie and began to pace in nervous anticipation of the conversation they were about to have, gripping his wand tightly in case Riddle tried anything funny.

Riddle drew himself up to his full height and looked around the office, first at Katie and then at Harry. Katie had sat up straight again, and was staring expectantly at Riddle. Harry on the other hand was wearing Riddle's own jacket, had his hand on his wand, and was pacing back and forth. Riddle paused for a second, his eyes appraising both of them, before he crossed over to Harry.

"Let me see your neck," he directed firmly.

Harry hesitated for a moment, but he knew he needed medical attention. He released his wand back into his holster and raised two hands to untie the makeshift bandage. As he dropped it on the desk, Riddle stepped closer and the lamp grew in brightness.

Harry drew back instinctively as Riddle extended an arm and lightly pressed Harry's head backwards. His fingers were cold to the touch and Harry felt a sickening wave of dread and nausea come across him as Lord Voldemort's fingers moved lightly over his throat. It took all his control not to throw him off. It was like a Dementor grabbing him, crossed with the knowledge that he was exposing his throat to a monster and fully expected him to slit it at any moment. Somehow, Harry managed to bely his baser instincts and stand still. Riddle raised his wand, and Harry felt himself tense. He could see in his peripheral vision a glow of blue light and then an icy coolness flowed into his neck before he felt the whole area go numb and then tighten. He assumed that the wound was closing itself, but he couldn't tell.

After a few more seconds Riddle finished his work. Relief flooded Harry as the headmaster released him and, with a quick glance at Katie, Riddle took his seat behind the desk. The Headmaster suddenly looked wearier than Harry had ever seen him. He reached into a desk drawer and pulled out a bottle and two small glasses. He removed the stopper from the bottle and Harry was able to smell the spicy aroma of pepper-up potion. Riddle poured a measure into each of the glasses and offered one to Katie and one to Harry, which they both accepted. Harry knew it would not be poisoned and he needed something to combat the blood loss and keep him awake.

Having put the potion away, Riddle faced Katie, regarding her carefully, a surprising hint of pity and guilt in his eyes. She swallowed the potion and returned his stare with a glare of her own that was part anger, part relief.

*So you should feel guilty, you bastard,* thought Harry coldly as he ignored Katie and stared back at Riddle. *She has no idea what you've kept from her all these years, how justified her anger at you really is...*

Then Riddle's eyes moved on to Harry. There was caution there, as well as triumph. It was that later expression that made Harry incredibly uneasy. For want of anything better to do, he ignored Riddle's probing and threw the remains of his shirt over the pile of bloody clothes by his sword, then leaned casually against the bookcase to the side of the desk waiting for Riddle to speak.

"This has been a long night for all of us," said Riddle at last, turning back to Katie. "I know you are both tired, but I must ask you to stay awhile. We have many things to discuss."

"Damn right, we do," muttered Harry, though Riddle ignored him.

Katie rose from the window seat and sank into the chair in front of Riddle's desk. She glanced from Riddle to Harry and back.

"Harry said you were going to tell me everything," she said, her tone slightly accusing.

"Yes," said Riddle gently. "Mr. Potter is correct. The time has come for you to know everything."

"That time came and went years ago, Tom," said Harry, coldly.

"Now see here!" interrupted an indignant voice to Harry's right. "You can't talk to the headmaster like..."

"Thank you Phineas," interrupted Riddle, his eyes never leaving Harry. The portrait fell silent and the headmaster continued to survey Harry.

Riddle did not appear angry or even surprised, "Normally I would ask that you leave us, Mr. Potter, but it seems you are more central to our situation than was first thought. I think the time has also come for you to tell us all what you should have told us when you first arrived here."

Harry hesitated. There was a look of victory in the Headmaster's eyes, and Harry got the distinct impression that he knew more about where Harry came from than he was letting on. Riddle may not be the evil monster Harry was used to, but he was still cunning, which made him dangerous. There was no way he would let the Headmaster weasel his way out of telling Katie what she needed to know.

"In turn," replied Harry evenly, his jaw clenched painfully. "I will tell you, certainly. But first, Katie has a right to know her part in this, since she's the victim here. I'm going to make sure you tell her everything. I want to hear you tell her why she has no parents, why she was attacked when she was only a year old, and why she should never have had to go to the Ministry tonight. It's past time she knew."

Riddle's face seemed as placid as ever. He didn't even react or ask how Harry could possibly know this. It was almost as if he had been expecting this conversation.

"How much do you know?" he asked in a tone so casual, he might have been asking if Harry knew what the latest cricket scores were, and this only served to anger Harry further.

"I know the whole thing," said Harry, his tone openly hostile now. "I know all about your Divination interview with Trelawney. I know what was said, and what was overheard. I also know what pathetic excuse you are going to give for what you have done to Katie. But I want to hear it from you. You've ignored and deceived her all year and had her go through torturous Occlumency lessons with little to no explanation, and don't get me started on Umbridge! Can't you see that she needs to know? Tell her, Tom, or I will."

Riddle surveyed Katie for a moment and Harry saw a look of great sadness and regret cross his face, which only made him angrier.

"Yes," the Headmaster said at last, "I have made a grave error of judgement, one for which I fear I shall never be forgiven." His eyes then turned back to Harry and this time when he spoke his tone was more accusing, though not quite aggressive. "But it seems that you, too, are not entirely blameless when it comes to deceiving Miss Bell. This is a crime that we both must hang for, Mr. Potter."

"Don't lay that on me," retorted Harry angrily. "I was only protecting her."

"As was I," replied Riddle firmly. "Fault my methods by all means, but please do not suggest that I would ever knowingly endanger any of my students."

It was an argument that would have sounded more sincere from Dumbledore and might even have humbled Harry were it not spoken from the lips of Lord Voldemort.

"Protecting her by deceiving her?" Harry mocked him. "Just like you told me my parents died in an accident? Does the truth mean nothing to you?"

"I was trying to spare you the heartache by distancing you from the danger, just as I was with Miss Bell," replied Riddle, sounding impatient for the first time.

"Distance her?" Harry shot back. "Protect her by removing her from the one person that Grindelwald fears? Good plan, Einstein..." he said with great sarcasm

"ENOUGH!" screamed Katie, jumping to her feet and sending the chair toppling over backwards with a loud crash. "Both of you shut up! The two of you stand there talking about me as if I am not even here!"

Her eyes flashed dangerously as she continued her rant, cowering the two males in the room. "Who lost their godfather tonight? ME! Who has been ignored," she glared at Riddle who looked away guiltily, "lied to," she glared at Harry causing his face to redden in embarrassment, "and put through Hell this year? ME! I don't care what arguments you have with each other. Both of you know whatever you are about to tell me, and both of you have kept it from me. I am tired and sore. In case you've forgotten, tonight I lost the closest thing to family I have, so give me one good reason why I shouldn't walk out that door right now!"

If the situation had been less serious, Harry would have pointed out that the door she was referring to was locked. However, this was no time for jokes. Katie's words had cut him to the core. He *was* as bad as Riddle. She was right, he had known all the time the reason why it was her, and yet he had not told her. Her anger would only get worse when she found out that he had known that Sirius would die, and worse that he had caused it. Harry grimaced. He was in a hole, and there was more digging to be done.

Harry was temporarily at a loss for words, but Riddle seemed to recover first.

"Your anger is entirely justified, Kathryn," he conceded. "In keeping the truth from you, both Harry and I have done you a great injustice. Though it means nothing at such a late hour, it seems that we both made our choices with the best intent."

"The best intent," she scoffed. "Some of the worst things imaginable have been done with the best intent. I bet it was a real comfort to the people of Hiroshima. Thousands dead, but hey Einstein invented it with the best intent, so it's all alright!"

Riddle sighed deeply, resting his head on his hands. He hoped to live to see Voldemort looking just as tired as Riddle now did.

*Tell her you bastard*, Harry screamed inwardly. Dumbledore had told Harry, and now it was Riddle's turn to tell Katie. *Prove me wrong...show me you do have a decent side to you.*

"The worst things imaginable," Riddle repeated softly. "Yes, I have had many failings these past months, culminating in the loss of Sirius tonight."

Katie flinched at the sound of the name, resting her chin on her chest. She swayed slightly where she stood.

Harry breathed a sigh of relief as he bent down and picked up the chair Katie had knocked over. He placed it back on its legs just behind her.

"Sit down," he said kindly. "We are going to tell you what you want... or rather *need* to know."

Katie looked back and forth between them for a second before sinking into the chair. She crossed her legs and put both hands in her lap, suddenly looking very small and meek. Harry felt another wave of pity for her. He wished there was some way to protect her from the heartbreak to come. If there was a way to lessen her anguish, he would do it. He felt so helpless standing there watching the silent tears cascade down her face.

"Nearly seven years have passed since you arrived at Hogwarts," began Riddle slowly. "And every year I should have told you what I now must. I foresaw this day, this conversation, ever since I left you on the doorstep of your aunt. You were in more danger than any but I knew. I knew that he was gone, but I also knew he would return... be it ten years, or twenty. I have fought Grindelwald long enough to know what he would never rest until he had killed you, so your future had to be decided then and there. I knew that standard defensive spells would never be enough should he return to full power, so I looked to the past, to what had defeated him in the first place – your mother's sacrifice. I therefore decided to place my trust in your mother's blood and sent you to live with your closest relative, your Aunt Gillian."

"But she hates me..." protested Katie.

"But she still took you," interrupted Harry before Riddle could answer. "In taking you into the place where your mother's blood resides, she sealed the magic that has kept you safe, the strongest magic available, and the only price was years of neglect. What was that to him anyway,

so long as you were alive? It's a paradox compared to what he will tell you later. At this point, your safety was of more concern than your happiness."

"Just as he did this year and all last summer?" said Katie miserably.

Harry could only nod. He cast a quick glance at Riddle, who kept his face neutral, although he glanced at Harry curiously.

"There are unhappy consequences to all plans," the Headmaster conceded, his eyes fixed on Katie once again. "However, the magic that protects you has lasted all these years and remained intact. While I confess I am not proud of having caused your suffering, I still believe that it was the right thing to do. So, ten years passed and then you came to Hogwarts as normal a girl as I dared to hope for. You rose spectacularly to the challenges that faced you much sooner than I ever anticipated. In just a few short years you had come face to face with Grindelwald himself. When it was over, the very first question you asked was why he chose to come after you in the first place. As you remember, I declined to answer. I felt that you were too young to be burdened with the information I must now give you."

Katie stared into Riddle's eyes as he spoke, tears still trickling down her cheeks. Harry could only stand and watch, thinking back to the day when it had been his turn. Part of him wished that it was Dumbledore here instead of Riddle. Harry reckoned Dumbledore would at least have softened the blow. He cast a mournful look over at the portrait who was watching the scene unfolding intently from his frame.

"After your return from the Chamber a year later," continued Riddle. "I should have again told you, and yet I did not. You were still too young. As Harry also pointed out, the flaw has emerged."

Katie glanced up at Harry, a look of confusion plastered over her face. He didn't blame her for not understanding. Dumbledore had asked Harry if he saw a pattern before it even had a chance to repeat itself. It seemed that Riddle was no better a narrator.

"It's a paradox," sighed Harry, shaking his head in exasperation and pacing the room. "All this year he has ignored you, sacrificing your happiness for duty, and it was the same when he left you that doorstep. What did it matter that you were neglected and bullied, if his great weapon against the Dark Lord was safe and in a few years would be ready for use?"

With every sentence Harry found himself enjoying it more. Every accusation was a nail in Riddle's coffin, further proof that he was the cold-hearted bastard that Harry knew him to be. Harry had been looking forward to this, showing Katie what Tom Riddle was really like and exposing him as a master manipulator. He wanted to see the look on Riddle's face when all his crimes were laid out in front of him. Harry found that as he progressed down the list of Riddle's failings the smile spread further across his lips.

"Then when you get here," he said excitedly, the smile growing wider, "all of a sudden everything inexplicably changes. Now that he's seen you, looked you in the eye, things are different. He doesn't tell you the truth because he cares more about your happiness than he does

in preparing you for the battle both he and I know you must face eventually. What did he care that hundreds may suffer in future days, when you were happy now? Then at the beginning of this year –" Harry snapped his fingers – "he flips again and is back to neglecting and preserving you. He jumps from one foot to the other, keeping you in the dark and trying to play God with your future. The paradox is that his plan never included caring about you. So, in a sense, he's screwed either way."

"What the hell are you grinning about?" snapped Katie, rising to her feet. "Do you think this is funny? Do you think that this is some great story? If it were, the author would be a complete prick! What you find so amusing happens to be my life! You stand there telling me about all his failings and loving it the entire time, but for each failing I have suffered and lost someone. This isn't a game! You aren't scoring points against each other. This is my life, so get a God-damned grip!"

Harry opened his mouth to say something but shut it abruptly as Katie continued, still on a rant.

"And another thing..." Her eyes flew from Harry to Riddle and back again. "You can't stand there and accuse him of playing God with my life when you knew all this and failed to warn me. That's just plain hypocritical. You're no better than he is."

Her eyes snapped coldly as she pointed her finger at him accusingly. "Pot," she said with venom, then turned her finger on Riddle. "...Kettle. And from where I stand you're both the same colour."

Harry recoiled under her wrath, knowing with every word that she was right. He had longed to show Riddle up, to throw it in his face, but he had never stopped to consider the impact it would have on Katie. Harry had used her as a tool in a petty game of one-upmanship with Riddle. He had completely missed that point that she was a human being, and had only considered his own battle with Riddle. As much as Harry wanted her to see that Riddle was no saint, that he had failed her, Harry suddenly realised that what she needed was something to believe in. All he was doing was tearing down her beliefs and leaving her more alone than ever. If he was honest with himself, his anger had more to do with Albus Dumbledore than Tom Riddle. After all, even though it was Voldemort who had ruined his life, Dumbledore had been pulling the strings for years, and Harry had come to resent him for all the same reasons Katie now resented Riddle.

He had sat in this office a few months earlier, nurturing his anger at Dumbledore and thinking that the old man should have done better, that if he had been in Dumbledore's shoes, he would have told Harry all about the Prophecy and not tried to manipulate him. Now, only a few months later, he *was* in Dumbledore's shoes and most disturbingly, he too had failed, he too had made the same mistake. He was as bad as Riddle or Dumbledore.

"You are correct," Riddle said to Katie, before Harry could think of a response. "We have both made the same mistake, and it was a costly one. We both failed to see you as a person, and you have every right to be angry with us. While we can never make this up to you, permit us if you will to at least rectify part of it by giving you the information you need."

Katie shot a glare at each of them before sitting back down and nodding to the Headmaster.

"The following year, Kathryn," continued Riddle, "I watched from afar as you battled Dementors and found the truth about Sirius. I almost brought myself to tell you that year, but you were so flush from your victory, having swiped Sirius from the clutches of death, that I dared not break the moment. By now my excuses were running out. The following summer was packed with disappearances – I mentioned them to you once if you remember. I knew the signs... Grindelwald was on the move. We both remember the events that followed the Third Task of the Triwizard Tournament. Grindelwald was returned to his body and Cornelius and I parted ways. Now I knew I had no excuse, but you were so broken over Cormac that I did not wish to cause you further pain. It was then that I laid my plan for this year. Before I go into any more detail, I must explain a little more about your scar."

Riddle shifted in his seat and leaned forward.

"That scar is the physical manifestation of a link between your mind and that of the Dark Lord's," began Riddle. "It was forged when the curse rebounded. In your early years here at Hogwarts it served as an alarm bell, if I am not mistaken, and I guessed what that meant. My suspicions were confirmed when you began to dream of him before the Tournament. I feared that he would try to use you through that scar, a theory which I am sorry to say was proved correct this evening."

"He used it to lure me to the Ministry," said Katie, understanding where this was going. "But it was useful, like the night I saw Mr. Weasley being attacked."

"Yes," interrupted Harry. "Unfortunately, you never stopped to consider that a door once opened can be stepped through in both directions. Just as you saw into his mind, he can see into yours. The difference is that he's a skilled Legilimens, so he went a step further and actually planted a scene in your mind to lure you to him. It was all a trick, made easier by Kreacher's treachery. Sirius' House Elf lied to you. He went to Narcissa Malfoy around Christmas and sold you both out. They, of course, told Grindelwald everything and he used your love for Sirius against you."

"Indeed," conceded Riddle. "And I must confess, I knew Grindelwald might try to access your mind. I knew that you should learn Occlumency, but I dared not teach you myself in fear of giving him access to my mind, to my knowledge. As such, I chose to keep my distance, to make you a less tempting target."

"So he can enter my mind any time he likes?" asked Katie, looking between them uncertainly.

"Yes and no," said Harry, before Riddle could respond. "While he has the ability to do it, he has spectacularly underestimated you. His plan was to pop in, deliver a false image, and then leave. However, he failed to notice that you had witnessed the night Arthur Weasley was attacked. Like you, he failed to realise that the connection works both ways, and until now, he did not see the danger in the connection. Whatever you think of your ability at Occlumency, you are stronger than you realise. Tonight when he possessed you, you gave him the mother of all brain-storms, so much so that he will think twice before daring to enter your mind again."

"But how... what did I do?" asked Katie bewildered.

"What did you think of when he was inside you?" asked Harry in a patient voice, knowing very well what she had thought of to drive Grindelwald from her mind.

Katie just stared at him, her jaw trembling and a vacant look on her face.

"You thought of your parents and Sirius, didn't you?" he asked, receiving a small nod in response. "Your love for them was what drove him out. It sounds corny, but he genuinely cannot bear to feel it. You hurt him tonight, and I believe that he will not dare to try that again... maybe even go as far as to employ Occlumency against you."

"But that's only a guess," supplied Katie pointedly.

Harry could only nod. It was pure conjecture, but he hoped for her sake he was right. His guess was not completely unfounded though, as he had not felt Voldemort all of the previous summer up until the point where he had dropped in on him in the field behind Aunt Marge's.

"Harry is right," said Riddle slowly. "I would expect Grindelwald to be very cautious of entering your mind again after such a defeat tonight. Although he succeeded in luring you to the Ministry with it, tonight's experience has shown him the dangers of your mind."

"It's too late now," said Katie, staring at her feet. "The damage is done. Sirius is..." she trailed off.

Harry remembered the feeling of guilt all too well, but he also remembered that he had refused to listen to words of comfort. He knew that Katie would not listen if he tried to comfort her – it was better to let her cry herself dry and speak to her later.

"And you haven't answered the question," continued Katie, finding her courage once more. "You still haven't told me why it's me he's after."

Harry and Riddle exchanged a quick glance before Riddle answered.

"You may recall in August after you first came to Grimmauld Place, Sirius told you what he was after," replied Riddle. "Against everyone's advice, he told you what we suspected."

"He said Grindelwald was after something he didn't have last time," said Katie. "A weapon?"

"Not exactly," replied Riddle. "It was a Prophecy. The whole point of tonight's operation was to get hold of that Prophecy, a task that Grindelwald ultimately failed to do. Ever since he regained his body he has been after it, determined to hear what was said, and we have been guarding it."

"Why?"

"This Prophecy is the whole reason for everything," Harry elaborated. "It was why he was after you to begin with when you were just a baby. He only heard the beginning part and came after you, forcing your family into hiding. He lost over a decade of his life because of that Prophecy and, especially after you escaped him once again in the graveyard, he hasn't dared to touch you without having heard the entire thing first."

"So you knew about this so called Prophecy?" she replied, staring aghast at the pair of them, her tone accusing. "You both knew he would try to get me to go there to retrieve it for him? You knew he would try to trick me, and you never warned me. Why?"

It was the Headmaster who answered first. "Because I believed it would endanger you," said Riddle, sadly. "I tried to let you live your life as normally as possible, believing that if I kept my distance it would keep you safe. I thought that as long as you were at Hogwarts he couldn't get to you. It was a mistake that has cost us all dearly."

"Cost *me* dearly," Katie corrected him.

"I think it's time we heard the Prophecy," said Harry, gesturing to the Pensieve. He didn't want this to turn into a full blown argument when there was still so much to get through. Also, he was interested to hear if the Prophecy was the same.

"It broke," said Katie in a dejected voice. "It fell when I was helping Ginny."

"The copy was destroyed," Harry corrected her. "The original still exists. In fact it is right in front of you in the Pensieve."

Katie turned to look at the shimmering bowl on the table, a terrified expression on her face.

Riddle slowly leaned forward and stirred the Pensieve with his wand. As the three of them watched, a familiar figure wrapped in shawls emerged from the bowl, rotating as she recited words so similar, yet very different in their meaning.

*...The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the eleventh month dies...and the Dark Lord shall mark her as his equal, but she will have power the Dark Lord knows not...and either must die at the hand of the other, for neither can live while the other survives... the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the eleventh month dies...*

The silence in the room was absolute.

"That was Professor Trelawney, wasn't it?" asked Katie softly. Her eyes were wide, and she stared unblinkingly at the Pensieve before her where Sybil Trelawney had stood seconds before.

Harry nodded and debated whether to rest a hand on her shoulder, but thought better of it.

"But how can you be sure it's me," asked Katie. "I know I was born on the last day of November, but the rest of it means nothing. It could be anyone."

"Unfortunately no," said Harry, shaking his head. "Your parents would have escaped Vol...Grindelwald three times before you were born. If you need further proof, look to the next line: 'the Dark Lord shall mark her as his equal'. Mark her, Katie?"

"My scar," said Katie solemnly staring Harry in the eye.

Harry watched as she gingerly raised a hand to her forehead and traced the outline of her scar. He noticed how her eyes widened with terror, and hated that he had been the one to lay that burden on her even as he knew that she needed to understand. He wished there had been another way.

"Correct," said Riddle, more kindly than Harry thought possible for him. "Mr. Potter is once again right. There is, unfortunately, no doubt that it is you."

"But the next bit," stammered Katie, "One must die at the hands of the other..."

Neither Harry nor Riddle could think of anything to say. Even Dumbledore had remained silent at this point as the gravity of what was to come hit home for the Chosen One.

"I'm going to die," said Katie finally, staring blankly into Harry's face.

"No," said Harry firmly. "That's not going to happen." For some inexplicable reason the thought of her dying after everything she'd been through was incomprehensible and terrifying. He had survived his confrontation with Voldemort in the Unholy Land, and she could do the same here. Besides, he was determined to give Katie a bit of a boost after everything she had been through tonight.

"What hope do I have?" asked Katie looking almost pleadingly up at Harry.

"Two things," replied Harry confidently. "One, you have me now, which might level the playing field. Secondly, you must remember the next line. You have 'power the Dark Lord knows not'."

"Like what?" asked Katie doubtfully, clearly not believing him.

"I don't understand it either," admitted Harry. "It's the same power that took you to rescue Sirius tonight, that drove the Dark Lord from your mind this evening. It flows in your veins, thicker than blood. It's love, Katie. Your heart saved you tonight. Voldemort cannot bear to feel love... as in *literally* cannot withstand it without tremendous pain. That's why he could not bear to be inside your head tonight and why your mother's sacrifice really stumped him."

As he looked over at Katie she was staring at him, a thoroughly confused look on her face, as if he had been speaking double-dutch...which on reflection he probably was. Harry glanced over at Riddle and to his surprise found the Headmaster looking as if he had seen a ghost. The man was white as a sheet, his body rigid and a terrified expression etched into his pale features. It was the first time Harry had seen him appear vulnerable or scared since he had known him.

"What?"

"Who's Voldemort?" asked Katie.

Harry's stomach clenched tight in his chest and a chill ran down his spine. *Bollocks!* He had mentioned Voldemort, a name that didn't even exist here. Harry's felt a shiver run all over his body as he realised he had messed up, and now he was on the back foot for this explanation. There was no use hiding anymore – it was time for the truth to come out.

Harry took a deep breath.

"To understand him, you must first understand me," said Harry, choosing his words carefully. He really wished he had rehearsed this a little more. "I believe the Headmaster has a vague understanding of where I come from."

Riddle leaned forwards, his eyes locked on Harry, a look of victory in his eyes though he still seemed very pale.

"I believe," he said carefully, pausing for effect, "that you are a parallel version of the Harry Potter we know."

Harry paused for a minute. He looked from Riddle, who was clearly waiting for confirmation, to Katie who looked slightly confused, and then back.

"How long have you known?" asked Harry, his curiosity getting the better of him. Perhaps it was his pride, but he really wanted to know where he had slipped up and what had given him away.

"Everything fell into place tonight," replied the Headmaster. "I have known for some time that your DNA was different. In addition, your physique and behaviour is radically different from the Harry we knew. He wasn't prone to carry around an arsenal of weapons as you were when you first came here, either. Other things have been troubling as well. Your visit to St. Mungo's last week was most perplexing, and seemingly impossible."

"I had a feeling you knew that was me," said Harry evasively. "Your offer of tea was not very subtle."

"Neither were you with your questions," replied Riddle, his tone not aggressive but firm, nevertheless. "Anyhow, I knew about your DNA and your trip, but I didn't understand everything until tonight when I found out about the theory of multiple universes and the concept of moving between them, stepping sideways in time. There were references to Arithmancy, something you showed an interest in, and also of differences in your blood which Poppy Pomfrey could not explain despite many sleepless nights."

"I knew she was up to something," said Harry more to himself. It had been the way she looked at him. He wondered how much longer he could have remained hidden before she discovered where he came from. Still, it was a moot point now.

"The wonders of modern science," Harry continued absently. He shook himself out of his daze. "Anyhow, yes, you are fundamentally correct." He turned to Katie, feeling the need to explain this to her more than Riddle. "Imagine that everything you ever knew was a dream. Imagine you woke up tomorrow to find that everything you remember had never happened, you had grown up with your parents, and everything was completely different. That is essentially what happened to me. There are parallel worlds side-by-side, some slightly different, but others are so different it feels like the world has literally been turned upside down. I accidentally jumped into one."

"You what?" she asked, raising eyebrows. Her tone was sceptical and she looked much as McGonagall had when Seamus had explained how his owl had eaten his homework.

"One day I was in my world," replied Harry, "and the next I woke up to find myself in a place that was completely different, where history had happened differently and I was not who I used to be. It was as if my whole life had just been a dream, and I was the only one who remembered it."

"So you're not really our Harry?" Katie asked looking thoughtful, if somewhat sceptical.

"No, I'm not," admitted Harry shaking his head. "I'm just another version of him."

Katie seemed to be searching him for any sign of a lie as her eyes swept over his face. She looked as if she was expecting him to say April Fool or something similar as she gazed from Harry to Riddle and back again.

"You're serious, aren't you?" she said after a pause. "You really are...or rather you really *think* you are from another world."

"How do you explain how I know everything?" asked Harry, trying not to sound patronising. "How did I know all this long before it happened?"

"So you claim you are from the future as well?" scoffed Katie, shaking her head. "*Quick Doc, we need to go back to nineteen fifty-five! Let's get my broom up to eighty-eight miles per hour. Oh, please, this is bollocks!*"

"No," replied Harry, struggling not to be sarcastic in return. "I am not from the future, just a place where things happened earlier."

"Which amounts to the same thing," protested Katie. "Look Harry, I've had a long day and I can't take any more BS. Either tell me the truth, or I'm going to bed."

"I am," argued Harry. "Do I need to take Veritaserum? ...Because I will if it helps me prove to you that I'm not lying." He clenched his fist and exposed the faint scars there, remnants of Umbridge's torture. "See this? 'I must not tell lies'. Ironic I got this from telling the truth." He gently took Katie's hand in his and placed it next to his own in order to compare the scars. "Just another thing we seem to have in common."

Katie sat still, staring at him for a few seconds. She didn't withdraw her hand or make any movement for what seemed like ages before speaking again.

"Say I believe you," said Katie slowly, "which I don't, but say I did. What *did* happen to my friend, Harry?"

"I'm..." Harry began but that was as far as he got.

"Not you," she cut him off. "The *real* Harry, the *true* Harry. The one I knew, my friend."

Harry paused. He hadn't really thought about it in all honesty. In fact, he hadn't really cared. He had seen the opportunity since Harry had died and had just filled it with no thought for the other him. To Harry, who had never met his counterpart, the other Harry was just a piece of history to whom he was no more related to than Napoleon Bonaparte. He had never stopped to realise that the other Harry was a person with feelings and friends too. The other Harry's life had been senselessly snuffed out along with his parents, and he hadn't even cared. He had dressed from Harry's trunk and walked around in the dead man's clothes with no respect for the person who had once owned them.

Suddenly Harry felt rather guilty.

"He's dead," answered Harry trying not to sound insensitive as he looked Katie in the eye. However, he didn't flinch either. After all, he hadn't been responsible for killing the Potters in this world. "He died in the fire in St. Mungo's. This wasn't a great conspiracy or anything, taking over his life. When I arrived everyone told me he was dead and assumed I was him. I never corrected them because it served my purpose."

"You took his name, his belongings, his identity," said Katie. Her tone was not aggressive but more pensive, as if, like Harry, she was trying to work out if it was morally wrong.

"I did," conceded Harry. "It seemed simpler than telling the world I was an alien. Also, I should point out that I did not end up here intentionally. I wandered back to Hogwarts thinking it was my home, the one where I truly belong, and then I found out that something had gone horribly wrong. I was in shock and when everyone naturally assumed I was your Harry I went with it until I could figure out what to do next. It was not my intent to harm anyone, just give myself a place to stay until I figured out how to get home. I've not been trying to infiltrate Hogwarts or spy on you or anything."

There was a long pause as Katie weighed up the story in her mind. She glanced over at Riddle who still looked pale, but he gave her a small nod confirming his story.

"Very well," said Katie. "But, you still haven't answered the question."

Harry looked at her, puzzled.

"You may be from another world," she admitted. "On any other night I would never believe it, but tonight I've given up on the impossible. Let's say I believe you and you are from another world. That is *what* you are, it doesn't tell us *who* you are. For all we know, on your planet you could be a Death Eater, a monster, a killer, a mass murderer – judging from what I saw tonight, you seem capable of it. Who are you *really*, Harry?"

Harry thought about that for a moment before he answered. It was time to come clean. "Monster? Maybe. Killer? Unfortunately. Death Eater? No." He took a deep breath and focused exclusively on Katie.

"What am I in my world? In truth, Katie, I am something far more terrifying than a Death Eater."

Harry raised his wand slowly and swept it lightly across his forehead, removing the makeup that had kept his identity hidden for weeks. Katie's eyes grew wide as they homed in on the scar that had appeared on his forehead. Her jaw dropped and she sat gaping like a fish.

"I'm you," said Harry simply.

Riddle and Katie sat in stunned silence, looking like they had been slapped. The gravity of what he had said hit them like a tsunami. Katie opened her mouth to speak and then closed it again. Riddle's eyebrows had shot up towards his hairline and his jaw was almost on the desk.

Harry moved closer to her and knelt down. "You asked how I knew what you were feeling," he continued looking her in the eye. "You asked how I knew what was happening, how I knew about the pressures you face. I know because I once sat where you are now. It was *my* parents who were murdered, *me* who survived. It was me in the Prophecy, me who was tricked into going to the Ministry, and me who tried to punish Bellatrix. You told me earlier that I could never understand what Sirius meant to you. You're wrong. I do understand, Katie, because my Godfather was once killed in exactly the same fashion. I've sat in your chair and felt the things you're feeling..."

"Can you offer us any proof," asked Riddle, surveying Harry cautiously. Harry had almost forgotten he was there. "...Anything aside from your word and circumstantial evidence? Your DNA is interesting, but not conclusive."

Harry thought for a moment. He could take them to the Node, but he did not trust Riddle with that kind of knowledge. He was about to say no, when an idea occurred to him.

"My wand," said Harry. He pulled his secondary wand out of his pocket and offered it to the Headmaster. "This is the one you returned to me after the other me died."

Riddle took it and examined it before nodding.

Harry then removed his primary wand, his own, from the holster and handed it to Riddle. "This is the one I brought with me to this world. You can get Ollivander to check them over. He will verify that they are brother wands with yours, even though Fawkes only contributed two feathers. Not only that, he will also tell you that they are not only twin wands, they are literally the same wand."

Riddle glanced from one to the other and then laid them down on the desk side by side. Harry assumed he would examine them thoroughly later.

"So all this?" said Katie, gesturing around her. "You've actually lived through it once before?"

Harry nodded. Katie stared at him for a second, appraising him before she looked down at the palms of her own hands.

"I will end up like you, won't I?" asked Katie, her eyes full of horror. Her tone said it all – she did not consider that to be a good thing, rather something to be feared.

Harry tried to place himself in her shoes once more. He would have loved to have been stronger and more powerful when he had sat where she did. Did she not see that this was necessary? Clearly she didn't, so Harry chose to tell her what she wanted to hear.

"I doubt it," said Harry, shaking his head. "You see, something happened to me. When I left my home, I accidentally jumped to another world, but not this one. I believe that instead of stepping through a doorway to another world, I was swapped with the Harry from that world. It is his body you see before you."

"Not our Harry's?"

"No, because when coming to this world, I stepped through a doorway and hence kept the third Harry's body. There would be two Harry's here, were it not for the fact that he is already...you know." He paused for a moment, trying to think of a way around referring to three different people as 'Harry'. "This is all rather complicated, isn't it?" he said with a shrug. "Anyhow, my point is that when I swapped bodies with the third Harry, I also inherited some...skills of his, muscle memory perhaps, as well as some lingering memories and instincts. The Harry I swapped with is what you described earlier. He's the killer, the monster, the Dark Lord's second in command."

"So, effectively," reasoned Katie. "You're saying that you are an alien who doesn't belong here, who was just pretending to be our friend, I'm assuming, while you worked out how to get home. And to make it worse, you have all the instincts and abilities of a fully-trained Death Eater, and are in fact a killer?"

"Well not exac..." protested Harry, but she cut him off.

"Yes or no?" pressed Katie more firmly.

Harry couldn't blame her for her anger and mistrust, but it was not as black and white as she thought. He suddenly realised that he knew of a Death Eater who had killed people, who was once a monster but had claimed to be on the Light side. One of the reasons Harry did not trust Severus Snape was the simple fact that he used to be a Death Eater. On reflection, Katie was entirely justified in her response.

"Yes," said Harry sadly. "On some level you are right."

"You either are, or you aren't," said Katie stubbornly.

"Let me explain," snapped Harry a little more aggressively than he meant to. As Katie recoiled, Harry instantly dropped his anger and took a deep, calming breath. "I was once like you once, just a normal student. Then one day I woke up to find myself in the body of a monster. Everyone I had ever known or loved now hated and feared me. I could do all these new things but people hated me because of it... because of what I had apparently done in that world. But I never remembered doing any of it. Even so, from the moment I arrived there I set about trying to right the wrongs I had never done. With the help of the Order of the Phoenix we managed to defeat the Dark Lord on that world. When you phrase it as you did, yes... I am a killer, a monster, and I

have done a lot of things I am not proud of, things I regret. Everyone who died in order to defeat that Dark Lord still haunts my dreams. However, I am on your side and I can help. Of the three people in this room, how many have actually defeated a Dark Lord?"

Katie stared at him levelly as he spoke. The final sentence had been a little childish, but it had nailed the point home.

"So, you left that world and came here," Katie pressed after a minute.

She evidently had chosen not to continue arguing that point, but whether she believed in his sincerity was another issue. Either way, she was continuing with the story, discerning more from what Harry had said than he would have in her position. Harry could only nod as she continued.

"And you said it was by accident. You were trying to get home?"

This was another awkward point that would not really gain her trust. He knew that if he answered truthfully, she would take it to mean he was trying to get out of here and leave them, as if he was trying to run away. This was yet another catch-22. When he answered, he chose his words carefully.

"I believe the evil me, the one from this third world, is in my home world," said Harry. "We have no defences against him, and if he joins the Dark Lord there... Without me to balance the scales I fear my world will fall."

"So you have spent the entire time you were here trying to get home?" repeated Katie, her tone thoughtful but not aggressive. She looked reflective, as if she was trying to piece it all together. "Why did you even come back to school then? You could have gone anywhere."

"Hogwarts was a good place to stay in the meantime," shrugged Harry. "Access to magic in order to research how to get home. Besides, like I said before, I didn't know something had gone wrong until I showed up here and frankly I didn't have anywhere else to go."

"And have you found a way to get home yet?" asked Riddle, the curiosity etched into his face.

"I'm nearer than I was," replied Harry avoiding the question. He had no desire to tell Riddle any more than he had to, and it was time to put a shot across his bows. "And considering Lord Voldemort, you will understand if I don't share that information with you?"

"Who is this Lord Voldemort?" interrupted Katie. She had clearly picked up on the tension between Harry and Riddle and looked to each of them for an answer. Then she shook her head and fixed her eyes on Harry. "No, hang on, we'll get to him, but first I have another question. I want to know, if you're so eager to get home, then why have you been following me? Why did you join the RA? Why did you come to help tonight?"

"Would you rather I hadn't?" asked Harry, trying to keep the frustration from his voice. He suddenly felt like he was in a witch hunt, as if his inquisitor was trying to burn him.

"If I was trying to get home," said Katie, her tone slightly condescending. "I wouldn't let clubs like the RA come between me and my objective. I wouldn't march headlong into duels with the Dark Lord or situations that are liable to get me killed. I wouldn't take risks."

"What's your point?" asked Harry defensively.

"You said it yourself," she replied. "You're main priority is to get home so you can save your own world. What made you do it? Are you addicted to risk-taking, to fighting... to playing the hero?"

"Of course not!" snapped Harry, although her question made him uncomfortable for some reason.

"So why were you sticking your nose in?" persisted Katie, her tone firmer, more argumentative than before. "You knew what was going to happen, but you didn't give us that information so you weren't there to help. Why go through the charade?"

"I helped you escape Umbridge," argued Harry hotly.

"Yes, but you could have told us weeks in advance," replied Katie. "You could have warned us about tonight, you could have taught us more advanced spells in the RA, but instead you pretended you couldn't do spells and didn't know things. You clearly weren't there to help, so what was the point of it all, Harry?"

"I was there for *you*," snapped Harry before he could stop himself. His response seemed to stop Katie in her tracks as well as him. The impact of what Harry had said hit him a second after it had left his mouth. His eyes were wide in horror as he realised that he had said it aloud. Katie had goaded him and he had slipped up again. He had never meant to say that, certainly not to her face. Harry sighed, resting his head in his hands and massaging his forehead. He sat down on the edge of Riddle's desk and then, after rubbing the weariness from his face, looked up at Katie. He tried to maintain eye contact, but her uncompromising stare forced him to look away. As Harry began to explain, he found himself staring at his hands hanging limply in his lap.

"I see in you a better version of myself," confessed Harry, experiencing a mixed sensation of wanting to tell her everything and wanting the world to open up and swallow him. As he continued he began to fidget, rubbing his fingertips together. "I've made so many mistakes. I once tried to teach my own version of the RA and I was curious about yours. You were so much better than I was," he added with a small, private smile.

He tried looking up again and this time he forced himself to look at her. She was staring forward, lost in thought, and somehow that made it easier to continue, his voice growing stronger and more confident with each word. "But most of all, I have spent a lifetime being gawped at by people who know the legend, who see the scar and nothing else. They know me for what my parents did, or rather died doing. It sounds wonderful, but living it means being completely alone. When I was in your shoes I was so lonely, so scared, and now I see you in that position and it's heart-breaking. I wasn't trying to avert the future, as you needed to learn, but while I was here I was trying to make you feel less alone. I wasn't trying to teach or protect the weapon, I was trying to help the person beneath, the real you."

Harry paused and looked at Riddle who was watching him carefully, and then at Katie who was looking slightly guilty, her eyes glistening slightly with unshed tears.

There was an awkward pause in which Harry stood and walked over to the window. He stared silently out over the forest beneath them, wondering if he had done the right thing after all. Katie was right... he shouldn't have gotten involved.

"I guess I failed," he muttered, sighing deeply and looking at his feet. "I should have left well enough alone and minded my own business."

"I'm sorry, Harry," said Katie gently after a few moments.

Harry turned back to face her, surprised.

"What for?" asked Harry. "You have nothing to be sorry for."

"I just assumed you were either spying on us, playing God with us or..." she trailed off.

"Or what?" asked Harry.

"It's nothing..." she said turned away and looking awkward.

"What?" It was Harry's turn to persist.

"I thought you might have been stalking me," confessed Katie, her face reddening as she studied the floor.

"Oh," said Harry, blushing crimson. "No...definitely not....well, that's not to say that I wouldn't...I mean I wouldn't, but I..." he trailed off before he dug himself a deeper hole. "I definitely wasn't stalking you," he said firmly.

Katie sat back down, smiling slightly and turned back to face him. "So who is this Volder-whats-it then," she asked, clearly keen to change the subject.

Harry shot a quick look at Riddle, before he answered. The Headmaster looked like his mother had just died. There was a great sadness in his appearance, and he looked utterly defeated. It would have been almost pitiful, were it not the man who had murdered his parents. All pride was gone from his posture. He had slumped forward with his forearms stretched out on the desk and his head bowed. He gave Harry a small nod. Harry had been looking forward to this for ages, but judging by Katie's reaction the last time he had tried to burn Riddle, he felt it best to tread softly and stick to the facts.

"In my world," began Harry, his eyes never leaving Riddle. "Grindelwald was defeated in 1945 by Albus Dumbledore who remains Headmaster to this day." Harry picked his wand up from on Riddle's desk and began to trace letters in the air, just as a younger version of the Headmaster had done in another life.

"Unfortunately," continued Harry as he wrote, "another rose in his place, a man calling himself Lord Voldemort."

He finished writing '*I am Lord Voldemort*' in mid air.

As Harry raised his wand ready to shuffle the letters, a hand clamped over his wand. Harry instantly tensed, and turned to face Riddle, who had risen from his seat. The man stood inches from Harry, and towered over him, but this was not the intimidating Lord Voldemort; the man before him looked crestfallen. To Harry's surprise, there was guilt etched into his face, and a great sadness in his eyes. Harry's almost felt a glimmer of pity for him. But as he remembered the glowing red eyes of his nemesis, his pity dissolved.

Riddle looked into Harry's eyes for a second and then sighed. He stared up at the letters glowing in mid-air.

"No matter how far you run," he said in a whisper. "The past will always find you."

The Headmaster bowed his head, and then with a small smile at Harry, he swept his hand over the letters, which quickly began to rearrange themselves. Harry's eyes never left Riddle's as the letters shuffled to match the sign at the front of the desk: Tom Marvolo Riddle.

The only sound in the room was Katie's shocked gasp as she read the name. She stared up at the Headmaster, her face aghast. Riddle stood motionless, his eyes now locked on the portrait on the wall, an almost pleading look on his face. There was a short pause before he turned around, having summoned the will to face them. In silence he sat back down behind his desk, brushed his long, dark hair away from his eyes and leaned back.

"Despite what you see before you," began Riddle, his voice slow and his tone sombre, "I was once no better than Grindelwald himself. I was once consumed by the same delusion, only worse. Harry once asked me what my greatest fear was: the answer used to be death. I blamed my mother for dying, a shameful human weakness. I knew I was descended from Salazar Slytherin..."

"The Heir of Slytherin!" gasped Katie, staring horrified at the Headmaster.

Riddle made no move to deny it. His head sank into a small affirmative nod. "It was not I who opened the Chamber of Secrets, Kathryn, but I am of that bloodline. And that, I felt long ago, meant that I had a right to do as I pleased. I believed I was special and better than Muggles from my days in the Orphanage, and having fallen in with the wrong crowd here at school, amongst them the first generation of British Death Eaters, my thinking became very dark. I planned to leave all Muggle routes behind, shed my Muggle father's name, and most importantly to conquer death."

"It sounds like you were becoming a Dark Lord," said Katie, nervously.

"He was," said Harry. "Trust me, I know. Your *Headmaster* did grow into a Dark Lord. Once he left Hogwarts he disappeared and travelled the world. Years later, people started disappearing

and rumours circulated amongst the underworld – a new Dark Lord was rising. When Lord Voldemort appeared again, few recognised him as the former Hogwarts Head Boy, Tom Riddle, and those who did were quickly killed. His power grew and grew. He was unstoppable, until he heard a Prophecy. He came after the boy who could potentially bring about his downfall. However, his curse rebounded, stripping him of his power and his body. Does this sound familiar, Katie?"

Katie nodded, staring at Harry and Riddle in concern.

"But what confuses me," continued Harry, "what I cannot understand, is how the man I see before me, the wizard who used the name Lord Voldemort even as a teenager, who I feel certain killed several people in cold blood including his own father, and certainly once wanted to rid Hogwarts of Muggleborns... how can he now sit here as Headmaster, clearly not a Dark Lord? If it were not for the fact that I have seen his Dark side I might have even thought it possible that he were a good man. He seems to have no prejudice against Muggleborns or any Slytherin-like leanings, so the big question becomes what changed? What was it that finally defeated Lord Voldemort?"

Riddle did not answer for a few seconds. He stared blankly into space before turning and staring at the portrait of his predecessor on the wall.

"It's a long story," replied Riddle, his voice very small. "One best left for another night."

"Oh no," interrupted Harry. "No, no, no! You are not getting away with that. What changed you?"

Riddle turned back to Harry, staring him in the eye for a second before looking away again. He turned back to face the portrait, and to Harry's immense surprise, a single glistening tear ran down Tom Riddle's face.

"One man," said Riddle, not taking his eyes off the portrait, a fond little smile on his face. "Albus Dumbledore."

Harry paused at the name. He knew he was dead, and he also knew that even if he had lived, Riddle would become Voldemort, so what had stopped him? Riddle rose gradually to his feet and walked slowly across to the portrait. He stood before it and gingerly reached out and ran his fingers over the canvas from which Albus Dumbledore smiled back at him.

"It has been over fifty years since I have heard that name Voldemort," replied Riddle. "I had hoped that it would never be uttered again. I was hoping that the world would forget that particular chapter of the past."

"Those who forget history are doomed to repeat it," replied Katie philosophically, her voice definitely cool. Was Harry mistaken or was she siding with him? He felt a sense of relief, mixed with triumph at that revelation.

"True," answered Riddle. He stepped to the side so the two students would see the portrait.

"I remember when he came to the orphanage," said Riddle, smiling sadly. "To rescue me, as I thought at the time. I had a box full of stolen trophies from my spiteful little acts of vengeance against other children. He told me that stealing was punished heavily at Hogwarts and that I should never let him catch me, to which my response was, 'I won't', after which I added 'let you catch me' in my head. Oh, I hated him at the time. He always kept an eye on me... spying, watching, waiting for me to put a toe out of line. If I had been a little wiser I would have realised that he was always there for me, and that he was trying to help me. Had I been able to do as I pleased...well....Harry knows what would have happened."

"So, just by being there he stopped you becoming this Voldemort?" asked Katie.

"Sadly not," replied Riddle with a sigh. "You are about to hear the very darkest chapter of my past... You see, Albus failed. In my seventh year I did something truly unforgivable. Harry, do you know what a Horcrux is?"

Harry nodded, but for Katie's benefit he explained Tom's question. "It's an object in which a Dark Wizard encases part of his or her soul. That way when they die, if the object is still intact, they survive – less than the merest ghost – but alive nonetheless."

Katie looked at Harry astonished. He could almost see the cogs turning as she remembered the events after the Third Task and the potion that brought Grindelwald back.

"I've heard that before," she said, staring at Harry. "In the graveyard. 'Lesser than the merest spirit, but still I was alive'. That's what Grindelwald has done. Does he have one of these Horcruxes? Is that why he didn't die?"

Riddle nodded. "It is the theory to which I have been working," he admitted. "You see, a Horcrux is made by the act of murder, by harnessing the energy released from draining the life out of a person. It is channelled into the caster and the object. It tears the soul in half and deposits half in the object."

"Why are you telling us this?" asked Katie, not following.

Harry on the other hand did. "Because he made one," he told her quietly.

Riddle bowed his head and Katie gasped.

"No!" she blurted out, wearing the face that looked like it was waiting for him to shout April Fool. Riddle gave her a small smile, as if he appreciated her show of support, even though he plainly did not deserve it.

"Mister Potter is once again correct," Riddle announced. "Since he has asked about my family, this leads me to believe he knows who the victim was. Am I correct?" he asked Harry in a shrewd voice.

Harry nodded. "I'm fairly certain it was your Muggle father and grandparents."

"It is the moment in my life that I regret the most, when I killed Tom Riddle Senior in order to make myself immortal. A life for a life-eternal. The other two were unfortunate bystanders."

"You didn't," said Katie shaking her head. "You wouldn't."

"I did," confessed Riddle, "though I have wished ever since that I had not. It was my darkest hour... when Tom Riddle disappeared and Lord Voldemort took over. However, upon my return to Hogwarts, the Horcrux safely in my pocket, who should I run into?"

"Dumbledore," said Harry with a hint of pride.

Riddle nodded. "He saved me," said Riddle with a small smile. "It took over a year, but he saved me. He failed to defeat one Dark Lord at Versailles, but he did defeat another."

"What do you mean?" asked Katie

"Lord Voldemort and his Horcrux died that day," answered Riddle. "Ever since then I have been trying to earn his forgiveness. When I die and, should I meet him again, I want to be able to look him in the eye and say that I did whatever I could from that point on to be a force for good in this world."

"You can't buy your way into Heaven," said Harry, shaking his head. "You need to genuinely regret, experience genuine remorse."

"You have no idea how right you are," said Riddle, with a knowing smile.

Harry had no idea what he meant, but Riddle continued before he had a chance to ask.

"But that is the sad story of Lord Voldemort." he concluded with finality.

"No it isn't," interrupted Harry. "What made you change? Dumbledore telling off or giving you a detention wouldn't do it. What made the monster see the error of his ways?"

"That is not something I'm ready to talk about," said Riddle, a little more firmly.

"But..." argued Harry.

Riddle shot him a look that said that this conversation was over and Harry backed down, seeing the futility of arguing. Katie on the other hand was not finished.

"So, let me see if I have this straight," said Katie. "Just to summarise this evening... I have to kill or be killed by the Dark Lord, and the two people most likely to help are a murderer and a traveller from another world, who in a sense used to be another Dark Lord's second in command..."

Harry didn't approve of her choice of words, but she was essentially right. "I understand this is a lot to take in," he began, but she cut him off.

"Really?" she asked, her voice oozing sarcasm. "I find out that I have been lied to from day one. I am not a person, but a weapon that everyone is just trying to protect. The people who I thought were trying to help me are just as bad as the person I am to fight. My life is in your hands, and personally I don't want my life in the hands of murderers, but it seems that is what has happened. After everything I have done for you over the years, Sir, and you never told me any of this? Neither of you know how utterly betrayed I feel."

Harry opened his mouth to speak, but Katie cut him off.

"No, Harry, I don't think you can appreciate how I feel. Just by talking to you tonight I think you speak like a soldier, like a killer. I've seen how detached you are, how hard you find it to act normally. As your little act flipped from cold to cuddly and back I could never tell which was the real you. But it's the cold one, isn't it...the warrior? I think somewhere along the line you've lost your humanity. But both of you are guilty. What really grates on my nerves is that tomorrow you are both going to expect me to pick up the fight where we left off, to soldier on, pretending none of this happened. I'm supposed to forget that you have done everything wrong. You expect me to come around and act all 'hey, you screwed me over, and ruined my life, but that's fine because we're on the same team'. You expect me to carry the standard and to continue to fight for you, when judging by what I have heard tonight neither of you deserve my support."

"Well, I have news for you," she announced. "I've had enough deceit and lies for one night. I'm off to bed. I need time. I don't mean time to come to terms with all the lies and the bullshit that you have been layering up this year, but lest you all forget, Sirius died tonight. But what do you care, Headmaster? He was just a foot soldier. What do you care, Harry... if you even *can* feel compassion? But me, I'm still human and I still feel. I still hurt. I am going to mourn my Godfather before I raise a finger to help you and your little war. So unlock the door, Professor, because I am going to bed."

"Before you do," said Harry, braving the glare Katie was shooting at them. "I think Riddle needs to see the third prophecy, Katie."

Her jaw dropped as Harry spoke but he stared calmly back, trying to keep all emotion and feelings hidden.

"How could you possibly...?" began Katie.

"Neville."

"Wanker," cursed Katie under her breath.

Riddle had looked up at the word 'prophecy' and was now staring at Katie intently. He was apparently unaware of the existence of a third prophecy.

"Can we..." asked Riddle hesitantly, gesturing to the Pensieve.

Katie nodded reluctantly and returned to her seat. Riddle raised his wand to her temple.

"Concentrate," he said, before pulling the familiar thread from her temple and dropping it into the bowl. As he stirred, Professor Trelawney once again rose from the Pensieve.

*"He shall come to you on swift wings, a stranger from an unholy land," she rasped, her voice croaky, deep and vacant, "and disaster shall follow in his wake. My last shall be re-written, your future re-cast. But beware your guardians; each will tempt you into their own darkness...choose wisely, Chosen One...your fate and the Knight's are now entwined. He is not as strong as he appears. His life now hangs in the balance but it is you who must choose for him, and with your choice, he may forever be lost to this world...choose wisely, Chosen One, choose wisely."*

"Firstly," said Harry after a pause. "We can discount the old prophecy, for this says that it is re-written. And secondly, I believe that I am the stranger from the unholy land."

"Why is that?" asked Katie curiously despite her attempts to remain neutral.

"In the first world I visited," he explained, "my parents were alive, but Voldemort was almost in charge. He had never fallen, and his followers were everywhere – even the other me was one of them. Everyone in that world wanted me dead... Voldemort because I had left him and everyone else because I had once served him. I was utterly alone and it seemed most of the time that I had no one to help me. I was a visitor to a strange, violent, and Godless world. I was a Stranger in an Unholy Land."

Harry paused and looked around. Katie's icy stare had melted slightly and she almost looked sympathetic.

"It was a nightmare of a world, ravaged by war," he continued, "But it gave me a chance to finally meet my parents, to live like a normal family, to meet a sister I never knew I had. For just a few months, I felt like I was home."

"But they weren't your real family," argued Katie.

"The world is what you make of it," said Harry, looking at her levelly. "I could argue that you aren't real and aren't worth my time and help, or I could decide that you are a good person in very harsh circumstances who might need help. I seem to have chosen the latter. In the other world, I tried to avoid getting involved, but I can't stand by while others suffer..." he trailed off.

"And now you find history repeating itself here," finished Riddle. "Now you find yourself in what you thought was the Promised Land, but still a complete stranger, and once again you find yourself getting more and more drawn in."

"I already am," said Harry. "In that other world the Newspapers had dubbed the other me the 'Dark Knight', and so I fought as the White Knight to defeat the Dark Lord. I believe that I am also the Knight in the second half of that Prophecy. Apparently, Katie here must choose if I live or die."

"Don't tempt me," muttered Katie. She glanced at him for a moment, her brow furrowed in thought. "Well, disaster *has* followed in your wake - Sirius is...." But she couldn't finish the

sentence and trailed off, staring at her feet again. Instead she moved on. "An old prophecy was re-written, a future recast. You said it yourself, Harry. With you here, things are different now. I assume you flew to the Ministry on Thestrals, hence the swift wings?"

Harry hesitated. He opened his mouth to answer, but quickly shut it again. How exactly does a man explain to a woman that he has repeatedly flown into her bedroom at night to watch over her, without sounding like a pervert? She would accuse him of watching her get dressed, of spying on her. She would be livid that he had deceived her, and in her current state that was not a good thing. Also, it meant that he could continue to keep an eye on her if he kept that bit a secret.

"Yes," he replied at length.

"So your fate is in my hands," said Katie more as a statement than a question. She fixed Harry with an appraising stare.

Harry had no idea what was going through her head. For a moment he considered that perhaps she was considering blackmailing him, but he doubted she was cruel enough for that, even in her current state.

Eventually she shrugged. "Well that's sorted," she said a little too casually. "Can I go to bed now?"

Riddle nodded and Harry followed suit as Katie turned to leave. As the door shut behind her, Harry turned to Riddle. That could have gone worse he realised, but what did Riddle make of it?

"She'll be fine," said Riddle, clearly reading Harry's expression. "She just needs time."

"The one thing we don't have," muttered Harry, trying to rub the weariness from his face.

Riddle nodded in agreement.

"But we can ask no more of her yet," replied Riddle. "We have both wronged her significantly. I remain confident she will come around in the end."

Harry agreed but it still sounded to him as if the Headmaster was taking Katie for granted. The trouble was that Harry was guilty of the same sin. There was nothing else he could do.

"So what happens now?" asked Harry, the tiredness suddenly catching up with him. "Am I to be locked up and examined?"

Riddle looked up at him in amusement. "I think we can keep a secret," he announced. "You are free to go."

"As if you could stop me," muttered Harry.

"And you will need this," said Riddle, offering Harry his two wands back.

He didn't question if the Headmaster was going to get it checked, but took them and pocketed them without a word. He turned to leave, but before he got to the door Riddle spoke again.

"Harry," he called. "Whatever has happened between various versions of ourselves, I hope we can put this aside. For Kathryn's sake."

Harry turned back to face him. "Maybe," he replied. "But sooner or later I am going to need to know everything about Voldemort. You can't remain silent forever."

With that he slipped out the door, closing it with a bang.

He caught up with Katie a hundred metres beyond the door.

"I'll walk you up to the Tower," said Harry, as he drew level. She didn't respond.

They descended the stairs and began the trek up to the seventh floor. He walked in silence next to the Girl-Who-Lived, not daring to speak, not knowing what to say. The awkward silence was deafening. As they walked, their footsteps were the only sounds in the deserted corridor. Harry longed to break the silence, but what do you say to someone like Katie after what she had been through? Back when it was him, he had just wanted to be alone. Harry stole a quick glance across at her.

Her expression was vacant as they walked along the darkened corridor, her jaw set and her eyes fixed ahead. As her face fell in and out of shadow, Harry thought he saw a tear glisten on the silhouette of her face. He checked his watch: it was ten to nine. The corridors would be deserted and most all the students in their dormitories as curfew started in ten minutes. Not that it mattered... no one in their right mind would challenge Harry, looking and feeling like he did.

As they reached the stairs, Harry couldn't take it any longer.

"Hermione and the others will be fine," he said as they began to climb. "A few days in the hospital and they'll be right as rain." It was about the only good news there was, and it had taken Harry the entire journey just to think of it. He was tired and she was ratty.

"Good," said Katie, her voice scarcely above a whisper. Her tone was almost bored, and the message was clear: she did not want to talk.

"Look," said Harry, trying to sound apologetic. "I don't mean to be a know-it-all, but I do know what you are feeling."

"Well if you are so good, you do it all over again. You fight Grindelwald and save me the hassle," replied Katie coldly.

"Look, I know Sirius was dear to you," replied Harry calmly, knowing that anger wouldn't help either of them. He dared't refer to Sirius as his Godfather yet, as she would think he was trying to steal him from her. "My Godfather was killed in front of me as well, remember."

"Don't say it like that," said Katie bluntly.

"Okay," Harry replied, his tone softer. "Just look at it like this. What would he want you to do? He came to visit you during the Triwizard Tournament, disguised as a dog. He lived off rats, and risked his life to be with you, to make you happy. He wouldn't want you to blame yourself. He would have given his life to save you, and this is what he did."

"But he's gone." Her voice cracked on the final word, tears flowing down her cheeks.

"He will only be gone when you stop loving him," said Harry. "He saved you from beyond the grave tonight. If he's up there watching over you, he would be glad to know that his death made you stronger, that it was not in vain. If you don't move on, don't face your destiny, *then* his death will have been in vain."

"There you go sounding like a soldier again," scoffed Katie. "Death in battle is honourable, blah blah blah... good death, blah blah. That is no consolation to me at the moment."

"You truly believe that?" asked Harry. "You truly don't care that he died doing what he wanted, died trying to protect you?"

"Oh, I don't know!" conceded Katie irritably, throwing her arms in the air. "It's just that I haven't even got back to the Common Room and already people are telling me it's the way it was meant to be, and to move on and grow up. It's just so hard. I feel so angry and yet so..."

"Lost?" offered Harry.

Katie nodded.

"Believe me, I know," said Harry. "People said similar things to me, and I just wanted them to shut up. Given time, I have come to realise that they were right. I won't let his death have been in vain. I will make him proud."

"I just need time," said Katie tiredly.

"Of course," replied Harry, remembering the pain. But then again she was not Harry. She was not even a man. Women reacted very differently to emotional situations. Harry knew this from Hermione's antics at the Yule Ball, and generally the sixth year girls. Harry had no clue how she would deal with this, if she even would. He just hoped she wouldn't spend the next few weeks crying – there was work to be done. Still, this didn't mean he couldn't be sensitive.

"Take all the time you need. If you ever need me, my door is always open."

"Okay," said Katie as they arrived at the Fat Lady.

Harry got the impression she was just saying that to shut him up and that if she felt lonely, he was the last person she would confide in. But now was not the time to press her.

"What in heaven's name happened to you?" gawped the Fat Lady as she saw Harry.

"I got into a fight with a mad German with a knife," replied Harry impatiently.

The Fat Lady looked down at him with a scornful expression painted over her face. "I was only asking," she shot back defensively. "There's no need to be rude."

Harry grimaced and gave the password. The Fat Lady looked even more mutinous that she had to step aside for him, and reluctantly opened to grant them access. The Gryffindor Common Room was a flurry of activity as Harry and Katie entered. Rumours had to have been flying wild, largely thanks to Colin Creevey who had seen the inquisitorial Squad capture Katie and the others. None of the others had returned yet. From the conversation it seemed that McGonagall had ordered everyone back to their common rooms, and the missing students taken by Umbridge were on everyone's lips. It was then that they spotted Harry and Katie.

Harry was dressed in Riddle's long black coat with white trousers and boots. He had a cut over his left eye and blood smeared over his jaw and chin. Katie didn't look as bad, but had a nasty scrape on her cheek. Her clothes were torn and both of them looked like they had been dragged through a bush backwards.

"What the f...?" said someone in the room.

The room froze and silence fell as Harry and Katie crossed the threshold into the room. If there was anyone who could answer the endless questions flying about all evening it was the pair in the doorway. But now that they were here, no one dared to approach.

They stood in a sea of stares and open mouths. Harry turned to Katie and, as expected, found her jaw firmly set in place, refusing to let the pain show. However it was clear to Harry how hard she found this.

"Come on," he said softly, resting a hand lightly on her shoulders. They moved forward and the crowd parted to allow them through, but the stares didn't stop. Harry guided Katie through the crowd towards the stairs where she began to climb slowly, her head hung low and her movements shaky. He wished he could follow but the alarms wouldn't let him. Instead, he turned back to face the room.

Every person in the room was staring at him. He had noticed that two of the seventh year girls had risen from their chairs and Harry had a fair idea what they were planning to do.

"I really wouldn't," Harry said to them. His voice was full of authority and carried to every corner of the room. "In her current state, if you press her for information all the make-up in the world won't hide what she'll do to you."

A look of confusion crossed over their faces. Harry felt a glimmer of anger – it should have been pity not confusion.

"And that goes for the rest of you as well," he continued, his voice rising to make sure he was heard. "Leave her alone. If you want information, Riddle is back and he will tell you in the morning. For now, just celebrate the fact that Umbridge is gone. The rest can wait."

As expected, at the mention of Riddle's name a muttering rose up as the news that Umbridge was gone and Riddle was back sunk in. Harry glanced around the room again before speaking.

"Prefects... pull your thumbs out and do your God-damned jobs – get everyone to bed. NOW!"

With one final glance around the room, Harry disappeared up the boy's stairs with a swish of his cloak as the Prefects jumped to attention and complied with his orders.

When he got to his room he took off Riddle's coat and threw it across the bed. Suddenly he felt really cold and tired, and part of him wanted to just crash out right now. But he knew his jobs were not yet finished. He kicked off his boots and socks, which landed in a messy heap in the corner. Merlin, he felt like hell.

Just then the door opened and Seamus and Dean slipped in. Harry had turned in an instant, aiming his primary wand at the pair of them. They nervously crossed to the next bed and sat down, staring expectantly at him as he relaxed and stowed it away.

"Well?" asked Seamus when he couldn't contain it any longer.

Harry was in no mood for conversation. He got shakily to his feet and approached the boys.

"Seamus," he said flatly. "Do you have any alcohol? Any vodka?"

"Sure," he asked. "Why?"

"I need some," replied Harry.

Seamus hesitated for a second before reaching under his bed. He emerged a second later with half a bottle of clear liquid. Harry walked awkwardly over and took the bottle from his hands.

"Medicinal purposes," he muttered.

Wearing just his trousers, he walked bare-foot to the bathroom and locked the door.

Safely inside, he stared at his reflection in the mirror, inspecting the damage. Riddle had healed the cut on his neck without even leaving a scar, but that was only one of his wounds. He had a busted eyebrow from which blood was seeping down the right side of his face, caking over the warmth of his skin. He had several large, ugly purple bruises on his stomach and chest. Were it not for his armour, they would have been worse – a fact for which he was most grateful. Unfortunately, there were injuries his armour had not absorbed. There was a cut just above his right hip on the side of his torso where the armour afforded him no protection. He had another on his thigh hidden beneath a mess of bloodied white cloth. Harry attributed both these to flying tiles as Grindelwald had tried to cut him to shreds. There were various other scrapes and cuts, but those little scratches paled into insignificance next to the other two.

Harry grabbed a flannel off the side and dipped it into the warm water in the sink. Gingerly he swabbed away the dried blood from around the wound on his hip. The white flannel came away crimson, and the water in the sink began to follow suit. Harry tried to disturb the laceration as

little as possible as he continued to clear away the dried blood, but as soon as he cleared some away, it was quickly replaced by fresh crimson. Cursing, he noticed that there was a fragment of a tile embedded in his hip. Twisting so he could see in the mirror, he could make out a jagged piece of white pushing out from inside the cut, and it was clearly not his bone. He knew it had to come out. Gritting his teeth, he aimed his wand at the piece of tile and took a deep breath, readying himself for the pain.

"Accio tile!"

Harry gritted his teeth and doubled up in pain, determined not to cry out as the debris was torn from his body. He then braced himself for more pain and poured a little of the vodka over the wound to sterilise it. Hissing in pain as the alcohol stung at the exposed flesh, Harry quickly covered it with a fresh flannel and kept pressure on it, somehow knowing it would stop the bleeding eventually. Holding it firmly in place with his left hand, he used his right to clean up the rest of his body, including the bushy eyebrow. He wiped away the sweat and the blood, leaving himself feeling much cleaner, but at the same time much weaker.

As he had cleaned his thigh, having used his wand to remove the fabric around it, Harry applied a touch more vodka over the cut, and rested another flannel over it before using his wand to create bonds to hold it in place. It was less severe than the one on his hip and had almost stopped bleeding to begin with. Satisfied that the rest of him was patched up, Harry turned his attention back to his hip. Gingerly removing the flannel to have a look, he was relieved to see that the blood was clotting again. He gently cleaned away some of the dried blood that was running down his hip and placed a fresh flannel over the top, and then bound it to his torso as he had done to his thigh. That would be good enough for tonight, he reasoned.

That done he returned to his room where Dean and Seamus were still waiting for him. Harry handed the bottle back to Seamus and limped to his bed. The lactic acid in his limbs was making his entire body really stiff in addition his wounds. He waddled more than walked as his legs began to cramp and seize up.

"Well?" asked Seamus, as Harry crossed to his bed.

Harry glanced at him, but remained silent. There was no point in telling him anything at this point. He could wait until the morning like everyone else. Harry reached under his bed and produced a box of chocolate frogs. He ate three to increase his blood sugar level and took a drink of water from the jug by his bed.

"What happened?" reiterated Seamus, clearly frustrated that Harry wasn't responding.

"Read tomorrow's *Prophet*," said Harry, lying down on his bed, his hip uppermost to protect it and so blood flowed away from it. "I'm sure they will cover the long and short of it."

With that Harry drew the curtains with a flick of his hand. Secure, he removed the bloodied remains of his trousers, leaving just his boxers on, rolled onto his back, and lay staring up at the ceiling waiting for Dean and Seamus to go to bed.

It was another few minutes before he heard them both leave, to go back down and share what little they had learned. With them gone, he had one more task to complete.

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Katie lay back on her bed, staring up at the ceiling. Her unfocussed eyes saw not the red curtains, but the image of Sirius falling backwards through the arch. The scene was imprinted on her mind, and every time she closed her eyes she was forced to relive it.

*If only I hadn't been so stupid, she told herself. ...If only.*

Guilt was building up inside her like a dam, but she refused to burst. She had cried enough this evening. As she listened to the wind howling around the tower, the words of the old prophecy came back to her. *One must die at the hands of the other...* The old Prophecy. Perhaps it was now void. But even if it was, Grindelwald would not stop coming after her. It wasn't over. The new prophecy wasn't exactly detailed when it came to the Dark Lord, and Katie was fairly sure that one day it would be her that had to face Grindelwald.

Kill or be killed, she repeated in her mind. Murdered or murderer. Did she honestly think she could do it? Even if she somehow managed to beat him, could she look into another man's eyes and end his life? There were enough killers out there, but she was not one of them. Riddle, Potter... they had both killed, but she was better than them. Anyone could kill – a toddler with his dad's gun could even kill someone. But to give life... that was real power. Riddle understood that, for that was what he was doing. As Headmaster, he was trying to ensure quality of life for his students, but Harry was a different kettle of fish.

Harry saw fighting as the only alternative. His heart was in the right place and, having spoken freely with him at last, Katie believed he was on the right side and thought he was doing the right thing, but he was so flawed. He had lived by the sword and believed the sword was the only solutions there was to life's problems. Somewhere along the line, he had lost what it meant to be human. Katie did not so much fear him, as pity him. He had spoken of a family, of finally meeting his parents, and it was a goal that Katie truly could understand. But Harry had walked away from that. He seemed to flip mid-conversation between compassionate and cold. Katie doubted he even realised that he had done it, but it was clear to see. The boy was insane. When she had heard who Harry really was, that he too carried the scar, her first thought was that he could take over the fight for her. But as she thought about it, would she really trust the future to him, an insane killer? Not likely. Somehow, Katie felt that it was her job to finish Grindelwald off. He had killed her parents, and she would be there at his end.

In her mind, Katie played the whole conversation over again. The evening had brought a lot of information to light, and none of it was good. She was supposed to either kill or be killed. Riddle had known this for years but not told her. Of all the opportunities he'd had over the years, he had never mentioned it to her. If she had known...she never would have gone there tonight. If she had known back in September, then none of this would have happened. Riddle could have shown her the Prophecy, and this whole year would not have been wasted.

As it was she was now more alone than ever. Now she had no one to turn to, for both Riddle and Potter were there for the war. Despite Harry's claims, he too looked at her as if she were an object, and spoke only of the fall of the Dark Lord. He may have come to the RA just for her, a claim that was rather flattering in itself, but now she had spoken to him in the open... now he was back in soldier mode, it was clear to see that he was thinking about war and not her. He flipped between his two personas so quickly, one minute cold and calculating, the next caring and trying to help. Every time Katie had challenged him, he had retreated into his cold persona, like a mask falling in to place. It was almost as if there was a war raging inside him.

There was a lot more to think about when it came to Harry. He claimed to be from another universe, but that was impossible, surely? A completely different Harry? Riddle had believed him, and he certainly seemed to know things he shouldn't... It was just that it was such a big thing to get her head around. She suddenly felt so small. When she thought about thousands of parallel universes side by side, she suddenly felt insignificant. And what of the person, himself? He didn't exactly seem sympathetic to the real Harry. He was walking around in dead man's shoes and didn't seem to care. Katie got the distinct impression that he hadn't given the real Harry a second thought.

And what of his scar? He was her opposite number, her counterpart on another world. *The Boy-Who-Lived*. Katie laughed at the idea, as the words just sounded ridiculous. The words seemed so...weird. It did explain how he knew everything. He had been through what she had, and was perhaps the only one who could understand. But the problem was that he didn't understand, not on a human level at least. She didn't want to end up like him – if he was her future, she would do everything possible to change it. She didn't want to endure what she saw in his eyes, the loneliness and the violence. Admittedly, his ability to fight had saved their lives and ultimately would help them. She knew that he had more chance of killing Grindelwald than she did, but that did not mean she envied his power. There was darkness behind those eyes. He had killed, she was sure of it. Did she trust him? She didn't even know herself?

*Thud!*

Katie sat bolt upright at the sound of the impact, a chill running down her spine. She grabbed her wand and slid open the curtains just enough to see out. The room was in darkness except for a sliver of moonlight coming in through the open window. Suddenly there was a flash of movement as something leapt towards her. She didn't even have time to scream before she suddenly realised what she was seeing. She breathed a sigh of relief. Perched on the dresser was the familiar form of her phoenix. She had yet to name the bird, but now was not the time. The phoenix spread its wings and jumped into the air, flapping its wings as it fluttered across the room. It flapped through the curtains and landed on one of the bed knobs inside. Katie made no objection, grateful for the company. She closed the curtains around them, the phoenix watching her intently the entire time.

"Hello," she said, gently brushing the top of its head with the back of her fingers. The bird twisted its head, nuzzling her fingers as she stroked it. It felt like the first time she had smiled in ages. At least with all the bad stuff that was going on, she had one thing that was pure left.

"At least one person isn't keeping secrets from me," she muttered.

With the phoenix watching over her, it was only a matter of minutes before she was fast asleep.

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"Is it possible, Tom?" Minerva asked, unable to get her mind around what she had just been told. Five minutes ago she was certain that the world on which she stood was all there was, and now to be told that there was more than one universe, that the reality around her was so much bigger than she could ever have imagined... it was unbelievable. The claim was just so enormous in its implication, monumental in its scope and just so...impossible was the only word Minerva could think of to cover it. Surely Tom was joking? She looked back at the Headmaster to find him staring back at her, gauging her reaction.

"This is not some sort of joke?" she asked, just to make sure.

Tom slowly shook his head and then rested his elbows on the arms of the chair and his chin on his interlocked hands. He almost looked as if he was praying, which was probably not far from the truth.

"Unfortunately no," he replied after a pause. "It's a sensationalist claim, I admit. However, there is proof in his blood and he carries two identical wands."

"But it can't..." Minerva started, but fell silent as Tom nodded.

"You are arguing with the wrong person," said Tom. "I am not defending Harry, and in many respects I agree with you. He shouldn't exist, but the evidence is overwhelming. After tonight, Minerva, I am not so sure of anything anymore."

Minerva's sharp eyes surveyed him; suddenly he seemed more tired than she had ever seen him before.

"It's almost like part of me wants to believe him," Tom continued, staring into space. "But is that just myself hoping for proof that there is something out there, or do I genuinely..."

He rubbed his temples before looking up at Minerva again.

"Harry paints a very convincing picture," announced Tom after a pause and Minerva could see that he was choosing his words carefully. "His story does answer many of the questions that we have both been asking for the last month. While I confess he is Occluding his mind so I cannot verify this, he appears to be telling the truth."

This only served to fuel Minerva's doubts. "Why would he Occlude his mind and hide his thoughts if he is on our side?" she asked.

Tom's gaze was steady, and when he spoke Minerva got the impression she was being humoured.

"I still Occlude my mind when I speak to the Order," replied Tom. "Even now, but that does not mean I am lying to you. Like anyone else, I do not believe Harry wishes all his little secrets to be revealed. In addition, Harry and I appear to have a history, and not a pleasant one."

"Whatever happened?" asked Minerva, her curiosity boiling over.

"A long story," he replied in a tone that perfectly communicated that this line of inquiry was at an end.

"Minerva," said Tom, bowing his head. "I have always asked you to stay out of my personal past. There were chapters of my life that I am certainly not proud of. Where Harry comes from, he has seen these chapters played through to a conclusion where I dare not imagine. Every time he looks at me, he sees...could you sit in front of Grindelwald in another life and ever feel at ease? No, Minerva, we cannot blame Harry for being guarded."

Minerva sat back, chewing over the facts in her mind. A new Harry, a new ally – and a powerful one if half of what Tom had told her about the boy's duel with Grindelwald was true – could it be possible? Was this new Harry a blessing though, or a curse? Minerva didn't know, but she realised that she seemed to accept Harry's story as being true.

*Imagine, she thought. The things he must have seen.*

"Let's say we accept everything prima-facie," said Minerva slowly. She wanted to make sure she understood the situation fully. "We are now dealing with two 'Chosen Ones', correct? Kathryn and Harry both carry the scar, and are both meant to defeat the Dark Lord?"

"Harry's role is still unclear," replied Tom. "Kathryn was the one meant to vanquish Grindelwald, but Harry's arrival may have voided the Prophecy. The situation is more complex than that and I will explain much of it to the Order, but first we have to decide about both Kathryn and Harry on a human level. They are both now under our protection, and after tonight, both will need time."

"I thought you said Harry seemed fine," Minerva asked.

"I was not referring to his physical health," replied Tom, evasively. He was staring into space once more, drumming his fingers together in thought.

"If Harry really has been in this kind of situation before," Minerva suggested, "perhaps there is a lot Kathryn could learn from him."

"That is a point I am still dubious about," replied Riddle, his tone against distant and thoughtful.

Minerva was confused. He had been singing Potter's praises a second and ago, and now didn't trust him?

"I thought you said he was on our side, and trustworthy," she asked.

"He is," replied Riddle, nodding. "I trust that he would never consciously betray us, and certainly never intentionally hurt Kathryn. But I fear he may unknowingly do more harm than good."

Minerva hated it when he spoke in riddles, but experience had taught her that persistence usually got an answer.

"In what way?" she pressed.

"Just in talking to him," said Riddle, rubbing his temples again. "I could see the darkness in him. It's just a theory, but I get the distinct impression that Harry has killed before, and not by accident."

Minerva's eyebrows shot skyward. The boy was a killer? What on earth would drive someone so young to do something so terrible? She understood now why Tom was dubious about letting him near Kathryn.

Tom continued to talk while staring into space, lost in thought. "His past conflicts appear to have been resolved by violence alone, and I believe that has left him with the belief that violence is the only way to move forward. He is not evil per se, but it is all he has known. He might believe that it is in Kathryn's best interests to craft her in his image, to turn her into a killer, and he could still place his hand on his heart and swear that he believed he was doing the right thing. I do not want to turn Kathryn into a killer, nor have her learn to wield a sword. I think that Harry believes this to be necessary, certainly for himself. His past conflicts – his residual memories, as he calls them, from his counterpart, who once served as the Dark Lord's lieutenant – have taught him to live by the sword. I just hope Kathryn will not."

"So you want them kept apart," stated Minerva, understanding the point he was trying to make.

"No," said Riddle, shaking his head, "on the contrary."

Minerva's jaw dropped. After that last speech, he wanted to put them together? Was the man insane?

"I think it would be beneficial for them to be together," he said, a small, knowing smile creeping across his face.

"But I thought you said it wouldn't help Kathryn," replied Minerva completely baffled.

"It's not Kathryn I am hoping to save," said Riddle with a shrug.

Minerva had no idea what he meant, but she was getting nowhere with her questions. Riddle seemed to have a plan, and she just hoped that was enough.

"So what do we do?" she asked, moving the conversation forward.

"First things first," said Riddle, sitting up in his chair. "To begin with, they are both to be checked over by Poppy. We need to make sure they are both fighting fit, so to speak. I know Harry, for one, sustained several injuries tonight, the worst of which I have healed myself. Secondly, we need to muster the Order. They need to be made aware of tonight's developments and plan ahead because the fall-out from this is going to be huge. I suggest ten o'clock tomorrow."

"Headquarters?" asked Minerva.

"Too risky," said Riddle shaking his head. "We don't know who inherits the house after Sirius' death. If it were to fall into the hands of Bellatrix Lestrange, for example, it would not be safe. I think it best we take a leaf out of Kathryn's book and use the Come and Go room. Kindly make the arrangements and include Harry and Kathryn on the list of those invited."

Minerva nodded, making a note on the parchment in front of her and tucking it into her pocket.

"Out of interest," she began. "How much are you going to tell everyone about Harry's origins?"

"As little as possible," said Riddle. "Outside this room only Kathryn knows the truth about Harry, and I agree with him that it should stay this way. For a kick off, everyone would think we are mad. But worse, if Grindelwald were to discover the existence of other worlds and a way to travel between them... Well, you can imagine the scale of the trouble it would cause."

Minerva nodded in agreement. She would not breathe a word of this to anyone, and was fairly sure she could act normally around Potter in the future.

"So what happens next?" she asked. "After tonight everyone will know that He's back."

Riddle stared at her for a long moment before speaking again. "I don't know," he answered. "I don't think even Harry does, but we have work to do. The security of the students is our number one priority. Tomorrow I will strengthen the wards around the castle, and we need a staff meeting to discuss new security precautions. As for the Order, well... we are at war now, Minerva."

"Is there any chance that Kathryn can actually do it?" asked Minerva.

"Of course she can," replied Riddle instantly.

"I am not a journalist," Minerva retorted indignantly.

Tom grimaced and looked her levelly in the eye.

"I don't know, Minerva," he replied honestly. "I just don't know."

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Harry awoke the next morning with his head pounding. As he tried to sit up every muscle in his body ached, as if had slept on a slab of granite. Groaning, he raised a hand to cover his eyes, his arm complaining with the movement. His muscles were balloons of lactic acid and every limb was stiff to the point where walking seemed a distant dream. Tentatively, he moved his hand to examine his throat. Riddle's spells had done the trick – he couldn't even feel the line of a scar. Despite himself, Harry was impressed. Then again, no one had ever questioned the man's ability to wield a wand.

As he lay there yawning, images of last night suddenly came flooding back. Sirius, Grindelwald, Katie demanding that he kill her... No wonder he was exhausted and his body felt as if it had been put through a meat grinder. That had been one hell of a fight, and considering his year that was really saying something.

"Bugger," muttered Harry to no one in particular. He rather regretted spending an extra hour or so watching Katie sleep last night and felt the deepest desire to roll over and pretend it had all been a bad dream, but he felt something pulling him, telling him to get up. Cursing again, this time more colourfully, Harry stretched, reaching up to the headboard with his hands and his toes extending beyond the end of the bed. Every muscle groaned at the movement, but the discomfort seemed to drive the sleepiness from Harry's mind. He struggled up into a sitting position, taking in the sea of red around him. The curtains partially blocked the light, making them glow red as the sun assaulted them.

Harry tested and tensed his limbs individually, groaning as he did. He tried to will himself back into consciousness. He considered going on a run, but quickly dismissed the idea as lunacy. Instead he quickly checked the improvised bandages on his thigh and hip. Both had small patches of red visible, but neither had leaked. He would need to replace them before he left the dormitory. No time like the present. Sighing inwardly, he quietly pulled the curtains aside, allowing the full glare of the morning sun to enter.

Blinking in the light, Harry stared out through the window across the valleys and the lake. This morning he had awoken to a brave new world. His secret was out now. While only Katie and Riddle knew exactly who he was, his abilities had been documented by Grindelwald, the Ministry, and the *Daily Prophet*, who would undoubtedly make sure that everyone else was aware of it as well before the day was over. Still, Harry had drawn blood on the Dark Lord, which was not easy to do. Grindelwald had suffered a huge dent to his pride from which he would not soon recover. He might have bought them time, but long term he knew he had only angered the Dark Lord greatly. Most likely Grindelwald would now be trying to find out exactly who he was, and luckily only a handful of people on Earth knew. However, that didn't stop Harry being in the top three on Grindelwald's hit list, along with Katie and Riddle.

Harry realised that this was a turning point for him. Not only had his other side been revealed, but he had also come to the end of his foreknowledge. Up until now he had known that Riddle would be ousted, he had known that ultimately Katie would go to the Ministry. From here on in he did not know what was to come. They had reached the point in the line of events at which Harry had jumped from his home world to the Unholy Land. Whatever Grindelwald was up to now, Harry was as clueless as the rest of them, and that was not an enviable position.

Harry realised that inside he had always known Katie would head to the Ministry and, by implication, Sirius – or at least someone – would have to die. He had hoped to have been out of this world and back home by that time. Since it hadn't gone to plan and he was still here, he had taken pity on Katie. Dumbledore had always said his ability to love, to feel compassion, was his greatest strength; Voldemort had always said it was his weakness. At this point in time, now in over his head, Harry wasn't sure who was right. What he did know was that he had become a target, and there was no way back. His days of flying under the radar were over. So much for not getting involved... This war had nothing to do with him, but Harry had steamrollered in, just like before.

Still, there was no use lounging about when there were things to be done. It was too late to go back now.

He rolled out of bed gingerly, his aching feet touching the warm carpet. Standing up shakily and stretching, he ignored the pain in his body as he reached for the floor and then the ceiling before twisting his torso back and forth to try to loosen up his muscles. He yawned again and took a sip of water from the jug beside his bed. Looking over, he caught sight of himself in the large mirror on the wall. He wore only a pair of boxer shorts, and so he could see his chest clearly from a distance. As Harry regarded the damage to his body critically, he judged that he hadn't appeared to come off too badly. His busted eyebrow was swollen and he could see the dark line of the cut, but it wasn't too terrible. In addition, there were several areas on his chest that were now purple with bruises, courtesy of the Dark Lord. The dressing on his right hip wasn't seeping yet thankfully, and was wrapped up in chords that coiled all the way around his belly. Another white ring of bandages was visible just above his right knee, which again had remained intact overnight and didn't hurt too much.

*It could have been a lot worse, Harry reasoned. I was lucky.*

He grabbed his wand and tried to walk to the bathroom, but it ended up as an undignified waddle. His limbs seemed reluctant to do as he ordered. Luckily it was deserted and no one seemed to be up yet, which saved him the embarrassment. After casting the Impervius Charm on his bandages, Harry enjoyed a quick shower, allowing the warm water to flow over his body and wash away the weariness. He almost went to sleep in the warmth of the shower, suddenly aware that he had been daydreaming, but couldn't remember what about or even starting. Looking at his watch atop his discarded underwear, he noticed that he had been in the shower for nearly twenty minutes and still had yet to wash his hair. He hastily cleaned up and, with a towel wrapped around his waist, returned to the sink to clean his wounds and reapply his dressings. As he returned to the dormitory ten minutes later, the sounds of snoring floated out from all of the other beds as Harry crept across the floor. Dumping his dirty boxers on the bed, he opened his trunk to pull out some clothes.

It was then that he paused. By habit he had pulled out his school uniform, but now that he thought about it, he had no use for it anymore. The days of hiding behind the identity of a dead man were over. He was not going to sit through any more lessons, do any more essays, or walk around pretending to be someone else. Throwing the uniform unceremoniously back into the trunk, he pulled out a pair of black trousers, a t-shirt, and black woollen jumper. Having used his wand to adjust and repair Dudley's old clothes, Harry topped his outfit off with a plain hooded cloak, the same one he had worn to St. Mungo's. He made a mental note to buy some clothes that actually fitted him, as his combats, the clothes he had brought from the Unholy Land, had been destroyed beyond repair. Once he was dressed, Harry tucked his wand up his left sleeve and fastened his watch again. He picked up the false glasses from the bedside table and threw them back in the trunk along with the make-up he now no longer needed. After closing and locking it, Harry turned to leave, but as he did he caught a glimpse of his reflection once more.

As Harry stared into the mirror the Dark Knight stared back at him, clothed all in black, a determined look on his face and the marks of combat visible on his hardened body.

"Here we go again," muttered Harry to himself.

This time it wasn't his fight, it wasn't even his world. However, his compassion for his friends had led him to intervene, and he had done so with all the power of the Dark Knight, but now the Dark Knight wanted to move on, while Harry Potter pitied Katie and wanted to help her. Part of him wanted to give her time, to help her during her time of grief, while another part wanted to slap her and tell her to pull herself together and move on.

Harry cast another look around, but all four beds had the curtains drawn and their occupants were fast asleep, judging by the heavy breathing. Harry slipped silently down the steps and into a deserted Common Room. It was Saturday, so everyone was having a lie in. That meant he shouldn't be hassled too much...until they read the *Prophet*.

"Good morning," said a soft voice as Harry passed the fireplace on his way to the portrait hole.

Surprised that he wasn't alone, he turned and walked around the front of the chair to where he could see who has spoken. A young girl was curled up in the chair, covered by a sky-blue blanket and reading what Harry recognised to be a Charms textbook. She had strawberry blond hair looked quite ruffled, alluding to the fact that she might have slept in a chair all night, and her contrasting blue glasses were perched high on her nose. She stared up at Harry questioningly, looking as if she expected him to give her an order.

"Are you alright?" asked Harry. He didn't know why he asked that instead of just saying hello, but there was something about the girl that just seemed to be asking for help.

She raised her eyebrows, which through the thick glasses made her eyes bulge. Her expression remaining vacant, she nodded, playing absently with the pendant she wore around her neck.

"Yes," said the girl. "I'm fine, thank you. I just couldn't sleep, so I came down here. I had nightmares. I get them a lot and I find that reading helps."

"Oh," said Harry uneasily. He had no idea why she was justifying herself to him but he wasn't in the mood to argue.

"You're not wearing your glasses," she pointed out while staring at him critically. "You weren't last night, either."

"I don't need them anymore," he said truthfully.

"Oh," she replied in a slightly unhappy voice, looking down in embarrassment. "It's alright for some, I suppose."

Harry gave her a small smile as she looked up again, realising it was not the most sensitive thing he could have said to a girl who wore glasses. "Sorry, who are you?" he asked, remembering his manners at last.

"Julia," said the girl shyly. "Julia Giles."

Of course, Harry could have kicked himself for not recognising her – he was really not with it this morning. She was a second year, whom he had briefly met a few times. He remembered

seeing her sitting in the corner crying after Umbridge had removed and killed her pet rabbit, Fidget, while attempting to remove Katie's Phoenix (i.e. Harry) from the castle.

"Is Riddle really back?" she asked, bringing Harry out of memory lane.

Harry nodded, "Yes, he's back."

"Does that mean I can get another Fidget?" she asked hopefully. "I could never replace him, but I would like to have another bunny."

"I'm sure Riddle will let you," said Harry kindly, just glad she wasn't asking him about last night.

She sighed. "I'd like that."

"Well, Julia, I'll see you around," said Harry politely as he began to leave. "If I were you, I'd try to get some sleep. You'll need your strength. If you continue to have nightmares, see Madam Pomfrey for some dreamless sleep."

She nodded and Harry turned to leave.

"Is it true?" she called before Harry had reached the door.

"Is what true?" asked Harry, turning back to face her, a sinking feeling in his stomach.

"The portraits were saying something about you," she replied. "They said that you duelled with You-Know-Who, that you nearly beat him. Are you here to save Katie?"

Harry grimaced, but gave her a small smile, "No," he replied shaking his head. "Just to lend a helping hand."

"What about your scar?" she asked pointing to his forehead.

Harry paused for a moment, almost forgetting that it was now visible. Since he didn't want to get drawn into an explanation, Harry just shot her a roguish grin and winked, as if it were some great secret. With that, he disappeared out into the corridor before she could ask any more questions. It was then that he realised the decision to not cover his scar might not have been the smartest move.

"By the way," he said, poking his head back inside the room and destroying any hint of mystique he had just created by his dramatic exit. "Have you seen Katie Bell?"

"Yes," said Julia, opening the book again. "She came down earlier and headed out of the door. She looked a bit pale to me."

"Thanks," said Harry, disappearing back out into the corridor once more and walking towards the stairs. Katie was out here somewhere, which was a good sign. She was up and about, but most likely wanted to be alone. Harry needed to check on her, to make sure he was okay.

"If I was in her position, where would I go?" he said aloud as he walked. He thought back to the time after Sirius had died and Dumbledore had told him of his destiny, what seemed like an eternity ago. He had just wanted to be alone, wanted everyone to stop trying to encourage him or trying to offer comfort. He had spent hours wandering the corridors aimlessly, just walking for the sake of doing so, enjoying the solitude. He'd even found a secluded spot down by the lake where he couldn't be found. That didn't bode well, for if she was doing that she could be anywhere and Harry didn't have the Marauder's Map.

Despite how he knew she must be feeling Harry wanted to see her, to make sure she was handling it okay. If there was anyone who might understand, it was going to be him. So where would she have gone to be alone? His first thought was the Room of Requirement where she had led the RA in a rebellion against Umbridge's rule. Surely that room held happy memories for her. Harry made his way up to the seventh floor, though his pace was somewhat slow due to the injury to his right leg. As he entered, Harry found the Room of Requirement to be nothing more than a cupboard, and a completely empty one at that. Cursing, Harry closed the door and headed back down the stairs, his mind thinking ahead to where else she might be. He briefly considered checking the Prefect Girls' bathroom, but he had a feeling that boys could not enter the room, and another feeling that many had tried over the years. A glance at his watch told him it was nearly nine, which meant that most people would be heading down to the Great Hall. Breakfast ended at ten, so people who had chosen to have a lie in still needed to be down and have eaten by then or they would have to wait until lunch. As such, the Great Hall would be starting to fill up round about now.

As Harry descended the stairs, he cast a quick glance out of the window to check the grounds and the edge of the lake. Outside the window there was frost on the chilled February grass, which had not been disturbed. There were no footprints on the grounds, and so it was clear that she had not gone out there. It seemed that Harry would now have to take the plunge and brave the stares. He would have to face the rest of the school eventually and it was best to do it on his terms.

It was highly unlikely that Katie would be at breakfast. He certainly had not wanted to sit there and eat with everyone staring at him as if he were an exhibit in a zoo. He would be very surprised to find her sitting at the Gryffindor table as if nothing had happened, but he was out of ideas. Unfortunately, the owls bearing the *Daily Prophet* would have already arrived. By the time he got there, the world would know most of what had happened last night.

*Remember Harry, you brought this on yourself, he told himself. You could have ignored her and walked away, but you chose to get involved. You've made your bed, now you have to sleep in it.*

Sure enough, as he approached the Great Hall the excited chatter floated up the stairs. The noise was ten times what it was normally, possibly thanks to the fact that Umbridge was no longer in command and Riddle was back. The noise was to be expected, as there was much to discuss: The Girl-Who-Lived had been in a fight in the Ministry and several Death Eaters had been caught, parents of students amongst them. And then there was the matter of one of their own having put in a mysterious appearance and duelled with the Dark Lord. Harry had no idea how much was in the *Prophet*, but rumourmongers would be having a field day with this, he knew.

He descended the last few stairs slowly and paused. Through the open doors he could see the students at breakfast, crowded around copies of the paper. It was such a refreshing sight to see smiles on their faces, laughter as well. There was an atmosphere of hope in the Hall despite the grave news of the Dark Lord's return, and Harry knew he'd had a hand in it. The school had lived under Umbridge's tyranny for months, and it was no wonder that the atmosphere was brighter even if the future was uncertain. It was the sort of thing that would normally put a smile on his face, but all he could think about was Katie. Putting the thought aside and trying to remain composed, Harry took a deep breath and steadied himself, preparing for the worst.

Unable to delay any more, he began to walk forward, heading for the door. Every step felt like he was heading for the gallows, but he forced himself to keep going. The twenty metres were over before they had begun and he found himself framed in the doorway, visible to the whole school. The huge plates of food seemed vastly untouched as everyone was more interested in the copies of a *Prophet*, which had attracted huge crowds. He could hear people reading aloud, others being told to shut up, and hundreds of conversations in between. Riddle was back in his chair at the Head Table, a sight that filled Harry with relief rather than disappointment, which in itself was a testament to the change in times. He raised his goblet to Harry in a small salute as he saw him, and Harry afforded the Headmaster a small nod in response.

Perhaps it was that gesture which alerted the school to his presence, for as Riddle placed his goblet back down on the table in front of him, Harry heard the first gasp and a sudden wave of silence spread over the room as the conversations died. Everyone in the room was staring at him nervously with their eyes wide, their mouths open in shock. Some were even pointing at him.

Harry stood frozen in the doorway, as if he were in a photograph. Looking around, he found expressions of wonder, awe, and in some cases fear or anger spread over their faces. Some were prodding neighbours who had yet to notice, others whispering excitedly as they compared the pictures in the *Prophet* to the boy in the doorway.

Harry stood motionless and looked around, taking in each face in turn. He guessed that about half were afraid, and half were too shocked for words. The Slytherins had their jaws set, unreadable or just plain gormless, but he knew what they were thinking. Many of them had lost family members to Azkaban last night, and it seemed that Harry was partially to blame.

Harry gave up on the idea of eating here in an instant, as there was no way he could stomach it amid the stares. However, there was one reason to stay, and that reason was sitting in the central seat behind the staff table, a seat that in Harry's mind still belonged to Dumbledore. He took a deep breath and began to walk back down the central aisle towards the Headmaster, his strides purposeful and his expression determined. He didn't acknowledge the stares or make eye contact with anyone as he passed, though it did not stop the whispers and stares. His footsteps rang out in the otherwise still hall as he passed, and Harry could have heard a pin drop as he limped down through the aisle. He stepped up onto the raised area on which the staff table stood and approached from the front.

"Good morning," said Riddle casually, his eyes twinkling.

Harry was aware that the room was still silent and listening as he nodded a greeting to the man in the seat. Riddle slid a copy of the *Daily Prophet* (Special Edition) across the table towards him. Harry picked it up and laid it out flat on the table.

### *HE-WHO-MUST-NOT-BE-NAMED RETURNS!*

Beneath the huge headline there were four images. The first must have been taken from a recording orb somewhere in the Ministry Entrance Hall. Harry had not seen one, but it did not mean there wasn't one. The image showed Harry and Grindelwald standing several yards apart around the remains of the fountain. A beam of crackling light linked their wands as they duelled, and the caption read, "Harry Potter duels with the Dark Lord". The second was much later and showed Fudge surrounded by Aurors with their wands aimed at Riddle and Harry, which was captioned "Bungler Fudge tries to arrest the wrong people". The third showed Katie and Grindelwald, the later with his wand aimed at her head, bearing the caption, "The-Girl-Who-Told-The-Truth". The last showed Harry on his knees, cradling a fallen Katie in his arms, which to Harry's horror carried the caption, "Our two star-crossed heroes embrace". Harry grimaced as he stared at the final photo and knew that somewhere in the article the journalist would have made the claim that they were a couple. This would be like his fourth year all over again. He wasn't cuddling her, he was supporting her, which seemed perfectly obvious to him and certainly didn't merit a Romeo and Juliet comparison.

Harry began to scan through the article quickly with a practiced eye, opening the paper to page two and continued reading. There were additional pictures, including the captured Death Eaters and Fudge being interviewed, the latter looking very flustered. The text was written with the same condescending tone and colourful use of imagery and insult that could only come from one person. As Harry checked the cover, sure enough the article was written by Rita Skeeter. It seemed that Fudge's stupidity over the last year had given her more than enough material to go on. She called him a 'rotund bungler in a stupid hat', and compared his intelligence to a 'concussed turnip with amnesia', and that was all in her opening paragraph. She went on to list his political failings, describing them as 'devised by a four-year old', and 'carrying the political prowess of a deranged flobberworm'. Rita spent half a page tearing Fudge's rule to pieces before she found time to move on to Katie and Harry. To his great surprise she painted him in almost a positive light. While she made implications about him and Katie, suggesting Harry was there to comfort her at night during her time of need, she did stick to the facts. Well, in comparison to her usual style of writing... In her conclusion, Rita summed it up by saying that had Riddle and Katie been believed from the off, the Wizarding World would not be in the situation it now was. According to Rita, Katie and Riddle between them would have seen them right. Regardless, with the new addition of Harry, the future looked slightly brighter. She also speculated on a replacement Minister of Magic, hoping this time for one who 'knows his arse from his elbow'.

Harry looked up at Riddle and then around at the room at large, all of whom were still staring. He couldn't help but wonder if Katie had seen this yet, if she in her current mental state had faced the barrage of questions he had managed to avoid from Julia.

Suddenly he heard a series of metallic clicks and as he turned around, Harry was greeted by the sight of a dishevelled figure in pink standing in the doorway looking mutinous. Umbridge looked like she had been dragged through a bush backwards, which was in fact true. She was still

wearing the same dirty clothes as yesterday and her rugged appearance confirmed that she'd had one hell of a ride in the forest. Harry wondered if Riddle had gone into the Forbidden Forest to retrieve her, as Dumbledore had done in his world. If it was him, he wouldn't have bothered.

In front of Harry, Riddle rose to his feet as Umbridge stormed down the central aisle making for the two of them. Harry really wished he had his sword with him at this moment in time, but he fingered his wand instead thinking of all the curses he could use on her. Steam was practically spurting out of Umbridge's ears as she marched down the silent aisle, and her eyes were alight with fire. Riddle on the other hand just smiled pleasantly back at her, appearing completely calm, no doubt a trait he had learned from Dumbledore.

"RIDDLE!" seethed Umbridge coming to a stop at the front, just before the raised area, "How dare you lock me in the dungeon cell all night like a common criminal! I'll have your head for that, mark my words!"

Riddle smiled impassively. "I thought you might like some time for reflection, Dolores, after your ordeal with the centaurs. I apologize if the accommodations weren't to your liking, but considering your threats, I rather felt I had no choice but to ensure the safety of my students."

Harry glanced to his right and noticed a smug smile creep over McGonagall's face as she sat watching. Harry was suddenly reminded of Peeves chasing her out of Hogwarts with McGonagall's walking stick. A smile crept over his face at the thought, an idea forming in his mind, as he turned back around to face the former High Inquisitor.

"And what do you think you are doing back?" she spat out at Riddle, practically foaming at the mouth.

"It seems that, in light of recent events," began Riddle pleasantly, "the Minister saw fit to reinstate me."

Umbridge looked like she had been slapped, as he spoke, and only turned a deeper shade of red at his infuriating calm.

"WHAT?"

"He has also decided that your services as High Inquisitor are no longer required."

"You're lying!" she shrieked.

"What he is trying to say," said Harry in mock politeness, "is piss off and don't come back."

A snigger went around the hall as Harry spoke and, out of the corner of his eye, he even saw McGonagall's lips twitch.

"You are no longer a member of staff here, Dolores," Riddle repeated in a tone significantly kinder than Harry's, but firm nevertheless. "And you no longer have any reason to be here, so I must ask you to leave."

"You'll regret this, Riddle," seethed Umbridge, her fists clenched as she stood glaring at him. "I am still Senior Undersecretary to the Minister!"

"Ministers come and go," shot back Harry flippantly. "We survive."

"When I am reinstated, Mr. Potter," she snarled, "you will regret that cheek! I will see you in detention for the rest of the school year."

"Oddly enough," said Riddle to Umbridge, still politely, "it seems that some of my students believe that your methods of detention may have broken the occasional Child Protection Law."

Umbridge's glare faltered for a second as the implied threat hit her, but her expression returned to one of utter loathing a second later.

"This isn't over," she shot back, before turning on her heel.

Harry cast a quick look at Riddle who nodded to him before sitting back down. Harry took this to be a sign that the conversation was over.

"PEEVES!" called Harry loudly over the silent hall.

With a bang the poltergeist shot out of the fireplace where he clearly had been listening, and rose up above the tables, regarding Harry curiously.

"Be a good poltergeist and show our guest out, will you..." Harry said with a calculated smirk, gesturing to Umbridge. "...As only you can."

"At your service, Sir," Peeves said, snapping to attention like a soldier on parade and raised his hand to Harry in a salute before turning his attention to Umbridge, who's eyes widened in horror.

Harry didn't have a walking stick, but grabbed a wooden spoon out of a bowl of scrambled egg and enlarged it to a decent size. He threw the giant spoon up into the air, where Peeves caught it, twirling it like a drum major. Umbridge's face turned to one of terror and she darted for the doors without another word as Peeves dived towards her, swinging for her head. Harry vaguely heard a shriek as Peeves escorted Umbridge from the grounds. The room promptly exploded in laughter and applause.

With a smirk still on his lips, Harry turned back to Riddle who did not seem the least bit bothered that Harry may have just inspired an act of grievous bodily harm against a former teacher. While the hall continued to laugh and jeer, Harry leaned forwards to speak to the Headmaster, but Riddle spoke before Harry managed to get a word in.

"It seems that yet another Defence teacher is required," said Riddle conversationally.

"Anyone would be better than her," replied Harry with a shrug.

"Anyone?" asked Riddle, raising an eyebrow.

"Well, near enough," Harry conceded. "Got anyone lined up?"

"As a matter of fact yes," replied Riddle with a knowing smile.

Harry was mildly surprised that he had managed to find someone so quickly. "Who?"

"Wait and see," replied the Headmaster mysteriously. "He will arrive later today or tomorrow depending on how quickly he can get away."

Harry opened his mouth to ask who it was, but then decided against it. Since he wouldn't be in lessons, the teacher made little difference to him. He had more important things to worry about – Katie for a kick off.

"So, where is she?" he asked, changing the subject.

Riddle paused for a moment before answering.

"I have not seen her since last night," he replied. "But I suggest you try Madam Pomfrey."

Harry thanked Riddle and, before anyone else could approach him, he turned and marched back down the aisle and out the doors. He climbed up the stairs in the Entrance Hall and made his way up to the fifth floor, then headed along towards the hospital wing. As he climbed the final two flights of stairs up into the infirmary his leg protested from all the stairs, but he made it without incident and gently pushed open the doors. Inside, he found the curtains closed, with the bright sun only just able to penetrate. The room was bathed in a dim, gentle light, and through it he could see the slumbering forms of the veterans from the Ministry battle in various conditions.

Hermione was lying on her back in the manner Pomfrey had laid her, still unconscious and looking very pale. The unnaturally straight position in which she was propped only made her seem more lifeless. Were it not for Harry's faith in Madam Pomfrey and his prior knowledge, he might have thought she was dead. Ron was in the next bed along, his forearms in bandages as well as a large white patch on his forehead. Contrary to Hermione, Ron had rolled onto his side and curled up as best his lanky frame could manage. This gave him a more natural appearance, and he didn't seem as bad off in Harry's opinion. Neville was in a somewhat better condition and, although he was covered in white patches and had stitches on his cheek, he didn't have any serious wounds. Ginny's broken ankle was raised over the bed on a support, and her head had lopped unflatteringly to the side. Since she was on her back, her breathing was bordering on snoring. Luna, to the best of Harry's memory, had not suffered too badly, just having been knocked for six at one point. She seemed relatively unharmed as she lay there sleeping, though for some inexplicable reason she was upside down with her feet up on the pillow and her head on the flat bed down the bottom end. The room was silent, only their chests rising and falling, and the gentle sound of their breathing – except for Ron, who every now and then gave a loud, distinct snore – and Ginny, of course.

Harry was glad that they were all alright. Although he had known they would be, it was still a relief to actually see them alive and recovering. Part of him wondered, if he had gotten there

sooner, could he have prevented some of this? But he couldn't afford to dwell on the past. He needed to find the ringleader of this group, and it was clear that she was not present.

He turned to leave, and came face to face with Madam Pomfrey.

"It's about time," she whispered, her face stern. She looked at him as if it were his fault that all this had happened. Her brow was furrowed and her tone accusatory.

Harry opened his mouth to protest, but realised it was pointless. In fact, it had been his fault, and there was no point in leaving since he needed medical attention.

"Well, let's get a look at you, then," Pomfrey said, gesturing to the empty bed nearest them.

Harry came very close to telling her where to shove her thermometer, but decided against it. Obediently he sat up on the bed, waiting as Madam Pomfrey grabbed her toolbag.

"Remove your top," she told him, her tone businesslike and short as she laid the bag down on the bed.

Harry did as he was told, removing the cloak, jumper, and t-shirt he was been wearing. He had a nasty feeling that he would soon be removing more so that Pomfrey could have a look at his leg.

The matron took her wand in her right hand and ignited the tip with the Lumos spell.

"Look up," she instructed in a harsh whisper.

Harry did as he was asked and looked up at the ceiling so that she could inspect his neck. Involuntarily, he recoiled as her fingers touched his skin, tickling him slightly as they ran along where the blade had cut him. Harry had been unable to find any evidence of having been cut when he looked in the mirror, but she clearly had.

"Who healed this?" she asked, as if she was not impressed with the workmanship.

"Riddle," said Harry flatly.

She tutted softly to herself. "Another inch and it would have clipped your jugular," she informed him, not looking him in the eye. "A lucky escape, if you ask me".

Harry merely shrugged, as Pomfrey turned her attention to his eyebrow. "This looks worse than it is," she announced. "I'll clean and then it can heal naturally." Without waiting for approval, she dabbed some ice-cold liquid onto the cut with cotton-wool. Harry hissed as the liquid stung the wound. "Don't be such a baby, Potter," she added flatly at his reaction. Harry gritted his teeth and bit back a response, his frustration with the matron growing quickly.

Once done she threw vanished the cotton wool and wiped her hands on a towel. She ignored the bruises on his chest and turned her attention to his hip and began to unwind the bonds that held the make-shift dressing in place. Harry hissed in pain as she peeled the flannel away from his

skin, pulling at the wound. Gritting his teeth, Harry twisted so he could see as well. The wound still appeared to be clean, with just a very dark red slit where the tile had penetrated.

"You did this yourself," Pomfrey said, more as a statement of fact than a question. Her voice was clearly disapproving, and her brow furrowed in frustration.

Was it just Harry or was she being needlessly short with him today? She normally was at least polite, and he had spent so much time here recently that he rather felt the two of them were getting on.

"What did you use?" she asked.

"Vodka and a flannel," replied Harry, hissing in pain as she moved her fingers around the cut.

"State of the art," she muttered sarcastically, as she leant in to look closer, shining her wand into the cut. "And you pulled out the foreign body, whatever it was?"

Harry nodded.

"Did you ever consider that perhaps the object was acting as a dam and by removing it, you could potentially have bled to death?"

Harry shrugged, and stared at her. He had had no real idea what he was doing, but he had lived to tell the tale. If he had been bleeding significantly, he would have sought help. He wasn't as stupid as she seemed to think this morning.

"Well, I'm not a first-aider," he retorted, his tone clipped.

"That much is clear," she replied dryly. "Hold still."

Harry felt a tingling sensation as the wound went numb. Madam Pomfrey traced the cut again with her wand, this time with the tip glowing a pale blue colour. She then paused for a moment in thought before pulling a small spray from her bag; the container reminded Harry of the Flesh Eating Slug Repellent tins that Hagrid used to buy in Knockturn Alley. Without comment she squirted the spray into Harry's cut, causing him to double up with pain. That done, she waved her wand over the cut, which healed like a zip until there was nothing left to see.

"Now your leg," she added briskly.

Harry grimaced and glanced around the room. Luckily the others were still fast asleep and so Harry begrudgingly undid his belt and lowered his trousers so that she could see his thigh. The procedure was much the same, but this time Harry knew to grit his teeth in advance when she reached for the spray.

"There," said Madam Pomfrey, finally satisfied. "You'll live."

"Thanks," muttered Harry, not sounding extremely genuine, even to his own ears. He hopped down off the bed and put the remainder of his clothes back on. As he pulled the jumper back over his head, he gestured to the others lying asleep in their beds.

"Are they..." he began.

"They're all fine," said Madam Pomfrey indignantly. "The Weasley girl's leg needs another day or so, and Miss Granger needs to rest after I drain her internal bleeding, but the rest will be up and about by the end of the day."

"And Kathryn Bell?" asked Harry.

"No idea," said Pomfrey with an impatient shrug. "Haven't seen her."

With that she turned to go into her office.

"One more thing," said Harry, his words sounding a little more aggressive than he had intended.

The matron paused then turned around, but still did not look him in the eye.

"You were right to do it," said Harry, having finally worked out what was bothering her.

Pomfrey looked slightly confused, but her eyes met his curiously.

"I was clearly different, and I might have posed a threat to other students," he said. "You did everything in your power to find out what, even stretching your Hippocratic oath by talking to Riddle and testing my blood. There is no need to tiptoe around me, Madam Pomfrey. You did the right thing, and in your position I would have done the same. I don't hold it against you or anything."

Pomfrey regarded him carefully for a second before nodding.

"Thank you," she said softly. There was an awkward pause before she spoke again. "I must be about my business," she told him. "But the Headmaster has asked me to check both you and Miss Bell. Please ask her to come to see me if you find her."

"I would, if I knew where the hell she was," said Harry, the frustration creeping into his voice. "I've been looking for her all morning."

"Try the East Tower," whispered a weak voice behind him.

Harry turned to see that Ginny was now awake. She had managed to sit up, or half done so anyway. Her leg being raised meant that she hadn't quite been able to manage it. Harry crossed to her bed and slid the support up the bed slightly, enabling her to prop herself up and keep her foot in place. She sat against the headboard, staring at him through tired eyes. Her eyelids were clearly heavy and her gaze was slightly out of focus, which was unsurprising since she had just woken.

"Hmm, you look different without your glasses," she replied thoughtfully. "Older. I like it."

Harry didn't know how to take that and simply stared back, trying not to blush. He had never gotten used to compliments and suddenly felt very self-conscious.

"Did we all make it?" she asked.

Harry turned around to check on Madam Pomfrey and found that she had already returned to her office.

"Almost everyone," said Harry without emotion. "Except for Sirius..."

"I know, I saw..." replied Ginny with a sigh, but she trailed off again. "How's Katie taking it?"

"No idea," replied Harry. "Haven't seen her."

"Try the East Tower," replied Ginny. "That's where she goes when she wants to be alone."

Harry nodded in understanding.

"Thank you," he whispered, rising to his feet again.

"So, what's your story?" asked Ginny as Harry turned to leave.

"I'm a traveller from another world," said Harry with a roguish grin.

Ginny looked at him and rolled her eyes. She grinned slightly and shook her head in exasperation.

"Okay, I'll tell you later," said Harry, pretending that she had proved him wrong. "Get some rest, Gin," he added, turning to leave. He had only taken two steps when another thought crossed his mind.

"Err, Ginny," he asked softly, unable to shake a nagging doubt in the back of his mind. "How long have you been awake?"

Ginny looked up at him, a mischievous grin on her face, "You have a very nice bottom, Mister Potter," she informed him.

"You're not as innocent as you appear, Miss Weasley," he replied, fighting the blush that was creeping its way onto his cheeks, and deciding that it was definitely time to leave.

Ginny grinned and waved him goodbye as Harry turned and tiptoed out of the infirmary and back down the endless stairs to the fifth floor. Pulling his cloak tightly around him to block out the cold, he set off for the East Wing of the castle at a brisk pace.

He arrived on the roof a few minutes later, stepping out of a door into the chilly morning air. The East Tower was not as high as the Astronomy Tower, and not as popular with lovers, which was

probably why Katie had chosen it. As Harry opened the door to the roof, he immediately felt the sting of the wind that whipped around the roof of the castle. Closing the door quickly, he wrapped his arms around himself to protect him from the cold before taking time to look around.

He instantly saw what he wanted.

The rooftop was about twenty feet across, surrounded by chest-height parapets which sank to knee-height in the crenels through which archers' bows – or in the magical world, wands – could be fired in times of siege. Sitting on top of the highest parapet, her legs dangling over the edge of a several hundred-foot drop, sat the Girl-Who-Lived. She hadn't turned around as Harry had appeared and continued to stare blankly out over the forest. Harry shivered in the bitter wind, but she seemed not to notice. How long had she been out here?

He crossed the rooftop towards where she was seated, his feet making next to no sound on the stone roof. The wind masked any sign of his approach. Harry didn't really wish to surprise her, not when she was that close to the edge, so thought it only fair to announce his presence. As he opened his mouth to say hello, she beat him to it.

"How are the others?" she asked, her gaze never leaving the horizon. She didn't turn around to speak, nor give any other sign that he was there. Still, at least he wasn't going to scare her into plummeting to her death.

"They'll be out in a day or so," said Harry, climbing up onto the next battlement and dangling his feet over the edge.

Katie's eyes stayed focused forward and she didn't respond.

Harry was more exposed up here and shivered again, pulling the cloak more tightly around him. She seemed not to notice the chill, and Harry assumed that she had added a warming charm to her clothes. There was an awkward pause that seemed to last an age. Harry looked out over the forest, the lake, and the mountains beyond. The sunlight glistened off the snowy peaks and the sparkling water of the lakes. It certainly was picturesque, but Harry doubted that Katie was up here for sight-seeing.

"Come to tell me to stop moping around?" she asked, as if she had read his mind. "To get the old arse into gear and elbow to the grindstone?"

"No," replied Harry, trying to sound as sympathetic and soothing as possible. "I may have lost my humanity by your reckoning, but I'm not that insensitive."

Katie just continued to stare, and Harry began to wonder what she was seeing, for he doubted it was the landscape.

"Everyone knows?" she asked after a few second, still not looking at him.

There was no way to soften the blow, so he gave the only answer he could.

"Yes," he replied, casting a silent warming charm over his jumper.

"The *Prophet*?"

"Special edition," Harry informed her. "Written by Rita Skeeter."

"How bad is it?" she inquired, now looking down at her pale hands clasped together in her lap.

"We don't come off too bad," Harry told her, leaving out the implication that they were together. "Fudge on the other hand will be lucky to last another week in office."

Katie nodded in understanding and then turned to face Harry. As she looked at him, he could see that she had been crying. Her eyes were still glistening and the trails of tears were still visible down her cheeks. He wondered how they hadn't frozen on her skin in the chill.

"You look different without your glasses," she said, attempting a small smile. "Part of your disguise?"

Harry nodded, smiling to himself. "Yes," he admitted. "Completely impenetrable."

Katie raised an eyebrow in doubt.

"Hey," continued Harry. "If it's good enough for Superman, it's good enough for me."

Katie actually laughed at that, her lips twisting in a pseudo-smile. Harry grinned back, confident that laughter was a good sign.

"So what am I supposed to do now?" she asked after a pause.

"How do you mean?"

"Since you seem to know so much about the future, what will he do next?" She had turned back to staring out over the lake again.

"I don't know," answered Harry honestly.

"Just like you didn't know Sirius was going to die," muttered Katie, though her voice was more sad than angry.

Harry didn't reply, partially through guilt and partially because he knew that there was nothing he could say. He knew she was venting her anger, and worst of all, he knew she was right.

"You've lived through this day once before?" Katie asked, turned back to face him.

Harry nodded.

"Then what the hell do you want to do it again for?" she asked, shaking her head in despair "I feel like I want the world to open up and swallow me, as if I am nothing more than a pawn on a giant chessboard, as if everything I have ever known has been a lie. But you... you have been through this, but you are staying to fight a war that isn't even yours. Are you insane?"

"Probably," said Harry, with a dry laugh.

"If I was you, I'd be back to my own world, like a rat up a drainpipe," replied Katie. "But you have just dived right back in, made yourself a target, and this isn't even your fight."

Harry shrugged. He didn't really know why he had gotten himself involved in all honesty, and it was not as if he couldn't see the truth in her words. It was his saving people thing, and once again it had landed him in trouble.

"I don't know," replied Harry. "I just heard that you had all gone to the Ministry, I knew where it ended, and...I just wanted to help my friends. You said last night that my parents in another world weren't real, but they are real and so are you. I couldn't just stand by when you were all in danger. I meant what I said, Katie. If I knew of some way to have lessened the blow for you, I would have."

"Like telling me in advance," she challenged him.

"In hindsight, maybe that would have been better," conceded Harry. "I tried to prevent Riddle being ousted, as he would have kept you safe. Unfortunately I failed, and then before I knew it, you had left, months too soon by my reckoning."

Suddenly he paused. "What if it was my fault?" he wondered aloud. "What if just by being here, I made it happen sooner than it should have?"

"Like you said," replied Katie, "It probably would have happened sooner or later."

The wind was channelled by the mountains around them and it whipped around the castle, biting at their feet dangling over the edge. Harry shivered, but Katie seemed not to notice it.

"So, what do we do now?" she asked at length. "Do we go on a rampage, go in search of a long lost weapon, run and hide... what?"

"No idea," replied Harry. "Let's see what Riddle has to say for himself. The Order of the Phoenix has their work cut out."

As if on cue, a large tawny owl swooped down out of the sky and landed on the parapet between the pair of them. Harry could clearly see that two letters were attached to its leg. As Harry reached out and removed them, he found that one was for Katie, and the other was for him. Apparently Riddle knew they would be together. Harry handed Katie her letter as the owl took the sky once more.

"Riddle's called a meeting," Katie said, reading her letter already. She checked her watch. "We need to go."

With a sigh, she swung her legs back around onto the rooftop and jumped down from the parapet, landing softly on the roof. Harry followed suit, and the pair of them crossed to the door which Harry opened.

"After you..." Harry offered.

Katie didn't respond, but stepped through the door and started to descend the stairs. He followed her, closing the door behind him, grateful to finally be out of the wind. He removed the warming charm from his clothes as he followed Katie down the stairs, then fell into step beside the Girl-Who-Lived as they headed up to the Room of Requirement where, according to the letter, the meeting was scheduled to be held. They had gone perhaps one hundred yards when Katie spoke again.

"Harry?" she said quietly as they walked.

"Yes?" he answered, looking over at her.

"Am I going to get through this?"

For the first time, Harry could detect a hint of fear in her voice as she spoke. As strong as she appeared, she was scared and Harry couldn't blame her. As they walked he felt a sense of foreboding grow over her. Harry had no idea what was to come, but if it was anything like in the Unholy Land, then all Hell was about to break loose.

"I don't know," he said truthfully. "In all honesty, I just don't know. Grindelwald is completely different from Voldemort. God only knows what he'll do."

"But what do you think?" Katie persisted. "Honestly."

"I think that his reasons for hiding are over now that everyone knows he's back," said Harry softly. He knew it was not the news she wanted to hear, but it was the truth. It was what she needed to hear. "His need for stealth is gone so he'll be more aggressive from here on out. There will be deaths. Have no illusions, Katie. From this moment on, this country is at war."

"Somehow," Katie said thoughtfully, "I had a feeling you'd say that." She blew out a long breath Harry hadn't even been aware she'd been holding. "God help us all."

## ~~~~ Chapter VII ~~~~

### **First Things First**

*"What would you do if someone told you to fight for freedom?*

*Would you answer the call or run away like a little pussy*

*'Cause the only reason that you're here,*

*Is 'cause folks died for you in the past*

*So maybe now it's your turn to die kicking some ass!*

*Freedom isn't free*

*It costs folks like you and me*

*And if we don't all chip in*

*We'll never pay that bill  
Freedom isn't free  
No, there's a hefty fuckin' fee.  
And if you don't throw in your buck 'o five  
Who will?"*

*~ Freedom Isn't Free (Team America: World Police)*

Harry took a deep breath, suddenly nervous about the sea of inquisitive faces that resided beyond the door. He had faced the inquisition once before on another world, and had no wish to go through it again. At least this time it wouldn't be in an interrogation cell with Veritaserum pumping through his veins. The stares, the hostile looks, the suspicion and people twisting every word he said had been degrading and humiliating, and it was an experience he hoped never to repeat. It wasn't as if he feared the Order in the conventional sense, but it was a horrible experience and he would rather avoid it if he could. But sadly, there was no way around it. Harry's only hope was that Riddle, wanting to keep the facts hidden, would protect him from the barrage of questions he felt sure he would face – especially from Mad-Eye.

He extended his hand towards the door, taking a deep breath as he did so, psyching himself up. Just as his fingers closed around the cold brass knob, a voice behind him called his name. Harry let go and turned to see the headmaster coming along the corridor, flanked by Professor McGonagall who looked very business-like in her silvery-grey robes. Her face was stern, and she carried a sheaf of papers under one arm.

"Ah, good morning," Riddle greeted both Harry and Katie as he arrived. He seemed infuriatingly happy for this time of the morning, which coupled with Harry's still aching limbs, only served to annoy him. "How are you both feeling?" Riddle asked.

Katie just shrugged and muttered 'fine', though she didn't meet anyone's eyes. It was a sure sign that she was anything but fine, and after the events of last night, Harry couldn't blame her. He could see from her slumped shoulders and glazed expression that she was utterly defeated. Harry knew how she felt, having spent many hours wandering these corridors aimlessly, trudging on alone, just him and his guilt. He had taken a long time before he felt up to talking to anyone. He could only wonder how long it would take her.

"I feel like I was trampled by a herd of Hippogriffs," said Harry plainly.

The corner of Riddle's mouth curled in amusement as he glanced around to make sure they were alone.

"Before we go in," said Riddle softly. "I must ask for discretion from both of you." He paused to let his words sink in before he explained himself. "We broached certain topics last night which, if made public, would cause serious problems."

"As in your colourful past?" asked Harry, his voice flat.

Riddle turned to look Harry in the eye. His face betrayed no anger, only a firm, serious business face.

"Yes," he said, making no attempt to hide or deny it. "In addition, we discussed a device last night, beginning with the letter 'H'. If even that word became public, then people would soon start asking very difficult questions. My concern is valid. How long before someone thinks to make their own? How long before we are neck deep in bodies because everyone wants what Voldemort once wanted?"

Harry glanced quickly over Riddle's shoulder as he spoke and saw McGonagall's raised eyebrow. It was clear to see from her expression that she was none the wiser about Riddle's past. She showed no sign of recognising the name Voldemort, and looked slightly perplexed at the 'H-word'.

"Do you understand what I mean?" asked Riddle pointedly. He turned to Katie and then Harry in turn, and they both nodded.

Harry couldn't deny that he had a point, and was impressed that Riddle had explained his reasons which was something that Dumbledore seldom did.

Satisfied, Riddle continued. "In addition, we must make no mention of Harry's true origins. Only the four of us, as well as Madam Pomfrey, know the truth. Again, should it be made public, how long before this doorway is found, and what would happen if the Ministry were to take it from you?"

Again Harry had to nod at Riddle's logic.

"The Prophecy, I would also ask be kept a secret," the headmaster continued. "We do not want to invite further attempts on the lives of either one of you."

Katie nodded, accepting of his decision. Harry didn't disagree. For some reason he couldn't explain, he wanted to keep Katie safe as much as Riddle; he cared little about protecting himself and felt confident he could handle himself should he be attacked, but Katie was all new to this and hadn't had the same advantages he'd had. No, he agreed with Riddle on this one too, but for different reasons.

"And finally, I would ask that you keep the history of Lord Voldemort to yourselves. Such knowledge would destroy confidence in the Order at the time we need it the most. I know I have no right to ask this of either of you, but in the interests of the Order, I ask you to hold your tongues."

"Okay," said Katie, and as Riddle looked at him, Harry nodded as well. As much as he would like to see Riddle laid out for all to see, he knew that what people needed the most now was hope and faith, and if that meant Riddle took the role of guiding light, then so be it. Morale was key. However, that didn't mean that Riddle could hide behind it forever.

"I will need to know what happened sooner or later," Harry said, not threateningly but firmly enough to be a stern reminder to the headmaster.

Riddle gave a small nod. "Very well. In that case, we can begin. Inside, you will find the Order of the Phoenix. Some you know, others you don't. In the meeting, if you have anything to say feel free to contribute, but I would advise you to sit back and listen. There will be a lot of information given this morning." He paused dramatically, gesturing to the door, which magically opened for them. "When you're ready..."

The Room was set out in the form of a large meeting room. The carpet was a deep blue, and the walls were covered in panels of polished wood, except for the wall to Harry's left which appeared to be a window looking out over the Hogwart's grounds and the lake. There was a fireplace at the far end in which a fire was happily crackling away, and in the middle of the room was a large oval shaped table made of mahogany and topped with several jugs of water and glasses. There were perhaps thirty large high-backed chairs around the edge of the table, several of which were already occupied. Artificial sunlight shone in through the false windows, glistening off the polish wood, and making the room seem inviting, despite Harry's apprehensions.

He stopped a few paces inside and took a moment to look around the faces in room, taking in all the people present. While a few had already taken their seats at the table, the rest were gathered in small groups, deep in conversations which died down as Riddle entered. Or perhaps it was Katie, or even Harry, who was responsible for the stunned silence that filled the room. To Harry, the silence was deafening. His mouth was suddenly dry and he could feel himself sweating as he quickly glanced around at the curious eyes of the Order, which were fixed on him. The old familiars were all present, and Harry could see many of his former friends in various groups around the room, a blend of both the Order he knew and those he had met in the Unholy Land. The only glaring absence he noticed was Severus Snape, much to Harry's delight. The greasy old sod was probably under a rock somewhere and, as far as Harry was concerned, that was exactly where he should stay. There were also many others who he had never seen before. This did not altogether surprise Harry. For one thing, he was literally in a different world. And secondly, even in his world he had never seen or known about the remainder of the Order of the Phoenix. Harry doubted that anyone except Dumbledore had known every single person in the Order. He could feel their eyes burning into his face as they stared. It was an odd feeling to have such old friends, people he cared about, looking at him so suspiciously. He felt somewhat embarrassed and very claustrophobic.

While Harry stood rooted to the spot, Katie had moved past him apparently unaffected by the stares, and had begun to move around the table looking for her name. Harry took a deep breath and followed her, not looking anyone in the eye.

"Ladies and gentlemen," McGonagall's shrill voice called over the sudden murmuring in room. "We will be starting in exactly three minutes. Please help yourself to refreshments and take a seat."

Harry decided he would make do without and continued to circle the table, avoiding any hint of eye contact as he moved to find his seat. As soon as he found his name, he dropped into the chair and leaned back, hoping the high back of the chair would hide him from view.

To his left, Mrs. Weasley held Katie in a bone-crushing hug as she fussed over her. Harry felt a rush of sadness as he watched and suddenly felt very alone. It should be him over there, not her. He used to have people who loved him like that instead of staring at him with fear, awe and hatred. Without warning he suddenly felt very homesick. He didn't care if it was someone back home or his mother in the Unholy Land, but he desperately wanted a hug. He realised how childish that sounded, especially from him, but he have never felt more alone in the world. At times like these he hated the unfairness of it all.

Mrs. Weasley released Katie, and then Mr. Weasley gave her a quick hug and kiss on the cheek. Then Fred, George, Bill, and Charlie were also there to congratulate and console her all at once. Turning away from the scene before his eyes started to well up, Harry turned his gaze to the right. Moody was watching him with both eyes, a look of distrust etched into his scared face. It was clear that the Auror wanted to give Harry a good grilling, and Harry consequently made a mental note to avoid Mad-Eye for the rest of his time here. Kingsley and Tonks were also deep in conversation with Frank Longbottom, while Alice, who stood with them, was looking towards Harry. He met her eye for a second and she nodded, gave him a small smile, and then turned away. Harry guessed that meant "thanks for saving my life yesterday", but he couldn't be sure. Her hand was clearly healed and she seemed to have recovered from the concussion.

Then Harry heard his name, although it wasn't directed at him. He turned back to the Weasleys to find them all staring at him.

"...he's the one you need to thank. He rescued us all," said Katie, gesturing to Harry.

Harry rose to his feet out of politeness. Mrs. Weasley covered the distance to Harry in less than a second, and the next thing he knew the air was being crushed out of his lungs.

"Thank you, thank you," she whispered as she hugged him. "If it wasn't for you..."

Over her shoulder Harry saw the rest of the Weasley clan holding back, uncertain how to treat him.

As soon as Mrs. Weasley released him and he found himself able to breathe once more, Harry spoke.

"It's easy to arrive at the eleventh hour, but the person who saved their lives was the person who taught them to defend themselves," he said, pointing at Katie. "If it wasn't for her, they wouldn't be here now."

"Thank you both," breathed Mrs. Weasley, her eyes welling up. "I am so glad Ron and Ginny have such good friends."

Harry was unsure of this Harry's past relationship with the Weasleys, but he doubted he had been invited to a family barbeque. However, he wasn't in a place to comment – he was just slightly relieved to be somewhere familiar and not quite so alone.

"You're Lily and James' son, aren't you?" asked Mr. Weasley politely as he shook Harry's hand.

Harry nodded.

"It's a pity I have never had the chance to speak to you before. I knew your parents quite well. Lily even baby-sat Bill, Charlie, and Percy a few times." His face grew grim. "Such a shame what happened to them. Our deepest condolences for your loss."

"Oh," said Harry lamely, not sure what else to say. "Thanks." It felt odd talking to Mr. Weasley like this, as if they had never met before, and he suddenly felt the irony of his situation. It wasn't everyday you met an old friend for the first time ever. "Nice to meet you," he added.

"Good morning," Riddle said clearly, his tone strong enough to silence any idle chatter.

Harry turned to see Riddle round the table to take his place at the head. This was a sure sign that the meeting was about to start and so Harry, along with the rest of those gathered, moved back to the table to sit down. He sank back into the chair and crossed his arms, waiting for Riddle to speak. It was then that he noticed he was sitting directly opposite Katie, with McGonagall to his left. Next to her was Riddle. Opposite McGonagall was Slughorn, and further on down sat the Weasley clan and all the others. He, along with Katie, had been given a place of honour near the head of the table.

"Right," Riddle began.. "Thank you all for coming on a Sunday. We have a lot to get through, and so I hope you can all bear with me. First though, it is my sad duty to inform you that Sirius Black was killed last night during the events in the Ministry of Magic. Sirius was a good and loyal friend with an infinite capacity for fun and joy, a capacity that not even the Dementors of Azkaban could take from him. He was a valuable member of the Order, and Godfather to both Kathryn and Harry."

Katie's eyebrows shot up and her head instantly turned to Harry, her lips narrowed as she stared questioningly at him. She had clearly not known that, and judging by the look on her face, she was not overly pleased about it. Harry didn't know what to say or do, and so he could only look away as Riddle continued.

"He will be sadly missed by all of us. I would like to hold a minute's silence in loving memory of Sirius Black."

Riddle rose to his feet and bowed his head respectfully. The rest of the room followed suit, their demeanour solemn. To Harry's right, a wizard wearing a flat-cap reached up to remove it from his head.

Harry could have heard a pin drop in the silence that followed. The room was utterly still, utterly silent. Those around the table had their heads bowed, many even had their eyes closed as each person contemplated what Sirius had meant to them. As far as Harry understood, although head-strong, Sirius had been liked amongst the Order. Well, except for Snape...who wasn't even here now. He guessed Snape wasn't in the Order in this world. With no Dumbledore to trust him, Snape most likely hadn't been able to turn spy.

*Good, I didn't want him here anyway,* he thought bitterly.

Harry cast the thought of the Potions Master aside, as he was supposed to be thinking of Sirius, not his enemy. Reverently, he closed his eyes and thought back to when Sirius had come to see him during the Tournament, hiding in a cave, living off rats. He remembered the feeling of elation when Sirius had offered him a home as they had led Pettigrew up towards the school. He recalled the time when Sirius had wandered around the house singing 'God Rest Ye Merry Hippogriff' the Christmas before last. He had barely had time to mourn Sirius before he had been thrust into the Unholy Land. It all seemed so long ago, but last night's events had brought it all oozing to the surface, and Harry found himself longing for that life with his Godfather. All that was gone now, all hope of a life like that was gone. There was only one thing left – Voldemort.

"Right," said Riddle as the sixty-seconds came to a close. "Now, we can begin. You may have noticed that we have two additions to our number today, one of which is not even of age, but I think we can all agree that after last night, this is the best place for them. Kathryn Bell you all know, or at least know of, and the young man sitting opposite her is Harry Potter." He paused to let the words sink in. Harry heard several excited whispers, including the words 'Lily' and 'James'. He, on the other hand, kept his eyes on Riddle.

"I assume by now you have all read the Special Edition of the *Daily Prophet*," he asked, looking around the table. There was a murmur of agreement, which was enough of an answer for Riddle to continue. "Although the details of the article are mainly speculation, the gist of the article is correct. Miss Bell and her friends did enter the Ministry of Magic last night in an attempt to rescue Sirius. They were ambushed in the Department of Mysteries by the Death Eaters, lead by Lucius Malfoy, who is now incarcerated in Azkaban. The object of the exercise was to recover the Prophecy we have been protecting for the last few months. Luckily none of the students were seriously or permanently injured, thanks largely to the efforts of Harry Potter here, who arrived in time to help us bring the conflict to an end."

"And do a lot more besides, according to the *Prophet*," added someone down the far end of the table. A mixed murmur of approval circulated the room, while Harry forced himself to look straight ahead and avoid eye contact.

Riddle nodded in acknowledgement, but did not change the subject. "Be that as it may, the main point is that the Prophecy has been destroyed. This naturally means that all guard duties are abandoned, as they are now obsolete. With regards to Harry and Kathryn, their safety is now paramount, and for that reason I will not divulge any more details about what happened last night. There were some finer points, which if made public would be most troublesome. I appreciate your silence."

"Our second order of business," Riddle continued, "is going to be the fallout from last night, of which there is likely to be a lot. Kingsley?" Riddle gestured for the Auror to take over as he sat back down.

The man in question rose to his feet. He wore a crisp grey suit, as opposed to the flowing robes he normally wore. If Harry had to guess, he would say it was Kingsley's attempt to blend in with Muggles, which made Harry wonder what the Auror had been doing. Kingsley cleared his throat and then began.

"Most of the Ministry is in an uproar," he said, not splitting hairs. "It is believed that Fudge's handling of the situation over the last few months has been... *abysmal*, I believe was the word used."

"Too right," muttered someone to Harry's right.

"There is a lot of pressure for him to resign, and even whispers of a Vote of No Confidence," continued Kingsley. "In all probability, Fudge is not likely to last another week. They say that he should have told everyone the truth last June and backed yourself, Professor, and young Kathryn here. I believe that Fudge, being a politician, will make one last attempt to keep his office and to do this, he will need to be seen to have the support of Miss Bell."

"Me?" echoed Katie disbelievingly.

"It's politics," answered Tonks sympathetically. "You have been seen to be fighting, and your past speaks for itself. If you were to talk to the *Prophet* and tell everyone that Fudge was doing a good job and his recent activities were all part of some great plan, he might save his career."

"Sod that," scoffed Katie.

"I couldn't have put it better myself," continued Kingsley, with a wink at Katie. "It is a foregone conclusion that Fudge will be removed from office within a week, though I would expect a letter from him begging for your support." Kingsley then turned his eyes to Harry. "And possibly one for you too, Mr Potter."

"I wouldn't piss on him if he was on fire," muttered Harry rolling his eyes. Those who heard sniggered while McGonagall gave him a stern look, before steering the conversation back onto the straight and narrow.

"If he does leave," she asked "who is likely to replace him? Is it someone we can trust?"

"Trust is a big word in politics," replied Kingsley. "The most popular choice is Rufus Scrimgoeur."

Harry paused. The name rang a bell in the back of his mind. He had heard it once before, but couldn't think for the life of him where. It was on the tip of his tongue, but he couldn't quite get there.

"He is currently head of the Auror Division," explained Kingsley, "working for Amelia Bones. He is certainly a stronger man than Fudge, and has seen combat. He is sharper, more intelligent, and more likely to get the job done. His methods are liable to be firmer, but whether they are just or not remains to be seen. As to the question of his trustworthiness, I believe we can expect him to fight for the right side. He is certainly no Death Eater, but I do not believe we can trust him to help us – he, too, will want Kathryn, and possibly Harry, to endorse him. Ironically, it would be better for us if Fudge remained in power, as he would do whatever the Headmaster asks in order to worm his way back into his favour."

"In other words," said Riddle. "We cannot count on the Ministry, even now?"

"No," said Kingsley decisively. "Now that the world knows *He* is back, more will flock to him in fear. If the Ministry isn't compromised already, it soon will be. I think we have to accept that the Ministry is a haven for Death Eaters. What they know, the Dark Lord will also know in a matter of hours, so all operations are to be conducted *beneath the radar*, as the Muggles would say. Our communication is secure, but I believe we need to find new ways of transportation, as we are liable to be tracked.

"Furthermore," continued the Auror. "Since we are talking about new additions, it is now necessary for everyone to be able to produce a corporeal Patronus. The jailers report that the Dementors have left Azkaban. We are looking at attacks becoming quite common, especially around North East England and Scotland, so instruct family members and friends on how to do it and spread the word – let's get as many of the general public in a position where they can defend themselves. Also, I would like Fred and George Weasley to see me afterwards to see what we can do about a Wheeze to ward off Dementors, as well as some shield charm bits and pieces for the general public. I'd be interested to hear your ideas, gentlemen."

The twins nodded and George made a note in a brightly coloured notebook bearing the WWW logo.

"On another front, screening is to be carried out on Ministry employees," Kingsley continued, "but it won't catch everyone, especially since the Magical Law Enforcement department is running an emergency recruitment drive, and that includes the Aurors. We in the MLE department need numbers quickly, but we have to filter out Death Eater sleepers and moles. More tests mean less numbers, and we need to find a balance. I'll keep you updated as we go."

"What is the Ministry doing about Harry and Kathryn?" asked Riddle.

"With regards to Miss Bell," answered Kingsley, "nothing, besides trying to get her on-side. Mr. Potter is more complicated. Since everyone knows so little about him, they are not sure how to play him. Now that the *Prophet* has lumped him and Miss Bell together I think we can expect the same sort of treatment. There is just one more thing though." He turned to face Harry instead of the room at large. "You are sixteen correct?" Kingsley asked. Harry nodded, wandering where this was going. "You therefore did a lot of underage magic last night, however the sensors were never tripped. Somehow, the Trace has been blocked or disabled."

"Trace?" asked Harry, bewildered.

"It's the spell that the Ministry uses to detect underage magic," explained Kingsley. "I have personally checked the Ministry's records and the Trace was put on Harry James Potter the night you were sent to live with your Aunt and Uncle, and will not be removed until you turn seventeen. The confusing thing is that the Trace was not tripped last night when you performed magic."

"Right", said Harry slowly. He paused for a moment, not answering. Harry had often wondered exactly how the Ministry detected underage magic, but had never really investigated it. To him it seemed a rather flawed method, considering how it had failed to tell the difference between him and Dobby the summer before his second year. As for how the Trace had been removed, it had

been applied to Harry from this world and that Harry had not done any magic last night on account of him being dead, so no wonder the Trace had never been tripped. However, Harry couldn't very well tell that to Kingsley.

"If I may," continued Kingsley. "I would like to do a little test." He walked around the back of the chairs until he stood behind Harry. He was acutely aware of everyone watching him and Kingsley with interest and he struggled not to react.

"Hold still," said the Auror gently, as he swept his wand past Harry's head. Nothing happened.

"Interesting," said Kingsley. "No wonder no alarms have been tripped, you do not even appear to have the Trace at all."

A murmur went around the room at his. Unable to think of any defence, Harry kept his mouth shut. There were two possible answers in Harry's eyes. One explanation was that the trace that had been applied to this body had been done in the Unholy Land and Kingsley couldn't detect the magic from another world. The other option was also quite probable: perhaps the Dark Knight had found a way to remove the Trace, since he had been able to train in secret and remain at large for so long in his own world. Harry stared around at the sea of inquisitive faces. "Don't look at me," he said calmly, and hopefully innocently, as Kingsley returned to his seat. "I'd never heard of the Trace until you mentioned it."

Seated once again, Kingsley glanced over at Riddle, who nodded, before continuing.

"However it happened, it isn't an insurmountable problem in my opinion. Most of the Ministry's top brass would not dare touch you because of your political worth," said Kingsley, bringing him back out of his stupor. "On a related note, I have persuaded Brian Carter to drop the assault charge levelled against you." He and Riddle exchanged a knowing glance while the rest of the room looked confused. Harry expelled a deep breath, glad that he didn't have to deal with that minor complication.

"Thanks," he told Kingsley gratefully.

"Right," interrupted Riddle, moving the conversation forward. "Getting back to the problem at hand, what provisions are being taken to protect people?"

"Well, it is a little too soon for a definitive plan to be ready," replied Kingsley. "It will take at least a week, especially since the backstabbing in the race to be the next Minister has effectively begun. Real work is being pushed aside as department heads scramble to be next in line. Lots of *Prophet* interviews, not a lot of real work."

"Any ideas Harry?" asked Riddle.

Harry was taken aback at being asked a direct question. He had expected to sit here and listen, but actually being asked his opinion by Riddle was a slight shock. He was suddenly aware of everyone staring at him in surprise and felt himself go red. Feeling pressured but unwilling to

look foolish in front of the Order, he shifted slightly in his seat, thinking back to last summer. What had he read in the *Prophet*?

"Kingsley's right," he said slowly. "Whoever the new Minister is will continue politicking away." Feeling slightly more confident, he continued, remembering the useless purple information pack he had received last summer. "We will all receive a personal safety pamphlet, giving advice on how to protect homes. If any of you in the Ministry can get onto the teams writing them, try to make them of more use than 'run, hide, Apparate away'. The idea is to reassure people, not panic them. Also, I think we are going to see a series of arrests in the near future, but mostly for show. I think some innocent people are going to get caught up in this, simply to raise the number of arrests."

"How do you know all this?" asked a pompous looking witch on the other side of the table. "Why should we trust the word of a teenager?" All around him Harry could hear barely audible mutterings of agreement.

Harry stared levelly back at her, refusing to answer. Luckily for him, Riddle came to his rescue.

"I think Harry's right," he announced. "If Scrimgeour does become Minister, his first priority is going to be to re-establish faith in the Ministry, and to be seen to be doing something. This means smoke and mirrors, much like Fudge. There is a part of me that agrees with him. Faith in the system, in the Ministry, is what we need right now. Whatever your private feelings are, please try to reassure those you meet that the Ministry is coping."

"Who is this Scrimgeour?" asked Harry. "I know I have heard that name before." Where the hell had he heard it? It was there on the tip of his tongue, but he couldn't quite reach it. Scrimgeour, Rufus Scrimgeour?

"Here," said a woman to his right. "The Ministry's own file on him."

She slid it file over the polished surface to Harry. He picked it up and opened it. Inside there were several sheets of parchment with various details listed out for him, but what drew Harry's eye was a picture at the top, of a man who largely resembled a lion. As Harry stared at the photo, he suddenly realised where he had seen him before and his blood ran cold. It was in a dream, a memory of the Dark Knight's. He had murdered both Scrimgeour and his wife in cold blood, cutting them open with his sword and watching them bleed all over the floor. Staring at the picture, he could almost feel the cold steel of the sword in his right hand, and the trembling throat of the woman in his right. Trembling, Harry closed the file, forcing himself to look away from the accusing eyes that stared out of the picture. His stomach clenched tight and he forced himself to take a deep breath to calm himself.

"That was informative," he said flatly, looking up.

"Are you alright?" asked McGonagall. "You look a little pale."

"I'm fine," said Harry quietly. Setting his jaw firmly to betray no emotion, he slid the file back across the table and turned his attention back to Riddle.

"Right," said Riddle, standing again to take charge. "Having established that the Ministry is now considered to be hostile, we must turn our attention to the Death Eaters. A number were apprehended last night, and at the moment are on their way to Azkaban. This would be more encouraging news were it not for the fact that the Dementors have deserted the island. The *Prophet* has a report of a suspected sighting in Yorkshire. I fear these may become more common; it is a good thing we can all cast a Patronus. For Kathryn and Harry's benefit, this is how we communicate. I will show you the modified Patronus later.

"We are currently watching many suspected Death Eaters and this is to continue," said Riddle. "However, I have it on good account that since his return, the Dark Lord is now even more paranoid. Since no one tried to find him for thirteen years, he has no faith in his Death Eaters. They are expendable assets, though they believe he values them. As such, I don't want anyone to intervene or take unnecessary risks. If he suspects they are being followed, he will not hesitate to kill them and you. Be careful. He will no longer be restrained."

He paused to let his words sink in. No one in the room said a word, so Harry figured it must have had the desired effect.

"So, what is Grindelwald going to do next?" asked Riddle rhetorically, ignoring the hiss as he mentioned the name. "I am afraid that this is not an easy question to answer. Of course he is going to insert spies into the Ministry. Of course he is going to stage some generalised attacks around the country in order to spread fear, drive people to him through fear and divide the Aurors' manpower. However, I must remind you that he is not out to rule. If he wanted to rule, he would be forced to keep the infrastructure intact. But as it is, he is out to destroy our entire community, meaning no target is off limits."

Harry realised the truth of these words. Voldemort, in order that he could take charge, needed the Ministry. He needed the Department of Magical Transportation to control movement. He needed the Aurors, albeit the Black Watch, in order to police his new kingdom. Grindelwald was out to destroy the country utterly. If Binns had been right, Grindelwald wished to destroy the Ministry of Magic and magical Britain, and then return to the continent, presumably to rule there. He despised anything British, and in his increasing paranoia believed he could only be free if England fell. That meant that he would not exercise restraint. He would kill anything. Even his Death Eaters were not going to be saved. Harry wondered if they knew it yet, or if they believed he would rule this country with them. Binns even raised the possibility that Grindelwald might not even care about purity of blood, but might just be using it to rally the Death Eaters. Harry began to realise more and more that Grindelwald was a completely different kettle of fish to Voldemort, and in some ways, far more terrifying.

"As such," Riddle continued, interrupting Harry's thoughts, "it will be very hard to see what he is after, probably until it is too late. Our first priority must be information. We need to work out what he is after. I have thought long and hard on this and feel certain his priorities now are going to be a... gathering support; b... inserting spies and collecting information; and c... spreading fear. However, these small goals do not shed light on his big plan."

"Thus far," began Kingsley, jumping in, "the Minister has sent me to keep an eye on the Prime Minister, hence the suit. I keep checking for Imperius curses, Polyjuice and such. Dawlish has also added two others to the Royal Protection Unit at Buckingham Palace."

"Would he really go for Her Majesty?" asked a woman near the back. "A Muggle target?"

"Scrimgeour clearly thinks so," replied Kingsley.

"And I have to admit I agree," answered Riddle. "Remember, he has spent the last year gunning for Miss Bell, as he believed her to be a threat. However, I fear that now he has moved past that, and has returned to his original plan. If he can kill Kathryn along the way all the better, but his primary plan was always to bring down Britain, and the Royal Family is a symbol of what is it to be British."

"Is that not aiming a little high?" asked a doubtful voice towards the back.

"Perhaps," replied Riddle thoughtfully. "But we are not dealing with a rational man. He is paranoid, more so now that he has no one to trust, and he is very, very clever. I think we are about to be hit by a wave of attacks to mask his primary aim, so we need to take steps to protect ourselves and the Muggles. Cornelius has already dealt with the Queen and Prime Minister. Kingsley needs to make sure he offers the same protection to high profile targets here. However, we need to find out what it is he is after, and that is where our problem lays. He plays his cards very close to his chest. If anyone has any suggestions, I am all ears."

There was silence as everyone racked their brains, but no one seemed to have any idea. Harry stared down the row of blank faces, looking for any sign of inspiration. As it happened, he already knew what Grindelwald's first priority would be, or at least he had a fair idea. The trouble was that he didn't dare mention it in front of everyone.

"In that case," continued Riddle, "there is nothing more we can do until he makes a move. Individual instructions shall be arriving shortly for you. Remember what has been discussed as you return to work. As the 'Art of War' states, the victor only starts the battle once the war has been won. He will be subtle, so even the slightest suspicion... please report it. Does anyone have any final comments?"

Harry looked round the table. Aside from Mad-Eye's magic eye which was fixed on Harry, the rest of the eyes in the room were fixed on Riddle and no one seemed to have anything to add.

"Then on that note, I close today's meeting," said Riddle. "Thank you all for coming. Please exit discretely and above all, be careful out there." Riddle lowered himself into his seat as he finished.

There was a clatter as everyone moves their chairs back and rose to their feet. Few words were exchanged as the Order filed out, with only a few hushed goodbyes. Riddle had not been kidding when he had said there would be a lot of information. Harry remained seated, as well as Katie who was eyeing Harry, and McGonagall who was waiting with Riddle. As soon as the room was clear except for the four of them, Harry leaned towards Riddle to whisper.

"We need to talk," he said simply. "Katie too."

Riddle paused for a moment appraisingly and then sat back in the chair. Katie had not moved, and she too leaned in at the sound of her name. McGonagall also hesitated, before Riddle gestured for her to leave. Her lips thinned as she was dismissed, but she knew better than to make a scene in front of students. Harry waited until she had left and the door had closed behind her before he spoke.

"I know what he's after," said Harry flatly, causing both Riddle and Katie to raise an eyebrow.

"In the Ministry, I mentioned the Horcrux to Grindelwald," explained Harry, certain he was right. "He knows that I know about it and will assume that by now you will too. He suddenly feels a whole lot more vulnerable than he did yesterday. If I were him, I wouldn't do anything until I had seen with my own eyes that it's still safe."

Riddle leaned back and took a deep breath, his eyes staring into space. "Interesting...." he breathed.

"You're assuming it's still intact," Katie pointed out, though she seemed thoughtful. "He hasn't used it up or anything? Can they be used more than once?"

"No idea," shrugged Harry – to be fair, the question had never come up before. "But there are two hundred and six bones in the male body, two hundred and six 'bones of a father' to be stolen – that's a lot of resurrections if it can be used again. Anyhow, the point is that he needs that fail – safe in case anything happens to him and after last night, the first seeds of doubt have been sown. I drew blood, and if I know about his little secret, he is going to play it safe. He won't gamble his life on the fact that we don't know where it is, and so he is going to move it."

"And once he moves and hides it again, it will be lost forever," said Katie, following his line of thought.

"Exactly," replied Harry, bowing his head in agreement. "He needs to fetch it, and that is our chance – when it is in the open. We need to snatch it and destroy it, though God only knows how we are going to do that."

"I know," said Riddle, slowly. Harry raised an eyebrow – he hadn't been expecting that. Reluctantly, he had to admit that Riddle was useful, and he was more reluctant still to admit that he had been impressed with Riddle's meeting. Since Harry had mentioned the Horcrux as a target, Riddle had been staring vaguely into space. "I can destroy the Horcrux," continued the headmaster, "if I can get hold of it." He still seemed distant and thoughtful as he spoke, as if his mind was a million miles away.

"I may be wrong," admitted Harry, though he didn't think so. "But if I *am* right, then the window of opportunity is closing, so we can't just sit here arguing. Whatever we plan on doing must be done fast, because this is going to be his top priority, and like Katie said, this is a one-time only opportunity."

"Agreed," said Riddle, seeming to come out of his thoughts. He sat back up in his seat, and looked at Harry. "I am impressed by your powers of deduction, Harry," he said interlocking his fingers and resting both hands on the table. "I had completely overlooked the Horcrux as being his first target. I thought he would leave it and forget. But now that you mention it, yes, I believe he would want to check it himself. He would not trust anyone else."

"But that doesn't help us find it," Katie pointed out. "Surely he would slip away in the dead of night on his own and fetch it," replied Katie. "He wouldn't want to draw attention to it, especially if he suspects spies and treachery amongst his Death Eaters. We can't follow him unless we know where he is to begin with, and even then we need to find it first. If I understand it correctly, it could be anything, anywhere....an old boot, a can of coke, anything. A needle in a whole field of haystacks – and we don't even know which farm."

"That is only if you assume he would pick anything," said Riddle thoughtfully. "I, for one, would not entrust a piece of my soul to just anything. I wanted something grand, not a piece of litter."

"What was it?" asked Harry, considering it a useful titbit. Any information he could gather on Voldemort's Horcrux would make it easier to find and destroy once he got home.

Riddle sighed deeply and stared at Harry for a few seconds before moving. Raising two hands, he opened his robes and produced a golden locket from inside his robes. The locket was made of gold with a row of green emeralds positioned to form a snake on the front. It was the same snake Harry has seen carved on the tap that served as the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets, and even the locket itself seemed somewhat familiar. Katie came to the same conclusion at the same time.

"Slytherin," they both gasped together.

Riddle nodded, "I had managed to get a job at Borgin and Burkes during the summer holidays, just to escape the Orphanage, and this crossed my path," he told them. "Slytherin's own. It belonged to an elderly lady who bought it at auction and then passed away...I didn't kill her," he added, looking at Harry.

"I didn't ask," replied Harry, though he was fairly pleased to see Riddle looking uncomfortable. His chickens had finally returned to roost.

"It is no longer a Horcrux," continued Riddle, holding the locket up to the light. "Just a locket."

He removed it from around his neck and held it out to them. It was split open as if something had burst out of it, leaving the outside edge tarnish and the locket looking old and battered. Harry could see between Riddle's robes that the centre of his chest was covered in a large burn scar, in the centre of which, a perfect impression of the locket had been branded into his flesh. He had no idea what had happened, but the Horcrux seemed to have imprinted itself onto his body, and he could see Riddle carried both physical and mental scars from that time. He almost felt a hint of pity for the headmaster. Harry began to wonder why he had never had the scar removed. Riddle seemed to guess what he was thinking.

"I keep it now, as it serves to remind me of just how wrong a person can go, to remind me what I could have been." He took the locket back and replaced it around his neck, tucking it once again into his robes. As it disappeared, Harry had a sneaking suspicion that he had seen it somewhere before. He hated these feelings of *déjà vu*, but this was no time to centre on anxiety.

"So how do you destroy them?" asked Harry as Riddle re-fastened his top button.

Riddle held up two fingers. "There are two ways to destroy a Horcrux, to the best of my knowledge," he said. "Horcruxes are made with pure hate, i.e. the killing curse, but they are destroyed with the opposite."

"Love?" asked Harry sceptically. He looked over at Katie who seemed equally unconvinced.

"Close," said Riddle with a small smile. "Genuine remorse, and not remorse as in 'I wish I had never split my soul', but remorse as in 'I wish I had never killed'. The regret must pain the soul so much that it can forge it back together, and that is pain I would not wish on anyone." His eyes seemed vacant as he spoke, as if his mind was lost down memory lane. There was a hint of sadness in his voice.

"No hope we can get that out of Grindelwald," muttered Katie, and Riddle seemed to jump at the sound of her voice. "What's the other method?"

"You of all people should know," said Riddle smugly. "You destroyed the last one."

Harry's jaw dropped. Katie had destroyed a Horcrux? When? How? Why hadn't she mentioned it? Harry stared at Katie, but she looked just as bewildered.

Riddle seemed to enjoy their confusion for a second before speaking again. "You have been in a Pensieve," he said cryptically. "But you couldn't touch or interact with the memories. The memories in turn could not interact with you, or think for themselves. That is not true of all the memories you have encountered." Harry was at a loss, wondering what the hell a memory in a Pensieve has to do with anything, but Katie was quicker off the mark.

"Grindelwald's Diary," she gasped. Harry suddenly understood.

"A memory thinking for itself?" asked Riddle. "A memory sucking the life out of a person to resurrect itself? It could not be living without some form of soul. In my eyes, this was the first proof of my theory about the existence of Grindelwald's Horcrux."

"The Diary was a Horcrux," said Katie nodding in understanding. "And it was destroyed by a Basilisk fang."

"Or any strong magical object that renders it beyond magical recovery," explained Riddle. "Basilisk venom, fiendfyre, dragon's fire, or even Gryffindor's sword would all suffice. Although in the strictest sense, the diary was not in fact a Horcrux, but we'll get to that. My point is that you need to make sure that no magic can mend the object once destroyed."

Harry was somewhat relieved that it was that simple. Katie had Gryffindor's sword, and Harry had the one from his world. They could quite easily destroy the Horcrux once they had it. Harry had visions of them having to climb a volcano and throw it into the molten heart or something like that – by those standards, they had it easy.

"Hang on," said Katie, shaking her head and waking Harry from his stupor. She looked thoughtful, and spoke slowly. Harry could almost see the cogs whirring. "This thing needs to be intact for him to come back to life, right?" she asked.

Riddle nodded.

"Well, the diary was destroyed two years before he came back. Does that mean there is a second?"

She was good; Harry had to admit that. She was smarter than he was, and if there was a second Horcrux, that raised a whole lot of problems for them, and double for Harry as it meant that by the same ilk, Voldemort must have at least two Horcruxes. Harry had destroyed the diary, leaving one still out there. Hopefully Riddle would know what it was, so Harry could at least be prepared.

"Very good, Kathryn," said Riddle, sounding impressed. "It is my belief, that the diary was not a Horcrux in the truest sense. Remember, the magic that lets a wizard split his soul was his invention, and like any invention was developed through trial and error. At the time he created it, I do not think he realised its full potential, and I don't believe the thought of immortality even crossed his mind whilst making it. I believe he simply saw it as a tremendously powerful energy source. Tearing the soul releases a tremendous amount of energy that he could harness, and he was exploring the power of a soul fragment. In the case of the diary, he wanted to see if he could separate his soul and instil it into a memory. The diary was intended as a weapon, which was to be powered by a soul fragment, but it was meant to be found and used."

"How can you know all this?" asked Harry. "In my world it was you who opened the chamber, you that left the diary in the hands of Lucius Malfoy!"

"You believe that I opened the Chamber?" repeated Riddle pensively. "I must confess, Harry, that another few months and I would have had the knowledge to open the Chamber of Secrets. However, someone beat me to it. Sadly it resulted in their own death."

*What? Grindelwald was alive, so it couldn't be him. Who was it who died then?*

"Who?" asked Harry.

"Myrtle," answered Katie, having already pieced it together.

Riddle's head sank into a slow nod. "Grindelwald remains to this day the greatest Legilimens I have ever encountered, a skill he no doubt learned from Albus."

"Yes, I saw them together in a memory," interrupted Harry. "Dumbledore and Grindelwald were once friends, weren't they?"

Riddle's head turned and he stared at Harry, his face deliberately held firm. Whatever was going on in his mind, Tom was determined to keep this a secret. Harry hesitated for a moment – why had Riddle's demeanour suddenly changed?

"There are very few left alive who know that," said Riddle slowly. "How could you...but of course, in your world..." he trailed off, thinking he had answered his own question.

"Actually no," Harry corrected him. "When we were fighting, I...don't ask me why, but I Legilimised him," said Harry. "He was so angry with me at the time, which was probably why he had no defence. I saw his past, I saw him at Durmstrang, I also saw him laughing and joking with a very young Albus Dumbledore, and most importantly, I saw his name."

"What name did he use?" asked Riddle leaning forward intently.

"Gellert Gaunt," replied Harry. "I guess we might be able to find out a bit about him, now?"

Riddle raised an eyebrow. "Well that certainly answers the question of him being a Parselmouth," he said pensively. He paused for a second, deep in thought before explaining further. "The Gaunts were the last descendants of Salazar Slytherin."

"I thought you were the last," said Harry curiously.

"My mother was Merope Gaunt," explained Riddle. "It seems possible that Grindelwald was related to her father, Marvolo Gaunt. Then again, the family tree could have branched a generation or two earlier. I suspect he changed his name to hide his past once he came to this country. That is why no records exist under the name Grindelwald. I will have Durmstrang send over all records on Gellert Gaunt, if they still exist."

"How will that help?" asked Harry.

"If we know enough about his past, it may reveal an inerrant weakness, or perhaps information about his Horcruxes," replied Riddle.

"But we don't have time," insisted Harry. "He will move it today!"

"Correct," said Riddle. "So back to the Chamber of Secrets. Grindelwald was strong enough, even back then, to possess people. I believe that he cornered Myrtle during the holidays and took control. Hogwarts' medical records show she went to the matron at the time, complaining of inexplicable tiredness, headaches and blackouts. Grindelwald took charge of her and used her to open the Chamber of Secrets, right under Albus' nose. Naturally, Albus blamed me and took to following me around."

"Saw right through you, didn't he?" Harry said with a smile.

"Not exactly," Riddle corrected him. "Let me explain. Grindelwald possessed Myrtle Hubbard in order to open the Chamber, which being a Parselmouth, he was able to do. As a prefect on patrol, I stumbled across Myrtle killing Roosters. Naturally, Grindelwald ordered the basilisk to kill me, and was most upset when it turned and slithered off after I spoke to it. He didn't count on a

second heir being present. To keep me in line he offered me a job, so to speak, in return for silence and later for finding someone to blame the whole fiasco on – Rubeus Hagrid. It was a long time before Hagrid would speak to me again. I offered him the teaching job because I have wronged him greatly. I told you, Harry, I have spent the last fifty years trying to right Lord Voldemort's many, many wrongs. Anyhow, once Grindelwald and I began to communicate, it was not hard to get the information on how to split the soul. It is worth noting that at this early point, he did not combine the actual murder with creating the Horcrux – he used the Basilisk to do the killing. It was still a work in progress. He succeeded in splitting his soul and creating the diary, thus his experiment was a success. While he viewed the process solely as a weapon, a source of power, I saw its true potential. I saw that the soul could perhaps lead the way to immortality. Already I thought I was smarter than he was. In a few years, perhaps, I would have killed him and moved on...but luckily, someone intervened.

"Dumbledore wasn't fooled, was he?" replied Harry with a glow of pride.

"No," acknowledged the headmaster, "and looking back now, I am most grateful that he was not. But we have digressed. Once Myrtle had served her purpose he killed her, and it was then that I refused to help any more – not out of regret for her, but as it would have resulted in me having to return to the Orphanage following an expulsion at the time I needed Hogwarts library the most. By then I had the information about how to separate the soul and had seen that it worked. I believed I could better the spell to allow myself to kill, rather than need a secondary, non-magic source of killing, and could anchor the soul to an object. However, I didn't dare try it at school. I was waiting until the summer, by which time the locket had crossed my path, and an opportunity to meet my father beckoned. But that is my history and I am moving off topic. As for Grindelwald, I believe that he viewed this Chamber experiment as a success and was ready to try again with a bigger more powerful weapon."

"Hang on," interrupted Katie. "So you knew where the Chamber was all those years ago, but when it was opened again, you pretended you didn't know."

"No," said Riddle. "As I mentioned, I know what was in it, but I never knew the location. Grindelwald never shared that information with me. But back to his second Horcrux...I knew he was planning to split his soul again, and I saw the possibility of using the soul to anchor oneself to life. But was one enough, and how much power must I sacrifice to get it? It was that knowledge that prompted me to go to Horace Slughorn to ask a question that had been plaguing me at the time. If Grindelwald could have two, could I have more than two? Is seven not the strongest magical number?"

"Seven?" burst out Harry. "Are you telling me that back home I have to find seven sodding Horcruxes to finally finish you off?"

Riddle looked at him for a moment, before answering. "I cannot in all honesty say," he replied. "It was a theory and it was my intention to make six Horcruxes, the seventh piece being in my body. It sounds like your Dark Lord is a logical extension of what I once was, Harry. I'm sorry, but I think it is a safe bet."

"We have gone slightly off topic," said Katie, interrupting them. "As fascinating as I find all this, I'm more concerned about my Dark Lord than your Lord Voldemort. Harry said it himself. We have to move very quickly on this if we are to have any hope at all of stopping him."

"You're right," agreed Riddle. "Which leads me on to a confession that I have never breathed to another soul before this day. I created a full Horcrux shortly after leaving Hogwarts, killing my father in the process." He paused for a minute bowing his head. "I was wearing it as I arrived in Versailles the day Albus was killed. Grindelwald recognised it for what it was, and it was from me he stole the notes on my Horcrux research. While he only stole a few ideas and not detailed plans, it was from me he gained the knowledge to create true Horcruxes and a few years later, during his isolation after his duel with Albus, he had his own Horcrux that would keep him alive. And it is all my fault."

"You couldn't have known he would steal it," said Katie sympathetically.

"But did I try to conceal it, fearing others might use it for evil?" asked Riddle, sadly. "No, only to make sure I was the only one to have one. My motives were as selfish and evil as Grindelwald's. A good person would have concealed the plans for a just reason, preventing others from getting hurt, for example...well, were I capable of that kind of compassion, I would never have been Lord Voldemort, and I would never have made a Horcrux. Albus once told me, that for some of the great acts of evil, it takes knowledge to work out how to do them, but it takes wisdom to work out that one should not do them. No, I developed it based on his techniques with purely selfish intent, and to that end I am just as foolish and wrong as Grindelwald."

"We can assign blame later," said Harry impatiently, though he did find Riddle's guilt mildly satisfying. "We need to find that Horcrux now, and it could be anywhere, even here."

"Here, as in Hogwarts?" asked Katie.

"I can see the appeal of him hiding such an item right under Dumbledore's nose," said Riddle slowly. "Then again, I have already searched the castle. Over the holidays I even had the House Elves bring me any mysterious magical items they found whilst cleaning. Well as you can imagine, being a school there were many trinkets that students had hidden and forgotten. In addition, the Elves were so eager to please they brought me every item they could find. I remember well the expression on Professor McGonagall's face as she came to reclaim her jewellery box which had been whisked away by an overzealous elf."

"Please tell me it wasn't Dobby," groaned Katie. Riddle didn't need to reply, but continued.

"The Horcrux is not here," he said firmly. "If for arguments sake, the Horcrux is in Hogwarts, he cannot get into the castle. Therefore we have it, he does not, and it is not going anywhere. Gringott's may seem logical, but since he could not open an account himself, it would mean entrusting it to someone else, an Englishman as well, so I find that unlikely. However I do have a theory, and I am fairly sure I know where it is."

"You do?" asked Harry in disbelief.

"Grindelwald is very partial to the 'eye-for-an-eye' approach," said Riddle, looking thoughtful. "He wiped out the four men who recruited him to the British government. He wants to destroy the authority that made him. In addition, he encourages the fear of his name, suggesting he is very egotistical. I wonder what you will say when I suggest that perhaps he wanted his Horcrux to lord over the time he came closest to death. The most significant event in his past was his duel with Albus, as he nearly died, and that would make it appealing for him to guard his means of immortality. I think that the Palace of Versailles near Paris would be a good place to start looking."

"Versailles is still a guess, though?" asked Harry doubtfully.

"Yes," confirmed Riddle. "However, unless you know otherwise, it is our best guess and as you quite rightly say, we do not have time. I will have the Order follow known high-ranking Death Eaters here and to watch Gringott's, but I do not believe that this will reveal anything useful. In addition, my acquaintance in the Death Eaters will let me know if Grindelwald leaves. This is why I believe he hasn't gone after it yet."

"You seem to be putting all our eggs in one basket," Harry said. "Even if it is in Versailles, it's a palace and the whole point of a palace is that it's massive. It could be anything in there."

"I'm glad you appreciate the magnitude of the task," said Riddle dryly. "I take it you have never been to Versailles?"

"No," replied Katie and Harry shook his head.

"You are familiar with the Louvre, correct, of how large it is?" Riddle asked.

"Not really," said Katie. "I know of it, and I've seen pictures."

"Louis Quatorze moved the royal court from the Louvre to Versailles," replied Riddle. "He thought the Louvre was too small for a king. The building makes Hogwarts looked like a two-bedroom flat. However, I believe Grindelwald would place the object as close as possible to where Albus died. I think that moment, the moment of Albus' death, was the most significant in his life. It certainly was in mine."

"Where in the palace did it happen?"

"La Galerie des Glaces," replied Riddle grimly. "The Hall of Mirrors."

"How can we get there?" asked Harry.

"We, as in the three of us?" asked Katie, her eyes wide. "I thought the Order would..."

"We can't risk Horcruxes becoming public knowledge," said Riddle logically. This was one point Harry definitely agreed with him.

"And let's face it," Harry added. "If anyone's earned the right to fight him, it's you," he said with an encouraging smile.

"I know," she said defensively. "I'm just surprised you're letting me come, and not wrapping me up in cotton-wool."

"I think that time has passed," said Riddle, which actually impressed Harry, as Dumbledore had never said that to him. "You are in charge of your life now."

Harry was glad to see her give Riddle a small nod and then rise to her feet.

"So, let's get going, then," she said. "Can you Apparate, Harry?"

Harry paused, as he had still not admitted the situation with the Phoenix to her or Riddle yet.

"Not between countries," replied Riddle, saving Harry the awkwardness of the question. "You cannot Apparate or Portkey across borders without tripping alarms, unless you have permission, which we do not. And you certainly do not Apparate into a crowded Muggle location for all to see. Everything is controlled by the Department of Magical Transportation, even International Floo is diverted via the Ministry's arrivals lounge."

"So how do we go?" Katie asked.

"I will contact the Department of International Magical Cooperation and they will speak to their French counterparts to arrange a Portkey as soon as possible, and issue orders to the Order members who need them," Riddle announced. "You will need Muggle clothing that is warm but not restrictive. I suggest you both go and get changed, and I will see you in my office in twenty minutes. If everything goes accordingly, we can leave for France within the hour."

"Let's get a move on, then," said Katie, heading for the door.

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Harry followed Katie out of the door and then down the stairs in silence, his mind already planning ahead. As he set off in the direction of the Tower, mentally compiling a list of what he would need, he was suddenly aware that she had fallen into pace with him and not the other way around. Out of the corner of his eyes, he was able to see that she was watching him intently. He could practically feel her eyes burning a hole in the side of his face. He ignored it for a minute or so, but it was fast becoming irritating. They had only gotten to the first flight of stairs when Harry couldn't take it anymore.

"What?" he demanded, halting and turning towards her. Katie's face was stony and determinedly neutral, but Harry could tell she wasn't happy about something.

"Sirius," she said simply.

She was clearly expecting a reaction, but to her inconvenience Harry had already had more than enough time to come to terms with Sirius' death, and so she detected no reaction to the name.

There was an awkward pause before she spoke again. "What was he to you?"

Harry hesitated for a second. Part of him wanted to tell her to shut up, as they had a job to do. The other half wanted to comfort her. He was well aware that once she knew Sirius was his Godfather as well, she would be far from happy. She had lost him less than twenty-four hours ago, and now she would think that Harry was trying to steal him from her. However, more lies would only hurt more later.

"You already know," he said truthfully. There was no point lying, and she would think that any words of kindness were patronising.

"Riddle said he was your Godfather, correct?" she asked, her voice level, but he could detect the hint of anger and possibly pain beneath it.

"He was," admitted Harry, but before Katie could interrupt him, he continued. "In *my* world, *my* Sirius was my Godfather. As for your Sirius, I don't know. I never met him."

Katie stared at him coldly for a minute. "Is that why you don't care that he died?"

"I do care," said Harry hotly. "I never meant for him to die, and I tried to help him."

"You didn't do a very good job," she added coldly.

"Neither did you," shot back Harry, before realising exactly what he had said. Her angry eyes immediately glistened and her stony expression wavered a moment before turning cold again.

He sighed. "Katie, I'm sorry, that was out of order. I shouldn't have said that."

She had turned her back on him and was staring at her feet. At least she wasn't crying, but he still had no idea what he was supposed to do or say.

"Maybe you're right," she said after a pause. "Maybe it was all my fault."

"It wasn't," said Harry firmly. "Sirius went there knowing the danger. That was his choice."

"So he brought it on himself did he?" she demanded, turning back to face Harry accusingly.

"Sirius was always his own man," Harry countered. "He was always taking risks."

"What would you know about him?" she snapped defensively.

"You thought he was in danger so you risked your life to get him out," Harry replied, recovering his cool. "He did exactly the same for you. You of all people should understand what he was thinking. If I were you, I'd stop complaining and start being proud of him."

"I am," snapped Katie.

Harry just stared levelly at her, and after a few seconds she looked away. She turned on her heel and set off up towards the tower. Harry sighed in relief that the inquisition was over and followed

her along the passage. They had gone on for a few minutes before Katie continued her questioning.

"So how come you were his Godson?" she asked, keeping her eyes directly ahead. "What was he to you?"

"He and my father were best friends at Hogwarts," answered Harry. "Him, Sirius, Remus Lupin, and someone named Peter Pettigrew."

"Him, I know," spat Katie.

Harry made a note that Wormtail's involvement seemed to have been the same in each world. "Pettigrew was my parent's secret keeper, and he handed them over to Voldemort."

"Sirius is framed and sent to Azkaban until he breaks out?" Katie asked, effectively confirming what he knew to be true: events had unfolded in a similar fashion. However, something had been bothering Harry for a while, and since they were on the subject anyway, he took this opportunity to ask.

"Your father wasn't at Hogwarts with my parents and Sirius, was he?"

"Nope," answered Katie. "He was three years older."

"So how come...if he wasn't a Marauder then why...?" began Harry, not knowing how to phrase the question without sounding like a berk.

For some reason Katie began to laugh. "I thought you might be stuck on that," she said with a smile, adopting a patronising tone. "Four boys, so close together that no one else could join their little group, so how could there be a fifth?" she asked, as if guiding a four year old through a simple problem. As she laughed again Harry got the impression she was enjoying his confusion.

"After Hogwarts?" Harry guessed. "He met your dad at work?"

"Typical male," muttered Katie. "It's all about the boys."

"You mean..."

"Yes," replied Katie as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. "My father never knew Sirius particularly well at school, as he was three years above him. It was my *mother* who went to school with the so-called 'Marauders', albeit one year older. They were an item for several years, in fact. Naturally, Sirius and your father being....Sirius and your father, double-dates followed, so she got to know your parents very well. Sirius was my Godfather, and my Godmother was Lily Potter – now both deceased," she added bitterly.

Harry shot her a look.

"Sorry, I've just realised who I am talking to," she stammered, turning red.

"Remove foot from mouth," muttered Harry.

"Anyway," continued Katie, forcefully moving the conversation on, "Sirius stayed with your father or my mother during school holidays once he ran away. Then, once my mum graduated and started work, she didn't see him enough since he was still at school, and so they split up. My mum worked at the Ministry and my Dad had just finished his Auror training. You can imagine how the rest goes. Sirius remained a very close friend to her, and when I was born he was named my Godfather."

"So how were you close enough to Pettigrew to let him be secret keeper?"

"The worst decision in the long sad history of bad decisions," muttered Katie. "Of the options, we didn't trust Dad's Auror friend, as the Ministry was full of spies. Sirius, James and Lily were too obvious, not to mention that your parents were being hunted to begin with, and Lupin was a werewolf and so not trusted, which left Pettigrew."

"What about your mum's friends?" asked Harry. "Your Dad's school friends? I can't believe I am about to say this, but why not Riddle?"

"Hey, I wasn't even a year old, remember?" said Katie impatiently. "I wasn't exactly included in the selection process."

"Sorry," said Harry, laughing at the image that formed in his mind of Pettigrew sitting in a chair in front of an interview panel headed by a baby Katie. They walked on in silence for a few seconds before Katie spoke again, this time her tone much more sober.

"If it had only been someone else," she said.

"Don't waste your time with what-ifs," said Harry. "You'd go mad. We can't change the past, we just have to decide what to do from now on."

"I know," muttered Katie. "Sirius spent all those years in Azkaban, two years on the run, another locked in headquarters and now...he's gone. I'm sorry, I snapped at you, Harry," she added. "I just thought...I don't know what I thought."

"It's alright," whispered Harry. "I was once very possessive of him, just like you. But you have to realise that even if he was named your Harry's Godfather... even if he was once in a line-dancing club, a barbershop-quartet or the Women's Auxiliary Balloon Corps, he is still the man you knew. It doesn't mean what you had with him was any less real."

Katie laughed. "You know, I can just picture him in a Barbershop quartet," she said smiling to herself.

They were fast approaching the Fat Lady, and it seemed the sensitive topic was over. Katie changed the subject.

"So what do we need for France?" she asked.

"At a guess," replied Harry, "Muggle clothing. ...It's February, so probably a coat as well. Hide your wand. If you've got them, then bring sunglasses to hide part of your face. You might also want a clothes peg."

"Why?"

"The smell of garlic," replied Harry with a smile.

"Oh God," muttered Katie. "I'm off to France with a xenophobe?"

"A what?"

"You hate foreigners."

"I don't!" protested Harry. "They're just...French, and we're British. I happen to have a fair few French jokes at my disposal."

"Really?" said Katie. "Do you speak French?"

"No," admitted Harry. "Well, hello and goodbye, yes and no, please and thank you. A few words here and there. Dudley did a French Exchange one year and came back with enough cigarettes to last the army a year. You do, I take it?"

"Bits and pieces," answered Katie. "Anyway, Harry, the point is that you need to remember your manners over there."

"Yes, mother," muttered Harry.

As the portrait hole opened and Harry and Katie stepped over the threshold, the room ground to a halt. Harry could see the images from the *Daily Prophet* plastered up over the walls. There had been an excited chatter, which had now died away to nothing. Harry wasn't entirely comfortable with the silence, and he had no idea what Katie was thinking. He felt the blood run to his face as the room stood motionless. Time seemed to stop in the sea of stares. Then amidst the silence, a single clap rang out over the still room. Then another, then another, and then more and more as the rest of the Gryffindors broke the spell of silence and joined in with the thunderous applause. Harry and Katie stood surrounded by all of Gryffindor House who were madly cheering, and Harry for one had no idea how to react.

Harry glanced at Katie, who was staring back with an expression what clearly said, *what do I do now?* Harry shrugged, at a loss himself.

"Katie!"

From the right Neville had emerged from the crowd, still looking fairly bruised but moving ably enough. As he approached, he threw his arms around Katie in a big hug. Harry began to wonder if there was something between Neville and Katie, though he wasn't sure. Anyhow, this was hardly the place...

*...Let her go already, Neville,* thought Harry impatiently after a minute of watching them hug. After all, they had a job to do and he was holding them up, right?

"Thank Merlin you're okay," Neville gasped as he hugged Katie.

"Glad to see you walking around," she replied with a grin.

"You were worried?"

Harry hated the hopefulness in his friend's voice. For some reason he found it extremely irritating.

"Of course," Katie answered, not moving out of his embrace. Harry wanted to wrench them apart and remind her she had a mission to prepare for until she added, "I was worried sick about all of you, Nev. You're my best friends."

Harry didn't miss the disappointment on Neville's face as he released her and stepped towards him.

"Harry," he greeted him coolly but in a friendly way, extending a hand which Harry accepted, gripping it tightly.

"How are you doing, mate?" Harry asked, relieved to see him unharmed.

"We'll all live," replied Neville nonchalantly. "Largely thanks to the two of you. Ginny and Hermione are being kept over for another night, Luna's free, and Ron is helping himself to the kitchens."

It seemed that Neville had broken the ice. The rest of the Gryffindors took his example as a cue and advanced to shake hands, clap them on the back, congratulate them, and bombard them with questions. Harry ignored the questions and glanced at his watch. Under any normal circumstances he would have liked to have spent time with the Gryffindors, but time was the one thing they didn't have at the moment...aside from the elusive Horcrux.

"Katie!" said Harry, loud and forcefully enough for the others to halt. Harry tapped his watch. "Tempus fugit."

She nodded, almost looking relieved.

"Sorry guys," she said to the room at large. "We've got to get going."

"Go where?" asked a voice. "You just got back."

Harry opened his mouth to tell the speaker to mind their own business, but Katie got there first and was more diplomatic in her response.

"The Ministry," she answered quickly. "They want to ask us a few questions, whatever that means. Typical Fudge, eh? Interrogate the good guys and do nothing about the bad guys." A

glimmer of laughter went around the room as she spoke. "Now, if you'll excuse us, we have to change."

She glanced over at Harry, who could only nod back. He had to admit that she had done a much better job of crowd control than he ever would have, and he was impressed though he tried not to show it.

Harry followed Katie through the gathered crowd and then made his way quickly up to his own dormitory, not missing the fact that the whispering started the second he had started climbing the stairs. He would face more questions later, but for now, at least, he was alone. He removed his cloak and threw it unceremoniously over the bed. His black boots, trousers, and jumper were acceptable for the Muggle world, but it would be cold in France in February. To compensate for this, he picked up Riddle's coat, which he had yet to return, and slid his arms into the sleeves. Using his wand, he cleared the blood from the collar where his neck had bled last night. He also magically shrank the coat so that it no longer dwarfed him. Riddle was a good eight inches taller than Harry with broader shoulders, and the coat showed it. Once it was smaller it only came down to the back of his knees, and his hands were visible at the end of the sleeves. Harry did not fasten it up at the front so that he could easily access his wand in case he needed it.

As a precaution, he removed his primary wand from his belt loops and tucked it up his left sleeve. He then put his spare in the holster and attached it to his hip, ready to be used. He dug out the concealer he had borrowed from Romilda Vane and once again covered his scar. That done he removed his false glasses from his trunk and transfigured them. Placing his new sunglasses on his nose, he glanced in the mirror.

*That'll do*, he thought. Not enough to hide him, but he shouldn't stick out too much. He looked...presentable, though at the same time dark, mysterious and quite cool in his opinion. *Since when have I cared about that?* He wondered as he descended the stairs back to the Common Room.

Katie was already there. She was wearing jeans with white trainers and a short black jacket over the top of a dark blue jumper and had tied her hair back into a single pony-tail. She was also wearing a pair of black sunglasses, just like Harry, having taken his advice.

"Isn't that Riddle's coat?" asked Katie, as he arrived.

"Borrowed without permission," said Harry with a shrug, "but it's warm."

"Quite the pair you make," cooed a voice behind them.

Hiding a glimmer of frustration, Harry turned to Romilda Vane who had spoken, managing to keep his poker face as he examined the look in her eyes – which for him spelt trouble.

"I don't think so," he said flatly.

"Definitely not," said Katie, looking at Harry critically. Their eyes met for a second, and Harry was fairly sure that she was rolling hers behind her glasses.

"Really..." said Romilda looking thoughtful. She stared at Harry for a second, then after a quick glance at Katie, turned and glided away

"Shall we?" asked Katie, gesturing for the door. Harry was grateful to be leaving and didn't hesitate to slip outside into the corridor. He breathed a sigh of relief as the chatter fell away behind him.

"Looks like you've got a not-so-secret admirer," laughed Katie as she drew level with him.

"I believe the appropriate response is 'Bugger!'," said Harry coldly.

"Really," asked Katie, in mock sincerity. "Why ever not?"

"Not only is she the shallowest person I have ever met," he explained. "But she is, essentially, an oxygen thief."

Katie snorted in laughter as they walked. "Well, I think you'd look cute together."

"Don't make me slap you," said Harry, shaking his head in exasperation. On the other hand, Harry was relieved that she was smiling at last. It may just be her way of coping, but at least in teasing him she was trying to take her mind off Sirius. Harry thought her teasing was a huge step forward.

They arrived back in Riddle's office ten minutes later to find Riddle searching through a chest of drawers in the office.

"I have spoken to the French Ministry of Magic," he announced as they entered, though he didn't look up, "and they are letting us tag along on this reconnaissance mission, but it is their operation. Naturally I didn't give them specifics, but I did allude to the fact that Grindelwald or his Death Eaters might attempt something inside the palace, and that there was a good possibility he might show up in person on the premises today. They seemed reluctant to believe me at first, but news of what happened last night has spread and they aren't willing to take chances. However, they were most adamant that we are there as guests, simply as a courtesy for tipping them off to this potential threat. We are to meet palace authorities and the French Aurors at Versailles, and I have transportation meeting us just outside the palace in five minutes."

"What are you looking for?" asked Katie impatiently when he continued to rummage through his belongings.

"A modified Secrecy Sensor," replied Riddle in a muffled voice. "It might help us to find....ah!"

He pulled what looked like a tuning fork out of the drawer, examined it for a moment, and then slid it in his pocket.

"Right," he said, "you will also need these." He opened a package which had been sitting on the table when they arrived. Out of it he pulled a small black box, which was connected via a wire to an earphone with a microphone attached. "Clip the box onto your belt or trousers, run the wire up your jumper and adjust like so," Riddle demonstrated.

Harry and Katie took one each out of the box and followed the headmaster's example.

"Press here to speak," Riddle showed them, "release and the connection is broken. They don't work inside Hogwarts as there is too much magic, so we shall test them en route. Now, let's sort a Portkey to get up to the gate as fast as possible."

As Riddle was doing this, Harry crossed the room to where his weapons were stacked. The bloody clothes had been disposed of but the weapons remained. He picked up the sword and examined it, wondering if he should take it to Versailles.

"Of course," answered the Dark Knight. "*Be prepared. Power through strength of arms.*"

But was he likely to need it? Probably not, but something told him he should bring it. It felt almost comfortable in his hands, much like his wand had all those years ago as he stood in Ollivander's shop.

"Impressive sword you have there," said Riddle, watching him closely. His words were enough to bring Harry out of his thoughts. "Quite advanced magic."

"Really?" asked Harry mildly surprised, drawing it out of its sheath and looking for evidence of what Riddle was saying. "I just thought it was a normal sword."

"Well," said Riddle. "It seems to be self cleaning, there are no scratches or kinks in it that I can see from here, and I myself was not able to remove it from the scabbard. If I had to guess, I would say that there are protective and strengthening spells on it. I doubt it will ever become blunt, and you are probably the only one who can wield it, or one with your permission, perhaps."

"Ah," breathed Harry. "Understandable."

The Dark Knight wouldn't want a broken sword. Harry had also batted away minor curses with it, he seemed to remember. Yes, it made sense that it was magical. Chalk another bit of genius up to the Dark Knight. Harry was suddenly quite glad to have it himself, and decided it would be best to have it in France.

"But what I really wanted to ask about," continued Riddle, "was about the other weapon."

"This?" asked Harry, putting the sword down and picking up the Stun Baton. Riddle was watching him intently as he held it up to the light. "It's derived from a Stun Baton which the Aurors used on another world," explained Harry. "They can store a Stunning Curse so it can be used as a sword, a close quarter weapon that is safer than a wand. However, my other self modified it to hold any curse, including Unforgivables."

"Really?" said Riddle, raising an eyebrow. He seemed unnervingly interested in it all of a sudden, and Harry felt it best to change the subject.

"Don't bother," replied Harry with an innocent smile. "I don't know how, and even if I did I wouldn't tell Lord Voldemort."

Riddle grimaced at the name, but didn't press him.

"Bring that then, if you must," said Riddle, "but leave the sword behind. You won't need it."

"But..." protested Harry, adamant Riddle was wrong.

"Trust me," replied Riddle. "You won't need it. Stunning will be enough if we run into trouble."

Harry resisted the urge to say that trusting him was a tall order. Reluctantly, he left the sword in place and tucked the Baton inside his coat. However, there was one more addition to his armoury that they would need.

"Katie," said Harry, picking up his dragon-scale armour. "You might want to put this on."

Harry threw it across to her and she caught it easily and held it up to examine it.

"I don't think it will fit," she said, throwing it back to him.

He caught it easily, slightly perturbed. She should be grateful he was giving up this valuable piece of weaponry for her benefit. Girls and their vanity. She probably didn't think it would match her outfit.

"You aren't that much smaller than me," he reasoned trying to reign in his temper, "and your jacket will cover it."

"No, Harry," said Katie awkwardly, "it won't *fit* me."

"Am I missing something?" asked Harry.

"Er...yes!" said Katie appearing unusually uncomfortable and fidgety. "It won't fit me. It's a bit..." she gestured with her hands.

"What?"

"Flat!" she said at last.

"Eh?" said Harry, then he suddenly realised what she meant. "Oh!" he stammered, blushing slightly. "Fair point."

Yes, it hadn't been designed for a girl and was not...curved in the right places. Since the armour deflected almost all magic including shrinking and transfiguration charms, how could he mould it to her body? Harry was suddenly aware that while considering this, he had been staring at those particular curves and quickly averted his eyes. If Katie had noticed she didn't comment, but was blushing as well.

Harry placed the armour back on the pile.

Riddle seemed to sense the tension and made a show of picking up a jacket from over the back of his chair. Putting it on, he began to button it up at the front, such that it appeared almost like a cassock. He also produced from the drawer a pair of sunglasses, presumably to blend in with Harry and Katie.

"Let's go," he said, holding up a small tea-cup. "*Portus!*"

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*Magnificent.* There was no other word for the sight that lay before them.

Standing in le Grand Appartement du Roi, the great chamber of the king, deep in the heart of Versailles, Margaret was left speechless. Le Grand Appartement was the collective name for the kings chambers, which originally consisted of seven room names after the then known planets, explained the guide book.

*Who needs seven bedrooms?* wondered Maggie as she gazed around in awe at the lavish décor. According to the leaflet in her hand, centuries ago the *salons* de Jupiter, Saturn and Mars, as well as a terrace linking the king and queen's Apparentments, had been altered to make room for what was now the Hall of Mirrors. Maggie made a mental note to have a look through there after this room. That was if she ever found that grandson of hers.

"I could do with one of those," came a voice from behind her. Maggie smiled as Barbara returned. "It would look great in the spare room."

She was referring to the huge bed along the far wall, with exquisite curtains draped around it. The bedposts were ornately carved and there was gold filigree worked into the curtains that surrounded the bed, proudly displaying the royal crest.

*The artistry on the carving must have taken ages and the patience of a saint,* Maggie observed.

*Flash!*

"Some people!" muttered Babs in frustration. Maggie turned to see a rather round young man in shorts, a red polo-shirt, and a baseball cap holding a camera up to his eye. A mere few feet away from was a sign with the phrase "No Flash Photography" translated into seven languages. Maggie, too, suppressed a glimmer of frustration at the young tourist. The artwork would fade with too much light exposure, and continual flash photography would do just that. Did young people not realise that if they didn't stop doing foolish things, then future generations would have nothing to look back on? Maybe it was a sign of age, but Maggie thought things like this palace was a key part of history, and the young needed to appreciate it while they still had it.

Maggie was glad when a man in a suit wearing a name-badge appeared from amongst the crowd of tourists and directed the man's attention to the sign. The tourist merely shrugged and moved on.

"Where's Jeremy got to?" asked Babs, looking around the mass of bodies, searching for her companion's grandson.

"No idea," replied Maggie in annoyance. "He knows not to wander off."

"Nan," came a sudden voice as Maggie felt someone give the sleeve of her coat a sharp tug. She looked down to see the missing twelve-year old standing beside her once more. He was wearing baggy jeans with a rip across the left knee, which in Maggie's eyes meant that they needed to be put in the bin, but according to Jeremy, it was 'the fashion'. They were frayed at the bottom where they extended under his shoes. He also wore a black t-shirt bearing a pentagram with 'Slayer' written across the front in what she assumed was meant to look like blood. He topped it with a black woolly hat. Maggie really wished he would smarten up when they went out, especially on holidays.

"Can we move on?" he continued impatiently as soon as he had gotten his nana's attention.

Maggie sighed. Jeremy was one of the millions of young people whose only concern was his video game system. Maggie failed to see how he could stand in a room of such splendour, in a building with such history, and be completely unimpressed. He was standing in the room of the king, in a palace that had survived since the mid sixteen hundreds, the place where the treaty that ended World War One had been signed, and all he saw was "old stuff". That wasn't to say Maggie disliked her grandson, but she took it as times changing that a boy could spend so much time in front of the television – a commodity that, while Maggie and Babs had succeeded in growing up without it, the thought of not having one came under the heading of torture in Jeremy's books. It was a point of frustration for Maggie that her daughter's family no longer did what Maggie considered to be family things. They never sat down to a meal as a family, played games together, or had any family time whatsoever. Everyone was always so busy. It only served to make Maggie feel older.

In absence of a reply, Jeremy had already begun to guide Maggie towards the door which led through the Hall of Mirrors.

"Pardonez-moi," he said loudly as he guided her towards the door. "Come on, Frenchy, out the way."

"Jeremy!" Maggie scolded him, as she was drawn through the crowd. She shot an apologetic look at Babs who seemed more than content to spend more time looking around the king's chambers. Babs sighed and reluctantly followed her friend towards the exit. They had almost reached the door when a shrill siren sounded in their ears.

"Ahh!" Maggie gasped in surprise as her ears began to reverberate, assaulted by the wailing alarm.

"Mesdames et Messieurs," called the attendant over the alarm. "Votre attention s'il vous plaît. Un feu s'est déclaré dans le château! veuillez rester le calme et quitter par les sorties les plus proches, merci."

Maggie's French was not brilliant, but she knew 'feu' meant fire, so it was fairly obvious what was going on. The attendant began to shepherd people towards the emergency exit as the siren

continued to fill their ears. Jeremy had already clamped his hands over his own in an effort to block out the noise.

Babs, Maggie, and Jeremy moved with the crowd as they headed out of the king's chambers, down the stairs, and then into the courtyard outside. Looking around, Maggie could see people pouring out of numerous exits, filling up the courtyard quickly. The gates at the far end had been opened, and the crowd had begun to spill out into the magnificent gardens.

It was nearly ten minutes before the lines of people leaving the building subsided and the palace was clear of people. All around them people were speaking in angry and bitter voices in a multitude of languages. Maggie shivered in the February air and pulled her coat tighter around her. She quickly checked that the other two were close by, hoping it wasn't a real fire. It would be such a shame if all that history did go up in flames!

Suddenly a horn sounded to their left. As Maggie turned she saw a large black Land Rover make its way slowly through the crowd, tooting its horn to disperse the crowd in its way as it headed towards the steps down which they had exited.

"They aren't fire fighters," said Jeremy, staring at the Land Rover.

"Pardon?" said Maggie.

"They are not firemen," Jeremy repeated, looking thoughtful. "They don't even look like coppers."

Maggie didn't disbelieve him. All his time spent playing various games that involved shooting someone had given him an interest to join the services. Although it changed weekly which branch – from army, to marines, to SAS, to police, to MI5 – Maggie had to admit her grandson knew his stuff. Hours spent on the Internet looking at careers in all these areas, and he was only twelve. He frequently came out with a random fact about one service or another.

As the Land Rover came to a halt by the steps, the doors opened. Out of the front stepped a tall man with long black hair that flowed over his shoulders. He wore a long black coat, which was fastened down the middle not unlike a cassock, and wore dark glasses, presumably to conceal his face. From the door behind him stepped a much younger woman, who appeared to Maggie's eyes no more than twenty at the most. She had hay-coloured hair tied back and also wore dark glasses to conceal her face. With her hair pulled back, Maggie could see something silver in her ear like a head-phone that stretch down towards her mouth. She was wearing jeans and a short black jacket. Maggie could see what Jeremy had meant. These were clearly not firemen, and were dressed too casually for anything else. She had to admit the boy had keen eyes.

From the far side of the vehicle a third person emerged. He looked to be around the same age of the girl, give or take, and wore all black, from his trousers to the black jacket that came down to his knees and the glasses he wore to match the other two. Maggie could also see the ear-phone in his ear, just like the girl.

"DGSE," said Jeremy, firmly.

Again Maggie shrugged, perplexed.

"French secret service," her grandson elaborated for her benefit as the three newcomers shut the doors and stood at the base of the steps. "I saw them in a film, once. Whatever is going on in there, it's not a fire."

The three new arrivals stood at the bottom of the steps looking up at the mighty palace before them. As the boy and girl began to climb the older man stood motionless, staring up at the door. He paused for a few seconds before bowing his head.

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Tom Riddle stood at the base of the steps looking up at the walls of Versailles. Anyone else would be taking in the gorgeous architecture of the building and appreciating the art of its construction, but not Tom. As he stood before one of the most beautiful buildings ever built, his mind could only think of one thing: that last time he had stood here.

*Lord Voldemort felt the crushing darkness of Apparation leave him as he landed gently on his feet in the bright sunshine. He stood in the middle of the courtyard of Versailles, the ornate exterior walls of the palace surrounding him, and the splendour of the palace towering up before him. As he glanced back through the gate behind him he could see the magnificent gardens stretched out like an ocean of green, but they were not important.*

*Voldemort turned his attention back to the palace.*

*Twenty metres from the double doors a hastily erected barrier was still being assembled, and behind it the French Aurors were cowering from the crashes that came from within the palace. Muggles were running screaming from the door at the top of the steps, shepherded by Aurors to the sides. Over to the left, Voldemort could see the British Minister of Magic and his French counterpart deep in frantic conversation as they struggled to gain control of the situation.*

**CRASH!**

*Suddenly a window a few floors above the door blew outwards raining shards of glass down to the courtyards and forcing the line of Aurors to duck. Voldemort gazed up at the window in wonder. In that room the two most powerful wizards of the time were fighting. Albus and Grindelwald – who would win? Did it matter? He, Lord Voldemort, would endure, but if either died, he would lose the chance to further his knowledge. He had to get in there.*

*The fight was symbolic of what was going on inside Voldemort's heart. He could feel the poor, lonely schoolboy inside himself, struggling, growing stronger. Tom Riddle.*

*'Get away from me, boy!' he snarled at the weakling. 'Lord Voldemort is in control.'*

*Voldemort ran forward towards the door feeling the weight of the locket around his neck. He had no need to be afraid, for he had taken measures to insure that he could not die. He was more powerful than Grindelwald, had greater knowledge of magic than either man inside. It was his*

*turn now! Voldemort forced his way through the melee, closer to the blockade, each step taking him closer to his prize. With every step, his excitement grew.*

*As he approached, he found a French Auror blocking his way.*

*"Non, monsieur," the Auror said, raising a hand to block his passage. "C'est fermé pour tout les monde!"*

*"RIDDLE!"*

*Voldemort turned to see the Minister of Magic striding towards him looking deeply flustered. He suppressed his anger at the use of the weakling's name, for he realised that to take any action was counter-productive. He had bigger problems. Instead, he adopted a cool and polite manner.*

*"Minister."*

*"What are you doing here?" snapped the Minister. "I warned you once. Stay away! We can deal with this!"*

*Voldemort felt a glimmer of anger at the petty man. He was caught up in a battle of the titans and utterly failing to keep up. Fool!*

*"I came for Albus," replied Voldemort, giving nothing away. "He's inside?"*

*CRASH!*

*As another window shattered the Minister ducked and covered his face. Voldemort stood unfazed as the minister straightened back up, glaring at him.*

*"He's in there alright," replied the Minister. "But we daren't go in after him."*

*"You daren't," Voldemort corrected him. "I do."*

*"I can't just let an untrained wizard as young as yourself just go strolling in there," replied the Minister.*

*Voldemort's eyebrows narrowed and he felt the anger rising inside him. The power that he could gain in that building would not be denied to him by a bureaucratic fool. He had no time for cowards!*

*CRASH!*

*Voldemort took his chance. As everyone ducked for cover, he pushed the Minister backwards and with a flick of his wand, launched the Auror into the air. Not waiting for a response, he turned and ran towards the blockade, jumped over the barrier, and sprinted up the steps three at a time, oblivious to the shouts of the French behind him.*

*Crashing through the doors into the palace, he hurtled up the stairs. At the landing he turned left, ignoring the priceless artwork all around him as he sped towards his goal. Voldemort didn't slow, blasting the doors ahead of him open and turning right into le Grand Appartement de Roi. He surged out the other side and along the terrace towards the sounds of explosions, bursting through the last set of double doors and arriving at last in the Hall of Mirrors where he ground to a halt.*

*The floor was covered in razors of shattered glass. The mirror frames were bare, their contents strewn over the floor, leaving only blank wall amongst the network of gold. The ornate candle stands, sculpted in solid gold, were mostly on their sides, and some were even in pieces. Most of the windows had been blown out and the painted ceiling was full of holes.*

*In front of him stood two men twenty feet apart. At the far end was Grindelwald, wearing long black robes which contrasted sharply with his straw coloured hair. His eyes were dark and his face thin, pointed and pulled back into a sneer. Nearer Voldemort stood Albus Dumbledore, robed in magenta with his greying auburn hair blowing in the breeze, coming in through the shattered window. Both of them were covered in small wounds, sweat and debris, but each looked fresh and ready for more. Both had stopped at the arrival of the newcomer. The question on both Grindelwald and Albus' minds was most likely the same: whom was he here to help?*

*The answer wasn't clear, even to him. Tom Riddle was here for his mentor, Albus Dumbledore, while Lord Voldemort was here for the power. Who was in control?*

*"TOM!" shouted Albus in a worried voice. "NO! RUN!"*

*Grindelwald moved quickly, sending up the shards of glass in a whirlwind of razors towards Dumbledore. With a flick of his wand the former headmaster sent Voldemort flying backwards out of the way. The golden frames of the mirrors came to life and wrapped themselves around Voldemort, holding him in place.*

*NO! Voldemort felt a surge of anger that Dumbledore didn't think him capable. No one dismissed Lord Voldemort like that! As the anger boiled in him, the golden metal shattered to pieces and Voldemort was free once more. He rose to his feet and ran forward, wand raised.*

*Maintaining the shield that was protecting him from the glass, Dumbledore again pushed Voldemort backwards, keeping him out of danger. Dumbledore thrust the shield forward, propelling the glass away from him, and before Grindelwald could react, jabbed his wand into the floor. The solid wooden floor seemed almost like liquid as a wave began to rise up out of the wood and swept towards Grindelwald. As the wave approached Grindelwald, the floor before him erupted with red sparks, and Voldemort once again found himself propelled back at the force of the explosion.*

*As the Dark Lord tumbled backwards, Albus stepped forward, pressing his advantage. With a swish, a double helix of orange light erupted from his wand with enough force to make Voldemort's hair stand on end. Grindelwald must have seen the spell coming because as he landed he continued to roll out of the way, leaving the curse to slam into the floor, erupting in a*

*geyser of debris. The Dark Lord returned to his feet amid the hailstorm of debris and shattered glass, standing unfazed amidst the carnage.*

*"You don't plan to kill me, old friend?" hissed the Dark Lord, advancing on the former headmaster. "Is it pity, weakness or do you still wish to save me?"*

*"I believe in second chances, you know that," replied Albus beginning to circle, his wand level.*

*"Except for Ariana," shot back Grindelwald.*

*The look on Dumbledore's face was terrifying, and for once Voldemort felt himself recoil. As Voldemort took a step back, Tom Riddle became stronger, fuelled by faith in his mentor. No! Lord Voldemort was stronger than a poor, scared little orphan! Get away from me, Tom Riddle! He looked back up to Dumbledore, who stared at Grindelwald with a look of rage Voldemort had never thought he'd ever see from his unflappable headmaster.*

*"There you crossed a line even I can never forgive," replied Dumbledore angrily*

*"But it took you two years to come for me?" snarled Grindelwald. "Why the wait, old friend? What made you run and hide in a school? Was it fear of seeing me again?"*

*Dumbledore didn't respond, but stood motionless staring at his opponent.*

*"Or perhaps," said Grindelwald, lowering his voice to a purr and stepping nearer. "It's because you are afraid to face yourself. You see, I have a theory: if I don't know who cast the curse that killed her, chances are you don't either. You see me as the villain, and have sat safely on your throne at Hogwarts, blaming me for her death. But what if it was you?"*

*"Whatever part we played in her death," said Albus, his voice like ice – a tone that made even Voldemort take caution, "we both shall have to pay for her life, starting with you today. But you shall not pay with your own life, Gellert. There are things worse than death!"*

*"YES!" shrieked Grindelwald victoriously. "There is the man I knew, there is that desire for revenge, to make me suffer! He still lives inside you! For all your high and mighty ways, Albus, you still feel the same darkness as everyone else. You were once a believer, just as I was!"*

*"I saw the error of my ways," replied Dumbledore, calmer once more, having been mellowed by the harsh words. "For their own good, old friend?"*

*"That was a long time ago," scoffed the Dark Lord.*

*Voldemort had no idea what they were on about, but he kept watching, hoping for any sort of information.*

*"I started out believing it," Grindelwald continued, "but then things escalated, and let us not forget we have your government to thank for that. I was happy to work behind the scenes, to control but to preserve, and all for their own good. Your government wanted me to kill, they wanted me to be what I am. They created the monster and now they want to kill me, because we*

*can't have monsters running loose, can we Albus? But answer me this, if you are so different, why did you come here as my judge, jury, and executioner? Why did you volunteer? Could it be that after all I've done, you still feel it in the pit of your stomach when you look at me, or do you just want to avenge Ariana? Tell me, old friend... for love or hate? "*

*"It doesn't have to be like this, Gellert," replied Albus after a pause. "No one has to die this evening."*

*"Die?" shrieked the Dark Lord, "I cannot die! I fear nothing!"*

*"Exactly, you fear the nothingness," replied Albus. "You fear the unknown beyond death. That is why you failed, Gellert, because you fear and hate what you do not understand. That is why you fear death. That is why you hate lo—."*

*"The same old argument," cursed Grindelwald, throwing his arms up in the air in anger. "Of all the time we spent together, always the same..."*

*"You felt it too," replied Albus. "You know of what I speak. A force more powerful, more terrifying, more horrible than any you could wield."*

*Voldemort's ears pricked up at the mention of this power. What was it that even the mighty Dark Lord could not wield?*

*"Love!" spat Grindelwald. "What are you going to do, kiss me to death?"*

*"I could have killed you the moment you stepped through those doors," replied Dumbledore. "You were protected by my capacity to love. I have turned from your path, by the ability to love Ariana. No, old friend... love is not a weapon, but I can guarantee that many years from now when you fall, when your reign of terror comes crashing down in one fell swoop, that it will not be some mighty warrior, nor a trained killer, but by an act of love by the most unlikely person imaginable."*

*Grindelwald paused for a second. "Very well, Albus," replied Grindelwald. "Let us put your theory to the test." Extending his arm to the side, he pointed his wand at the floor. A large jagged spear of glass rose up from the floor, hovering a few feet above the ground. "Let us see if your famous love can save your young friend."*

*Before Voldemort could react, Grindelwald flicked his wrist. The blade of glass caught the fading sun that shone in through the shattered windows as it surged towards Voldemort. It seemed to happen in slow motion as the blade inched closer to his throat, Tom Riddle's limbs seemed to freeze in panic. His life began to flash before his eyes. The orphanage, Dumbledore's visit when he had saved Tom and brought him to where he belonged... He saw his classes, Myrtle, the chamber, the diary, the Horcrux he'd made that currently swung around his neck, and tea with Albus.*

*"Oi!" snapped a voice. "Are you coming or not?"*

Tom raised his head as the sharp call broke him out of his stupor. Looking up at the stairs in front of him, Harry Potter stood waiting impatiently. The boy reminded him strongly of another young man who had walked this path once before, and that thought scared him senseless. Which course would Harry choose in the end? Knowing that was a question better left for another day, Tom sighed and began to climb the steps he hadn't seen in over fifty years.

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Katie paused at the top of the stairs a few feet in front of the door, not wanting to go in alone. She had no idea what was beyond these doors, but she had a feeling that it would not be pleasant. Harry was a pace or two behind her. He had stopped to wait for Riddle, who Katie saw was standing at the bottom of the steps looking up at the building with a vague pained expression on his face.

Katie had no idea what this Dumbledore was like. She had heard the name, she had come across the Frog Card, but she didn't know him like her companions had. Judging by Riddle and Harry's attitudes, he must have been something special. This was where he had died, and it seemed from the conversation last night that Riddle had been there when it happened. She could only imagine how he was feeling. Harry, as always, was hiding any emotion. The soldier was in charge now, Katie realised with a grimace. His eyes were cold and his posture tense and alert. There was no point trying to ask him about Dumbledore in this state.

"Oi!" snapped Harry suddenly, his eyes trained on Riddle who seemed to be lost in memory. "Are you coming or not?"

Katie thought his voice was unnecessarily harsh. Whatever had happened here had obviously affected the headmaster a great deal and Harry, as usual, was not giving Riddle an inch. He was being a complete prat.

The shout, however, had the desired effect and awoke Riddle from his daydream. After a brief pause he followed them up the steps. Katie waited until he had passed and then followed him through the door. Harry waited until they were both inside and brought up the rear, like he was covering their backs. Yes, he was in full soldier mode all right.

The first thing Katie noticed was the high-pitched wail of the fire alarm. Grimacing, she took the opportunity to look around. They stood at the bottom of a small yet ornate staircase, which served as a fire exit. The banister was made of polished steel topped with ornately carved gold. The walls were a pale blue with gold and white borders. Lamps made of gold and silver hung on the walls, casting a bright light up the steps and above them, an ornate wavy pattern embossed into the ceiling. Katie didn't know for sure, but she suspected that it had been restored to how it had been in Louis Quatorze's day. The only thing in the room that was modern was the green emergency exit light above the door.

Two men were already coming down the stairs towards them. One was clearly a Muggle and wore a sharp grey suit, while the other wore navy blue robes. If Katie had to guess, that was the uniform of the French Aurors. As they reached the foot of the stairs the wailing siren stopped. That was better, though her ears were still ringing.

"Monsieur Ree-del," greeted the Auror in English. "Bienvenue au Versailles. I am Monsieur Gerard DuPont of ze French Ministry of Magic."

Riddle took the proffered hand and shook it.

"And zis," continued DuPont, "Is Monsieur Calvet, ze head of security 'ere. 'E iz fully aware of ze situation, and he does speak Engleesh."

"So what have you done, aside from empty the palace and let everyone in France know we're here?" asked Harry suddenly. His face was set in stone and behind his sunglasses, Katie could tell his eyes were fixed on DuPont. Katie really hoped he didn't anger the Frenchmen too much. As she watched Harry, she couldn't help but wonder if deep inside there was still the little boy trying to get out. Was the Harry she had always known a prisoner in there, somewhere? She scarcely recognised the boy who stood before her.

"And who are you?" asked DuPont coldly in Harry's direction.

"This is Mr Harry Potter, and this is Miss Kathryn Bell," Riddle said introducing them.

"But they are..." Calvet hesitated and turned to Dupont. "Comment dit-on "élève", en anglais?"

"Students," replied Dupont.

"Oui," said Calvet turning back to Riddle. "Zey are just students, n'est pas?"

"They have experience and personal ties to this case," replied Riddle conversationally. "Trust me when I say we are better off with them. Now, please, tell us what you have done so far."

Riddle was playing the diplomat, Katie realised, and Harry the soldier. Katie wasn't entirely sure what her role was here so she watched the proceedings impartially.

Calvet paused and then took a deep breath. "We 'ave evacuated ze palace," he began. "We 'ave a state of ze art security system and cameras in every room, all controlled by ze security hub. My men are currently sweeping ze east wing, making sure zat it iz clear. You can relax monsieur, we are in control."

"I wouldn't be too sure," said Harry coldly, looking around. "This man can deactivate security systems easily. He can be invisible, slip in and out without you noticing, leaving nothing but dead bodies behind him. Your electronics won't help you. Trust me when I say, this man is a ghost, and if he is here there is no such thing as safe."

"Let us not forget, Monsieur Potter," interrupted DuPont, "We 'ave Aurors with them. All basez are covaired."

"Grindelwald..." Harry paused and grimaced as the Auror hissed at the name, "...has evaded every law enforcement agency since the second world war. I somehow doubt a small security force can stop him." Harry shot a quick glance at Katie before muttering quietly to himself, "Let alone a French one."

Katie could see that he was holding back his true opinion in light of what she had said. This so called Dark Knight was heeding her warning. Perhaps there was hope that she could get through to this monster. On the other side both Frenchmen were glaring at Harry, having picked up on what he was suggesting.

"Zese men are ze best in France," said DuPont stepping up to Harry.

Again Katie saw him look to her before answering. He seemed to hesitate for a second before backing down. Yes, the Dark Knight was definitely consulting her before he commented.

"I hope you're right," he said slowly. "For their sakes."

DuPont looked at him coldly for another few seconds before stepping back.

"Right," Harry said placidly. "First things first. I want to see this security hub, and complete plans of the wing in question. Katie, Professor, get up to the Hall of Mirrors and see if you can find anything. I'll watch your backs on camera."

"So you are in charge now, eh?" asked Calvet, raising an eyebrow in amusement.

"Until I meet someone who knows what they are doing, yes," said Harry flatly.

"As I said," Riddle remarked in a diplomatic voice, "Mr Potter has experience with this case, as you might imagine if you stay current with world news." He was, of course, referring to last night's events and it had the desired effect.

Calvet looked from Harry to Riddle and back again before nodding stiffly. "'Very well... for now."

"Then let's go," replied Harry, stepping past DuPont.

"Not so fast," DuPont called. "One of my men ez coming wiz you to la Galarie to make sure you don't do anyzing stupid."

Harry didn't visibly react as far as Katie could see, but she could tell he was not impressed. However, he didn't object. As Calvet spoke into the radio, there came the sound of footsteps from above. DuPont began to lead them all up the steps and, as they arrived in what was probably the most magnificent bedroom Katie had ever seen, another man in Auror robes appeared behind them. Katie would have liked to have a look around, but there was no time for that.

"This is Touille," DuPont introduced him. "He ez one of our most experienced Aurors."

Again Harry glanced at Katie, and she had a feeling he had bitten back another comment. Both Harry and Katie stared appraisingly at Mister Touille. The man was tall with fair hair and was built like a tank. He had a thick moustache and large nose over which his grey eyes stared coldly down at Katie. She stared defiantly back at him.

"Allez à la Galerie des Glaces avec monsieur Riddle et la fille, s'il vous plaît," said DuPont to the newly arrived Auror.

"La fille?" asked the Auror. Katie's limited French made the meaning perfectly clear, and she felt a wave of anger at the patronising git. "Mais, s'il y a *lui*...une petite fille?"

"Who are you calling a little girl?" she asked indignantly, glaring at Touille. It was clear from the shocked expressions that they hadn't expected her to understand. They both regarded her cautiously for a few seconds. Katie got the impression there was more to it than met the eye, but before she could work it out Touille spoke again.

"I mean no offence, Mademoiselle," said the Auror in English. "But if He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is really coming, then better a team of Aurors with experience, n'est pas?"

"Experience?" pressed Katie, stepping closer. "You have experience fighting Grindelwald?"

"Of combat," corrected the Auror uncomfortably, flinching at the name.

"Coming from the French that is laughable," said Harry loudly, apparently unable to contain himself any longer. The three Frenchmen turned to him instantly, their faces hostile.

"Harry!" said Katie in a warning voice.

"He's the one who called you a little girl," he reminded her. She sent him a look that meant back off and thankfully he did, leaving Katie to fight her own battle. Although in all honesty he didn't seem happy about it.

"Exactly how much combat experience have you had?" asked Katie coldly, glaring at him.

"Grindelwald, whose name you can't even bear to hear or say, hasn't been to these shores for nearly half a century. In case you didn't know, I've survived his killing curse, and I've fought him more than once during my years at Hogwarts. I'm still standing here. If anyone needs to wake up and smell the coffee it's you, *n'est pas?*" she added icily.

"D'accord," nodded DuPont, who had stood passively to the side during this exchange. "Touille, go wiz zem."

Still scowling at Harry, Touille turned angrily and gestured to Katie and Riddle to follow him.

"See in you in a bit," she said to Harry as she and Riddle set off after Touille, leaving him with DuPont and Calvet. Hopefully he would behave himself.

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"Zis way," said Calvet to Harry, his tone much colder than it had been.

Harry ignored the tone, not really caring what the Frenchman thought of him. He had little faith in English Aurors, so the French were hardly likely to fare better in his eyes.

Calvet turned sharply on his heel with a precision that to Harry appeared military. He strode off out of the door to the left and into a grand hallway. As he walked, his head was held high, his chest out and shoulders back. His keen eyes continued to scour the passage ahead. The longer they walked, the more certain Harry was the Calvet was ex-military.

For several minutes they walked along the endless halls adorned by works of art and such extravagant architecture that Harry had trouble keeping his mind on the task in hand. The palace was huge, not only in the number of rooms and acres, but on every scale. Ceilings were twenty feet high at least, windows were always huge, nothing was done on a small or cheap scale. Everything just emphasised wealth and power. Freud would have a lot to say about it, but then again it was so sublime, so artistic and ornate at the same time... It was definitely a palace fit for a king.

It occurred to Harry half way round that a king living here must get quite lonely. All this space just for him? Harry's footsteps echoed around the rooms as he passed, making the rooms feel cavernous, and himself feel so small. To live here permanently in this vast building must have been...impossible for him to comprehend. Growing up in a cupboard, he was used to just enough to survive, used to everything having a purpose. But having one hundred rooms that he could probably never even visit just seemed pointless. Still, that was the rich for you – more money than sense.

With Harry's mind still on the art, and it occurred to him that that was something that did not happen often, they arrived outside a set of double doors. Next to it, in complete contrast to the décor, was a small silver box with a red light on it through which Calvet swiped a card. There was a buzz and the door clicked open. Calvet held the door open and ushered DuPont and Harry inside.

"This is the surveillance hub," announced Calvet as he closed the door.

The room was about ten feet squared, and all along the far wall were lots of screens feeding from the cameras all over the building. They were controlled by the machinery beneath them that was being worked by a man in a pale blue shirt with his sleeves rolled up. He had straggly ash coloured hair and thick glasses. There were also several computers along another wall and a coffee machine in the corner. Two other men were in the room aside from the Muggle, and both were dressed as Aurors.

"Merci, Anton," said Calvet. The Muggle at the computer look up, grimaced, and then left without a word.

On the table to the left was a blueprint rolled out and the corners pegged down by four pots of different coffees. Harry didn't bother with introductions and crossed to the blueprint, examining it carefully.

DuPont stood next to him and pointed.

"'Zis is la Galerie du Glaces," he said, pointing to the blueprint. "We 'av cleared zis entire wing across all floors. Ze public are still visiting in zese areas 'ere, but zey are on ze ozer side of ze

châteaux. Entrances from zis area are ‘ere, ‘ere, ‘ere and ‘ere, and are all being guarded. External entrances ‘ere and ‘ere are being guarded along wiz zese fire exits. Nozing gets in or out wizout my say–so."

Harry took a minute to assimilate the information and try to create a 3D image of the room in his mind. It was not lost on him that his trail of thought was not 'how can I protect this' but rather, 'if I were to break in, how would I do it' – it was a bothersome reminder of the Dark Knight's influence.

"Apparation and Portkeys?" asked Harry bluntly, his eyes scouring the paper.

"Covaired by wards," replied DuPont. "C'est impossible."

"What about top and bottom?" asked Harry. "The roof, and from underground?"

"As part of ze anti–theft system," interrupted Calvet, "we 'ave seismic sensors underground to detect any tremors, and motion sensors on ze roof."

"Ze roof ez also covered by ze same wards," replied DuPont. "Zey are covaired on all six sides."

"Good," said Harry. "Advise your men to call in the slightest thing. They don't get creative – they call for help. If they investigate alone, they will end up dead, okay?"

"I will pass on ze message," said DuPont, nodding.

Harry glanced over the blueprint one more time. The palace did seem to be covered, but Harry couldn't help but wonder if this was all wrong. What if it wasn't even here? There were a million places it could be, and all they were betting on was Riddle's best guess. Admittedly, as far as Dark Lord's go, it takes one to know one, but Riddle was far from certain. Harry just hoped his shaky trust in the man was justified.

"Right, let's have a look at your security cameras," he said, pushing the doubts aside.

"Oui, Monsieur," said Calvet, approaching the screens. "Since you know what it iz we are looking for, take a seat s'il vous plaît."

Harry did as he was told, slipping into the spinning chair in front of the desk. Thirty small screens were in front of him, and a large one in the centre.

"You can change ze cameras 'ere," explained Calvet, pointing to a set of buttons, "and move ze cameras zemselves by zis." He pointed to a joystick.

Harry reached forward and began to flip through the cameras, but all he saw was more grand rooms, now completely deserted. He changed cameras again and saw the courtyard, still full of Muggles now being shepherded away by the police. There were numerous cars present with flashing blue lights on the top. At least Harry thought they were blue, as the screen was black and white. He changed several more times before he saw movement on the camera.

Touille was walking along a corridor. Katie and Riddle followed him.

"You can zoom with zis," Calvet told him.

Harry reached up and pressed the button on the radio in his ear. "Okay, I'm in the hub. I've got you on camera."

On screen, Riddle reached up and touched his earpiece. "Thank you, Harry. All secure?"

Harry decided not to voice his doubts, more for Katie's sake than his. "All locked up," he replied. "All is quiet on the Western Front."

"Let us know if there is anything up ahead," came Riddle's voice, and then he was gone.

Harry watched them on the screen as they continued to follow Touille along the passage. There was something about Touille that Harry deeply disliked.

"Can I get sound?" he asked, suddenly wanting to listen. The silence of the camera was unnerving. Calvet pressed another button and handed Harry a headset. "Thanks," said Harry as Katie's words began to emanate from the headset.

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Touille was ten metres ahead of them as they walked along the huge hallways, his footsteps echoing off the polished wood. The man seemed to want to march ahead, and as fast as they walked the Auror still seemed to be far ahead. As they walked, Katie couldn't help but wonder if something was waiting for them. She tried to put the thought out of her mind, but she couldn't escape the nagging doubt.

"What if he's already been there?" she wondered aloud. "What if he came here last night and took it?"

"All is possible," replied Riddle as they walked.

Katie would rather Riddle reassured her that it would be all right. If Grindelwald had gotten away he could rise again, even if Katie somehow managed to kill him. He would be invincible.

"If he has, we're screwed," said Katie. "And he can return any time he dies."

"Best put that thought out of your mind," advised Riddle as they turned a corner. "Don't dwell on what-ifs, Kathryn. Play the hand that is dealt to you."

"That's pretty much what Harry said," replied Katie, noting the choice of words. Either Harry and Riddle had been chatting, which was unlikely given Harry's dislike of the man, or they were both singing from the Albus Dumbledore hymn sheet. "It's actually one of the few things we agree on," added Katie.

"You don't like him very much, do you?" asked Riddle, staring down at her. Katie was slightly taken aback by the directness of the question.

"I don't *dislike* him," answered Katie carefully, before remembering the ear-piece. "He can't hear me, can he?" she added in a horrified whisper.

"Not unless you press the transmit button on your earpiece," replied Riddle shaking his head. "No."

"Like I said, I don't dislike him," began Katie honestly. "I just...don't know where I stand with him. One second I am talking to a friend who is trying to help, joking, being nice and supportive, and the next I am talking to a soldier who wants me to grow up and fight. I mean, I know he is trying to help, I know he is on our side, but I just don't feel safe around him. It's like talking to Jekyll and Hyde."

Riddle did not reply immediately, but continued walking. Katie didn't know whether Riddle would try to tell her to stay away from him or to try to vindicate Harry. The Headmaster paused for what seemed like an eternity before speaking.

"Harry is in a unique situation," he began slowly. "He has all these skills, ones he did not acquire himself. He is haunted by a horrific past and this is all he knows. He means us no harm. That is to say, he means *you* no harm. However, he has his own way of doing things, which as you can see at the moment is all about fighting. He does not know any other way."

"But there is another way?" asked Katie hopefully.

"I want to believe there is," answered Riddle. He appeared to be sincere, but it was not the encouraging answer Katie had been looking for. Riddle seemed to sense her disappointment and smiled down at her. "Albus was adamant there was one."

"Did he say what it was?" asked Katie, though she knew better than to hope for a 'yes'.

"No," replied Riddle, with a small smile. "It was from him I inherited my habit of speaking in riddles, and he was a lot better at it than I. Half the time, I didn't know what he was talking about or whether to take him seriously. He always said it was love, but at the time I couldn't understand it."

"And you do now?" asked Katie.

"I'm afraid not," said Riddle to Katie's disappointment. "Albus told me that when Grindelwald fell it would not be some great warrior, but through an act of love. I had no idea what he meant, and I just assumed that some great witch or wizard would have the ability to use love and magic together, like an anti Avada-Kedavra curse. I even spent considerable time researching it, though I knew that I, myself, with my past could never manage it. So, I watched at Hogwarts for some inherently good person who might be able use love this way. Oddly enough, I actually considered your mother and godmother to be potentials. Unfortunately, I was right on both

counts, and both gave their lives for the children whom they love. Anyhow, can you see the flaw in the theory?"

"Not really," said Katie. "Aside from that it is impossible."

"Exactly," said Riddle. "I hear people saying that it should be possible to have an inverse-killing curse, but it isn't. I have come to realise that you can't use love as a weapon, because a weapon by definition is not used to love or forgive. Love is more of a shield."

"A shield against the killing curse?"

"Against the darkness inside us all," replied Riddle.

"I don't understand," replied Katie honestly.

"I didn't either," replied Riddle with a sad smile. "For a long, long time Albus' death always puzzled me, but then suddenly I had an epiphany. You see, his death destroyed Lord Voldemort for good and broke his Horcrux. His death brought Grindelwald to his knees. And when Grindelwald finally fell, it was by the act of love from your mother. You have never been tempted to join him, because of your love for your friends, for your parents. It is the darkness within that love can protect you from, Kathryn."

"That still doesn't help me kill him," replied Katie.

"No, it doesn't," admitted Riddle. "Albus always said it would, but I never understood it. What I can say is that you must value your friends and the love you hold for your family, because that can protect you. As for Grindelwald, his life must be taken through an act, not of love..."

"But of hate," finished Katie.

Riddle didn't have to nod, Katie already understood. Sooner or later, she would have to kill.

"So Harry is right," said Katie, trying to keep the misery from her voice. "Despite what you have just told me about love allegedly protecting me, on a practical level it doesn't help at all. I still have to kill him, and fighting like Harry or using the sword is the only way to do it."

"One way, yes," conceded Riddle. "But not the only way. Killing is not nearly as easy as you might imagine, certainly not for someone with your capacity for love. You once saved Wormtail, a man whom you have no reason to save, all because you did not like killing."

"And look where it got me," muttered Katie. "Look where it got Sirius."

"True," said Riddle. "But what if it had gone the other way? How many sleepless nights would you have had? The road to darkness is just a series of small steps, and it is a slippery slope."

"But there is a line," protested Katie. She knew right from wrong. It was black and white, clear as crystal.

"Really?" asked Riddle. "Very well. If I told you I can cure all the world's disease, cure third world poverty, and end all wars... is that worth one person's life?"

"Erm..." began Katie. She knew that logically and statistically yes, but she would sound like such a monster to say it.

"You think that statistically, one life for millions is a good deal," said Riddle, with a small smile. "Don't worry, I know I am putting you on the spot. It is just food for thought. As soon as you cross that line and kill one, what is wrong with just one more? What about killing two, killing ten... one hundred... one thousand to save millions. Where do you draw the line? And remember also that there is a big difference between condoning a death in this fashion and actually doing it yourself. For example, if I told you the price for this miracle cure was to kill Ginevra Weasley or perhaps Neville Longbottom, could you kill them in cold blood knowing the benefits?"

"I get the point," said Katie defensively.

"What if it was someone you did not like?" asked Riddle. "Could you kill Bellatrix LeStrange in exchange for the miracle cure? I know how you feel about her, and it would seem easier than killing an innocent, but it is the same thing. You still have to look into her eyes and end her life. As I said, a slippery slope. The 'this is war, there are always casualties, who cares' attitude is a step along that road, and if you don't care then you are no better than Grindelwald.

"There are those out there that will look at our position, and think we should," said Riddle.

"Those who read about what we do and the horrors of what Grindelwald has done and think that you should kill him for what he has done, that he deserves death. They would say you should. They will welcome it if you could, but they do not get their hands dirty. They are not in that situation, they do not have to look into a man's eyes and then kill him."

Katie walked on in silence, Riddle's words echoing in her mind.

"Then we get to Harry," said Riddle. "He has already killed, so we know he can. What stops him killing a few more? He has killed in war because he thought he had to, but what stops him killing every Death Eater he meets? Nothing. Only his ability to love and feel remorse. I fear that even his ability to feel remorse is weakening in him as he shuts everyone out. I do not know to what extent this so-called Dark Knight influences him, but by pushing everyone away he is leaving himself open to that path. When he does find a way home he may not know how to let his friends back in. If he is not careful, he will forever be alone, and that is the true path to darkness."

"So Harry is becoming a monster?"

"He already is a killer," said Riddle, seeming to choose his words carefully. "He can become a monster if he has nothing to hold him back. I think Harry is a ticking bomb, and one severe emotional blow could send him over the edge."

"Is it too late for him, then?" asked Katie, her heart breaking for a boy so much like herself, but yet at the same time so different.

Riddle stopped in his tracks. Katie paused and turned to look at him. He was staring at her, a glowing smile of pride and admiration on his face.

"There is that sense of love that protects you," he said. "Despite all I have told you about him, you still believe in him – you still have faith in the goodness inside him."

After a pause they continued on in silence, each lost in thought.

"I see good in half of him," said Katie honestly after a moment. "But the cold soldier in him is in charge now."

"Yes," admitted Riddle. "Harry has a habit of hiding behind the soldier when pushed. If you challenge him, he is quick to resort to anger or become like ice. It's like a defence mechanism, and ironically, it only pushes the rest of us away and leaves him more vulnerable."

"Can anything be done?" asked Katie.

"WE'RE 'ERE!" called Touille before Riddle could answer.

With the question still echoing in her mind, she turned her attention back to Touille. He was waiting twenty feet in front of them, holding open a set of large doors through which Katie could see the gleam of light off the mirrors. She took a deep breath and tried to push her thoughts of Harry aside.

*Now, let's see if we can find that Horcrux,* she thought to herself.

She followed Riddle through the doors and into a long hallway. One side was covered by mirrors from the floor to the ceiling, and the other was covered by giant glass windows. The ceiling was ornately painted with an angelic mural and the golden candleholders were exquisitely carved, depicting babies climbing and reaching towards the heavens.

She turned to see Riddle standing a few feet inside the door to the right of it. He had knelt down and was staring vacantly at the floor.

"'Ave you found something?" asked Touille, from the doorway.

Riddle didn't answer for a moment, but continued to stare at the floor. He then sighed. "This is where he fell," he announced. "This is where both Albus and Voldemort died."

His shoulders were slumped and his head bowed. Katie didn't know what to say or do as a single tear fell from the end of Riddle's nose onto the floor.

"I'm so sorry, Albus," he whispered. "I'm so sorry..."

***BANG!***

Katie and Riddle looked up just in time to see the door slam.

"EXPELLIARMUS!"

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Harry sat back in the swivel chair his brow furrowed in thought. Although he was supposed to be watching their progress and checking the rooms in front and behind them to keep them safe, he had ended up listening to their conversation which he had found so enlightening. He had been tempted at times to interrupt over their ear-pieces, but somehow he had resisted the urge and sat back and listened to what they really thought of him. He felt like a fly on the wall.

Katie didn't think highly of him, did she? Harry scoffed at the idea, trying to school his emotions and squelch the hurt. She was just a scared naïve little girl who could not fathom what she was caught up in, he thought angrily. She can't be goody two-shoes for ever. Sooner or later, she would have to grow up, and Harry hoped he was there when she realised that fact.

Riddle, on the other hand, understood a bit more. He was right about the Dark Knight. Harry could feel him getting stronger, and all the time he felt so angry and so alone. He could feel the subconscious pull to go home, to war, but it was for Katie, for Neville, for Ginny and his friends that he felt compelled to stay and help. Harry was holding them fast while the Dark Knight wanted to push them away. With his mind torn between two courses of action, Harry felt a bit lost. When he had gone to Lundy and to the Ministry to fight Voldemort, both he and the Dark Knight had had the same objective. United, they had won. Now they were pulling in opposite directions. Harry suddenly felt small and helpless, as if the tide was just carrying him along for the ride.

*Am I doing the right thing?* he wondered.

*I am doing what I can,* he thought defensively as the mask fell into place. *They don't know what I have been through.* Like Riddle said, any mindless idiot could look at him and say he was a monster, but none of them had ever walked in his shoes. None of them would be the one to actually pull the trigger. So bollocks to Riddle, bollocks to Katie, and bollocks to everyone else! He was doing his best, and that was all they could ask of him.

*Crack!*

Harry looked up as the camera in the Hall of Mirrors went black. It went out like a light, leaving darkness on the screen. Had the camera failed, or was it blocked? Harry flicked away from that camera and back, but the screen was still black. He glanced quickly around the other screens, his stomach clenching and a chill running down his spine as he did so. Something was very wrong. Riddle and Katie were nowhere to be seen. Someone had destroyed the camera, leading him to only one conclusion: they were in trouble.

Harry glanced back over to the blank screen and his jaw dropped. Because it was dark, he could see a perfect reflection in the polished glass. Behind him, all three Aurors had their wands aimed at him. Calvet was cowering in the corner, while the Aurors advanced.

Harry didn't move, not wanting to lose the element of surprise. Pretending his attention was on the screen, he carefully slipped his hand into the coat and grasped the Stun Baton, all the while watching the advancing Aurors in the reflection on the blank monitor. Then, as DuPont raised his wand to strike, Harry forced the chair backwards, straight out from under him, and into DuPont's body. The man cried out in pain and doubled over as the chair knocked the air out of him

The first Auror swished his wand in an attempt to cast a spell, but the Dark Knight was too fast. Harry's hand clamped over the man's wrist and twisted, pulling him closer to block any curses from the others, and then drawing back as he thrust his fist into the man's chest shouting a Blasting Curse. With a bang the Auror was launched off his feet and landed on top DuPont, who crashed to the floor under the unconscious body.

The last Auror flicked his wand and the boiling coffee flew out of the pot towards Harry who dived out of the way of the scalding hot liquid. The coffee splashed all over the computer screens, which began to crackle and fizz as it short-circuited, causing all the screens to turn black. Harry sprung off his shoulders back to his feet just as the Auror approached. He raised his right leg and kicked the wand aside before leaping forward, knee raised. His knee slammed into the man's chest with the full force of his weight, cracking several ribs as the man fell away. As he crashed to the floor Harry grabbed a pot of instant coffee that was holding down the blueprint and smashed it over the Auror's head, sending him reeling into unconsciousness.

However, as Harry stepped back, DuPont was back on his feet. Before the man could cast a spell, Harry wandlessly summoned DuPont to him. A look of surprise crossed the older man's face as he was swept off his feet. But at the last second Harry sidestepped the incoming body, and sent DuPont crashing into the computer screens. The man screamed and thrashed as the electricity conducted through the coffee and up into his body. Harry watched for a second in satisfaction, until the lights exploded into sparks and darkness fell, before he put DuPont out of his misery with a Stunner.

Surveying the three fallen Aurors and the broken equipment, Harry breathed a sigh of relief. Then he glanced back over at the screens again, but they were all blank now: he had no way of knowing how many were out there or what was happening. Grimacing, Harry raised a hand to his ear-piece.

"Katie? Riddle? Can you hear me?"

*Silence.*

Harry waited for what seemed like ages, but there was only silence.

"Katie, Grindelwald's here, get out now!"

*Nothing.*

*Maybe it's being blocked, he thought. Maybe they had either been taken off them or they were destroyed. Maybe they couldn't answer. If Grindelwald was listening, Harry daren't say any*

more. He had to assume that Grindelwald had Riddle and Katie, and that he knew Harry was coming. Somehow he had to get them out.

First, he needed to find out what was happening in there. He picked up a map of the Chateaux and ran his finger over it, searching for the Hall of Mirrors. Luckily, English translations were written on it underneath the French words. Right, he knew where he was going. He just had to get there, have a look inside, and plan his next move. He had the surprise card, and he needed to use it.

Calvet was still sitting in the corner, cowering from Harry. The Muggle was clearly not up for a Magical fight, whatever his military background.

"Monsieur Calvet," said Harry, standing over him. "I'm not going to hurt you."

"You killed zem!" the Frenchman managed to stuttered.

"No I didn't," said Harry, shaking his head. "Check their pulses. They're just unconscious."

"Why did zey...?"

"Attack me?" finished Harry. "Because they are working for our terrorist. He has infiltrated your government, it seems."

"But..."

"Monsieur," said Harry losing patience. "We don't have time for long conversations. Look, I need you to contact your police. Our police will be watched, but yours won't be. I need your armed police to storm the Hall of Mirrors as soon as possible. Do you understand?"

"Mon dieu, Je..."

"Calvet," said Harry sternly. "I can't do this alone. Just get some armed police in there as soon as possible."

With that, he disappeared in a ball of flames, ready for his rescue.

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*"EXPELLIARMUS!"*

The curse hit Katie in the small of the back, and her wand was ripped from her hand as she was forced forward. She lost her balance and landed on her face on the hardwood floor. Shaking the disorientation from her head, she quickly rolled over to see her wand and Riddle's land with a clatter at the other end of the hall. She turned to see Touille standing over them, his wand levelled at Riddle who had also been thrown to the floor by the curse.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" snapped Katie

"Whatever I tell him to do," said a low voice behind her.

Katie's heart skipped a beat and a feeling of dread filled her stomach. She knew that voice all too well. For the second time in twenty-four hours, Katie turned to find the Dark Lord had appeared in the room. He was dressed once again in all black and his hood was up, leaving only the bottom half of his pale face visible. His darkened lips were turned upwards in a malicious sneer as he stared with loathing at her.

*Idiots*, thought Katie angrily. She'd had her mind on Harry, and Riddle had his on Dumbledore. They had both been caught with their knickers down. Why hadn't Harry warned them? Where was he? She raised her hand to her ear.

"Harry?" she whispered desperately.

*Silence.*

"If you are calling for the boy-wonder," said Grindelwald calmly as more Death Eaters appeared behind him, "he is indisposed at the moment."

"If you've hurt him..." began Katie angrily.

"You'll do what, exactly?" snapped Grindelwald icily.

He paused for a moment, and Katie realised that she was utterly powerless. She couldn't help her friend, she couldn't even help herself. Grindelwald seemed to read her thoughts, "Accept the futility of your situation and shut up," he sneered.

Katie climbed slowly to her feet as more Death Eaters appeared around the room in a wave of pops. There were perhaps twenty-five or thirty of them now, all hidden behind glowing white masks and jet black cloaks. She and Riddle were completely surrounded.

Grindelwald turned to the Death Eater behind him and spoke in rapid French, which Katie didn't pick up.

"Oui, Maître," replied the man as he turned and hurried out the far end of the hall.

These weren't all English Death Eaters, but French as well. It also explained why he had not been detected entering the country or the Chateaux – he had been helped. Was it DuPont? It seemed that his forces on the continent were not as dead as everyone had assumed. If he was already reaffirming his strength on the continent, that meant he was closer to finishing off England than they had realised and was almost ready to return home.

As the Death Eaters moved to encircle them, Grindelwald stepped up to Riddle.

"Tom," he said calmly.

"Gellert," replied Riddle, conversationally. His tone was quite jovial, rather than scared. Katie was suddenly aware that while he accused Harry of going 'cold' when threatened, whenever

Riddle was threatened or pushed onto a subject he did not wish to talk about he adopted his 'conversational' voice and made some odd comment, giving him a slightly barmy, but non-threatening appearance. Katie realised that Riddle was a lot more like Harry than he wanted to admit, and it all came back to the old headmaster, Dumbledore. This Dumbledore must have had quite an influence on both of them, she realised.

"What a nice reunion we have here," said Grindelwald with a smile as if they were old friends, though the venom in his voice suggested that he wasn't as pleased as he appeared. Riddle on the other hand made no comment, but continued to smile at Grindelwald. The Dark Lord raised two hands and lowered his hood, revealing his haunted-looking face and those icy black eyes.

"We've been in this situation once before haven't we, Lord Voldemort?" he said, his voice almost a purr on the name.

Katie could see he was testing the water, seeing how Riddle would react, and she felt a shiver run down her spine. After all these shocking revelations about Riddle and Voldemort in the last twenty four hours she still had faith in her headmaster, but to hear it said by the Dark Lord himself was chilling. In fact, it shook the very foundations of her faith in him.

"That name no longer has any meaning for me," said Riddle flatly, pulling the locket out from inside his robes.

Grindelwald eyed the locket for a moment before speaking.

"He was right about that," said Grindelwald, nodding his head. "He found a way to destroy them. Sentimental old fool. I show him the path to ultimate power and all he did was destroy it. He was blind."

"There was no need to kill him," said Riddle, shaking his head.

"It was you who I wanted dead!" snapped Grindelwald, leering in front of Riddle like a snake. "He was an accident."

"Just like Ariana?" asked Riddle icily, unable to keep calm any longer.

Katie had no idea who Ariana was, and she never got a chance to ask. Suddenly there was a bang and the doors were thrown open. Harry came rushing in looking flustered, as if he had run the whole way up here.

"KATIE, WE HAVE TO GET OUT OF HERE, IT'S A TRAP! THE AURORS ARE....ohh!"

He froze and looked slowly around the room, taking in the many figures in black that now surrounded him. As twenty-five wands pointed at his chest, Harry turned back to Riddle.

"Never mind," he said flippantly. "It's clear you already know, so I'll be going then."

He turned and headed back towards the doors, however several Death Eaters moved to block his way while another closed the doors. He was now surrounded on all four sides. After a pause,

Harry gave a dramatic sigh and raised his hands in surrender. "Okay, so maybe not," he said casually. "I guess I can stay a little longer. I do so enjoy reunions."

Katie watched as Harry turned back to face Grindelwald, who was looking at him with a victorious sneer on his face. Grindelwald had swept his cloak back, his hand hovering near his wand. He had clearly learned his lesson and was remaining guarded as long as Harry was present. Harry stood facing Grindelwald with his hands up, but still the Dark Lord didn't relax. He removed his wand and aimed it at Katie's chest. Katie took a deep breath to calm herself while Grindelwald addressed Harry.

"Surrender your wand or you shall find yourself picking her up with a sponge," he said in that same cold voice.

Trying not to think about the wand aimed at her heart, Katie watched Harry look from Grindelwald to Katie and back again. As he caught Katie's eye, he gave away nothing. Sighing, he opened his coat with his right hand, displaying the leather holster hanging from his hip with his wand in it, while holding his left hand up in surrender. A Death Eater cautiously moved forward to take the wand. Katie braced herself. It seemed obvious to her that Harry was about to make a move. He wouldn't take this lying down. It was odd, Katie noticed, that she was now relying on the soldier that she hated to get them out of here. Her body tensed, ready to move, ready to retrieve her wand as it all kicked off.

The Death Eater moved closer, stepping up to Harry and reaching for the wand. Harry stood motionless, staring the Death Eater in the eye as he reached for the wand. To Katie's surprise, he made no attempt to stop the Death Eater. The man retreated a few paces with the wand in his hand and Katie was sure that beneath the mask, his face was one of relief.

"And the other one," snapped Grindelwald icily. "People like you never carry just one."

"Shucks," said Harry flippantly. "You got me. I just can't fool you, can I?" Harry reached up into his left sleeve with his right hand.

"Slowly!" hissed Grindelwald.

Again Katie tensed, ready to move.

Harry grimaced and slowly removed the wand with two fingers and let it fall to his feet. Katie's jaw dropped in surprise and she glanced up at Riddle, who met her eyes. Neither of them could understand what Harry was up to. It was clear from his attitude that he was planning something, but neither of them knew what exactly. Katie would have expected Riddle to take the lead, to speak to Grindelwald and negotiate, but with Harry here and clearly up to something Riddle seemed to be erring on the side of caution and waiting for Harry to act.

"Step back," the Death Eater ordered.

Harry did as he was told, and ended up standing next to Katie. He didn't look at her, but instead kept his eyes on Grindelwald.

"So," said Harry conversationally, "what brings you to this neck of the woods, Grindy? You don't seem like an art fan to me."

Grindelwald stepped closer to Harry, his eyes burning with anger. He stood perhaps a foot from Harry, towering over him like a king cobra, his unblinking eyes boring into the younger wizard's with unbridled rage.

"Don't play the fool with me," hissed Grindelwald, scarcely more than a whisper. "Don't for a second believe you can outsmart me. Did you think that if you mentioned my invention, that I would be forced to check it with my own eyes? Did you think I would walk headlong into your petty little trap? Did you think I would not find out you have travelled to France?"

"Bait a trap with a big enough piece of cheese and a rat will always bite," said Harry with a shrug. "Wormtail can vouch for that."

Katie watched the two carefully, trying to ignore the fear in the pit of her stomach. Harry's smug look was enough to infuriate Grindelwald, but Katie didn't see the point, the objective. What was Harry doing?

"I have allowed this fiasco to play out for one reason only," said Grindelwald.

"You wanted a chance to gloat?" asked Harry flippantly.

"*CRUCIO!*"

Harry had pushed him a step too far and the curse launched him off his feet. Katie knew he wasn't wearing the armour and remembered all too well the pain that that word could conjure.

"Gellert!" called Riddle, stepping forward the second the curse had struck, but his way was instantly blocked by several Death Eaters. "Gellert, let him go!" ordered Riddle, the first time she had ever heard him raise his voice in anger.

The Dark Lord ignored him as Harry continued to thrash on the floor. Katie was impressed that he didn't cry out. She could see his teeth gritted as the pain tore through his body. Katie watched helplessly as Harry writhed on the polished floor.

"NO!" Katie couldn't take it any longer – it was her friend in there. She surged forwards, but Riddle was just as fast. His hands grabbed her, holding her back, refusing to let her near the danger.

Grindelwald's head turned at the movement, and he sneered at Katie. He broke the curse on Harry and turned to her instead, levelling his wand at her chest.

"Interrupt me again, my dear, and you will suffer as well," he stated coldly.

Katie looked from Grindelwald down to Harry, who was lying in a ball on the floor. He seemed to be struggling to move and his body was steaming from the curse. His breathing was deep and erratic and he was coughing.

"Don't just stand there, girl," snapped Grindelwald, jerking his wand towards Harry. "You're boyfriend requires your assistance."

Riddle released Katie and she knelt next to Harry. With her help, he staggered to his feet. His expression was slightly vacant, and he was leaning on her with nearly all his weight. They were face to face as she helped him to his feet and it was the first time in ages he had looked her in the eye.

"Are you alright?" he asked with a weak smile.

"Me?" asked Katie astonished. "What about you?"

"Chipper," said Harry with a pained smile. "Better me than you."

"Don't you dare do this to protect me," hissed Katie angrily.

Harry suddenly took his weight off her and pulled her into a hug. His strength as his arms wrapped around her didn't match his image as he still looked weak from the curse. She suddenly realised that he was playing it up! He wasn't that badly hurt! Harry had the situation in hand. Katie suddenly felt a whole lot safer and more confident as his arms wrapped around her and he gave her a gentle squeeze. As his cheek rested on the side of her head, he whispered two words into her ear.

"Trust me."

Harry released her and stepped away, taking her hand with him until he was out of reach. Against all reason, her whole body tingled from where his body had been and she found herself smiling slightly. She watched with fascination as he stepped towards Grindelwald once more.

"That was juvenile," he said callously.

As Katie watched, she felt the mood change in the room. Harry had dressed down the Dark Lord in front of everyone and appeared to have more or less shaken off his punishment. He appeared shaken and weak, though Katie was sure he was playing it up, but mentally he had shown everyone he was unbroken. Katie suddenly had new faith in him. She had no doubt that the person who had hugged her was Harry, and he was in charge now. The Dark Knight might be in there somewhere, but this was her Harry. Although why was he being so flippant, so reckless? What was he planning?

"So...," said Harry, drawing the word out conversationally.

Suddenly Katie guessed that this calm and slight battiness must have been inherited from Dumbledore, as both Harry and Riddle used it when it suited them. Harry sidestepped Grindelwald and stepped past him to look at the others gathered. "So are these English Death Eaters, or French Death Eaters?" he asked. "What is the French word for Death Eater anyway? 'Manger' is to eat, I know that. That was the first word my cousin, Dudley, wanted to learn when he did his year abroad. By anyway, what's the French word for death?"

"Morte," supplied Riddle, still standing next to Katie.

"Mangé de Morte," scoffed Harry. "That doesn't exactly sound scary."

"Your grammar is appalling," said Riddle mildly.

Katie turned to look Riddle in the eye, guessing that he, too, was none the wiser about what Harry was up to; however, she was surprised that Riddle was willing to let Harry continue. He was making no move to intervene. Did he know something she didn't?

"Oh well," shrugged Harry. "'Death Eater' in English is a bit cheesy to begin with, isn't it? It's cliché, really." He turned and pointed and finger at both Grindelwald and Riddle in turn. "Out of interest, which one of you thought it up?"

The Dark Lord raised an eyebrow and stared at the headmaster, a sneer on his face. "They know?" he asked victoriously. "They know about what happened fifty years ago? About your past?"

"Oh, there are no secrets between friends," said Harry, waving the interruption aside. "Well, that's not entirely true. For instance, where did Albus Dumbledore die?"

Grindelwald's eyebrows narrowed and he glared at Harry, but Harry seemed not to care. Katie watched in fascination as they stared at each other.

"Over there," said Riddle after a few seconds, pointing towards the area to the left of the door where he had knelt earlier.

Harry crossed over to where Riddle had pointed. "Right here?" he asked Grindelwald. "This is where you murdered him? He tracked you all over Europe and then finally he caught up with you, and you murdered him," said Harry, his cold persona returning. "He was better than you, more powerful, too. He hated you and everything you stood for, didn't he? So poor little Gellert got scared and killed him."

Katie had been expecting Grindelwald to lash out and curse Harry again, but he didn't. A smile spread slowly over the Dark Lord's blackened lips and he laughed softly, cruelly, as he stepped closer to Harry. They were about ten metres away from Katie and Riddle, and Harry stood perfectly still as he approached. Katie felt Riddle gently take hold of her arm, presumably to hold her back.

"I did not murder him," said Grindelwald quietly, stepping nearer. "You have got the whole story wrong, boy. Your great hero was nothing of the sort."

Grindelwald stepped up to Harry until they were almost nose-to-nose, except for Grindelwald being taller. As the Dark Lord towered over him with a smug look on his face, Harry continued to smile back amiably.

Katie could see Grindelwald's lips moving, as he whispered to Harry. Katie was too far away to hear what was being said, but whatever it was it had Harry's attention. Katie watched as the

smile vanished from Harry's face and Grindelwald's face became even more smug and victorious.

Katie's heart fell as Harry stepped back and shook his head defiantly. Grindelwald stepped in closer again, bearing down on Harry, as he continued to whisper.

"No!" Katie heard Harry gasp.

Grindelwald's head nodded as he continued.

"No!" Harry said again, "LIAR!"

Harry moved forward to strike Grindelwald but he was too slow. The curse launched him off his feet and his back slammed into a mirror. He fell away and hit the ground hard, leaving a spider's web of cracks on the glass. His body thrashed and writhed as he struggled against the curse. Katie could see a flash of red above his eyebrow from where he had hit the floor.

"You see, boy?" sneered Grindelwald as Harry writhed under the curse. "You know nothing! You are over your head in a situation you cannot comprehend. You thought your flippancy could unseat me? You thought you could throw me off guard with talk of Albus. WRONG! How pathetic."

"NO!"

Katie escaped Riddle's grip and ran forward. "STOP!"

Katie saw Harry struggle to raise a hand towards her, warning her off.

"NO!" he gasped. "S—stay out of this."

Grindelwald turned to her, his teeth gritted with anger as Harry continued to suffer.

"Please," shouted Katie, "stop it!"

Grindelwald looked back to Harry who was still writhing in agony under the curse. With a flick of his wand, Harry was thrown upwards and slammed into the wall. He was no longer writhing and appeared barely conscious as Grindelwald held him against the wall.

"I stop when I am ready." With another flick of his wand, Harry fell forwards to the floor and landed with a sickening thud. As he struggled to move, Grindelwald advanced again, levelling his wand at Harry's head.

Suddenly there was a woosh and a pop and a man dressed all in black appeared out of thin air clutching a can of lager. He instantly looked around the room, his body crouched, ready to pounce like a cat. A second later, having seen no danger, he drew himself up to his full height and slipped the can into his pocket. Whoever this man was, he was different from the other Death Eaters. His mask was not white but black, and it appeared to be made of metal. It looked almost

Egyptian in that it resembled a death mask. Then again, it could have been samurai, or from any culture. All Katie knew was that it sent chills down her spine.

Grindelwald turned to the new arrival, his attention leaving Harry. The new arrival walked towards Grindelwald, standing tall and unafraid. As Katie watched, the Dark Lord's face grew into a smile. He turned to Katie, and shot her a cold look.

"Pick up your beau," he said, turning his back on Harry.

Katie didn't hesitate and ran over to Harry, kneeling next to him.

"Hey," said Harry weakly as Katie held his head in her arms. "I messed up, I let him get to me, I lost..."

"Shh," said Katie softly, wiping the blood from his eye. "You're alright now."

Katie helped Harry up into a sitting position, and they both turned to look at the new arrival.

"Him!" said Harry, his voice full of venom.

"You know him?" whispered Katie in astonishment. "Who is he?"

"No idea," Harry replied. "He tried to kidnap a girl on the first day of term, and I think he's the one who killed my parents... in this world anyway."

"How do you know it's him?" Katie whispered.

"It's in the way he moves," Harry replied. "...The way he is. I just know it's him."

"You have it?" asked the Dark Lord as he approached the figure in black. Katie struggled to hear the conversation.

The figure in black extended his hand and opened it, showing something to the Dark Lord. The fingers of his gloved hand concealed whatever it was from Katie's eyes. The Dark Lord's lips drew back into a small smile as he stared at the item.

"How many more?"

"One," replied the figure. His voice was low and rumbling, but at the same time clipped and precise, yet it was so indistinct. Katie was positive that something was altering his voice, making it sound distorted in order that no one recognise him. Who the hell would do that? Was it for the Death Eater's benefit of theirs? Either way, she knew the Dark Lord had succeeded in whatever he was doing. Was this all a distraction? If Grindelwald had known they would be here, had he only come in order to lead them away from the real goal? What had the figure in black found?

"Just one?"

The figure nodded.

Grindelwald seemed satisfied. "Good," he said, turning back to Harry. "Now, let us be done here, and leave. We have wasted enough time. Watch them."

The figure in black drew his wand from within his robes, holding it towards Katie with a gloved hand. Katie's eyes followed Grindelwald as he crossed the room to a mirror on the far side. He stared at his reflection for a moment before pointing the tip of his wand at the palm of his hand. Katie watched as the Dark Lord made an incision on his hand, and then reached up towards the mirror. In the giant mirror, his reflection mimicked his movements, and as both Grindelwald and his reflection touched, he stepped through the mirror and disappeared. There was a gasp around the room as the Dark Lord appeared to vanish into nothing.

As the Death Eaters stirred uneasily, Katie looked around for a way out. However, the figure in black remained unfazed as he stood before them.

With a pop the Dark Lord emerged from the mirror, stepping back out into the room. To Katie's surprise, he was holding a pair of golden half-moon spectacles. He handled them carefully, as if they were really delicate, and the expression on his face showed how precious the object was to him. Katie felt a chill go down her spine. Inside those glasses was a piece of the Dark Lord's soul, a piece of evil.

"Help me up," whispered a voice in her ear.

Katie stood up and helped drag Harry to his feet. He continued to lean on her as he watched the exchange.

"Come," said Grindelwald to the room at large. "We are leaving. I will dispose of these three and then we shall return."

"They were Dumbledore's," said Harry, stepping forward and leaving Katie, only to halt when the figure in black moved the wand to cover him. Harry stared at the figure in black for a moment. "Oh, it's you again, is it?" asked Harry a grin breaking across his face. "I'd wondered where you'd got to, my slippery little friend. Did I tell you that I saw your film? I saw you blow up St Mungo's. That was you, wasn't it? My parents died in that blast."

The figure cocked his head.

"And all so you could kill one healer?" scoffed Harry. "The others didn't need to die! Why did you do it? Do you feel manly killing defenceless people?" Harry turned to Grindelwald. "And he works for you, running errands? What was that in his hand? What has he done?"

"Nothing that concerns you," snapped Grindelwald.

"Why?" asked Harry. "Worried I'll scupper another plan?"

"You won't 'scupper' anything ever again," said Grindelwald. "Goodbye."

He levelled his wand at Harry. "AVADA..."

"All this because he saw you for what you really are," muttered Harry with a shrug, though Katie saw him tense, ready to move – this was a dangerous bluff. As the Dark Lord hesitated, Harry pressed his advantage. "I don't know what you two were, but he was better than you. You are just a spoilt little rich kid on a power trip. But you have all these minions to do your dirty work. And this guy, the lieutenant or whatever you call him. Your most loyal? Of course not, because he's English. You'll leave them all behind one day. Trust me I know. Dark Lord's never appreciate their second in commands. I..."

"He's stalling," said the figure in black simply. "Someone is coming!"

Of course, thought Katie. Harry was only interested in buying time. But who was he waiting for?

Suddenly there was a scraping sound and a figure in black coveralls, armour, a gasmask and holding a machine gun dropped down onto the balcony outside. Katie's jaw hung limp as the window shattered and the man dived in, rolling back up to his feet.

Startled by the movement, the figure in black turned to the window. Katie recognised the man on the balcony for what he was – an armed policeman. All this time Harry had been stalling, allowing Grindelwald to feel in control until he had the Horcrux. And all the time, he was waiting for the Muggles.

"AVADA..."

Harry's tiredness seem to vanish, and he instantly raised a foot and kicked the figure in back off balance. Unfortunately, another Death Eater managed to complete the curse. The Policeman fell in a flash of green light just as three more came crashing through the other windows. Grindelwald recovered quickly and aimed his wand at Harry,

"AVADA KEDAVRA!"

Harry instantly flicked his coat backwards and drew from within the concealed stun baton. He threw it up in front of him to parry the curse. As he swung, the baton absorbed the power of the curse and burst into light, glowing a sickly green. Harry raised it high, the figure in black on the floor at his feet defenceless.

Katie watched in horror as the scene played out in slow motion before her. Surely he wouldn't kill the man in cold blood? Whatever he had done, Harry wasn't a murderer. She remembered what Riddle had said in the hallway, about slippery slopes and Harry being on the edge of a precipice.

"HARRY! NO!" shouted Katie.

Just as the baton started to descend, Harry froze at the sound of her voice. He paused for a split second and then turned to face her. Katie could only stare pleadingly at him, as he stared at her emotionlessly, his jaw set and his whole body tense. Their eyes met and Katie saw only emerald green ice.

*Please, Harry!*

Suddenly he moved, turning back around and with all his strength, he threw the baton high up into the air. The glowing green rod spun as it flew up towards the huge chandelier that hung over their heads. Harry held out a hand to the Death Eater who had taken his wand. Instantly two wands flew from the man's hand into Harry's, and he raised them both towards the baton, pressing the tips together.

"*SECTUMSEMPRA!*"

The spell hit its target and the combined magic was too much for the baton. With a thunderous explosion the magic in the baton erupted outwards, vaporising the chandelier, knocking everyone in the room off their feet and shattering every window in the room. The police outside recoiled as glass erupted outwards, cascading down into the courtyard like a waterfall of razors. Katie was forced violently to the floor as the shockwave passed straight through her. Her ears were ringing from the explosion, but she managed to sit up in time to see the Stun Baton fall back to the floor, dormant. Harry quickly summoned it back to him, and lit it with a Stunner. With a flick of his wand, Katie's wand came flying free from the Death Eater's grip.

"Catch!" yelled Harry.

Katie caught her own wand as it sailed through the air and immediately sent a Stunner at the Death Eater nearest her. The room was in pandemonium. As the windows had shattered outwards, the Muggles were free to enter, and six had repelled in through the window. Their gasmasks and helmets made them look inhuman as they aimed their weapons at the occupants. Katie knew they didn't know friend from foe, and so they had to get out of there. She threw herself to the floor as a crackle of gunfire sounded over her head. With a thud a Death Eater landed near her, his hollow eyes staring into hers and a trail of blood seeping out through the mask and the holes that had been ripped in his chest.

With a scream, Katie saw a Muggle get hit by a curse and fly backwards out of the window. *Christ!* It was carnage.

Suddenly she was aware of a man standing over her, his machine gun aimed down at her. The man hesitated as he came across a young woman in a room of monsters. That was enough, for a second later, an arm wrapped itself around his neck and in a flash of red light the man went limp as Harry arrived by her side.

"The glasses," gasped Harry. "Get them!"

Katie jumped to her feet. "*Accio spectacles!*" she shouted.

Grindelwald had almost made it to the door when the glasses were ripped from his hands. A look of horror appeared on his face as his soul was dragged from his gasp. He reached out for them and screamed as they sailed across the room. Katie grabbed them as they flew through the air.

Suddenly a tremendous crackle of gunfire filled the room, and the wizards threw themselves to the floor. Katie looked out to see three men in black assault gear carrying automatic weapons burst through the double doors. Already two Death Eaters were lying in puddles of their own

blood. There was another flash of green light and a Policeman shot backward out through the window and disappeared through the curtains. Suddenly Riddle was by their side.

"We have to go!" he shouted above the racket as he took his wand from Katie.

"The man in black..." protested Harry.

"...can wait!" insisted Riddle, picking up piece of debris. "We have the Horcrux. *Portus!*"

"RIDDLE!" screamed a voice.

They all turned to see Grindelwald unleash a jet of green light at them. Suddenly they all felt a tug behind their naval and landed in a heap on the Headmaster's office floor.

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"Are you alright?" asked a weak voice.

Harry merely groaned in response. He had ended up face down on the cold hard floor of Riddle's office and as he rolled over, his eyes unaccustomed to the gloom, he found Katie looking down at him, a look of concern etched into her features. Harry blinked a few times, trying to let his eyes adapt, but was then forced to cover them as Riddle lit a lamp. Groaning, and trying to ignore the dull throb of pain all over his body, Harry tried to sit up, but after the shooting pain that followed, thought better of it. In all honesty he felt like he'd been run over by an eighteen-wheeler; his limbs were aching, he was completely drained and he just wanted to go to bed.

*Still, at least I haven't been shot,* he thought gratefully. That was one saving grace at least, and they had been successful after all. Katie had gotten the glasses, hadn't she?

"Did we get it," he asked, propping himself up on his elbows.

"Yeah we got it," said Katie impatiently, "now are you alright?"

"More or less," answered Harry truthfully, managing to sit up properly. The adrenaline was gone now, and the pain was setting in. He began rubbing his head, trying to drive it out. "Just a headache, I think."

"Here," said Riddle, offering Harry some chocolate.

Harry accepted it and took a bite as Riddle put the kettle on – even the drive to fight Riddle was gone, such was his exhaustion.

Katie sat down by his side and looked him up and down, pausing on his busted eyebrow. "We need some water and a towel," she told Riddle. Taking hold of his arm, she practically dragged him up into a chair. Harry was surprised at her strength, but was in no position to resist. Riddle set a bowl of water in front of Harry as Katie deposited him in the chair.

"Oh please don't fuss over me," groaned Harry. "I'll survive." His cut seemed less of less importance to him than what he had learned this afternoon. Grindelwald had to be lying! Harry felt his rage building once again, but he didn't know who it was directed at: Dumbledore, Grindelwald, Riddle, or even Katie now that she was being all.....female. He didn't want her attention or her pity. He didn't want anyone's pity. Anger seemed to bring some of his strength back with it.

"Survival isn't always enough," Katie corrected him gently as she dabbed at his face.

Holding back a spiteful comment Harry reached for the towel, but Katie pushed his hand aside. She dipped it in the water again and then began to dab it on Harry's cut forehead.

Harry grimaced and tried to sit still as Katie cleaned up the cut on his forehead, but it wasn't easy. The frustration pumping through his veins made it hard to sit still. He just wanted to get out of here, to be alone.

"Why are you doing this"? he asked impatiently, staring into her eyes. He tried to keep his face neutral, to not betray the inner pain he felt at her ministrations, but he failed.

"You took those curses to protect me," she said gently. "Don't try to deny it – somewhere in there you believed you were saving me. And you did save my life."

Harry grimaced again but said nothing, lost in his own thoughts. He didn't want or need her thanks, just time to be alone.

"Have some tea," Riddle offered as he placed a tray down between them.

Harry ignored the tray for now and stared at the recovered half moon spectacles . Katie followed his gaze to the Horcrux.

"So it was worth it then?" asked Katie. "We got it."

"That we did," said Riddle, lowering himself into his chair. "Thanks largely to Harry's efforts. I was dubious about allowing your charade to continue, Harry. It was a dangerous game, but luckily it worked."

Harry didn't respond – Riddle's gratitude was way down on his list of priorities. Instead he just stared angrily at the glasses.

"So if we destroy this," asked Katie, swabbing at Harry's cut once again, "what's to stop Grindelwald from making another one?"

"Nothing," said Riddle slowly. "However I do not believe he would risk splitting his soul further. As he has likely seen, such things are not fool-proof. I believe he will not risk making another one as long as people who know about it survive."

"At least we hope," said Harry flatly. As Katie released him, he leaned forward nonchalantly and poured himself a cup of tea.

"So, how do we destroy this one?" asked Katie, putting the towel and water back on the desk.

Riddle rose to his feet and moved to the bookcase behind him. He reached up and removed the jewel-encrusted sword from its glass case. Harry watched without emotion as Riddle held out the weapon.

"The sword of Godric Gryffindor," he said, offering it to Katie. "The stage is yours – you have earned that right."

Harry continued to watch in silence as Katie took the sword from Riddle. The glasses were perched on the edge of the desk, ready to strike. Katie held the sword high above her head, taking aim at the glasses on the edge of the desk.

Harry watched intently, willing her to make that blow.

"Will he feel this?" she asked hesitantly.

*Don't worry about him, just do it!* thought Harry.

"Unlikely," said Riddle.

"Okay." She visibly braced herself and took a deep breath.

Suddenly there was a flash as the glasses began to glow. The misty shape of a man began to materialise in front of Katie not unlike a Patronus becoming corporeal as it glided towards her, its eyes fixed on her. As the shape solidified, Harry could see that the man was tall with mousy brown hair that came down to below his ears and a determined look on his face. His eyes were bright and locked onto Katie, who lowered the sword.

"Kathryn?" asked the figure as it became more opaque. "Is that you?" The voice was distant, but sounded kind and gentle.

"Daddy?" gasped Katie as she lowered the sword. Harry suddenly realised what was happening – the Horcrux was trying to defend itself, playing on her deepest fears.

"It's a trick, Katie," said Harry, resisting the urge to take the sword himself. This was her task, her trial.

"You wouldn't kill me again, would you my daughter?" asked the figure. "We can still be together. Help me!"

"Katie..." said Harry again. She didn't respond, but just continued to stare at the man, her eyes wide and glistening with tears and the sword hanging lamely at her side. She was rooted to the spot and tears began to stream down her cheeks as she stared longingly at the figure. The silence seemed to last for ages, and afforded Harry the chance to glance at Riddle. The headmaster made no move to help, but stood to the side of the room, watching Katie intently.

*Come on, Katie*, thought Harry, realising what Riddle was doing. This was her trial and she alone could face it. It was all up to her now, and neither Harry nor Riddle had the right to intervene.

Suddenly, Katie made her decision. Swinging the sword violently back over her shoulder, her eyes hardened. "You're not my father," she screamed.

Before she could swing, the figure changed into an exact mirror image of Katie, and stood sneering at her from a few feet away.

"Poor scared girl," hissed the copy. "You've spent all your life hiding, hoping those around wouldn't notice what a coward you are, but deep down you know... you know that you can never win. All you have accomplished has been for nothing! You will die and the Dark Lord will live again! All your friends will burn in the fires of wrath, just like your dead parents!"

"Katie, do it!" snapped Harry urgently, rising to his feet.

"And the prodigal son," hissed the copy, turning on Harry, "...the killer of his own world, which he left to burn in the hands of the enemy. You shall never see them again!"

"Kathryn," said Riddle firmly. "This thing is playing on basic fears, it's reading your thoughts. It is not real. You must destroy it!"

"And the orphan, still clawing at the memories of greater men, struggling to deny a past of darkness now masked behind the cloak of valour and peace. You can never be what he was....you can never outrun your past..."

"Katie!" Harry shouted again, urging her to do it.

It worked. With a scream of anguish, Katie brought the blade down as hard as she could on the glasses. The spectacles shattered as the blade sliced through the middle of them, sending a lens flying in each direction. There was a blinding flash and a shockwave passed through Harry, as the copy exploded into sparkling dust. Katie turned under the force of the explosion, dropping the sword with a clatter, and stepped backwards, losing her balance. Harry moved instantly to catch her as the light from the destroyed Horcrux faded. He caught her easily as she turned towards him, but he hadn't been expecting her head to burrow into his shoulder, as she cried into his coat.

Harry got the distinct impression that her strong persona had finally broken. She had been forced to present a strong, unfazed persona to the world. She had refused to let herself cry until now, not allowing herself that weakness, but now it was gone. Years worth of pain and frustration were all coming out at once as she cried into his shoulder.

Harry wasn't entirely sure what to do. He could feel her shaking as he wrapped his arms around her. Her head rested on his shoulder as she wept, and he gently rested his cheek on her head. With his left hand, he rubbed her back in what he hoped was a soothing way, feeling his anger with the whole world subside slightly as he held her in his arms. How could he continue to resent everything with her like this? It wasn't often that he felt emotion like this, and oddly there were

no thoughts of telling her to 'grow up' or 'deal with it'. The Dark Knight was absent, and Harry felt a wall within his heart shatter.

Over her shoulder he saw Riddle staring at him with a look that he couldn't quite read, and then nod slowly before sitting down behind his desk. The headmaster scooped the remains of the Horcrux up and silently dropped them into a drawer.

Harry turned his attention back to Katie, and he gently began to rock her slightly as he supported her in his arms.

"It's okay," he whispered. "It's gone now. I've got you." He stroked the back of her head gently as she sobbed, desperately trying to comfort her. He had no idea how to deal with weeping girls and so just stood there, gently swaying.

"It's over now, I'm here, you're safe," he whispered, wondering whether it was appropriate to kiss her forehead. He decided against it, and continued to gently rub her back, hoping the tears would subside soon. Harry didn't know how long they stood there, but eventually, she stopped burying her head in his coat and raised it enough to look into his eyes.

Her face was pink, and her eyes bloodshot from the tears. Her blue eyes sparkled, but not with the intensity he had come to know, but with pain and anguish. She looked almost as defeated as after Grindelwald has possessed her. The look of pain was heartbreaking, and Harry could only give her an encouraging squeeze and hope he never saw her like this again.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled in an embarrassed voice as she wiped her eyes.

"Don't be," said Harry, trying to be sensitive. "That thing played out your worst fears. It was teasing you, nothing more, but you beat it. It isn't real and it's gone forever."

She gave a weak smile and before Harry could react, she reached both her arms around his neck and lightly kissed him on the cheek, before pulling him into a proper hug. "Thank you," she whispered as she released him.

As Katie, sank into a chair and reached for some chocolate, Harry could only stare open mouthed into space. The skin in his cheek where her lips had touched him still tingled and it was all he could do to stop himself raising his hand to touch it. Suddenly Harry realised he had been standing stone still, looking as gormless as Goyle with his jaw open. He quickly closed it before anyone saw him and turned his attention back to Katie and Riddle.

"Well done," said Riddle taking a seat, as Katie bit off a bit of chocolate. "With his Horcrux destroyed, not only is Grindelwald now vulnerable, but he has also been shown how strong you are, and more importantly, how strong you are together. Against one of you he may have won, but together, he fears you. Also, we have had a glimpse at what he is up to. We don't know who this figure in black is, but we know he is collecting something. We are further on than we were this morning, and you both have performed admirably, far beyond anything I would expect from mere students your age. Take fifty points each for Gryffindor. While I know such rewards mean little when compared with today's events, it is the least I can do, and what your housemates need

the most is a symbol. For now, though, let me deal with this mess at both the British and French ministries, and clear up issues from this morning. You've both earned a rest, so may I recommend that you take the rest of the day off to recover?"

Harry nodded and Katie did the same.

Katie seemed to be all right now and the tears at least had subsided. Another few bits of chocolate, and she would be fine. Harry on the other hand was still feeling hollow inside, and was overcome once again by the desire to be alone, to think things through.

"I'm off, then," he announced. "I, ah... need a shower."

"Of course," Riddle said kindly. Harry noticed that Katie didn't make a move to join him so he guessed she wanted some time to herself as well.

He nodded to each of them in turn, and then headed for the door. He hadn't even reached it when he heard his name.

Harry turned back to face Katie.

"What did Grindelwald say to you?" she asked. "What made you snap?"

Harry paused, staring levelly at her. In his mind he played back the conversation, remembering exactly what Grindelwald had claimed, suddenly feeling sick as the words echoed over and over in his mind. He struggled to keep the pain and confusion from showing.

"It..." he began slowly, pausing, knowing he couldn't go there just yet. "It was personal."

Fifteen minutes later Harry was standing under a warm shower, staring blankly into space as the warm water washed away the dirt and pain. He was alone in the bathroom and grateful for it. As the water trickled off his body, the steam cleared his head and his muscles relaxed, taking away the majority of the pain from the Cruciatu s Curse. Time seemed to melt away as Harry stood there, his mind miles away. Unwillingly, he closed his eyes and found himself back in the Hall of Mirrors.

*"I did not murder him!" said Grindelwald, stepping nearer. "You have got the whole story wrong. Your great hero was nothing of the sort."*

*Grindelwald stepped up to Harry, until they were almost nose-to-nose, except for Grindelwald being taller. As the Dark Lord towered over him with a smug look on his face, Harry continued to smile back amiably, hoping to put the Dark Lord off balance. He could see his smugness was infuriating the Dark Lord, but for the last few seconds it had been the Dark Lord's turn to look smug, and that was worrying. When Grindelwald spoke, it was scarcely a whisper.*

*"Dumbledore was once on my side," he whispered softly. "He once believed as I did."*

*"Never," said Harry, still grinning. It was such an obvious attempt to unbalance him that Harry couldn't help but smile.*

*"Oh yes," whispered Grindelwald, his voice almost a purr. "We once planned to rule Muggles for the greater good, me and him... side by side, hand in hand."*

*"He'd never join you," Harry scoffed, the smile vanishing from his face. But there was something in the Dark Lord's eyes that laid a small seed of doubt. Harry wasn't an accomplished Legilimens, but there was something in Grindelwald's eyes that almost bordered on regret.*

*"No," said Grindelwald, "he did not join me in the end, and I did not convert him or trick him – I loved him. We planned this together. We were partners. We loved each other deeply, in the most literal sense."*

*Harry hesitated. Loved? Surely he didn't mean that in the way Harry thought he did.*

*"You are incapable of love," Harry sneered.*

*"Now, perhaps," said Grindelwald. "I learned my lesson from Albus. You see, however well you know someone, however long your relationship..."*

*"Relationship?" interrupted Harry in disbelief, keeping his voice low.*

*Grindelwald raised an eyebrow.*

*"No!" Harry trailed off. "You mean you and he were..."*

*"As much as you can love someone," continued Grindelwald, "they can still betray you. He didn't hunt me down because of my so-called atrocities. He hunted me down to try and save his lover from himself. But I didn't need saving."*

*"So you killed him, the man you claimed to..." Harry couldn't bring himself to say it.*

*"I was aiming at Riddle," said Grindelwald, appearing angry for the first time. "Albus was an accident. I never wanted to kill him. I wanted us to rule this country together..."*

*"LIAR!" screamed Harry, lashing out at Grindelwald, but he was too slow. The curse hit him in the stomach and he didn't have time to prepare himself for the onslaught of pain that followed. He was vaguely aware of his feet leaving the floor as his whole body contorted in agony as the curse swept through his nervous system.*

*Harry gasped and his eyes flew open: the daydream was over.*

*"Harry?"*

*Harry looked around, taken in his surroundings. His body tensed, ready to fight; at the same time his heart was pounding and he felt sick. As he came to his senses Harry relaxed, taking a deep breath and wiping the water from his face and trying to forget.*

*Dumbledore? Grindelwald? Never! It was impossible, he thought, shivering despite the warm water.*

"Harry?" repeated Neville. "Is that you in there?"

"It's me," replied Harry, moving his head out of the stream. "Did you need something?"

"Are you alright?" Neville asked, concern in his voice. "You've been in there a long time."

Harry didn't have a wristwatch on and didn't know if he was right or not, but he probably had been.

"I'm alright," he called back. "I'll be out in a minute, thanks."

That seemed to satisfy Neville and he left, leaving Harry to shut off the taps and dry himself. Back in his dormitory, he dressed for running. He needed to get away from everyone and be alone. Part of him considered Flaming to the far side of the world, but somehow a run seemed better – the physical exertion, the pain was what he deserved.

Ten minutes later he was racing up the side of the mountain where he had run on his first day in this world. He needed to get away... away from the mindless chatter, to where he could think. The words of the conversation were drumming through his mind. It was as if everything he believed in was wrong, tainted by Grindelwald's words. Harry knew he had no reason to trust Grindelwald, but somehow he knew that it was true. Had Dumbledore once planned on becoming a Dark Lord? That couldn't be, but at the same time he was certain that it was true on some level.

Harry ran faster and harder, his lungs protesting at the effort. *Good*, he thought bitterly, welcoming the pain. He deserved this because he had failed to see it for himself.

*Dumbledore and Grindelwald.*

Harry shook his head. No, it couldn't be true...

Surely Dumbledore had seen him for what he was? He was an excellent judge of character. He had seen Sirius as innocent the second he met him again, and as much as Harry hated to admit it, he was also right about Severus Snape. How could Dumbledore be so stupid?

Harry reached the fallen tree where he had sat on his first day and came to a stop, panting deeply. Here he had hatched his plan to get home, a plan that had since gone sideways, but it was a good quiet place to think. Harry walked out along the fallen trunk, held up by the canopy of the forest below. He sat down, dangling his legs over the edge, some eighty-foot drop beneath him.

In turmoil he stared out over the forest and the lake beyond, but his vacant eyes saw only Grindelwald's gloating face.

Dumbledore was a homosexual... He and Grindelwald were lovers.

It wasn't the gay thing that bothered him – Harry wasn't homophobic – but the statement was still met with horror for two reasons. One, why had Dumbledore never told him; and two, of all

the people in the world, why Gellert Grindelwald... Gaunt, or whatever name he used at the time?

Harry thought back to Dumbledore's office at the end of last year.

"*Sit down, Harry,*" Dumbledore had said, "*I am going to tell you everything.*"

*No, you bloody didn't!* he thought resentfully. He felt the sudden need to lash out at something, to hit a wall or kick something, but there was nothing to hit. He began to sway with pent up frustration, not even realising he was doing it.

All his wizarding life Dumbledore had been there – a rock, a pillar, a symbol of good. And all the time...

He was supposed to be a force for good, not a reformed Dark Lord. Dumbledore had once wanted to rule Muggles, and rule alongside Grindelwald? What right did he have to lecture Harry on fighting for good, equality, and all that bollocks when he himself once wanted to sit on the throne? Was it all a lie? For six years, had Harry just been taken for a ride?

He felt so betrayed, as if Dumbledore has stabbed him in the back.

*Why didn't you tell me?*

In his mind's eye he could see Grindelwald standing there, smirking at him. That knowing smirk only served to infuriate Harry even more. Looking back he felt so stupid standing there, trying to defend Dumbledore, when it had all been a lie. He had been played for a fool, and now Grindelwald was out there laughing at him. Harry longed to wipe that smirk off his face. The way he felt right now, he could quite happily wrap his fingers around that throat and squeeze the life out of him, with a big smile in his face.

He clenched his fists in frustration.

*Why?*

"I thought I might find you up here," said a familiar, warm feminine voice.

Harry turned to see Katie standing at the end of the fallen tree, still on the path. She had her hair tied back and, like Harry, was dressed for running. She wore black tracksuit bottoms with a white stripe down the side, white trainers and a white sports vest. Harry noticed she was covered in a thin film of sweat and her cheeks were pink, indicating that she had also run up the mountain path.

Harry regarded her coldly for a second, before turning back to stare at the forest.

"Can I join you?" she asked, unperturbed.

"Can I stop you?" he muttered under his breath.

He felt the log wobble slightly as Katie hopped up, walk along the length of it, and sit down astride it facing him. She sat staring at him for nearly a minute, and Harry could feel her eyes boring into the side of his head. He refused to turn around.

"What do you want?" he asked finally, his voice emotionless.

"To see if you were alright," she replied casually.

"As you can see, I'm fine," he muttered.

"Clearly," she said sarcastically. "Have you also chosen to take a vow of silence and solitude?"

Harry turned to face her, his eyes narrowed. He felt his blood boil and struggled to remain calm, but didn't grace her with a retort. Whatever pity he might have felt towards her earlier was gone – he was too wrapped up in his own anger at Dumbledore to care.

"You are anything but fine," she stated, ignoring the glare he was giving her. "You still seemed pretty cut up about something, and I'm willing to bet it was what Grindelwald said. It was about Dumbledore?"

"Whatever gave you that idea?" he asked sarcastically, turning back to the forest. She may have worked it out, but Harry didn't want to talk to anyone. The sooner she got that message and left, the better.

"You're quiet, brooding, snappy, wanting to be alone," she replied as if he required an answer. "And if that wasn't enough, there is always the big 'piss off' stamped on your forehead." She smiled, irking Harry even more that she seemed to know him so well.

"If it's so obvious I want to be alone, then why have you come to stick your nose in?"

Katie ignored the question. "Let me guess," she said. "Whatever you've discovered, you are wondering why he didn't tell you. You feel betrayed that he kept it from you, and you feel as if you have been taken for a ride. In addition, you feel that your guiding light all these years was a fraud and now you feel lost."

Harry turned to face her again. He was furious at Dumbledore, but now even more angry at Katie for being right, and more so at himself for not hiding it. Still, he refused to give her the satisfaction of admitting she had hit the bullseye. Instead he just looked out placidly over the forest, trying to ignore her.

"So, I'm right," Katie declared when he didn't respond. She reached over and made him turn towards her, pinning him with a gaze he couldn't escape from. "You see Harry, I can help. I've been through this before."

"Are you taking the piss?" asked Harry, his tone aggressive. "You don't know anything."

"Oh, God!" sighed Katie, leaning backward until she was lying on the log. She raised her hands to wipe imaginary weariness from her face. "It's like dealing with a four-year-old."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You honestly think you are the first one to go through this?" she said with a dry laugh as she sat back up. "You think no one can understand?"

"And you can?"

"Yes," said Katie as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "Let's not forget, Harry, that last night you did exactly the same to me. Riddle, the one person I have counted on all my life. You tore his reputation to shreds. Riddle has always been my guide and you showed me he was once a Dark Lord. And if you remember, you did it with a damn smile on your face. So how does it feel when the tables have turned?"

"You came all this way to gloat?" Bitterly, he turned back to the forest. He realised she had a point, but his anger only made him resentful.

"I'm not that petty," she replied, and for some reason he believed her. "I came all this way to try to knock some sense into you, you dolt!"

"Because you are so wise in these matters," hissed Harry, his voice oozing sarcasm.

"Harry," she said wearily, "like it or not, we are in the same boat. We both had mentors whose reputations have been called into question, and we have both been lied to and deceived. You and Riddle didn't tell me about the Prophecy or Voldemort, and Dumbledore didn't tell you about the Prophecy or Grindelwald's big secret."

"And because you have never hidden information from me," Harry reasoned, "that somehow makes you better?"

"That's not what I'm trying to say," replied Katie, sounding impatient. "What I am trying to get you to understand is the same thing you spent nearly an hour trying to tell me last night. Like it or not, there is a lot that we can learn from each other."

"Really," he said with a doubtful snort. "You were fairly adamant all last night that you didn't want my kind of help. And what, may I ask, do I get?"

"You really are determined to isolate yourself, aren't you?" she said with a shake of her head and ignoring the jibe.

"Am not," he retorted coldly, realising how immature that sounded. He took a deep breath and grounded himself. "It's not like I do it on purpose."

"Oh grow up," she sighed. "Who do you think is isolating you? You are! Stop feeling sorry for yourself. *'Oh, I'm all alone, just a weapon, once he's dead no one will need me.'* How can you be so blind? For God's sake, get your story straight!"

"Straighten it out," Harry challenged her.

"Very well," said Katie serenely, crossing her arms. "You think you are just a weapon and that no one really cares. You think once Voldemort is dead, you will be cast aside and everyone will forget you. Where is the proof of that? Let's look to the past. As you told me last night, once you arrived at Hogwarts and Dumbledore saw you, he cared about you so much he screwed up his entire plan for the great weapon. He jeopardised everything by not telling you about the Prophecy, and all because he cared about you. Riddle did the same for me. Again in your own words, you met your family and finally felt at home. That is a luxury I haven't had."

"So you think you are worse off than me?" he said, hating the defensive tone his voice had taken.

"This isn't a game of one-upmanship. I'm not trying to prove who's suffered the most, you know," she replied exasperatedly. "The point is that Dumbledore – whatever Grindelwald told you, whatever happened to him – he changed, just like Riddle has done. Your mentor was a good man, the man you remembered, and he clearly cared about you. Whatever your past dealings with Riddle in your world, here in my world he is a good man. Remember what you said this morning about Sirius and the Women's Auxiliary Balloon Corps? Whatever happened in his past, doesn't make what you had any less real, Harry – your own words. Why is it that people who insist on giving advice can never take it?"

Harry shot her a glare.

"As for me," she continued. "Yes, we have argued. Yes, we have issues, but we can put those aside, Harry. Today I saw what you were willing to do for me, and okay, maybe I was wrong to be so hostile last night. Riddle's willing to accept you, to help you, and I know I am, too. You are not alone, and trying to convince yourself that you are is not going to help."

As she finished, Harry stared back out over the forest. Her words had hit home and she had a point. Despite his failings, Dumbledore had always been there and in later years, he had been a good man. As he was always saying, it is our choices that show what we really are, and he had chosen to return to the light and leave Grindelwald. In this universe, he had even given his life to that cause.

"I'm not going to ask what Grindelwald told you," said Katie. "If you want to tell me then you will, I just want you to know that I am here for you. I'm your friend."

"To stop me falling into that precipice of darkness?" asked Harry, turning to face her.

Katie's eyebrows flickered, but she managed to keep calm.

"I heard you," he admitted. "You think I am a walking time-bomb, a monster."

Katie paused and sighed. "I think you have the capacity to be one," she admitted. That sounded rather like bottling the answer to Harry. "You were close to killing that man in black. And I've seen the coldness inside you, this defence mechanism. But at the same time I've seen the person underneath, and he is worth fighting for. He took two Cruciatu Curses for me today, and followed me into the Ministry instead of going home."

"Actually," Harry corrected her, "I don't have a key yet. I can't go home."

"Shut up and take the compliment," said Katie, laughing. "My point is that this so-called Dark Knight doesn't control you. He's just an imprint left by another person. You, Harry, are in control and you are my friend, not that other guy. Every time you say no to the Dark Knight you get stronger, but you are still so scared to let anyone in."

"What if they don't like what they find?" he said in a small voice, suddenly fearful. He hadn't even realised that he even felt like that until she brought it up. It was a revelation to him, and he was mystified how she had seen it when he had clearly missed it.

"That's their choice to make," she said with a shrug. "But if you don't try, you'll never know."

Harry paused, considering what she had just said.

"Why are you trying to help me?" he asked finally. "Last night you hated me, this morning you distrust me. You complained to Riddle that I am untrustworthy and you can never feel safe around me. But here you are being nice to me. Why?"

"Because I've seen into your eyes, Harry, and the Dark Knight's," she replied. "You are stronger than you think. Sure I may be angry about Sirius, and I may not like or trust this cold soldier persona, but I've seen what's underneath all that and it's you, Harry. The real you. Despite everything, I think I like that person. And besides, I guess it's just nice to have someone around who can understand what it's like to be me."

"Snap," muttered Harry.

"I guess I just want someone to trust and talk to, and when you are not acting like you're made of ice you fit the profile," she admitted. "And I know I was wrong to blame you for Sirius' death. I don't want to fight any longer, I just want to be friends, okay?"

Harry stared her in the eye for a moment, before nodding.

"Friends," he said simply.

Katie shot him a small smile and then climbed to her feet. Harry did likewise, and they stood facing each other on the log. It was time to head back for dinner, and Harry found that his appetite had mysteriously returned.

"I'm going back now," he said as he stepped closer.

"Before you do," said Katie. "There's one more thing I wanted to say."

Harry paused and stared at her, waiting.

"I wanted to say sorry for the way I acted earlier," she said. "I was just angry about Sirius, and I didn't mean to try to take him away from you. And generally I've been really rude to you." She

stepped closer to him. "I just wanted to say sorry, and I'll try not to be such a bitch from now on."

"You're not a b..."

"There's more," said Katie, cutting him off with a finger to the lips. "I wanted to say thanks, not only for saving my life and all you did at Versailles, but also for the way you were earlier. I'm sorry I lost control in Riddle's office, I..."

Hey," Harry interrupted gently, moving her hand away from his lips and clutching it to his chest. It felt oddly right there for some reason and he was loath to move it. "You have nothing to apologise for. After what you have endured in your life, you deserve a break. You waited years to cry, taking everything that was thrown at you. You couldn't show the pain, and just had to struggle on, presenting a brave face to the world. Any normal person would have crumbled years ago."

"You didn't," she said timidly.

"Dumbledore once told me that the fact I can still feel pain is what makes me human," said Harry. "The fact I feel Sirius' loss so profoundly is an emotion to be proud of, and is what makes me better than Voldemort." Harry realised as he spoke that his statement was no longer true. He realised that Katie knew this as well, judging by her conversation with Riddle at Versailles. A nagging doubt rose in the back of Harry's mind, one that could not be silenced.

"I doubted him at the time," continued Harry, "but looking back he was right. Look at me now. I kill and I feel nothing but anger. I can silence those voices of conscience in the back of my mind, push friends away, isolate myself and just keep fighting. Am I still human?"

"Hey," said Katie, taking her turn to interrupt. She raised her other hand to gently touch his cheek causing a strange shiver to run through his body. "You heard me in Versailles. I am not giving up on you this easily. We are who we chose to be – you are not beyond saving."

"Not giving up on me?" He grinned.

"Never," she said with a small smile. She pulled away before turning around and heading back along the log. "Come on, oh great Knight of Darkness," she called back playfully. "Race you back!"

As he made to follow her, Harry felt somewhat relieved that at least someone had faith in him, even if he did not. However, he couldn't understand how she had gone from deadly serious to provocatively mocking him in a heartbeat.

"Women," muttered Harry exasperatedly, as he set off in pursuit, determined to not let her beat him back to the castle.

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Harry was awoken the next morning by Ron getting up to go for a shower. His response to this was to swear, and then roll over and go back to sleep after making the tactical decision that it was too early to wake up yet. Unfortunately for him this was not to be, as a few minutes later he was awoken by a loud squawk next to his bed. Cracking open one eye, Harry parted the curtains to find an unfamiliar owl sitting on the dresser.

He groggily reached over and removed the letter from the owl's foot, keeping an eye on the creature's beak just in case. With the letter in hand, Harry retreated inside his curtains, crawled back under the covers, and opened the letter.

*Dear Mr Potter,*

*Due to your role in recent events Rufus Scrimgoeur, Commanding Officer of the Aurors, requests your presence at an emergency meeting to take place in the Ministry of Magic tomorrow, Tuesday, February 27th, at 1300. Please be discrete, as this meeting is of a sensitive nature.*

*RSVP via return owl.*

*Kind Regards,*

*A. Hughes  
P.P. Rufus Scrimgoeur  
Department of Magical Law Enforcement*

Harry groaned and threw the parchment down – the last thing he needed was a sleazy politician giving him the tenth degree, especially if all Harry could think about was killing him in another dimension. If Kingsley was right, the man would spend two minutes on preparations for the future and then an hour trying to get Harry to endorse him as the next Minister. Fat chance.

Not only was this letter bad news, but it also meant he needed to get up and show the letter to Riddle. In a foul mood, Harry threw the duvet off him and opened the curtains. To his further annoyance, the owl was still perched on the dresser, staring at him. The bird clearly wanted a reply.

"You can go, I'll reply later," said Harry as he crossed to the dresser. He reached out to open a drawer for some clothes, but the owl lashed out and tried to bite his fingers. Harry's reflexes allowed him to whip his hand out of range.

"I said I'd reply later, now go away!" he snapped at the bird, which stared defiantly back.

"I don't normally condone cruelty to animals," said Harry, summoning his wand. "But you are pushing it, featherbrain. Now, sod off," he said firmly, pointing his wand at the bird. The owl looked indignant for a minute and then with a loud screech flapped its wings and flew out of the window.

Once the bird had gone, Harry threw on some clothes, and headed down the stairs. To his surprise he found Katie emerging alone from her dorm as he arrived in the Common Room.

"Morning," she said, eyeing what was in his hand. "You got one too?"

"If you are referring to a request to join the Scrimgoeur arse kissers club, then yes," he muttered cynically.

"Did anyone ever tell you, you have a wonderfully charming way with words?" Katie teased, heading towards the door,

"Once," he replied grumpily. "I told him to f-off."

Katie laughed as they made their way out into the hall.

"Was your owl really vicious?" asked Harry. "When you didn't respond?"

"No, mine was fine," she replied. "What, did yours bite you?" she asked, trying not to laugh.

"No," answered Harry slightly embarrassed, "but it wasn't through lack of trying, little git."

"So what did you do? Swear at it and threaten to hex it?" she asked, openly laughing.

Harry grimaced, that he was so predictable. "Something like that," he said, trying to pass it off as a joke. Katie just shook her head.

They walked in silence, but unlike in the past this was not an awkward silence. In fact, it was quite comfortable. Yesterday they had reached a crossroads and drawn a line under past conflicts. Things were looking up and Harry liked it. Almost without realising it he found his mood improving.

They arrived at Riddle's office a few minutes later and entered without knocking since the door was already ajar. Riddle was leaning back in his chair talking to the head of Kingsley Shacklebolt in the fireplace.

"Ah, the very people," said the Auror, noticing their arrival.

"Morning," said Harry congenially.

"Received your letters?" asked Kingsley.

Harry nodded and Katie held hers up.

"I think it best that, should a meeting happen," said Kingsley, "it be on neutral soil. I wouldn't put it past him to use your presence as a coup, before you even have a chance to speak."

"We'll get to that," said Riddle, "For now, just carry on as before. And remind the Weasley twins that time is of the essence."

Kingsley nodded and with a wave at Harry and Katie, disappeared in the fireplace.

"Take a seat," said Riddle as the green flame disbursed. "Tea?"

Neither Harry nor Katie accepted.

"You need not worry about Rufus," Riddle informed them. "I will deal with him for you, and keep you both out of the spotlight. However, it is fortunate that you are both here, as we have something important to discuss."

There was a pause and when neither Katie nor Harry interrupt him, Riddle continued.

"Grindelwald made the point of removing his school records from Durmstrang, but under their school rules their Ministry of Magic also keep records, though this is not widely known. I have received this morning the information they have on the student, Gellert Gaunt."

Harry leaned forward, suddenly alert and interested.

"Harry, how much do you know about his past?"

"Very little," said Harry. "I was always more interested in someone else's past. He's not my Dark Lord, is he?"

Riddle ignored the stab and opened the file.

"Well, now that we know his real name a good deal more information has come to light," replied Riddle. "We were wildly mistaken when we estimated his date of birth. I say, we. What I meant was the British Ministry of Magic assumed he was born around 1915. However, it appears he was born in 1883, which makes him one hundred and fourteen this year."

"And he's still going strong," muttered Harry. "Then man is seven times my age, but he's still like hitting a brick wall."

"Is that a result of the Horcrux?" asked Katie hopefully. "Is he now weaker?"

"Unfortunately, no," replied Riddle. "Horcruxes don't affect magical or physical strength. I think there is some other magic that keeps him from aging. Strength enhancement is a common field of magic. Witches and wizards are lazier these days, and prefer to let magic do all the work."

"What do we know about his early years?" asked Katie, steering the conversation back to the topic at hand.

"From the school records he was bright, brilliant in fact, but wildly reckless," replied Riddle. "This led to his expulsion in the year 1899, after which these records are useless. It is simple to work out that at this point he changed his name from Gaunt to Grindelwald and came to England."

"But he was born a Gaunt?" asked Harry. "He's your...what is he?"

"I am unsure," confessed Riddle. "To the best of my knowledge, my uncle never married. But our grandfather may have had siblings. Some time before him the family tree must have branched."

"He doesn't have to be directly related," Katie pointed out. "There's probably hundreds of Gaunts around."

"Grindelwald opened the Chamber of Secrets," Riddle pointed out. "He is a Parselmouth, which means a close link to Salazar Slytherin. Apparently, my mother's family spoke Parseltongue at home as their first language. No, he is definitely related. I will look into the family tree and see if I can identify where it branched. According to his Birth Certificate here, he was born in England, moved to Germany when he was four, and then to Romania before starting at Durmstrang."

"What was he expelled for?" asked Katie.

"Suspected involvement with another student's death," replied Riddle. "According to this it was known that he was involved so he was expelled and arrested, but there was no evidence to convict him. As such, he was released and fled abroad."

"So if there was no evidence," said Katie thoughtfully. "Why was he expelled?"

"They knew he had done something, and he had many detentions for violence," replied Riddle. "In the end they were glad to be rid of him, and thus used the fact that he was out of bounds after curfew, defacing school property, as an excuse."

"Defacing school property?" scoffed Harry. "Not exactly a glamorous crime, scribbling whatever 'Gellert was ere' is in German on something."

"Actually," said Riddle. "It appears he carved what was for a short time to become his symbol into the wall, and it is still there today." He held a photo out to Harry and Katie, which showed an eye inside a triangle.

"Illuminati?" asked Katie, raising an eyebrow. "Is that the all-seeing eye?"

Harry had no idea what she meant and glanced from Riddle to her and back, which was not lost on Riddle. "The Illuminati, or Illuminted Ones..."

"Professor Binns said Enlightened Ones," added Katie.

"...are allegedly an ancient Order that cropped up in both Magical and Muggle history, which are always at odds with the Church and Wizard authorities of the day, and are also at the end of most conspiracy theories."

"I know roughly who they are, I just didn't know about the symbol," replied Harry defensively.

"The all-seeing eye," Riddle continued, "is an eye inside a triangle that is the symbol of this alleged Order. They crop up everywhere, and there are so many versions of the legend that you can get lost in it all. Anyhow, that is not the Illuminati there," said Riddle.

"How can you be sure," asked Katie,

"Because it is from the Peverell Family Crest," replied Riddle. "Who in turn are another descendant of Salazar Slytherin."

"I thought he was a Gaunt," interrupted Harry, not seeing the relevance of the Peverells.

"He was," explained Riddle. "The Gaunts are descended from the Peverells, and so this was briefly his symbol before he changed it in favour of the Dark Mark."

"The skull and serpent *is* slightly more awe inspiring," replied Katie.

"There was a time when I would have loved to have heard you say that," replied Riddle.

"You designed the Dark Mark?" asked Harry jumping ahead. He had wondered why Grindelwald's signal was the same as Voldemort's. Now it made perfect sense.

"Yes," replied Riddle. "I was rather proud of it at the time, but then...imagine my horror when it started appearing where people had died."

"I always thought that was the point," Harry said icily with a raised eyebrow.

Katie rolled her eyes. "Don't start," she warned them sternly. "This is about Grindelwald's past, not yours."

There was an awkward pause before Riddle changed the subject. "Anyhow, he fled to Britain at the beginning of the century. There he met the young Albus Dumbledore."

Harry froze at the words, remembering all that Grindelwald had said.

"They were...close," said Riddle. Harry's body involuntarily clenched. Riddle had known the entire time. Looking back on his odd behaviour whenever the subject came up, Riddle had known all along and not told him. He had deliberately avoided the questions. Damn him! Harry deeply wanted to scream at the man, but Katie was right, this was not the time. Soon though, Riddle would answer for his past.

"For a time, at least," continued Riddle. "We know from police records that Albus' sister, Ariana, was killed in a confrontation between Albus, Gellert Grindelwald, and Albus' brother, Aberforth. If I had to guess, I would say that this confrontation was what brought Albus into the war, and why he started hunting Grindelwald. They spoke about it during that final conflict, but I do not know enough about what happened to make sense of it. However, it seems certain that this was Albus' motivation. However close they had once been, that was something not even Albus could forgive."

Just as Riddle was about to continue, a silver tabby-cat glided through the solid door to the office and soared up onto Riddle's desk. The cat stared at Riddle and then spoke with the familiar Scottish accent of the Gryffindor Head of House.

"Headmaster, our new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher has arrived," the cat said.

Harry still found it odd to be talking to a Patronus, and the tone in the cat's voice and the expression on its ghostly features were Professor McGonagall to a tee. Harry managed to hide the grin as the cat dissolved into nothing.

Riddle picked up his wand from the desktop and flicked it. With a whoosh, a plume of white vapour erupted from his wand and surged out the door, but it had sailed through the door before solidifying into a shape. Harry was mildly curious about what form Riddle's Patronus took. The Voldemort he had always known was incapable of a happy thought and so didn't have one, nor have need of one, as Dementors already feared him.

"That reminds me," said Riddle conversationally. "I need to teach you both that charm. It is a variation on the Patronus and is used to carry a message. The message you need to have reading in your head to begin with is the trick. Harry, you first. Think of a simple message and its recipients. For example, 'what colour socks are you wearing', to Kathryn."

Harry raised an eyebrow, at Riddle. He had the distinct impression he was being patronised. He glanced across at Katie who was looking expectantly at him. Harry sighed. It was a childish message, and he wasn't sure if Riddle was teasing him.

"Now," Riddle continued, "with that message in your head, point your wand in any direction but give yourself space. You need the following incantation – *Crypto-Patronum*. Crypto meaning secret, as in Cryptography, and Patronum from Expecto Patronum. Now, please, ask Miss Bell what colour socks she is wearing."

Harry was still dubious about the glimmer of amusement in Riddle's eye, but he tried his best. Ever aware of the headmaster's eyes on him, Harry aimed his wand at Katie.

"*CRYPTO PATRONUM*"

The stag erupted from Harry's wand and trotted around to Katie. It stood regarding her for a second before opening its mouth.

The stag mumbled something that sounded vaguely like words before vanishing. Feeling slightly deflated, Harry resisted the childish urge to insist on another go. Instead, to preserve dignity he turned back to Riddle.

"A little more emphasis on the message, but otherwise good," replied Riddle. "You may wish to practice in your own time. Kathryn?"

"What shall I say?" she asked, as she removed her wand from her pocket.

"Why not answer the question," suggested Riddle.

Katie readied herself, and then after a deep breath pointed her wand and said the words. A plume of white light shot out of her wand towards the far wall where she was pointing. In mid-air the mist began to solidify, and out of a cloud leapt an animal that for a second Harry thought was a dog, but it was sleeker and wilder with a large bush of a tail.

"A fox?" said Harry aloud as the animal padded up to him and leapt up into his lap, its ghostly bushy tail dangling over his legs. It was an odd sensation as he could see and hear it but he felt no weight on his knees, only the cold of the mist and the tingle of the magic.

"A *vixen*," corrected Katie, as the creature opened its mouth. Both Harry and Katie braced themselves as the vixen began to speak.

"Green and blue stripes," whispered the vixen softly. With that the animal faded into nothing. Katie looked partially annoyed and partially relieved at the same time. That could have been worse, he supposed.

"Fox, eh?" asked Harry, picturing the creature in his mind.

"Vixen," said Katie, somewhat defensively.

"Okay," conceded Harry, restraining the sarcastic comment that leapt to mind. "A female *fox*. Your father was an Animagus, no?"

"My mother," replied Katie. "Cunning as a fox."

"Oh," said Harry, making a mental note, though he wasn't sure why he felt it was important.

*Knock! Knock!*

"Ah, perfect timing," said Riddle, conversationally. He waved a hand in the direction of the door and there was a click as it unlocked. Riddle rose to his feet, presumably out of manners, while Harry and Katie turned towards the door. As it opened, a figure stepped into the room, a figure cloaked in black.

Harry's jaw dropped as he stared at the man before him. He knew that face!

The newcomer was tall with a thin and pale face framed in thick black hair. He was clean-shaven, but the course of his journey had left him with stubble. He wore black trousers, boots, and a black set of robes above which the collar of a white shirt was visible. Hovering behind him was a trunk on which a cage containing a large lizard was perched. The man looked about as trust-worthy as Mundungus Fletcher.

"Ah, welcome to Hogwarts," said Riddle, stepped around the table to greet the newcomer.

Harry continued to stare at the new arrival. It was the same man he had met in the Department of Mysteries, the man who had saved him from a gorilla-like Death Eater. At that time he appeared on be on their side, but had been cloaked as a Death Eater. Harry remembered Riddle raising an eyebrow when Harry had said anyone would be better than Umbridge. To make matters worse, Harry was sure he had met the man long before he had arrived in this world. Who the hell was he?

Just then a voice hissed his name. Harry leaned back so Katie could whisper in his ear. "Is it just me or does he look kind of familiar to you?" She had clearly been thinking the same thing.

McGonagall had appeared behind the new arrival and had closed the door. Riddle instantly conjured two chairs and offered them to the man and Professor McGonagall.

"Please, take a seat," he said returning to his own. "I have ordered some drinks to be served once you had arrived." He stared at the fireplace for a moment then turned back to the room. "But forgive me, I am forgetting my manners: Minerva McGonagall you know, this is Kathryn Bell as I am sure you can tell, and next to her is Harry Potter."

The professor nodded to each of them in turn.

"I know you," said Harry, before Riddle had managed to start the other side of the introduction.

The headmaster hesitated for a moment, and Harry felt a tense silence descend over the room. The new professor seemed not to notice. Not taking his eyes off Harry, he leaned forward and spoke with a soft and calm voice.

"Yes, Mister Potter," he said politely. "We met briefly in the Department of Mysteries where I believe I was of some assistance."

Harry paused. The man had admitted he was a Death Eater and that he had helped him. Was he a spy? Better to be safe and not mention the Order, he decided. Still, something else about the man was familiar.

"No," said Harry, certain he was right. "We've met before then, I'm sure."

"I don't think so," he replied, studying Harry critically. "At least, not that I recall."

"Who are you, then?" asked Harry.

"This," announced Riddle with a flourish, "is our new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher, Professor Regulus Black."

Harry and Katie's jaws dropped at the mention of the name.

"I thought you were dead," said Harry, before he could stop himself.

"Not that I'm aware of," said Regulus with a small smile.

"Must have imagined it," said Harry quickly, realising how foolish it had been to highlight a difference between worlds.

"You're Sirius' brother," said Katie next to him. Her voice was shaking and as Harry turned, he saw that she was sitting bolt upright and looking very pale.

"I am," replied Regulus, a sad look crossing his face.

"And a Death Eater," continued Katie. Black shot a quick look at Riddle who nodded.

"That depends on who you ask," replied Regulus. "I have for the last few years been an active member of the Order of the Phoenix, though no one knew it. So much so that I had to take down Alastor Moody two nights ago as he tried to hex me."

"So he's the best choice you have for Defence teacher?" asked Harry, outraged. "We are supposed to be teaching defence, not the Dark Arts themselves."

"But he has actually been there," said Riddle. "He has seen it from both sides."

"So you are publicly acknowledging Regulus as joining our side?"

"After a fashion," said Riddle. "And best of all, it was not my idea. Regulus?"

"Right," said Regulus, making himself comfy. "Following on from that night in the Ministry, the Dark Lord had two priorities. First was his trip to France, whatever that was about, and the second was to re-establish his eyes and ears inside Hogwarts and the Ministry. Now, from my brother I assume you know that the Ancient and Most Noble House of Black has always had leanings towards the Dark Arts. The Dark Lord gave me the task of playing the grieving brother."

"Playing?" asked Katie angrily.

"His words," replied Regulus calmly. "Anyhow, on his instructions I am here to throw myself at the mercy of the Order. And on Tom's orders, I am here where he can keep an eye on me. The Dark Lord expects me to collect information from his young fans and pass it to him."

"What about Sirius?" asked Katie. "Why didn't you help him? Why didn't you warn us?"

Regulus sighed and shook his head. When he spoke, his voice was slow and sad, "Not even being able to tell my own brother was perhaps the hardest part of being a spy," he said. "He died hating me, and nothing can ever change that."

"That doesn't answer the question," said Katie bluntly.

"Because I didn't know what was happening until it was too late," said Regulus, his tone more firm. "I got the message to go to the Department of Mysteries less than five minutes before we actually got there. The next thing I know we're in the middle of a fire fight. Please know that I attempted to get the children out."

"So you are the best spy we have, and you didn't know this was happening?" asked Harry incredulously.

"No one knew about that mission," replied Regulus. "Only perhaps Lucius Malfoy and Bellatrix Lestrange. I found out two minutes before I arrived, when it was already too late. I did what I could without blowing my cover. Luckily for you, Tom here was already forewarned."

"Hang on," said Harry. "If Regulus didn't tell you and only Malfoy and Lestrange knew of the plan, then surely that means only one of them could have warned you?"

"Ah, yes," said Riddle. "We have hit upon another great mystery of this saga. Who sent that message? It was delivered by a Patronus, which can only be conjured by a member of the Order. However, it was no Patronus that I have ever encountered before that night."

"What Patronus?" asked Katie curiously. "What form did it take?"

"Yeah," said Harry. "I might have encountered it."

Riddle paused for a moment before answering:

"The message was delivered by a deer," replied Riddle. "A silver doe."

## ~~~~ Chapter VIII ~~~~

### Keep Your Enemies Closer

*These fancy things, will never come in between  
You're part of my entity, here for Infinity  
When the war has took it's part  
When the world has dealt it's cards  
If the hand is hard, together we'll mend your heart  
Because  
When the sun shines, we'll shine together  
Told you I'll be here forever  
Said I'll always be a friend  
Took an oath I'ma stick it out till the end  
Now that it's raining more than ever  
Know that we'll still have each other  
You can stand under my umbrella*

*~ Rihanna (Umbrella)*



A cry for help in the Dark throws Harry into a moral dilemma and brings him face to face with an old enemy. With two suspected Death Eaters on the table, trust is a luxury he can ill afford. As fate throws him in closer to his opposite number, Harry begins to realise that sooner or later he is going to have to choose between worlds: sooner or later, he is going to have to make a sacrifice, and a choice.