



Harry Potter and the Clean Slate

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/36531124) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/36531124>.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	F/M
Fandom:	Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling
Relationship:	Harry Potter/Nymphadora Tonks
Characters:	Harry Potter , Nymphadora Tonks , Amelia Bones , Albus Dumbledore , Perenelle Flamel (Harry Potter) , Sirius Black , Nicholas Flamel (Nicholas Flamel) , Fleur Delacour , Voldemort (Harry Potter)
Additional Tags:	Harry Potter Epilogue What Epilogue EWE , Time Travel , Slow Burn , Metamorphmagus Harry Potter , Comedy , BAMF Harry Potter , Out of Character Harry Potter , Powerful Voldemort (Harry Potter) , Magically Powerful Harry Potter , Teacher Harry Potter , Alternate Universe - Harry Potter Setting , Different Horcrux Locations , Good Albus Dumbledore , I have no idea where this is going, but I'm trying my best , Unhinged Harry Potter , Master of Death Harry Potter , Adult Harry Potter , Harry Potter Has a Different Name
Language:	English
Collections:	HP stories I could read a thousand times  , Ficspotter , Melhoresdestiny , glitters faves  , ZombieLove's Time Eaters , Carefully Constructed Chronicles , História que gosto e que sempre vou reler yukio_tanaka
Stats:	Published: 2022-01-19 Updated: 2023-10-15 Words: 157,321 Chapters: 12/?

Harry Potter and the Clean Slate

by [ForsensProgeny](#)

Summary

It's been seventy years since Voldemort fell and the war ended, but Harry's battle never did. Until he clashes with a witch meddling with time in the endless sands of Algeria, and the clocks turn back.

The die is cast, a new path forged. Old challenges meet new tricks. Someone's going to die, and it won't be him.

Sic semper tyrannis, he says, and may the gods help all those who stand in his way, for no one else will.

Kronos

Chapter 1: Kronos

Harry wiped his brow free from sweat once more as he crawled along the baking hot sand, huffing in annoyance as grains rubbed against his chest from where they'd somehow managed to get through his layers of armour. The sun beat down on his back furiously, steadily eating its way through the cooling charms imbued in his BDUs.

He didn't know exactly where he was, except that he was definitely still in the Sahara judging by the endless sea of sand stretching around him. Probably still in Algeria... somewhere. For the last month or so he'd been tracking the bloody trail of a particularly nasty Dark Witch called Aigamuxa who had been massacring the local muggle populous using magic that the ICW had thought had been destroyed centuries ago. Harry suspected that the mad bitch had somehow managed to find and break into one of the infamous vaults left behind by the immensely rich African trader mages that used to collect knowledge from all across the continents, using the gold they mined from the area along with very nasty wards to protect the knowledge they hoarded.

He and Bill had found one in Tunisia while Harry was on a contract out there 27 years ago. Some of the tomes that they had found—after going through the arduous task of translating languages that hadn't been used in centuries—had been nothing short of groundbreaking in some cases and horrific in others. Harry wasn't sure why someone had wanted to make a parasitic worm that ate a mage's magic and then duplicated before spreading, but it had made him slightly queasy. The artist had been unfortunately accurate in depicting the stages of transferral. The method the worm used to enter and exit a human wasn't pretty.

Not many people could do the job that Harry did, but he'd made a living out of it. And he was damn good at it. He'd killed one of the worst Dark Lords seen in centuries when he was in his early twenties, and he'd only gotten better since then.

After completing his NEWTs and getting counselling for some severe mental trauma from his run-ins with Riddle's merry band of psychopaths he'd joined the Hit-Wizards when they found that he could qualify for the more elite group of mages. The purpose of the Hit-Wizards was to actively hunt down and move in on dangerous targets while the Aurors investigated and did general policing. He was the youngest to join in a long time, and he'd risen through the ranks quickly. In the five-year process of tracking down the remnants of Riddle's little fan club, he had risen from being a recruit to commanding a squad of his own. He still had fond memories of his squad. There were 5 of them, and by the end of his time with the Hit-Wizards, he had managed to get them through it all alive apart from one due to his own stupid mistake, which was saying something with Harry's tendency to attract trouble and history of friends dying around him. It had been one of his proudest achievements.

He had managed this because it was what he did best. He was a master at simply living through whatever was thrown at him. The 11 long, lonely, dark years at the Dursleys would have broken him if he was anything less than he was. He had been repeatedly dodging death

even under the supposedly best wards in the country every time he returned to Hogwarts for a new year. By the time he was 17, he was at the centre of a civil war and had seen countless deaths, dodging death himself more times than he could count when he was on the run for five years starting in his 7th year. He had killed before his balls even dropped, although some would question if Quirrell was a murder, as he had died when Voldemort left his body after possessing it. But it had still been something that an 11-year-old shouldn't have had to see.

After 21 years with the Hit-Wizards Harry had shown himself to be the best of the best. He and his squad had taken down countless dark mages and run-of-the-day criminals, gaining the respect of both his peers and superiors in the process. This was important to Harry, who had always wanted to be respected for something that he actually did, instead of something he did as an infant.

Eventually, he caught the attention of the ICW, who discreetly approached him through a branch of itself that didn't officially exist and offered to employ him to take down up-and-coming or already existing dark mages and even the odd muggle terrorist from all around the world. It was a tough choice for him. He had gained the respect and loyalty of his squad, who he had carefully built a friendship with based on the understanding that they couldn't let friendships get in the way on missions. In the end, though, he acquiesced. Some were confused as to why Harry left the Hit-Wizards—A job that everyone knew he loved—for a desk job at the ICW managing and maintaining the Statute of Secrecy for the UK, but they got over it.

Of course, he was doing nothing of the sort. Instead, he was being tested by some of the most formidable fighters and knowledgeable teachers that he'd ever seen from all over the world before they deemed him acceptable. They paid him monthly like any other job, and highly at that, but it also through a bounty system that was adjusted for how dangerous the mage in question was. Call it an incentive to go after the more insane ones. He had grabbed the job with both hands. Nothing got his blood pumping like going against dark mages. After all, it was all he had ever known. He had grown up running from people and the occasional animal that wanted him dead. And though people would always be disturbed when he said it, he enjoyed it. In the years of peace between killing Voldemort and joining the Hit-Wizards he had felt out of place and antsy, itching to get back into the action and fling curses at something. His mind healer called it a combat stress reaction. Harry didn't really give a shit.

He had been working as a Hunter for around 49 years now, and in that time had maintained his ability to go through the most arduous trials and somehow come out on top. Harry still remembered one particular contract where he was ordered to hunt a Bosnian wizard who was turning trolls into inferni, which of course meant they were immune to fire and still had the magic resistant skin. The ten idiot Ukrainian mages that the ICW forced him to babysit made jokes the whole time about undead trolls, disrespected the women in every public place they stopped at and generally pissed Harry off at every turn. In the end, they (read: Harry) tracked the mad bastard down to a plot of land in the middle of nowhere New Mexico where the trolls promptly rose from the earth midway through their attempt to kill the bastard. Harry had spent around 5 hours gleefully sending steel javelins through the skulls of the trolls, keeping up spell fire on the wizard at the same time with a second wand. He hadn't really paid attention to the mages he was sent with, assuming they could handle themselves. At the end of the fight, all that remained were hundreds of dead trolls, one dead dark wizard, 8 dead

Ukrainians and one thoroughly pissed-off Harry. That guy had been worth 45,000 galleons. On a completely unrelated note, the ICW decided that pairing people with Harry wasn't necessary anymore. 'Economically inefficient' were the official words, he believed.

The six-figure price tag attached to this one's head told Harry that this 'Aigamuxa' was extremely dangerous, and high on the ICW's need-to-kill list. Now that he had seen her handiwork, she was pretty high on his as well. He'd never liked it when mages killed muggles. Muggles were like ants to mages; they had no defence against magic. To kill them was an act of cowardice. Even an imbecile like Mundungus Fletcher could kill a muggle with a couple of words and a flick of his wand.

Harry pushed images of that coward out of his head and grimaced as he heard the metallic rasp of his false leg scrape along the sand. He had lost the right leg to the same curse as Moody, just above the knee. He even had a wooden stump like Moody before he managed to dig up a book from Riddle's personal library on some really obscure body modification magic, in which was the magic that Riddle used to fix up the rat's arm when he lopped it off. He had never gotten used to the sound of metal whenever something hit it, even if it felt just like it had before he lost it, feeling, pain and everything. The Elder Wand had a tendency to do the impossible like that.

Along the way, he had also lost his left eye to an obscure Scottish tribal curse from the 500s, from a former Death Eater hiding out in Malaysia who he knew for a *fact* had researched it just to piss him off. It specifically targeted only one of the eyes, and he had only got his eyes fixed a year previously. Everyone knew his eyesight used to be abysmal. That guy had died slower than the others. It had taken 3 years to figure out how to fix it and it took an eyeball-sized diamond, some irritatingly delicate transfiguration, 2 rituals and some equally finicky enchantment work for it to function like a normal eye. That Russian noble family was pissed when they found out their diamond had been taken. Their fault for having shit wards.

Harry was pulled out of his fond memories of robbing the Kerimovs and finally crested the dune he had been climbing for the better part of half an hour. He was then greeted by a sight that made him want to go straight back to the ICW headquarters and demand more money and maybe an obliviation or two. Maybe a complimentary bottle of good whiskey and a Veela-attended massage parlour, too?

In front of him was one of the most sickening sights he had seen in a long time. And considering his occupation, that was really saying something.

A small village had been ruthlessly torn apart as if a rouge tornado had torn through it. The bodies of the inhabitants were uncaringly piled off to the side in a heap, each one unnaturally pale, even for a dead body. Children lay unmoving on the bodies of their parents, even the animals weren't spared. A raven was perched on top of the pile. It turned its head to the side and fixed him with a look that was far too intelligent to belong to a creature.

Evidently, Death was keeping an eye on him. It was always more powerful around areas of death. Harry mentally flipped it off and returned to his observation of the scene.

The reason for this gruesome sight was painted into the sand where the village used to be. The entire area had been turned into one huge ritual circle, painted entirely with the blood of

the villagers. In the centre a tall, dark-skinned witch was painting what seemed to be the last of the runes for the ritual circle. She was completely naked and covered in blood. If he hadn't seen the hundreds of deaths she was responsible he might have been aroused at the sight, she wasn't bad looking and all those rituals had given her quite the figure. She must have been doing it for days, the sand was covered in more runes than Harry had ever seen before for a single ritual. Scattered around at different points of the circle were also piles of sand that sparkled brightly, contrasting harshly with the dull, dark sand of the Sahara. Harry didn't really understand why, so pushed it to the back of his mind.

"I'm getting too old for this shit," Harry grumbled, ignoring the fact that he stopped visibly ageing when he was around his mid-30s. He had to resort to using his metamorph abilities to prevent suspicion. Handy thing, being a metamorphmagus. The metamorphmagus he had to sacrifice to gain the ability would probably disagree, but hey, he'd been a mass murderer anyway.

Harry stood as quietly as he could, slid his wand from its holster into his hand, and immediately sent off a whispered killing curse at the woman while her back was turned. ICW clearance level 7 was a handy thing. He'd lost track of the number of bounties that became a lot easier because of it. The reduced payout from them being dead was oftentimes worth it when you took in the time it cut down.

She noticed it, of course, and dodged it effortlessly, blood falling off her in droplets as she twisted and turned towards Harry in one smooth movement before snapping up a pale white wand (*why do all evil mages have pale wands? Maybe it has something to do with yew?*) and sending a very nasty rainbow of hurt-flavoured curses back his way without hesitation, teeth bared in a feral snarl like a cornered animal.

Harry dodged the first three, sand spraying the back of his head from where they impacted the dune behind him, narrowly avoiding being decapitated, having his eyes boiled and... castrated? What the fuck? Harry growled as he threw up a shield for the last, a bright white piercer splashing across the equally pale shield before him. Harry dropped the shield along with himself and sent off two bone-exploders before the role and another killing curse as he stood again, quickly conjuring a protego with his left-hand wandlessly to stop the banisher that would have caught him off guard.

She paused for a fraction of a second, seemingly shocked or intimidated by his use of wandless magic. Not many could do it to that degree.

In her brief moment of hesitation, Harry cast three more bone-exploders followed by a bone-breaker, favourites of his due to the fluidity and shortness of the wand movements and how well they fit together. On top of that, to his annoyance, they were really some of the best for the situation due to the curses not being area of effect. Harry had witnessed the aftermath of what happened when someone accidentally hit a ritual circle with a spell, and safe to say it wasn't pretty. As in, picking up body parts for days, not pretty. If you scuffed it with a stick, it wouldn't be a problem, but when magic interacts with rituals it can get tricky, and sometimes it accidentally activates it, which can then cause a cascade failure and mess it up spectacularly. Suffice it to say in some cases it goes boom, and with the size of the one before him, Harry really wasn't keen to see what would happen.

She dodged two and batted away the other, but missed the bone-breaker, which he had purposely snuck off at the last second at an angle to try and get lucky and predict her dodge. It worked, and connected with an audible snap as the shoulder on her wand arm was viciously broken as Aigamuxa twisted to avoid the bone-exploders. However, to his disappointment his hope that the beautiful psycho would drop her wand and the fight could all be over quickly was for nought as to his annoyance, she was one of those pesky ambidextrous mages, and simply switched her wand to her left hand before quickly correcting her posture and composure. She evidently had used a ritual to lessen the pain as well, as she only winced slightly when the bone-breaker hit. A dangerous ritual, as sometimes you could do something stupid like hold something hot and burn right through the skin on your hand to the bone before you realised, but it was useful in fights.

Her dark eyes were burning in fury as she furiously cast two dark green curses at him that he couldn't identify, evidently not visibly hampered by the arm hanging limply at her side. Harry played it safe and flicked his wand up in a jerky motion, causing a sandstone hand to rise from the ground in front of him and catch the curses, which proceeded to hiss angrily and start to melt through his transfigured hand. *'Right, acid spells, the Bellatrix special. Haven't seen those in a while,'* Harry thought irritably, even when that insane bitch was dead, she still pissed him off and tried to kill him through the fucked up spells she created.

Harry fired a blaster at the back of the hand, sending the corrupted sand flying at her then followed up with another bone-breaker and his favourite spell, *velox iaculum*. It translated to 'swift javelin' and sent a roughly 4-foot long, inch wide metal spear with a pointed end at a velocity that would happily tear through most things. It was what he'd used against the trolls.

She let off a shrill scream of frustration that reeked of insanity as the sand that Harry blasted away from him took on the form of a huge snake and lunged at her. Harry internally winced as he continued to slowly advance on the witch, unpleasantly reminded of the creator of the two spells he just blocked.

She banished most of the sand away with a *ventus* and a shield, but some still hit her legs and feet as the magical barrier didn't cover her full body. She didn't notice. His javelin also caught her off guard and grazed her cheek, barely keeping herself from being shish-kebabbed. He wasn't surprised that she didn't see it coming, the wand movement for *velox iaculum* was really simple, just a tight circle then a jab forwards, and he'd learnt to cast it silently and quickly. It was one of the fastest spells he had in his selection. The dull grey spear was also harder to spot than the bright light of the spells, and thus could be snuck into chains to greater effect.

She looked positively mutinous now. As with all dark mages, she had underestimated him and just assumed she would beat him easily, that he was just another bounty hunter. Harry was happy to dissuade her of that assumption. Harry wondered if arrogance was caused by the nature of black magic.

She completely ignored the sand currently steadily making its way through her feet and responded with a blood freezer and cutting curse, cursing and screaming incoherently the whole time. Harry dodged both of them by angling his head slightly to avoid the first and just taking the second to his fake leg, which made an odd bell-like noise as the runes protected it.

Harry used the extra time to try and catch her off guard with some piercers, another one of his spears and an obscure spell made in the British DoM that shrunk the brain of the target. Funnily enough, it was made so they could pull the brains of their experiments out easier. It was never intended for the living.

She dodged all but one of the piercers which tore a perfectly circular hole through her right hand, which was a shame since he had always wanted to see what the last one would do. Harry advanced further while she cauterized her hand brutally by straight up using conjuring red hot steel to burn it. She then dropped the shield and fired off 3 curses in rapid succession.

Harry grunted in annoyance as one of the curses, a light violet one that caused bones to shrink, actually hit him. One of the metal strips inside his armour caught it and absorbed it for a few seconds before glowing a bright violet and fading away. A tricky bit of rune-work and enchanting that took a couple of years to figure out how to do, inspired by the magic inhibitor cuffs the ministry used.

Harry shielded the other two, a blood-boiler and an obliviate that would have left him brain-dead, then returned with an overpowered bombardia which she shielded again, this time keeping the shield up and pouring seemingly all of the magic she had left into it. Harry recognised the shield, it would feed directly off the life force of the mage who cast it until they died, so understandably was very rarely used. She slumped when she finished then glared at him balefully before slicing a finger off her already abused right hand with a cutting curse. The blood started to flow freely from the wound, which she apparently also couldn't feel.

Harry started grumbling various unsavoury comments on the subject of the witch's parentage as she began chanting and he started sending his strongest shield breakers at the pale blue shield to indirectly kill her through it. A killing curse at this point would be useless. The curse would pass through the shield like it did all others and wouldn't break it, and she would dodge it far too easily. The shield was a much larger target, a better plan than playing AK dodgeball with Aigamuxa. She was too fast, she'd just dodge it, and even he wasn't powerful enough to waste that much magic on so many killing curses.

As his shield-breakers splashed against her shield she began painting the floor with her own blood, slowly and painfully nearing completion of the final part of the ritual, the centre rune. She slumped slightly every time a shield-breaker hit but continued stubbornly.

After around a minute of Aigamuxa painting the ground with her blood and Harry continuing to send shield breakers as he advanced, the dark witch seemed to finally finish. Aigamuxa started to shout at him from behind her shield, apparently deciding that now she finished the ritual it was time to monologue. Her manic arm waving, screaming and shouting did interesting things to her chest, he idly noted. Harry had no fucking clue what she was saying of course, since he knew none of the African dialects apart from a few written ones for obscure rune languages. But who was he to get in the way of evil mages and their precious monologues? It had always only ever given him more time to kill or capture them.

If he had understood what the witch was saying he might have caught her gloating about 'banishment from life' and 'soul ripping', and maybe not have ignored it.

Harry eventually got bored with casting shield-breakers as her sodding shield was being a pain in the arse and refusing to break. The ritual circle was also starting to concern him, giving off twisted strands of magic and humming with increasing intensity, distorting the air around him. There wasn't a way to explain how it felt, it just felt wrong. Harry was incredibly in tune with his magic and had felt many different types of magic from many different parts of the world. But he had never felt something this... backwards.

It wasn't the same as horcruxes, which were still the most black, twisted and evil things he'd ever come across. It was wrong in that his magic felt that what the ritual was trying to accomplish shouldn't be possible, that laws that shouldn't be bent were being broken. It felt unnatural in a different way to black magic, like knocking a glass off a table and seeing it fall upward, leaving you bewildered and questioning your whole worldview. Harry's mind started to race as he desperately thought of a thousand ways to get out of the situation. The ritual was starting to get to him.

Eventually, he settled on probably the most inelegant and brute-force way forward. Dumbledore would have wept if he saw what he did, Albus was always a stickler for elegance and grace in spellwork.

"Fiendfyre!" he roared. Normally, he would kick someone's ass for shouting spells like a third-year, but in this case, he really needed the emotion behind it. He would know, he was probably one of the few that could control it and definitely the most proficient. The Elder Wand seemed to like the spell as well, or maybe it was him. He should probably be concerned about that. Hmm.

The witch's eyes widened comically in a way that Harry would have found amusing if he wasn't busy trying to control the intent of the spell he was casting, namely its desire to destroy everything within a wide radius, including him. The roaring flames took the shape of a thestral, just like his patronus did ever since the battle of Hogwarts. He didn't really want to think about why right now. At the same time a part of him was also wondering if casting chaos magic into an activating ritual circle was a good idea, but fiendfyre ate everything, and he really needed it to eat her at that point, and that pesky shield didn't look like it was going to break anytime soon. He didn't know what the ritual would do, and also didn't know if he wanted to know, but any ritual that requires a whole village's worth of blood probably didn't have the best intentions. He just had to pray that she was the source that the ritual was feeding off and that killing her would stop it.

The flaming red and orange thestral rang almost as foul against Harry's magic as the ritual did as it charged towards the now panicky witch in its way, rearing its head and snorting jets of blood-red flame as it approached. Fiendfyre tended to do that, the aura it gave off was just so malevolent and intimidating and hateful that mages tended to panic when confronted with its full ire. She could have just apparated away, but instead, her brain turned to mush.

Harry grit his teeth, beads of sweat rolling down his face, eyes and wand fixed on the swirling flames of hate barrelling towards the witch, who finally snapped out of her terror as the flames were around ten meters away from her. She looked at Harry with pure hatred in her eyes.

Maybe she knew what would happen, one last act of defiance before she went onto the next great adventure, or maybe the next great killing spree in her case.

She screamed. It was a scream of pure desperation, with a charming sprinkle of madness and defiance on top. She then pointed her wand at the main rune in the centre of the circle and shouted an unintelligible phrase, one laced with power. As the thestral caught her, jaws opened impossibly wide, the humming grew in fever pitch, and the very air around him seemed to shiver with magic.

Harry felt his knees buckle and the hairs on his arms rise as he fell to his hands and knee under the oppressive feel of the ritual activating, as the witch in the background screamed in pain before being cut off abruptly.

Harry watched in horror as the fiendfyre thestral then seemed to get pulled into the centre of the ritual, along with the rapidly burning witch. Both were inhaled by the huge centre rune. Harry got a brief look at the rune glowing, and then the heavy ritual magic suddenly stilled. Everything was deathly quiet.

'The calm before the storm.'

Harry felt the weight of the ritual lift off of him and immediately started to scabble desperately away from the circle, his instinctual sense of danger, honed after roughly 90 years of being in the middle of shit-storms, kicking in in full force. His heart was in his ears, the rasping of the sand against his boots a dull ache in the back of his head. The iron tang of blood sparked on his tongue, and he realised he'd bitten right through it.

Then, from the centre of the ritual a terrible, unnatural, eldritch shriek pierced the sky. The noise seemed to echo off things that weren't there, and Harry felt his ears start to ache under the pressure of the screech, which continued to reverberate around him. Harry looked down at his hand which had a strange double image, as if it were being shaken faster than he could see. The sand in the centre started to swirl, and the other sand from other points around the ritual circle also started to pour into the centre rune, following the mage and the fire. All this time the scream continued until it stopped when the last of the mysterious (but somehow familiar) sand poured in.

For the second time, the night stilled unnaturally. Then, before Harry's widened eyes, a tear formed where the rune was, unzipping with taunting slowness. The rip in reality was filled with pure black, not a single feature marring it, and a claw made from shadows tore out of it, grasping around itself. Harry watched in morbid fascination, reminded for some reason of dropping something underneath a bed and grasping wildly underneath it in search.

The hand stilled, then honed in on Harry. His eyes widened further, but he still didn't let himself freeze. He had been in too many situations like this to do something so amateur. He cast his strongest shield, Aegis, a golden sphere made from interlinked hexagons which appeared around him instantly. But the hand went straight through as if it wasn't there, and grabbed him.

Harry cursed colourfully as a distressingly familiar feel emanated from the hand from where it grasped him around the midriff and pulled.

'It feels the same as the Elder Wand.' He thought absently, as he was dragged helplessly towards the centre of the ritual through the runes, leaving a dark furrow of the blood of the villagers and sand behind him as he struggled helplessly to set himself free. He couldn't apparate and the arm seemed to be entirely resistant to magic in a way that he had never encountered before. The spells he was furiously casting, animation cancelling charms, high powered blasting hexes, even one that banished poltergeists just went straight through the arm as if it was non-corporeal, even as it held him and dragged him forward.

Nothing worked.

Resigned, Harry eyed the centre rune of the ritual where the fiendfyre and the woman's charred remains had gone into. The tear was pure black, and around it, the runes were blazing orange and spinning. It emanated a feeling of wrongness so strong that it made his head spin. Not good.

'Well... bugger.'

These were Harry James Potter's last thoughts before he was pulled into the rift, and ceased to exist.

Attis

Chapter 2: Attis

Harry got the brief impression of amusement from an incomprehensibly massive being shrouded in darkness.

Apparently, Death found his demise amusing. He definitely didn't feel like he was greeting Death as an *old friend*. Probably still held a grudge against great-grandad Ignotus for outsmarting him.

Bastard.

He hung in a space that both did and did not exist, and time stretched. His time there was infinite, yet also passed in the blink of an eye before he felt his soul fall from him, away from him.

There was no sound, or sign of what was to come, the void he was suspended in winked away without warning, and he was dragged away.

-oOo-

5th August 1995, 02:37 am

St Mungo's, London, England

Healer Mary Owen, head of the emergency ward in St Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries, looked on in resignation as the man in the bed in front of her started to weakly heave out his last breaths. In a hospital, it wasn't exactly a rare sight, especially a magical one. But it never got easier for her to see someone she tried to save pass away before her eyes. She didn't even know his name. Whoever had raided where the mystery man had lived had gone on to destroy his wand and burn down his house along with all his possessions, at least that's what the Aurors that had brought him in had told her. And she didn't want to look through what he had left (which seemed to be the clothes on his back) to find out his name, it had always seemed like a violation of privacy to her.

He was around 6ft, with short brown hair matted with dried blood. His face was lean and sculpted with hollowed cheeks and high cheekbones, but it didn't make him seem aristocratic, it made him look a bit alien and exotic. His entire build seemed almost frail, but Mary knew from when she had healed cuts on his torso that he had some muscle to him and looked to be one of those 'deceptively strong' types.

He had been brought in from a raid on a muggle town. To her dismay and fear, these types of raids had been increasing in frequency ever since the Triwizard Tournament, not that the public knew that. She only knew because she had to deal with the aftermath, which was mostly injured muggles that had to be patched up and then obliviated. Any attempt to report the happenings to high authorities got nowhere. Oh, the smarmy suit who turned up would

certainly note their concerns down and make assurances, but after he left they never heard another hint that their concerns had gone any further.

But this man had fought back. In the town of muggles, he had been the only wizard, probably the most unlucky one could get given how few wizards there were that lived in the muggle world. For daring to fight back he had been hit with a curse that nobody at St Mungo's could understand nor fix, soul magic was a tricky thing after all, and this curse was slowly eating away at the very soul of the man. He had had many other injuries, such as cuts and broken bones, but they were fixed quickly, it was the curse that was killing him. It seemed to be some kind of variation of the killing curse, but with a prolonged effect to slowly tear the soul from the target. Mary felt sick that someone would even consider creating such a thing.

Mary watched on as the man took one more breath and lay still. Mary had seen what happened to those who lost their souls, having seen the aftermath of a dementor attack recently and recipients of the killing curse more than she would like.

She glanced at her diagnostic charm to confirm confirmed that he had passed and lowered her quill to the parchment to mark down the time of death, only to start as the bar on the diagnostic chart that measured the presence of a soul suddenly jumped up, as if the man had somehow sucked his soul back inside himself like some sort of reverse dementor.

Forgotten, her quill trailed a black gash down the time of death certificate as she gazed wide-eyed as the man began to breathe again, his chest impossibly starting to rise and fall once again.

Professionalism taking precedence over her astonishment once more, Mary turned and shouted down the ward for some assistance.

"Jenkins, Warren! Get your hides down here! Patient 14 is regaining consciousness!"

-oOo-

6th August 1995, 10:03 am

St Mungo's, London, England

Harry opened his eyes and immediately took note of the fact that he was still alive. He then felt the absence of his fake eye in place of what felt like a real one, as well as the odd feeling of having his right leg back. He wasn't sure how that was possible, considering that nobody had been able to heal him. He then processed that he wasn't in his own body, hardly revolutionary for him considering his metamorph abilities, but right now he was in base form from what he could tell, and it was still unfamiliar.

'Oh god oh fuck, what the fuck did that crazy bitch do?' He thought, slight panic colouring his thoughts.

Harry took in the sterile white walls and monitoring charms surrounding him and realised that he was in the emergency ward of St. Mungo's, somewhere he had been more times than he would care to admit.

'How the fuck did I end up here from Algeria...?' Harry was getting a bad feeling about this. His bad feelings were not normally unfounded. Correction: They weren't *ever* unfounded.

Harry raised his hand to his eyes and almost fainted. Unfamiliar bones moved across unfamiliar muscles, and it took all he had not to gasp at the *wrongness* that he felt. He gazed uncomprehendingly at the hand that didn't belong to him as he flexed it and curled his fingers, morbidly fascinated.

"Mr Slate?" an unfamiliar, female voice called.

Harry continued staring at his hand, tracing the veins across the top of it before he realised that he was the only one in the vicinity, which meant that she was talking to him. But who the fuck was Slate? Harry felt his 6th sense of danger start to murmur in increased agitation.

Harry slowly turned his head towards the sound of the voice to see a matronly, middle-aged, curly-haired blonde woman looking at him curiously as if she was confused as to how he was alive. Harry found that he didn't like that look. He looked at her uncomprehendingly for a moment before he replied.

"Yes?" he croaked. He barely held back a wince at the unfamiliarity of the voice that emanated.

"I'm head healer Mary Owens, you were brought here after an attack on your home and have been here overnight. Are you aware of what happened to you?" the woman asked, quill poised over a parchment next to her as she started running scans over Harry. Ok, apparently that meant he was 'Slate', was that some kind of codename or something? Had the ICW found him?

Harry took the opportunity to look into the state of his mind. As soon as he entered his mindscape he found that his barriers were all sound and up, but there was a presence outside of them. It reminded him of when he had a bit of Voldy in his head, which he didn't like. He lowered them cautiously and gasped as the memories of another person rushed in and took space for themselves amongst his memories inside his own mindscape. It was a completely alien feeling.

It was while he was intaking the man's whole life story that Harry learnt the name and age of the man whose body he was now inhabiting, and how the poor guy had eventually met his end.

Harrison Slate, 25 years old. Born on the 3rd March 1970 in Lewes. Home-schooled by his parents until they died when he was 20, the mother to cancer, and the father to suicide shortly afterwards. To deal with the grief he travelled the world until he was 25 when he eventually settled in the sleepy little town of Digby in Lincolnshire, where he lived for 4 months before he was killed in a death eater raid.

"Death Eaters," he rasped, his voice back to what it had sounded before now. Morphing his voice box had always been tricky, but there was no way he was sounding like someone else; it was far too disturbing.

Another thing that Harry gained from Harrison's memories was the current date. Harry felt a little bit of his sanity crack and his grip on reality slip slightly as he locked away thoughts of having to go through his whole life all over again, having to see people he had killed and failed to save again, away deep into a deep, dark pit in his mind where he could process it later.

'At least I get to kill Bellatrix this time around.' A voice in his head told him consolingly, still holding a grudge from the fight he had just... departed from. Great, voices in his head. Just what he needed.

The mediwitch's breath hitched for a moment before she nodded and continued. "Yes, you were hit by a curse that attacked and ate at your soul, however, you appear to have made a full recovery," she looked up from her diagnostic table into his eyes. "You are very lucky to be alive, Mr Slate."

'Yeah...about that...'

Harry hid his thoughts, which were ranging from amusement to guilt to all-encompassing hopelessness, behind a thankful nod. He looked around the ward and then back to her. "Thank you...so, I can leave this place now?" He asked.

She nodded. "You're welcome, and of course you may, the diagnostic scans have all come back positive and you don't seem to have anything else wrong with you, so you have no obligation to stay. The clothes that you were wearing are to your left, they have been mended and cleaned. Have a good day, Mr Slate." And at that, she promptly turned and left, only moments later helping two other workers bring in a man who appeared to be missing both of his hands. St Mungos was always a busy place.

Harry shook his head and roughly suppressed rising dark thoughts of his current situation with occlumency. He refused to spiral into panic now. Suppressing emotions with occlumency was dangerous, with a real risk of him losing his ability to feel certain emotions if he did it too often. He would have to pull them back up and process them one at a time before they damaged his mental state... well, damage it even more. He'd always wondered if it was why Snape had ended up being such a bastard by his time, surely that level of misery and vindictiveness couldn't be natural. Maybe he had suppressed all of his memories of happy times with his mum and had ended up destroying his ability to feel positive emotions... Nah, he was just a cunt.

Anyway, he had survived and still had his mind, even if it might be a little unstable right now. He had lived like he always did, and now he would deal with it like he always had. No use in moping. With that in mind, Harry stood and looked for his clothes.

-oOo-

His clothes consisted of a simple white shirt and a pair of blue jeans, not exactly the best outfit for any time of the year in the UK, where the weather always had a high chance of being dismal. As soon as he exited the hospital, he apparated to where Harrison remembered his house to be, just to be sure that nothing survived.

Nothing had survived. He had at least expected to find some coins or other metals in the ashes, but from the heaps of slag piled around the burnt-out husk of what used to be his house whoever burnt it down had used some dark variant of a fire spell. He could tell they didn't use fiendfyre however, because almost everything else within a 10-mile radius hadn't been reduced to ash.

And so, as he had done so many times before in his life, he paused and thought out his situation, then set out a plan of action. As he made his way to Diagon Alley, he set everything out.

From what he could glean from his new memories, the Slate family was a pureblood family, but without any political presence. Similar to the Weasleys, but they didn't breed like rabbits and were richer, more around the middle class like most wizarding families. His father, Adrastus Slate, married another pureblood called Anna Mills who was from a family of similar standing. This meant that, like any self-respecting pureblood family, they had a long-standing Gringotts vault. And, to his delight, the Slate vault key was one of the few things that he had remaining after his nice house in Digby was burnt down by the raiders, having had it on a cord around his neck like so many tended to do. He chose to ignore that taking gold from the vault could be construed as robbery, dismissing the idea as inconsequential and more importantly not any fun.

After withdrawing some galleons from Gringotts to get some supplies (and most importantly a new wand, as Harry was getting jumpy without one), meeting with his account manager to manage his finances, ("say, Bloodripper, have you ever heard of 'Apple' or 'Microsoft?") and making some more choice purchases, Harry trotted out of Gringotts and wandered along the alley for a bit.

The business in Gringotts had taken a while, and by the time he had escaped the clutches of the greedy fuckers it was past lunchtime. He stopped at his favourite food place in Diagon which he used to stop at every time his work brought him back to the UK, a cute little patisserie stuffed in a corner between a place that sold clothes for children and a room expansion charm specialist. He sat and enjoyed a couple of apricot tarts and a coffee as he people-watched from his seat, idly attempting to chat up the cute brunette witch who served him to try and bring some normality into his current situation. She gave him a disdainful look that screamed *'I know your trouble, and I intend to stay the hell away'*. Harry couldn't blame her or bring himself to care and continued to watch people walk past and munch on the delicious food.

After he finished and paid, leaving with a teasing wink at the waitress – who gave him a dirty look – Harry headed straight for Ollivander's, feeling the absence of a wand keenly and starting to get antsy due to it, like an addict without his fix. He had never liked to be parted from either of his wands for any amount of time, and that hadn't changed after whatever the fuck had just happened to him. He could just about manage without a wand enough to defend himself in a fight, but wandless magic was still limited and he had always found the feeling of a wand on his arm comforting.

He ducked as he entered the shop, almost splitting his forehead open on the low doorway. He wasn't quite used to his new height yet, being a few inches taller than he was before. With

that the thoughts of what he had left behind started to rise once more before he suppressed them again. He would deal with those later.

The old wand shop was just as he remembered it. Apart from when it was forcefully closed during the war, Harry didn't think that it had ever changed, and for that matter neither had the wand maker. Maybe it was because Harry lived longer than most, but he was the only one that ever seemed to notice that the old man seemed to be just as ageless as Harry was.

Harry approached the counter, and as he came forwards Ollivander walked from behind the shelves at the back of the shop and started to walk languidly towards Harry. Sure enough, he looked the same as he had 6 years ago when Harry had seen him last. Steel grey eyes with white hair standing up on ends like a crazy scientist and a wizened look.

The wand crafter peered at him with those creepy mirror-like eyes. "Harrison Slate, Ash and Unicorn hair, 12 inches and unyielding, a wand of a wizard with strong beliefs, good for charm work," Ollivander peered at him, an accusatory look in his steely eyes. "And pray tell, where is your wand, Mr Slate?"

Harry got the odd feeling of being scolded by a teacher and looked down to play the part, even going as far as to shuffle his feet like he was being scolded by old McGonagall. "Got caught up in a raid, they snapped then burnt it, I need a new one... please?" Harry said sadly with a questioning lilt at the end. He didn't have to try much to get the tone right, the loss of a wand always made him feel sad. Sensing the magic around him had the downside of feeling the backlash of a broken wand, and it held a hint of sadness and lost potential each and every time.

Ollivander hummed and stared at him just long enough for it to be uncomfortable, "I suppose that is an adequate reason, very well, let's start by getting you measured then." Harry let out a sigh of relief, although he knew that Ollivander couldn't refuse him a new wand.

While the tape measure danced around Harry and measured parts of him that he didn't feel needed to be measured Ollivander rummaged around in the back of the shop, apparently looking for his first wand. As he returned, the intrusive tape measure finished measuring from his left shoulder to his left little toe, snapped up into a ball and scurried away into a cubbyhole behind Ollivander's desk.

"Ash and Unicorn hair, 11 ½ inches, springy, similar to your first. Give it a go." He encouraged. Harry grabbed the wand and immediately shook his head and put it back.

"No, this one doesn't like me," he said confidently.

Ollivander rose an eyebrow but nodded and turned away without question, already reaching for another.

"Black Walnut and Griffin feather, 13 inches, give it a wave..."

It took him 15 tries before he got his new wand.

"Red Oak and Dragon Heartstring from a Ukrainian Ironbelly, 14 inches exactly, give it a try Mr Slate," Ollivander said, reaching over the piles of dismissed wands to offer Harry a well-polished, rich brown wand hilt first. It was a long prismatic shape, with the edges of the prism softening and narrowing until it was rounded around the tip. On all 3 sides of the wand, runes were burnt in intricate patterns. It reminded Harry of Sirius' wand, although his had been cuboid instead. The grip was fastened to the wand with two rings of silver. It was made from midnight black dragon hide from the underneath of the dragon judging by the size of the scales and the softness. When Harry picked up the wand he immediately felt the link with it form, and knew instinctively that it was definitely stronger than the one from his first, presumably due to the lack of a sadistic maniac in his forehead this time around to influence the decision. Silver sparks erupted from the wand in a fountain and Harry felt a harsh warm wind, reminiscent of the intense heat when the Horntail in the first task spewed fire at him, sweeping through the shop. It was as if an Ironbelly had stuck its head through the shop door and breathed on him.

Ollivander had a huge grin splitting his wrinkled face, practically vibrating with glee. Harry found that he had a large smile on his face as well. "Bravo! Bravo, Harrison!" He exclaimed, "a brilliant match I daresay, that wand will do you well!" He paused before continuing in a lecturing tone. "Red oak is the wood of a warrior with quick reactions and decisive thinking with a penchant for battle magic, and the dragon heartstring will give the wand the power to back it up. I daresay, with how unyielding the wood is, you've got the wand of a fighter Mr Slate," The old crafter said, all the while getting the box and a holster that Harry had pointed at while they were trying out wands. "I hope to see you put it to good use. Now, that will be 36 galleons for the wand and the holster."

Harry thanked him, paid for both, and fixed the wand to his arm without hesitation. He let out a breath that he hadn't been aware he was holding, feeling much safer with a wand at his side again. He felt the loss of his old wands keenly, but couldn't help but be pleased with his new one. It'd felt right from the moment he'd held it. Ollivander, clearly aware of what he was thinking, gave him a knowing smile before he turned back into the darkness of the back of his shop. Harry stared after him, turned and left.

The next 3 hours were pure fucking torture. Harry had never been one for clothes shopping and had avoided it at all costs for most of his life. He'd been wearing clothing he bought 50 years ago when he eventually snuffed it and got sent to wherever he was now. Magic was wonderful for many things, including maintenance charms.

Alas, it could not be avoided and so, with great reluctance, he went clothes shopping in both the muggle and wizarding world to get some semblance of a wardrobe back. By the end, he was using occlumency again to prevent himself from running away from the next store as fast as he could.

After picking up some more supplies from various wizarding shops and stopping off at the co-op on the way home for some dinner, Harry collapsed into his new sofa in the flat he had bought in Brixton and sighed in exhaustion.

It was when he went to the bathroom for a piss that Harry caught the first glimpse of himself in the mirror out of the corner of his eye and, quick as a bullet, span and cast a stunner to

catch the intruder off guard before he realised that it was him in the mirror.

'You... *blithering... idiot,*' drawled a Snape-esque voice in his head.

Harry sheepishly repaired the wall behind him before getting a good look at his new body for the first time. He was somewhere around 6ft. His hair was brown but turning black at the roots, as if his old hair was coming back. His face was sharp and angular, almost feminine. Harry tilted his head, and tried something new. He allowed his abilities free reign. Essentially, it meant that his body would morph into what best represented him. It took into account his personality, known and unknown desires and his mental picture along with countless other things. He'd never allowed it before, having been vaguely attached to the body he was born with, but the face he had now was unfamiliar. He'd rather change completely than don the face of a dead man.

He watched in detached interest as his face shifted subtly. It softened, angling away from gaunt to a healthy fullness. His cheekbones remained just as pronounced, however, swooping in a visible contour parallel to his jaw. The brown hair darkened and became the shade of inky black that was so familiar to him, falling around his head in careless pitch locks. His eyes, though, were the most surprising difference. Harrison Slate's had been grey, but instead of becoming green again, they lightened, turning a light silver that contrasted the darkness of his eye sockets and black eyebrows. Harry rose an eyebrow at the result. He wasn't normally one for vanity, but the only way to describe himself would be handsome, maybe even pretty. It was almost unnerving. He had no idea that he would picture himself in such a way, no idea he was so bloody vain. He rose a hand to his face and traced the line of his jaw and the straight cut of his nose, absent wonder shining in his quicksilver eyes.

Shaking his head at himself, he pulled himself from his self-absorbed daze, turning away from the mirror with a violent twist and strolling to the kitchen, where he threw pasta, chicken and some tomato sauce together. He ate the bowl cheerfully on his balcony while watching some kid pick up drugs from a man below him with what he must have thought was subtlety. *Hmm, does the wizarding world know what weed is?*

After purchasing some miscellaneous herbs and spices from his new friend on the corner, Harry sat cross-legged on his bed, pillows arranged supportively at his back with a spliff in his mouth, carefully bringing back up all of his emotions and feelings on what had just happened to him. The effects of the weed helped him to dull them enough to not spiral into a complete mental breakdown, but it was still a close thing.

It was a long time before he was stable enough to fall into a resemblance of sleep, his emotions roiling. Even then, his dreams were vivid and dark.

-oOo-

7th August 1995, 01:38 am

Flat 14, Fyfield Road, Brixton, London, England

Harry jerked awake and looked around him warily, sitting up then staying stock still to wait for what had woken him. After a moment his unspoken question was answered as he felt a

pull on his magic that alerted him that his alert ward had been set off. The wards were set up so it could only be set off by a mage, so Harry was immediately on guard.

He slowly slid out from under his covers as quietly as possible, wand appearing in his palm with a subtle twist of the wrist. Knees bent, he treaded silently to the wall with the grace of a cat and flattened his back against it. Harry silently cast a quick illusion at his bed to make it seem like he was still sleeping. He wanted to see what this person wanted with him. The disillusionment charm hid him with the sensation of cool water spreading over his body and he became indistinguishable from the wall, like a chameleon as he stood perfectly still.

'Must have stuck a tracker on me when I was out, very sloppy, Potter', a voice that sounded like his instructor from the ICW said in his head.

Two long, tense seconds later Harry heard a whisper and the sound of a lock sliding open, then the sound of the entrance to his flat being opened. Still as a statue, he listened to the footfall of someone come ever closer. Harry mentally sighed. Not even a silencing charm for the footsteps? Or a check for wards? He almost felt insulted. He was being underestimated.

'Fucking moron' Harry mentally snorted.

A black, cloaked figure with a familiar mask entered his room and walked right past him, focused entirely on the rising and falling figure of the sleeping man in the bed. Harry rolled his eyes. He could hear Moody mocking and berating the idiot, he was doing the same.

'CHECK YOUR CORNERS WHEN YE ENTER ANY ROOM LAD, OR YOU'LL BE PASTE ON THE FECKIN' WALLS BEFORE YE CAN SAY EXPELLIARMUS!' This was said before said ex-Auror started cackling madly and casting borderline illegal curses at him without restraint. Ahh... good old Moody. Beyond insane, but a good mentor.

The mage was crouched low, placing his feet carefully as he carefully drew his wand (looked like a cedar wand to Harry, good for a perceptive wizard, this guy seemed to be the exception), and pointed it at the illusion. He probably thought he was being sneaky and clever. In reality, he just looked like an idiot.

The mage drew level with 'Harry's' head and pointed his wand at him point blank before snarling, *"Avada Kedavra!"* and jabbing it at the illusion.

'Fucking hell, straight to the killing curse? Guess they didn't want a wizard witness to snitch on their raid. Must have pissed Tom right off when he learnt a wizard survived.' Harry almost felt sorry for the poor sod that had to tell him that a mage survived the raid and saw their dressup.

The sickly green curse passed straight through the illusion and dispelled it with a crackle and a pop. All the mage had time to do was freeze in shock before he was hit with a *stupefy* to the side of the head and fell stiffly to the floor. Harry would have cast a blasting curse at the stupid little shit's temple and danced on his remains (Harry *really* didn't like people using that curse if they weren't him) but knowing his luck he was probably some puffed-up prick's heir so he would inevitably end up in Azkaban for the trouble. Gone were the days when he could just say 'I'm Harry Potter' and everyone would just go, 'oh right, as you were then'.

Didn't make it any less tempting.

Harry sighed, plucking the would-be murderer's wand out of their stiff hand and ripping the tacky mask off. "So, who do we have here, hmm?" Harry said in a musing voice.

The mask was taken off to reveal the ugly mug of Elias Burke, one of the mid-level Death Eaters who had been accepted thanks to Tommy's friendship with the co-owner of Borgin and Burkes, this dude's father or uncle or some shit, probably. Tom was hired there right out of Hogwarts and acquired one of his Horcruxes through it, he owed the guy. Burke also had a seat on the Wizengamot as an unlanded Noble house, so it was probably for the best that Elias' stupid Noble face didn't get painted on the walls of Harry's flat.

"Ooo, ickle Elias, ay? My my, Daddy is going to be *very* disappointed, Elly boy," Harry said mockingly, well aware of the fact that he couldn't hear him and also not caring. While he waited for the Aurors to arrive, (who would have picked up the AK magical signature by now), Harry took off his Pjs and dragged on some of the clothes he had pulled at random off the racks after a courtesy check that they were the right size. He ended up with another pair of jeans, a comfortable white shirt and a good pair of boots. You could never go wrong with boots.

With a brief glance at the mirror to check he didn't have anything on inside out, he slumped into a chair next to Burke. Sitting still had never been within his abilities, however. After a few minutes of manic, impatient leg bouncing he gave up and summoned his last spliff, lighting it with a snap of his fingers.

-oOo-

Auror Nymphadora Tonks was happily munching on a chocolate brioche from the cafeteria, eyeing the clock across from her cubicle beadily with an impatient cyan eye. The clock was slowly approaching 02:00 am, the end of her shift, with torturous slowness. It had been a long day, starting with a robbery at a powdered magical ingredients store in Knockturn, cleaning up after another raid up North that people would deny happened later and finally finishing off on patrol splitting up the odd fight in the Leaky and other pubs around the Alley. Now, she was finally near the end. Tonks closed her eyes and imagined the bliss of falling into her soft bed at her flat and smiled, taking another bite out of her brioche.

Of course, that was when it was all cruelly snatched away.

"Green alert, green alert, Aurors Tonks, Wells, Stannard and Hicks report to Auror leader Griffiths in apparition room 1, killing curse detected in Brixton, London near Max Roach Park." The alarm, glowing brightly with the familiar bright green of a killing curse, flashed harshly across the cubicles as the calm voice emanated from every corner of the almost empty Auror office.

"Oh for *fucks* sake," Tonks grumbled, but still quickly rose to her feet and swung her red Auror-issue jacket on, checking to make sure her wand was secured on her arm, along with an emergency portkey and cuffs. She would grumble and complain, but at heart, Tonks was a good Auror and a green alert was *bad* and, unfortunately, getting more and more common.

The wizarding world was tense these days, everyone could feel it. Soon, it would snap, and who knows what would happen after that. Nothing good, Tonks imagined.

She wasn't happy about having to go with Richard Griffiths for this. The guy was admittedly an okay Auror in terms of combat ability, but he made no attempt to hide his bigotry and regularly let purebloods and higher-ups off the hook while throwing the book at muggleborns and the occasional half-blood, occasionally just making laws up on the spot. He would get reported for misconduct, then get bailed out by the Minister or his bitch of an Undersecretary every time. He also looked down at Tonks in a way that thoroughly pissed her off without fail. When he wasn't looking down at her for being a Black family cast off and a half-blood he was making tasteless jokes about her abilities and their use in sex. She was proud and completely unashamed of her abilities, they were what set her apart and made her unique, something which she had always valued greatly. Griffiths was just angry that he didn't have anything to set *him* apart from the countless boring, bigoted men that were just like him, she knew that. It didn't make him any less of a pain in her magical arse.

Deciding she'd already dedicated more thought to Griffiths than he deserved, Tonks mentally readied herself to deal with the guy's shit as she weaved between the cubicles, hurriedly finishing her brioche as she went and occasionally nodding at some Aurors that she knew along the way. Without being entirely aware of it, Tonks' face and features shifted to become more modest and plain, her hair darkening and her curves lessening. It wasn't to avoid Griffiths and his leers (even if it was a nice benefit), she wasn't some meek little girl to change how she looked for anyone, it was an instinctual reaction that she'd developed for going into any situation where she needed to be discreet. Her normal bright colours and crazy styles would attract unwanted attention on missions, so she dulled her hair from the usual bright pink to a dark brown and pulled in her breasts and ass a little to give herself her normal balance and combat ability. D-cups may *look* good, but in combat, they were normally just a huge pain in the arse. Tonks checked over herself one more time to make sure everything was in place, entered the apparition room, pointedly ignored Griffiths' leering once-over and waited for the call to apparate to the given coordinates.

The call was given 30 seconds later, and the team of five apparated outside of the flat where the signature was picked up at. The area was decently well kept, but not to an extravagant extent. It seemed to be a middle-class neighbourhood in the suburbs made up of modest semi-detached houses and the occasional square brick apartment block sprinkled around ruining the view. Overall, an average British muggle suburb. The black asphalt road sparkled with the remnants of a rain spell earlier in the day as the street lamps shone down on them. It was entirely silent, not a soul present at this time of day. Tonks glared a hole into the back of Griffiths' head as he looked around in disdain.

'Prick.'

"This way, Stannard, wait outside and make sure that nobody leaves the building," Griffiths said gruffly, looking up from the device that tracked the signature and pointing at an innocuous 3 story block of flats on the corner of the road. Stannard, a tall, thin bald man with a constant scowl, nodded curtly then took up vigil across the street from the block and kept watch, wand drawn at his side and casting the standard muggle repelling wards. Any muggles

approaching would be turned away, and any inside would be suddenly very uninterested in anything out of place.

The team approached the flat and – after casting silencing charms on their feet – let themselves in, which wasn't hard as the door had already been unlocked. They entered into a small entryway, with a rack of cubbyholes on the right side for mail. They followed the device which led them upwards, towards the third-floor flat on the corner of the building. The team moved slowly up the stairwell, wands trained around corners with Wells bringing up the rear.

"Residue of a tripped alarm ward here, sir," said Hicks, who had his wand trained at the floor of the corridor around 15 feet from the door of the flat they were approaching. A cone of light shone from his wand like a *lumos*, the light illuminating a glowing line of dead magic crossing the corridor like it was invisible ink. "Whoever lives in that flat, or *lived* in that flat, knew someone was coming," he finished in a hushed tone, which still sounded loud in the silence of the corridor.

Griffiths grunted in acknowledgement but didn't look away from the door, "Hicks, Wells, set up the standard set of wards. Tonks, watch the door with me until they're done, you're first in with me," he said in a low tone. Tonks felt a heady rush of adrenaline and anticipation flow through her, she always got excited for this sort of thing on missions, the tense moments before they moved in on a scene and prepared to confront whatever they were called to confront. It was why she signed up for the corps in the first place.

Tonks nodded and set herself up on one side of the door, wand trained on it, with Griffiths on the other side mirroring her. After five minutes Tonks felt the air hum slightly above her and heard the hushed, "*done*," from Wells to confirm that the wards were up. The two Aurors, now finished with the warding, rushed to take up a position behind Tonks and Griffiths, wands readied at their sides and gazes fixed on the leader as they waited for the signal.

Griffiths glanced around at the others to make sure they were all in position before giving a sharp nod and barking, "enter!"

Griffiths banished the door open and entered, shouldering the rebounding door with a shoulder. Tonks followed closely behind with her wand sweeping the revealed flat and eyes scanning the inside of the modest flat, trying to take in as much information as possible. It looked slightly barren, as if whoever was living inside had only just moved in. Tonks scrunched up her nose as a cloying smell that she vaguely recognised made itself known.

"Aurors! Make yourself known and raise your arms above your head with your wand pointed upwards!" Griffiths shouted, sticking his head into the bathroom to the right of the entrance with his wand pointing in as they gradually moved through the flat.

Tonks was just looking away from the small room holding what looked like a boiler when she caught movement out of the corner of her eye, and he stepped out. As soon as she lay her eyes on him her first thought that there was no way a murderer should look that good. He had a casual beauty about him, as if he wasn't even trying. His hair was a mess, clothes completely normal, yet he was easily more pretty than most of the women she knew. Even as she thought this, though, the analytical part of her was chattering, *danger; danger; danger*. It

was in the way he appeared completely at ease with the wands pointed at him, his lips curling at the corners as if he found it funny. There was just... something about him. Something that made her cautious.

Some people just had that aura of importance about them, a certain *gravity*, as if they had yanked the frayed strings of fate from the crones' crooked fingers and woven them according to their own will. As if life was a pantomime, and they were the only one not playing a part. She hadn't met many like it. Albus Dumbledore was one, Harry Potter another. Despite only knowing this man for mere seconds, something primal within her knew he was among those numbers.

"Lo' ladies, what can I do for you this morning?" he asked cheerily, leaning against the wall. His wand arm was obscured, Tonks couldn't tell if he had drawn or not. She shifted her grip on her wand subconsciously. Her palms were sweaty.

"I'm lead Auror Griffiths, these are Aurors Wells, Tonks and Hicks. We're here to respond to a detected killing curse," Griffiths eyed the man suspiciously, "you wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you?" Tonks wanted to shift her wand to him instead of whoever this guy was. The prick had apparently already decided that he didn't like the man, most likely based on his muggle clothing.

The man's eyes widened in mock surprise. "Oh! You're here for that bloke? Yeh, he's in the bedroom," he pointed to the doorway he had come out of. He had some sort of rolled-up paper cylinder in-between his index and middle finger, letting off smoke that smelt of that odd smell she had noticed earlier. "Cheeky little brat tried to off me, can you believe the nerve of some people?" he directed the last part to Tonks, shaking his head. "Really, the idiot didn't even realise he set off an alert ward, what are they teaching assassins these days?" Tonks' mouth curled but she stopped herself. He could still be the killer, she couldn't be disarmed by some basic charm.

Griffiths sniffed dismissively. "We'll see about that...Tonks, Hicks, guard the suspect and question him, find out what *really* happened. Wells, come with me," Griffiths said condescendingly as he looked at the man in disdain. He smiled back brightly. Griffiths gave him one more distrustful glare then pushed past him through the door, Wells following faithfully behind.

Tonks nodded and turned to the man, who was leaning up against the wall looking entirely at ease. He lowered his non-wand hand and inhaled from what Tonks now knew to be muggle cannabis, blowing the smoke into rings in front of him.

"What's your name?" she asked, wand still trained on him, the other hand opening the notebook and dictation quill to write down the details.

"Harrison Slate, at your service m'lady," he performed an exaggerated bow of deference, mercury eyes staying on her. It was quite the transfixing effect.

"I'm sure. You live here?"

"As of about," he lifted his wrist to look at a watch which wasn't there, which made Tonks quirk a smile despite herself, "11 hours ago, yes." She raised an eyebrow at that and he explained, "last one got burnt down in that raid a couple nights ago," he grimaced, "motherfuckers even killed my dog."

"You were attacked in the raid on Digby? I wasn't aware there were any wizards there," she prompted, ignoring his muttering about 'going John Wick on those inbred fucks', whatever *that* meant.

He smirked at her crookedly in a way that she distantly catalogued as dangerously disarming. "I don't doubt that you haven't heard of a wizard who survived it, as much as I don't doubt that it is that way entirely on purpose. I suppose I was supposed to die here so there were no witnesses left that could tattle on their little group of murderers." His smile turned slightly feral, and Tonks saw something dangerous spark behind those pale grey eyes, "unfortunately for them, whoever they sent was... not up for the task. Didn't even check if I was the right guy before he tried to AK me in the back of the head. I'll be sticking around a while longer, I reckon."

Before she could ask him to elaborate, Griffiths stormed back into the room, levitating a stunned and bound man in a dark cloak behind him. Tonks was caught somewhere between being horrified and amused when she saw a Death Eater mask in Griffiths' other hand, with a large penis drawn onto it in permanent marker.

Griffiths strode right up to Slate and gripped him by the front of his shirt, pushing him roughly against the wall. Slate allowed himself to be slammed backwards with nothing but a raised eyebrow and a bemused smile. "Do you have *any* idea who this is, boy?" Griffiths snarled, "that is the son of Lord Burke, someone who is *much* higher up on the food chain than a muddy little runt like *you*. Do you understand, mudblood? You could be facing *ten years* in Azkaban for assaulting him." For the duration of Griffith's tirade he had his wand pointed at Slate, who for his part didn't even seem to notice. Tonks immediately knew this wasn't going to go well.

Slate waited for a beat before speaking, shaking himself as if he'd been in a stupor. "Oh, are you done? Sorry, there was so much pretentious bullshit there, it all started to just blur together for a while there," he smiled, razor-sharp. "First of all, *nobody* talks to me like that, ever. Second of all, fatfuck, if you'd just *do your job* instead of spouting your bullshit you'd be able to accomplish the bare minimum and cast *priori incantatem* on his wand and see that *he* cast the killing curse, thus eliminating the need for this piss-poor intimidation attempt." Slate lowered his head so he was eye-level with Griffiths. "You're wasting my time, Auror."

Tonks stared. It felt like she was watching two trains approaching each other helter-skelter on a single track.

As predicted, Griffiths puffed himself up, indignation clearly writ across his face. "Don't tell me how to do my job, filth! I know *exactly* what I'm doing, in fact, I think for intimidation of an Auror I'll have to up the sentence, on top of the one you've *already* got for attempted murder on such a *respected* member of *our* society. It wouldn't be hard, a few words in the right places..."

Slate rolled his eyes, appearing genuinely bored. "*Gawd*, you're so *boring*. Always the same shit with you lot, threats and ego. You sound like a woman I once knew, actually. Tell me, do you just pay money to Umbridge or does she ask for sexual favours too? When you're fucking her, do you get her back folds and arse mixed up?"

Tonks turned to the side and coughed violently to hide her laughter. To her left she saw Hicks do the same. She had no idea how he knew how Griffiths kept his job, but it was funny nonetheless, and more than a touch satisfying to see him so humiliated.

Before Griffiths could reply Slate continued, amusement heavily present in his eyes. "As for Burke, I don't give a toss who he or his daddy are. The little worm tried to kill me, even if he was pretty bad at it. So could either you or maybe someone more competent," he glanced at Tonks, who felt an odd swell of pride, "quit the bullshit and check his wand so I can just get back to sleep?"

Griffiths was red in the face with humiliation and fury, a satisfying contrast to Slate's complete disregard. He finally pushed off Slate, who corrected his shirt casually. "Unfortunately," he said in a forcibly calm tone, sneering, "The wand was subject to a most *unlikely* accident, and found snapped at the scene. That only leaves one wand, which *will* be found to have the killing curse after *a priori*. You, mudblood, are *fucked*. You should have learnt your place before you went around insulting the wrong person."

Tonks seethed helplessly. '*Bastard!*' She fumed. '*I'd bet anything that that wand was perfectly fine not five minutes ago.*'

Slate, however, didn't seem phased. "Of course, delicate things, wands, known to snap completely by themselves. I guess you'll need my memory, then?"

Griffiths sneered unpleasantly at the man, who was still leaning casually against the wall, "That won't be necessary, I think I can *personally* make sure that your story is truthful... Wells! Cuff the suspect and take him to one of the holding cells to await trial, I'll make sure that Heir Burke is looked after as a man of his station should be. Tonks, make yourself useful and go with him." He grinned nastily. "We'll see who's innocent after you stew in a cell for a while, boy."

Slate sighed dramatically and waved in her direction as Wells, a hulking brute of a man, advanced on him with the cuffs. "Come on buddy, if I'm gonna get tied up, at least let the pretty one do it instead of Hagrid here," he jerked a finger at Wells. Griffiths just sneered at him then apparated away with Burke.

Wells roughly spun the man around and snapped the cuffs onto him without hesitation, then apparated away as well, Tonks sent a patronus to Stannard, who was still waiting outside and apparated into the Ministry atrium, leaving Hicks to take down the wards and clean up.

She followed Wells as he led Slate past the fountain and the front desk. He was cheerfully trotting along, once kicking the back foot of Wells to make him stumble. Wells glared back at him and shoved him forward roughly, making him almost fall over. He laughed.

"You know, you're awfully cheery for someone who's about to be put into Azkaban," Tonks remarked as she trailed behind him. He twisted his head to look back at her. His eyes were wild, like a man in the midst of an adrenaline high.

"Bah! I'll be fine princess, don't worry your pretty little head," he grinned, white teeth flashing. "Plus, how could they possibly suspect little old me of doing anything unlawful to the revered Heir Burke? I am the picture of innocence."

Tonks snorted as they turned a corner to approach the needed lift to get to the cells, "Sure you are, and I'm Minerva McGonagall," she replied dryly.

He sighed wistfully, "ahh, if only. A formidable witch, McGonagall, with the power and attitude to back it up. Why, if I was a couple decades older..."

Tonks couldn't hold back the bark of laughter at that. It was a well-known joke amongst the boys of Hogwarts to say they were attracted to the older witch, which seemed to be the only way to make her display any emotion by making her flustered, though it normally ended up with the boy ending up with weeks of detention.

"That your type then? Older witches that could kick your arse?" she questioned in amusement.

"Nah, I'm more into witches around my own age in uniforms, y'know?" he said teasingly, winking at her. "Worth going to Azkaban for, in my book."

She rolled her eyes. "You know, you're not really in the best position to be flirting right now"

"Try to stop me," he said without hesitation. "For all I know this might be my last chance to chat up a sweet thing like you for years, I think I'll take the opportunity."

Tonks was amused but also felt sorry for the guy. She had seen this happen more times than she liked over the last few months, muggleborns or half-bloods taken in on trumped up or false charges before they were held in a cell at the Ministry, then inevitably moved to Azkaban for the maximum week before the ministry was legally obligated to put them through a trial. By that point they'd be barely coherent and scared out of their minds and would end up getting convicted most of the time.

The worst part was that she couldn't *do* anything about it. Any complaints she made were shut down, and her job had been threatened multiple times. It was at these times when she hated being an Auror, but there was no better way to help. The Order of the Phoenix wasn't any better than just being the average citizen. Most of the time she guarded Harry Potter or whatever was in the DoM, two of the most boring jobs in existence. And for every Death Eater they stunned, there were always more to *rennervate* them, and they didn't have the ability to prosecute them either, being a vigilante group.

Logic dictated that this 'Harrison Slate' would be the same as everyone before him, but for some reason, a small voice in the back of her head just couldn't see the cheeky grey-eyed man devoid of any of the life that he seemed to be full of to the brim. In a way, he reminded her of Sirius, a limitless spark of life and mischief that nothing could ever snuff out.

She wasn't able to reply to Slate's last comment as they had reached the floor with the cells on them. Wells turned to Tonks when the trio reached the entrance to the holding cells underneath the Ministry. "Tonks, watch the prisoner, I'll go get someone to put him in a cell." And with that, he turned and was gone.

Tonks waited next to the man for several seconds, looking down the corridor before she heard him whisper. "Hey, princess."

Tonks whipped her head back to him to see him smiling enigmatically back.

"Yes?" she asked with a slight frown. She wasn't sure if she liked being called princess.

"Could you reach into the inside pocket of my jacket for me please? I've got a little something for you there" he replied. "I promise this isn't a tasteless joke, but you can still cop a feel if you want."

Tonks rolled her eyes but reached into the pocket and felt around, frowning slightly when she came in contact with something cool and cylindrical. A vial. She looked inside his jacket to see a silvery glow emanating from the pocket. "Is this your memory?" she asked, surprised.

"Either that or I'm very happy to see you."

Tonks gave him a deadpan look as she pulled it out. Indeed, there was a vaporous substance swirling inside, writhing like silver snakes.

He bobbed his head in the positive, smirking. "Yeah, it is. Saw who I stunned and reckoned that some shit like this might happen. I don't know you all that well, having just met you and all, but I trust that you can get this to Bonesey, yeah? You seem like a good woman from what I can tell," he said, suddenly serious. She felt her face warm, her infamous composure slipping again for the second time that day, and nodded, pocketing the vial. She was rarely talked to like an adult, her bubbly personality and lewd jokes tended to make people talk to her like she was 12 instead of 22.

He glanced over his shoulder to see a jailer coming over with Wells. "Alright my Knight in Shining Armour, seems I gotta be off," he turned back to her, a look on his face that made her want to check for prank jinxes on her person. "I'll play the part of the damsel in distress, your role is to come and save me from my big bad dark tower so I can live happily ever after, yeah? After all, people like us have to look after each other." Just as the jailer got within hearing distance he winked, his left eye turning a deep purple before he winked again and it reverted to its mirror-like grey.

Tonks sucked in a sharp breath, *'holy shit! He's a metamorph?'*

She wanted to grab him and shake him until answers fell out, but all she could do was nod numbly to show she would do as he said, still processing what he had shown her. He grinned at her one last time and then was dragged roughly away by the jailer.

"*Au revoir*, Sir Tonksie! I'll see you on the other side!" He cried dramatically as he was towed through the doorway.

The last thing she heard before the door shut behind him was the jailer's gruff, "*shut the fuck up,*" and him laughing, apparently amused that he had found a new person to annoy. Then the sound was cut off and she was left standing alone in the long hallway.

Tonks stared at the door that had just shut behind the only other metamorphmagus she'd met in her life, then put on a determined face and stormed away in the general direction of the Head of the DMLE's office.

She had an appointment with Madam Bones.

Tartarus

Chapter 3: Tartarus

9th August 1995, 07:46 pm

Ministry Holding Cell 24, Ministry of Magic, London

Harry hummed a tune to a song that wouldn't come out for another 54 years, tapping his foot along to the rhythm. He had been in the holding cell for around 17 hours. They had taken his wand before he was shoved into his cell and left there, with only one meal for lunch since he had arrived. It had tasted like hippogriff droppings with a hint of pumpkin. He hated pumpkin.

The holding cells were a place that he had never really thought he would ever end up in, having been the one that normally had put people there when he had come to the UK for bounties. The cells were deep down underneath the Ministry, the room he was in was all rough-hewn grey stone with iron bars separating it from the corridor. There was no light given where he was. A maximum security cell. Whoever that Griffin guy was must have some sway in the Ministry if he managed to get him here, probably trying to intimidate him. Harry wondered if he maybe actually was sleeping with Umbridge? He didn't see any other way the woman would get laid.

Hopefully, however, Tonks would be able to get the memory to Amelia Bones. From what he remembered of the war in his last life, Bones was one of the few competent department heads in the Ministry and had jumped on every opportunity to combat favouritism and corruption within her department and others. Unfortunately, this had made her a prime target for Voldemort, and she died in 1996. If she got him out of this pickle he would be sure to prevent *that* disaster from happening. Amelia Bones' death had hit people almost as hard as Dumbledore's. Both were (and still are, he supposed) bastions of the fight against the dark.

Seeing Tonks had been a bit of a shock. When he had first met her he had been an emotionally stunted 15-year-old boy and had had bigger problems than thinking about good-looking older witches. When he was older, she had been shackled up with Remus and then had died with him shortly afterwards in the battle of Hogwarts. So he had never really realised how *hot* she was. There were beauties like Fleur Delacour, Daphne Greengrass and Susan Bones, but Tonks was different. She was, to him, beauty personified. A metamorph like him, she was effortless in a way that was almost intimidating.

He was brought out of his musings on the now suddenly available witches he could poach when he heard footsteps approaching his cell, and the ugly mug of Richard Griffiths came into view, a sneer already fixed on his face.

Harry groaned. "I guess it would be too much to hope that you're here to go to Azkaban in my place?"

Griffiths was most likely internally annoyed that he couldn't recite his no doubt riveting speech, but on the outside, he smiled nastily. "No chance, mudblood. I'm here to take you to feed you to the Dementors, maybe there you can learn not to be so disrespectful to your betters," he said snidely.

Harry rolled his eyes and stood up, proffering his hands to the jailer. "I'll disrespect whoever I want, whatever I want, whenever I want, Griffin shit. Now just get on with it and stop talking. I can actually *feel* myself getting stupider with every word you say," he said in exasperation.

Harry inwardly grinned as the idiot unsuccessfully tried to hide how easily Harry got under his skin. This was far too easy, the guy was just so easy to wind up, he couldn't resist. He hadn't met someone with easier buttons to push since Malfoy.

"We'll see how you keep that attitude after a week in Azkaban," Griffiths sneered, "maybe you can get antiquated with the place in your stay there, after all, the sentence for trying to frame an Heir of a Noble house for use of the killing curse is at least 10 years," he added smugly while he manhandled Harry down the corridor towards the apparition point.

"Meh, I think I can handle it. Dementors can't be worse company than you, after all, more attractive as well. At least they won't try to fucking talk to me, which automatically makes me like them more than you. And they've *definitely* kissed more women than you."

Harry watched in fascination as the man steadily approached a familiar shade of Vernon Purple, a sure sign that Harry was successful in getting under his skin, just a little further...

"It must cost quite a bit for you to manage to get the Azkaban transfer through," Harry mused in mock thoughtfulness, he turned to Griffiths to see him facing determinedly forward, "So, what did Umbridge make you do, Griffin shit? Oral? Bondage? Maybe she put on a strap-on and bent you over the—"

"ENOUGH!" He roared, grabbing him by his t-shirt and slamming him against the wall, ignoring the snickering of the jailer behind him, "I WILL NOT HAVE A LOWBORN LIKE YOU SAY SUCH THINGS ABOUT ME!"

Harry grinned. "I notice you didn't deny it. Now is it just me or are you walking a bit funny?"

Griffiths' face looked like a grape.

The jailer tried unsuccessfully to hide his laughter.

Harry's grin widened and turned predatory.

Victory felt sweet.

-oOo-

15th August 1995, 05:03 am

Azkaban Prison, Somewhere off the Coast of Scotland, North Sea

Auror Irving Sims was on his way to pick up the inmate from his cell on the mid-level security floor of the tower of Azkaban with his partner Shay Davie. Some guy called Harrison Slate. From what he had been told the guy was due to sit a trial for the assault of an Heir of some Nobleman. He almost felt sorry for him, a week in Azkaban would break down anyone. Even he got affected, and he only had to patrol the corridor twice a day. The rest was spent in a guard room which was as far from the Dementors as possible, with Patronuses standing guard to keep the dark away. He was annoyed that he had to go out and deal with the depressing aura of the cloaked demons to get the inmate, that prick Richard Griffiths was originally supposed to come and pick him up, but for some reason had adamantly refused. Not that Irving would complain, the guy was renowned for being an arse.

As he approached the cell, he noticed that there was a Dementor leaning against the bars of the prisoner's cell, skeletal fingers curled around the dull iron bars. For a moment he thought that the prisoner was being attacked, and started forward, but he then heard horrific raspy, low noises coming from inside the cell and, to his horror, the Dementor answered in the same way.

He and Shay stood stock still, watching the noises coming from the cell in detached horror. After a couple of minutes, Shay finally spoke.

"Is he... speaking to it?" Shay asked in disbelief, her voice several octaves higher than normal.

Her voice seemed to catch the attention of the Dementor as at Shay's words it turned to them, surveying them with whatever was under its tattered black hood. Irving's denial died in his throat. After a moment of just staring ominously at the two guards – who were shuffling uncomfortably – the soul sucker turned back to the cell. It made more of the horrible, scratching noises that sent chills down his spine and, after an equally discomforting reply from inside the cell, it turned away from them and floated away from the two terrified Aurors in the opposite direction, torn black robes billowing behind it.

Irving exchanged an incredulous look with Shay. After a few seconds, they mutually came to a decision and cautiously continued forward after sharing a small bar of chocolate that Shay kept in her cloak to take the edge off of the depressing aura. His Komodo Dragon patronus and Shay's Dalmatian followed either side of them, positive emotions and faint white light emanating from their ghostly forms, illuminating the rough stone walls of the hallway in white light.

They reached the front of the cell to see Slate lying on his back on his stone cot with his head lolling off the edge, throwing a rubber ball that he shouldn't have been able to own up in the air and catching it. He looked thoroughly bored, but more notably also didn't look like he had just spent a week in Azkaban, or that he had just been within a couple of feet away from a Dementor.

"Were you... t-talking to that Dementor?" Irving asked disbelievingly in introduction. He didn't even know that the noises that the Dementors sometimes made were a language, he just had assumed that it was just another creepy thing about them.

"Hmm?" Slate turned towards the direction of his voice and brightened when he saw them, apparently completely unfazed by the Dementor he had just been within arm's length of. He rolled back onto his feet gracefully then stretched languidly, like a cat waking up from a long nap. "Oh, that guy. Yeah, I was, decent bloke. They don't have much to do around here so they're always glad for the conversation," he finished with a shrug as he straightened his prison overalls out.

That explained less than nothing. In fact, Irving only had more questions.

"Right..." Irving dragged out. He glanced to his right and met Shay's eyes again. He could see his '*what the fuck?*' clearly reflected in her hazel brown eyes along with a healthy amount of fear as she looked back at Slate, who was leaning against the wall bouncing the ball on the floor looking at them expectantly.

"So... are we off then? I've got a trial to get to, and it wouldn't do to be late," Slate said, tapping an invisible watch on his wrist and throwing the ball over his shoulder, where it promptly vanished before it hit the floor.

He and Shay jumped out of their shock and sheepishly cuffed Slate before leading him away. The dark-haired man started whistling a jaunty tune as they led him through the corridors of Azkaban, occasionally waving at Dementors as they passed who, to their disbelief, waved back. Irving shared another glance with Shay and shook his head. This guy was either the next coming of Merlin, insane, or both, and he wasn't sure which option made him more uneasy.

He and Shay's unease was not lessened when, halfway back to the mainland on the boat, Slate's cuffs just fell off of his wrist without the man even looking at them. He, Shay and the boat captain didn't even have time to react accordingly, looking on in shock as Slate stared down in bewilderment as if he hadn't expected it. With a muttered, "Shit, sorry," the man had casually plucked the magic inhibitor cuffs back off the metal floor of the boat and put them back on. He then proceeded to act like nothing had happened, leaning back and continuing to whistle.

Yes, Irving was not a happy man. How in the name of Morgana's saggy left tit was he supposed to guard a man that could break about of magical inhibitor cuffs without even realising it?

Shay appeared to share his sentiment if the increased amount of fearful looks that she was sending his way was any indication.

All in all, it was a very jumpy pair of aurors who accompanied the cheery man as they made their way to the Ministry.

-oOo-

15th August 1995, exactly 06:00 am

Trial Room 3, Ministry of Magic, London

Tonks was standing stiffly to the side of the trial room, surveying the crowd critically as they conversed and shifted in anticipation of the arrival of the accused. She'd managed to sneak in as a guard through Amelia Bones, as she had passed on the memory for the trial. The predatory smile on Madam Bones' face after she had watched the memory and Tonks had told her what was going on had been a sight to see. Tonks knew how much she loved to put down farce trials like the one she was currently presiding in.

Suddenly the double doors at the back of the chamber banged open dramatically, and two Aurors walked in with Harrison Slate, each one of them holding one of his arms. For some reason, both were giving him fearful side glances as if he would escape at any moment. They were holding his arms because, despite his hushed-up stay in Azkaban, publicly they couldn't show him to be suspect enough to warrant cuffs. Plus they had his wand, so there was no chance of him escaping anyway. Someone had also given him back his clothes somewhere along the way. He cast a sharp contrast to his surroundings, juxtaposing the formal robes and dour colours with his ruffled black hair, relaxed stroll and casual muggle clothing. He looked up at the witches and wizards surrounding him on all sides on their raised seats, a dark smile on his face. An intimidating sight, but despite the numbers against him Slate gave off a presence that refused to be cowed.

Tonks couldn't hold back a smile as she saw him, she had half expected him to walk in a husk of a man, gibbering in fear like so many others who came back from a week's stay at the dreaded prison. She should have known better, should have trusted that voice in the back of her head that told her that the man she had seen a week ago couldn't be subdued. In his unabashed cast around of the room his eyes landed on her, and he winked lazily. If she had still harboured any doubts that the spark she'd seen had been put out, the flirting eliminated them.

Tonks tore her eyes away from him (which took a surprising amount of effort) and looked to Madam Bones, who was seated with two others, Dolores Umbridge (who was probably only on the board on Fudge's demands) and a judge by the name of Zayan Muir, a tough but ultimately fair judge who was renowned for being unshakable. Tonks suspected Bones' hand in her appointment. Normally, in trials like this, the judge would be another puppet of Fudge, who in turn was a puppet of Malfoy. Evidently, Amelia had called in some favours. Tonks didn't miss the anticipatory gleam in the head of the DMLE's eyes, like a shark who smelt blood in the water. Tonks could tell the woman was looking forward to this.

Looking back at Slate, who was leaning back in his chair with one leg crossed over the other as if he was sitting down for a casual conversation over tea, she couldn't help but look forward to it as well.

-oOo-

Harry looked around the room he had been escorted into curiously. He had never been in a proper trial chamber, his last run-in with the law had landed him in front of the whole Wizengamot in the designated Wizengamot Chamber, which was much larger than the one he was currently in. It didn't escape his notice that both times were a huge crock of shit. He considered that his other self had just sat that trial only three days ago if his sense of time was correct.

Now that was something he hadn't considered. He didn't know how he would react if he saw the Harry Potter of this new world. He would probably fuck with himself, it would be funny to see how he would react. Maybe he could pretend to be a seer or something and say something he shouldn't know all mysterious-like.

He was seated in an uncomfortable wooden chair in the centre of the room, with Elias Burke to his right, who was currently leering at him. Harry gave a wide smile and an enthusiastic wave, causing the aspiring junior Death Eater to scowl and turn away.

In front of the two of them was a long mahogany table on a raised dais, on which were seated 3 people. Harry had to make use of some advanced occlumency to stop himself from launching himself at the rounded pink eyesore seated to the left side of the table, instead forcing himself to look to the next person along.

In the centre was a thin, mixed-race witch who was fixing him with a look that reminded him of Dumbledore when the man was scrutinizing someone. She had sleek black hair that was tied up in a tight bun and equally black eyes framed by a pair of rectangular silver glasses.

And finally, on the right was the woman that would hopefully be preventing him from having to break out of Azkaban, perform mass obliviation and probably do some heavy damage to the ancient wards over the dratted place.

She had shoulder-length blonde hair tied up into a bun, not unlike the witch's in the middle, with a square jaw and steel grey eyes, a monocle clasped in one of them. She wasn't the most attractive witch, but she was certainly very intimidating. Susan took the cake in the Bones family for looks, Harry would always fondly remember the younger Bones as the first one to 'sprout' in his year.

To the right of the room against the wall was a stand consisting of around 30 mages. Harry was mildly surprised to see the twat that had fast-tracked him to the dark and gloom was sitting in the stands as well, apart from the others. Harry idly wondered if he was going to stand as a witness, he hoped so. His suspicion was all but confirmed when the auror caught his eye and shot him a smug look.

'Wanker.'

"Interrogation of Harrison Slate of number 14 Fyfield Road on the 15th August 1995, the judge presiding Zayan Muir, the rest of the board consists of Dolores Jane Umbridge, undersecretary to the minister to my right, and to my left is Madam Amelia Bones, head of the DMLE," the witch in the middle, Muir he now knew, said in a no-nonsense tone, the words echoing around the chamber accompanied the by low scratching of the scribe's quill.

This was how trials in the wizarding world were normally done. 3 judges would be chosen for a board. The idea was that this would make it harder to force a corrupt judge to sit on a case and make the final choice fairer. In reality, it just meant that the people in power would end up spending more money on bribes, but at least it was an effort.

The only reason why Fudge had been the only interrogator in the trial in his 5th year was that the fat prick brought him before the full Wizengamot, where there was only one interrogator

but the whole Wizengamot voted on the punishment.

"You stand accused of the attempted framing of an Heir of a Noble house for the use of a killing curse, how do you plead?" she asked.

Harry snorted, "is that even a real fucking thing? Attempted framing my ar—"

"Yes, Mr Slate I assure you, attempted framing is a real accusation, with a 10-year sentence in Azkaban if it passes, so how do you plead?" Muir repeated, sounding slightly irritated.

Harry rolled his eyes, "fiiiine, not guilty," he said, making his voice childishly petulant on purpose.

Harry heard Umbridge sniff imperiously. He listed the various ways he could hide a body to calm himself down. *'For her, a live burial.'*

"Very well. Heir Burke, I am aware, has already acquired legal counsel. Mr Slate, do you have legal counsel you wish to call upon?"

Harry gave off a bark of laughter. "Legal counsel? And how exactly do you envision me getting legal counsel from Azkaban?"

Muir frowned. "Azkaban? You were held in Azkaban for an attempted framing? That is highly irregular for a case of this type."

"Hem hem."

'Right, she's dead as soon as I'm out of this shithole.'

"Pardon me Judge Muir, so silly of me, but it almost *sounded* like you were questioning the judgement and integrity of the Ministry, and by extension, the Minister himself," she gave off a high-pitched giggle, "but I'm *sure* I was mistaken. Now, we are getting off-topic, could we please proceed with questioning the suspect?"

'Painfully and slowly should do it.'

Muir's frown deepened as she turned to look at the woman in annoyance. "Very well, although I hope this will be looked into Miss Bones," she directed the second half to Madam Bones, who nodded tersely. "Good. Now, Heir Burke has already provided what occurred from his point of view, this was done to prevent either the defence or the prosecution from changing their version of the event. Mr Slate, please tell the board exactly what occurred at roughly 1:30 am on the 7th of August from your point of view."

Harry sighed, "I was woken up by my alert ward—"

"Alert ward?" Umbridge cut in with another horrid giggle, "Forgive me for asking, but why would one need an alert ward in the muggle world?"

Harry sighed dramatically. "Well, apart from it just being common fucking sense," he glared at the underdeveloped swamp debris, who went an ugly shade of red (not that any other shade

was any more attractive). "I had recently narrowly survived a raid on my home by some men in some ridiculous-looking skull masks. I thought it prudent to take precautions so I wouldn't get murdered in payback, constant vigilance and all that rot." He waved his hand dismissively.

The corner of Bones' mouth twitched upwards. Harry knew that the woman had been one of the few chosen to be personally mentored by Alastor Moody. "Indeed. Please continue, Mr Slate."

Harry hummed then continued, inspecting his fingernails in boredom. "Yeah, well, as I was saying before the genital wart over there interrupted me, I woke up, and when I realised that it was my ward that woke me up I knew it was a mage, so I got out of bed and waited by the door. I then set up an illusion to make it look like I was sleeping in my bed," he shrugged, "wanted to see what they wanted with me, turns out they just sent ickle Elias here to kill me, tried to send an *Avada Kedavra* through my noggin," Harry sneered at Burke, "too bad that he was a shit assassin, pampered prat had no idea what he was doing, didn't even silence his footsteps," he shook his head. "Moron."

Muir spoke up at that, speaking in an admonishing tone. "Now Mr Slate, Heir Burke's competency as an assassin isn't what's being called into ques—"

It was at this point that Umbridge decided to cut in and open her mouth again, much to the detriment of all living beings in her vicinity. Harry seemed to have been able to crack her out of her girlish mask and reveal the hateful bitch residing just below the surface. Harry smiled quietly as he drummed his fingers on the arm of the chair. People around here were so easy to annoy.

"Now listen here mudblood, I will not have the character of the honourable Heir Burke called into question by filth such as you!" She finished, crimson-faced and jowls quivering.

The chamber went silent, disgusted looks were being given to both Harry and Umbridge at her words. Harry was smiling with an anticipatory gleam in his eye, gaze fixed on the horrid pink woman, who still looked furious.

"First of all, I will question the character of whoever the fuck I want whenever I want, including certain ass-kissing secretaries who I shall not name. Second of all, not that it matters either way, but I'm actually a pureblood," at this, there were several gasps in the crowd, and the cow's face shifted from red to white at an impressive pace.

Harry looked around the chamber and laughed mockingly. "*Oooh*, not looking so eager now that's been revealed, are you? Not so happy to see a possibly innocent man off to prison now you know he's one of you, ay?" He looked sweepingly over the crowd, some of whom indeed did not look as eager as before, and leant over and spat on the floor. "You all *disgust* me," he bit out. "And you know Umbridge, it doesn't surprise me that you didn't do any research before trying to sentence me." He laughed. "Naughty naughty Dolores, you best hope that Daddy Fudge doesn't give you too hard of a spanking," he crooned, leaning forward in his seat.

"That is enough!" Muir snapped, seeing that Umbridge was about to respond, "Madam Umbridge, if you cannot control yourself I will have you thrown out of this courtroom, and that goes for you as well Slate, I will not have people throwing around insults around my chamber like school children!" She glared at both of them. Harry just smiled back with a 'who, me?' expression on his face which she chose to ignore.

"I agree," Amelia piped up, "Mr Slate, please continue with your recounting, I'm sure the both of us wish to be finished with this sooner rather than later," she threw him a significant look, which he returned with a lazy smile, relaxing back in his chair. Everyone around them looked confused at this interaction and, in the case of the Heir Burke and the undersecretary to the Minister, slightly concerned.

Harry bowed his head. "Of course Madam, after this sack of... I mean, after the oddly dressed individual who invaded my home cast a killing curse through what he assumed to be the back of my head, I concluded that he perhaps might have less than honourable intentions. In response, I simply cast a *stupefy* to the side of the brat's head, then waited for the Aurors. During that time, I took off the mask of the intruder—which was also one of the funny-looking skull ones by the way—and bound him," he tilted his head to the side. "Funny choice of outfit, could've almost mistaken him for a Death Eater, but surely that couldn't be true, considering that the Ministry is still insisting that they don't exist, right?"

Harry knew for a fact that the guy was a Death Eater, he had seen the guy die at Flitwick's hands at the Battle at Hogwarts after all, one of the many fallen in the final battle. But his forearm hadn't revealed any mark back in his flat when he had looked. He assumed that killing him was supposed to be Burke's initiation, a murder was often the way they were inducted into the group.

Umbridge sniffed and appeared to be trying to look down her nose at him imperiously, which only made her ugly from a different angle. "Indeed, your insinuations that Heir Burke is a Death Eater are preposterous, yet more proof in my eyes that you are simply making up this whole story. The Dark Lord is not back, no matter what Dumbledore says."

Harry nodded sagely. "You're right, he could have just been wearing a Halloween costume."

Umbridge looked surprised that he had agreed with her then nodded stiffly, agreeing with him.

Harry was laughing incredulously in his head. No wonder the Ministry had gone to shit so quickly with room-temperature IQ people like her in positions of power.

"Please continue Mr Slate, we must get onto presenting evidence sooner rather than later," Muir said, tapping her wand impatiently on the desk in front of her. Apparently, she didn't appreciate his humour.

"Well, there's not much more to say really," he continued. "Aurors arrived, I came out willing with my hands up, the lead Auror, I think his name was Graham or something, went to look at the guy I knocked out while I answered some questions by Auror Tonks. Gerald came back out and started laying into me for stunning Burke here, performed some frankly pitiful

intimidation attempts then apparated away with Burke, and I was led into the cells by Auror Tonks and another one that looked like a troll. Willis, I think his name was."

"You mean Auror Griffiths?" Muir asked.

"Oh, is that his name?" He asked with mock surprise. "I suppose it must be him then. Very unpleasant fellow, made all kinds of unkind remarks about my parentage."

"And you say that he apparated away with a possible murder suspect and ordered you to a holding cell?" Her perpetual frown deepened as she turned to the stands to her left to look at Griffiths, who looked distinctly uncomfortable. "That is most irregular."

"However... *unfortunate* it is that Mr Slate here had to be imprisoned, we really must move on to the evidence," Umbridge said, changing the subject with the subtlety of a first-year Gryffindor. She gained an anticipatory look in her beady eyes, the type a slug gets when it sees a fresh leaf to eat. "I am most interested to see what Mr Slate has to prove his tale," she finished with a giggle.

Muir and Madam Bones agreed and then asked Burke's lawyer to present his evidence. The guy was pasty and pale, looking like someone had taken some dough, moulded it into a semblance of a human then hit it with an animation charm. He had a permanent sheen of sweat on his forehead and wore an expensive-looking white suit. According to Raymond Richie, Harry had kidnapped Burke from outside of his home in South Wales, then taken him to his flat, bound him then fired the killing curse with his wand, which was then cruelly broken by Harry. They had even gone so far as to plant some newspapers referencing Burke around his flat to insinuate Harry had been keeping track of him, which Harry found hilarious as he had only moved into said flat on the same day. The prat may have said more but that was all Harry could be bothered to listen to before he started to space out. He preoccupied himself by sending wandless itching hexes at Burke's fat arse when nobody was watching. He thought he saw Bones shooting him suspicious looks every now and again, but she didn't act on it.

They even brought Griffiths on as a witness. Harry wasn't sure how *that* worked, considering that Griffiths was the one who arrived on the scene after the alleged crime had been committed, but then he remembered this was wizarding Britain, where the impossible becomes distressingly common.

Harry was eventually brought back to reality by his name being repeated by someone who didn't sound too pleased. Harry looked up into the unimpressed face of Judge Muir.

He shook his head to clear it then smiled innocently back. "Sorry, that was just so boring that I genuinely was at risk of falling asleep."

Muir snorted, then looked slightly horrified that she had just let out some semblance of emotion other than displeasure and fell back into a deep scowl. "Just get this over with and present your evidence, Mr Slate," she said, a hint of exasperation colouring her tone.

Harry looked around and saw that both Umbridge and Griffiths looked very smug. Belatedly he realised that they had not given him any opportunity to present a memory or get a counsel,

so they assumed he had nothing. He smirked, this was going to be fun.

"Very well, I call for my memory of my event to be brought into the courtroom, and for an official to register the authenticity of said memory."

He watched in satisfaction as the smug look on the faces of several disappeared and suddenly turned various shades of white. It was very interesting, being able to tell who had contributed to his accelerated incarceration by the ovals of contrasting white among the stands. With the number of times people were going red with anger and then pale again, he thought they might start having circulation problems.

"What! That's not possible!" Umbridge shouted before she could help herself. "Obviously the mudblood has faked it!"

What?

And she had called him a mudblood again... did she just call anyone she didn't like mudblood?

Harry feigned confusion. "I don't see how you would know it was fake when you haven't even seen it yet," as he was saying this a short red-headed witch in Auror robes came in pushing a cart with the memory on the side of it and a large, wide pensive on top.

At this, Umbridge fell silent, which was a blessing.

Madam Bones waved her wand over the memory, which had been placed in front of her. After several seconds of intricate wand waving the memory inside glowed blue briefly. At this, the stern witch nodded. "The memory is valid, it has not been tampered with. All in favour of watching it?"

Bones and Muir rose their arms, and Umbridge sulked and folded her arms crossly. Harry rolled his eyes.

Fucking child.

"Very well, auror Yori, please play the memory for the chamber."

The petite mage nodded stiffly with a, "*yes ma'am*," and poured the memory into the liquid in the pensive. She then tapped a few runes around the edge of the basin. The runes glowed briefly, and then the liquid rose from the basin and formed a flat circle in the air, with the memory starting in the centre.

And so everyone watched as everything that the young Harrison Slate had said was replayed in front of their eyes. It was most amusing to see the face of Burke and Griffiths turn to fright. Umbridge looked less frightened and more like one of her toys had been snatched away, she knew she wouldn't be affected by this, she was just losing a supporter and potentially one of her contacts in the Auror office. The ones who were in deep shit were Burke and Griffiths, although Griffiths would probably get off the worst of it because Harry's memory had been made before the prat had arrived.

The audience watched as Harry woke up for no apparent reason, not able to sense Harry's ward, and then move to the door. In the memory, he was only in pyjama bottoms. He looked to Tonks and noticed she was checking him out not so subtly. He caught her attention and rose an eyebrow. A hint of pink rose in her cheeks but she stared back defiantly, refusing to be embarrassed. Harry just smiled and turned back to watch his own show.

There were some appreciative murmurs at the illusion he had placed on his bed, Harry was quite proud of that bit of magic. The chamber then seemed to collectively hold its breath as the intruder crept into the room, and some gasped in shock as they watched the killing curse cast for probably the first time in their lives. They watched as the intruder was hit in the side of the head with Harry's pale red stunner, and then the room was filled with angry muttering as the intruder was unmasked, with scattered laughter at Harry's comments about the man. The memory ended just as Harry was about to take off his pyjama bottoms, much to the disappointment of some of the witches and a few closeted wizards in the crowd.

Amelia Bones look very satisfied as the water sank back into the pensive, smugness radiating from her as she spoke firmly, "Well, I believe that sheds a very clear light on the actual events. I do believe the wrong man is being accused here, all in favour of charging Heir Burke with attempted murder of a mage by the use of a killing curse?"

That unpleasantly reminded Harry that the law specified 'mage' because killing a muggle carried a roughly halved sentence.

Even Umbridge raised her hand, even if she didn't look very happy about it. It's not like she could refute it.

Muir shot off a canon shot with her wand again to make the crowd shut up, kind of like the mage equivalent of banging a gavel. Harry watched the expression of dawning horror on Burke's face with grim amusement. "Very well, Elias Ruben Burke, you are hereby charged with attempted murder of a mage by the use of the killing curse, the sentence of which is 45 years in Azkaban. Aurors, take him away."

Harry grinned widely and waved merrily at Burke as he was taken away shouting and screaming by two Aurors, who weren't bothering to be very gentle with him.

Harry stood and received his wand, revelling in the feeling the magic in it gave off as it connected back to him. He hadn't held it for very long before he had been parted from it, but it had served him well in that time. He slipped it back into the holster that had been returned with it and turned to address the board again.

"Judge Muir, may I please address the stand one last time before I depart?"

She looked slightly reluctant but, probably against her better judgement (no pun intended), she nodded and gestured him to continue.

Harry bowed and turned to the small crowd of mages, some of whom looked angry, some satisfied and some scared. He couldn't imagine why.

"I would like to finish by saying, to those who contributed to this attempted farce of a trial, as a great man once said, 'fuck you all very much,' Harry ignored the outrage and primly brushed his coat free from non-existent dust, 'and your mother twice'."

"Yes yes Mr Slate, you may stop now," Amelia admonished sternly over the shouts in the crowd, although Harry thought he saw amusement in her metallic eyes. "Before this trial ends, I wish to ask to talk to you afterwards if you would please wait outside of the chamber for me?" She questioned.

He nodded slowly in response. "Yeah, sure, who am I to deny such the honour of a talk with a witch as well reputed as yourself?"

"You can stop flirting now Slate, you are free to go. This trial is hereby concluded by my word," Muir said irritably.

He met Tonks in the corridor outside of the chamber, sitting down on one of the benches normally used for people waiting to enter. She looked as she always did when she was relaxed. Heart-shaped face, pastel pink hair, brown eyes and a curvy figure. He couldn't tell because she was sitting, but she looked like she was around 5ft 9.

"Hey," he said, slipping onto the bench beside her, "thanks for saving my ass in there, I'm glad my read on you turned out to be correct."

She turned to him and smiled. "You're welcome Mr Slate, as you said, people like us should probably help each other out, speaking of which, how come I've never heard of you? I've been looking for another metamorph for all of my life."

Harry held his hands up, palms outwards and grinned. "First of all, call me Harrison, Mr Slate sounds like the name of an accountant. Second of all, as I'm sure you know, revealing yourself as a metamorph is dangerous. There are many who would try to take one of us and sell us to the highest bidder for our abilities." This was a lie to cover his ass, but the facts themselves weren't false, the value of a metamorph was immense, especially to the prostitution and sex slave rings that would pay top galleon for a mage that could look however they wanted. When placed under an imperius, your appearance became the whim of the caster. It was the same for Veela. Luckily these types of organisations were few and far between in the wizarding world, but they were still there.

She grimaced. "Yeah, don't I know it, had to fight off a couple of attempted kidnappings in my day. Luckily, I'm more than capable of dealing with them."

"I don't doubt it, you seem like the kind of witch that can handle herself." He had no way of knowing that of course, and she knew that as well, it was blatant flirting. The fact that he did know that she was a formidable mage wasn't something she needed to know.

She smiled at that, a good sign. "Still, it's nice to finally meet someone like me, are you a full or partial metamorph?" she asked eagerly. Harry noticed that her eyes had turned the same mirror grey that his new ones were.

"I'm a full metamorph. Height, width, fingers, toes, eyes, all that jazz. I'm assuming you're the same?"

"Yup," she nodded, her legs swinging under the bench like a child's. Her head tilted curiously. "Do people ever ask you what you really look like? It's just that I get asked that all the time."

Harry shrugged. "No. The only person in the world who knows I'm a metamorph is sitting right next to me."

"Why not? Tell anyone, I mean."

He smirked at her, dragging up humour so didn't have to answer with the truth. "Can't be having people thinking I'm not a pretty boy naturally, can I? My reputation would be ruined."

She snorted inelegantly and switched topics, her curiosity about his powers apparently momentarily sated. "Talk about metamorphing aside for the moment, that was wicked in there. I thought Umbridge was about to burst a blood vessel," she sounded wistful at the notion of the unpleasant woman bleeding out.

Harry nodded in agreement. "Preferably one of the major ones. By the way, what do I call you? I'm assuming Tonks is your last name..." he was cackling evilly inside, he only had one opportunity to do this and he wasn't about to waste it.

She stiffened slightly. "Just Tonks is fine."

"Embarrassing first name? Your parents didn't name you Margaret or something did they?"

"Worse than that," Tonks said, smiling with saccharine sweetness. "But I'm not telling, just call me Tonks."

Held up his hands in mock surrender. "Alright alright, just curious. You can call me Harri if you want, Harrison's a bit of a mouthful."

She smiled in a way that would drive any man mad. "Is he now?"

Fortunately, Harry was already a little mad. He nodded, his face a perfect mask. "Definitely more of a mouthful than Tonks."

A lock of her long pink hair falling down the side of her face steadily turned a playful blue. Harry traced its passage with dark eyes. She brushed it behind her ear. "My first name's much longer, it's more than enough."

"Shame I don't know it," he murmured. "I'd like to test that theory."

She cocked her head and smiled at him mischievously, "Maybe, maybe not. But for now, we'll stay with Harri..." She frowned. "Harri, like Harry Potter? Don't you get a bit tired of being compared to the Boy-Who-Lived?"

He waved his hand dismissively, "That little pipsqueak came after me, he can stand to the side. Plus, I'm far better looking."

Ouch, self-burn. Those hurt the most.

She looked at him cautiously. "Not a big fan of Harry Potter?" Harry noticed that she didn't refute his last comment. He didn't know whether to be offended or not. This was going to get complicated, wasn't it?

She was probably wondering if he believed what the papers were saying about him at the moment. He knew he was around halfway through August, so at this point, the papers had been calling mini-Harry an easily influenced, deluded child and poor old Dumbles senile for almost 2 months now.

Harry shook his head. "Hah, feel sorry for the kid. The way people speak about him in this fucking country makes him seem like some sort of god, as if he's supposed to just be able to kill Voldemort and save the day," he snorted, "he's what, 15? He's probably only just figured out that the girls in his year have tits for crying out loud."

Tonks cringed at the use of the dreaded name but laughed at the final comment, it wasn't a delicate giggle or a ladylike titter, it was a hearty, boisterous laugh that echoed loudly around the corridor and made the passing dignitaries turn and scowl at them. Harry found that he liked that laugh. He wanted to make her do that more. He also wanted to put that damn blue lock of hair back behind her ear because it kept falling out and distracting him.

"Sorry, sorry," she gasped out after several seconds, trying to get herself back under control and wiping a tear away, "it's just the thought of Harry and girls, he always gets so flustered around them."

Harry feigned puzzlement. That was a Hagrid-level slip-up. "First name basis, huh? How do you know him so well?"

She only looked panicked for a moment before she got herself under control after a brief pause, Harry was impressed, not many could compose themselves that well after being caught like that.

"Oh, I've met him a few times, and I'm pretty close to the Weasley family, whose son is his best friend, I've picked up a couple of things about him," she said with a casualness that didn't fool Harry in the slightest. He gave her a sceptical look and she started fiddling with the edge of her robe.

She was a smooth liar, probably Auror training. Moody was a very thorough instructor, it wasn't surprising that she was good, from what he had heard Tonks was a formidable Auror when she was alive in his time. She would have had to have been if Moody had chosen to personally mentor her.

The young metamorphmagus turned the topic away from things she shouldn't say before Harry could reply. "So you believe what he and Dumbledore said about what happened in the third task? That the Dark Lord is back?" She pierced him with her eyes as she said this, searching for any sign of a lie.

He shrugged. "Well, seeing as my house got burnt down by some Death Eaters and I almost got killed by one afterwards, I would say there's a decent possibility that that's not a coincidence," he said dryly, "Voldemort was a dark fucker, and they never found a body when ickle Potter offed him, so it wouldn't surprise me if he was back."

"The public would disagree with you," she said, wincing at the use of the name again.

Harry laughed and shook his head in exasperation. "The public has a tendency to believe what they read and not what they see." That was one thing that had never changed in the future.

There was a pause for several seconds before Harry spoke up again. "So, do you believe the kid and the old man? It would be interesting to hear from your perspective as an Auror."

She nodded slowly, hair turning a dull brown due to the dark thoughts. "Yeah, I think I do, first of all well... it's Albus Dumbledore, right? I mean he's rarely wrong, and on top of that, as you said, I'm an Auror. I see things others don't." Her hair gained some angry red streaks. "I've seen remnants of the recent raids and murders, they're quiet and don't leave any evidence, but I can tell it's their work."

"No evidence apart from lucky ol' me," Harry said cheerfully.

Tonks laughed and her hair slowly returned to its previous pink. "Yeah, I would warn you to be careful but it looks like you can take care of yourself. That illusion, for instance, was pretty impressive and the concentration on that stunner was good."

Harry grinned, amused by the unneeded compliment. "Cheers. By the way, any idea what Bones wants to talk to me about?"

She shrugged. "Not a clue, maybe she wants to thank you for the opportunity to bring Umbridge down a couple notches," she looked thoughtful as she fiddled with the errant lock of blue hair that had snaked its way over her shoulder. "Maybe she wants to recruit you, she was right impressed with ya memory."

He nudged her with his elbow and smiled. "You want company? From what I can see most of the people there are assholes."

She raised one shoulder and smiled at him over it, eyes a deep blue. Harry looked into them as a man looks into the depths of the sea. "I wouldn't mind company from such a distinguished gentleman such as yourself," she teased.

Harry scoffed. "I'm many things Tonks, but I'm definitely not a gentleman, I'm the guy that breaks into the gentleman's house and nicks their shit."

She laughed. "But surely you'd never steal anything from a gal like me?"

"I'd only take what you wanted me to."

"Hmm. Good answer." Her lips curved in a slow, hungry smile. Harry tore his eyes away before he fell too far. "You know, you remind me of someone."

Harry arched an eyebrow. "Oh?"

She nodded. "Yeah, the same kind of humour and attitude, you even look a little like he did when he was younger. Although recently he has been slightly more... subdued," she said, a hint of sadness in her normally bright voice.

Ah, she was talking about Sirius. He had never really thought about it but Sirius was Tonks' cousin and one of her few remaining relatives on her mother's side who wasn't trying to kill her. They would have been close.

"Hmm, sounds like a great guy if he's anything like me. Maybe you should introduce us some time, we could be buddies or something." He really wanted to see Sirius again, even if his Godfather wouldn't recognise him in his current state, he missed the man. There were so many questions he didn't even know he had for him that he'd never got to ask.

Tonks' lips thinned into a line and she looked slightly pained. "Maybe. Someday," she said heavily.

Yeah, not much chance of someone she only just met meeting her infamous mass-murdering cousin any time soon, much to Harry's regret. Maybe he could 'accidentally' come across Pettigrew and drag the rat into the Ministry by the tail and expose the lie. That's if he could restrain himself from killing the man on sight. Of course, he'd actually have to find Pettigrew to do that, which was easier said than done.

They fell into a silence that was neither comfortable nor uncomfortable. Tonks looked pensive, probably thinking about Sirius' situation. Harry fished around in his various pockets to see what he still had on him to keep himself occupied. He found, much to his amusement, that the mages who searched his belongings didn't see any reason to remove the baggy of weed he had in the inside pocket of his jacket. Probably thought it was Gillyweed.

Just as he was about to ask some vague and boring question about being an Auror to break the silence Tonks turned to him and opened her mouth as if to say something, then snapped it shut as she saw something over his shoulder. Harry turned to see the tall figure of the Head of the DMLE, Madam Bones, approaching them from the doors to the chamber.

"Auror Tonks, I need to speak to Mr Slate here, I assume you have somewhere else to be? If I remember correctly, it's still working hours for you and you were not assigned to guard Mr Slate," Bones said, eyebrow raised with her hands clasped behind her back.

Tonks sighed. "Yeah, don't I know it. Azkaban patrol." She grimaced. "Not sure how you stood it, Harri, that place gets me down in the dumps," she said grimly as she stood up from the bench, Harry stood with her and shrugged.

"The Dementors aren't so bad behind their gloomy exterior, you just have to get to know them," he said casually.

Both witches looked at him incredulously for a few seconds before Madam Bones shook herself out of her stupor and turned back to Tonks. "No matter how miserable the place is,

someone has to do it and you are required to be there. You are dismissed," she said, the order clear in her voice. Harry almost snapped to attention and saluted on instinct.

Tonks nodded in assent, then addressed Harry, "Alright then I've got to be off, I hope we'll meet again?" she asked, she didn't bother to hide her hopefulness as she looked at him with turquoise blue eyes, widening them slightly to give off a puppy dog look.

Harry grinned, repeating, "Try and stop me. And before I forget, thanks for saving my ass back there. I would probably be rotting in Azkaban by now if you hadn't helped me out."

She smiled happily, bouncing on the balls of her feet with her hands behind her back, her chest thrust out. Harry cursed the restrictive Auror robes. "No probs. And by the way," her smile became an amused one, "Fuck you all very much, and your mother twice?" She laughed again, and Harry heard Bones let out a breath through her nose in amusement next to him as well, "That was the funniest thing I've heard in a good while, thanks for the entertainment. Anyway, later, Harri. Later boss," she snapped off a cheeky salute.

"Later Tonks, I'll see you at the scene of the next crime I commit."

Tonks snorted. "Yeah, see you then," then, after nodding to Amelia and saying goodbye with a muttered 'boss' she turned sharply on her heel and marched off like a palace guard, straight arms and legs swinging. She threw one more grin and a cheery wave over her shoulder before disappearing around the end of the red-carpeted corridor.

The two stood in the now empty corridor for a few more moments before Harry broke the slightly awkward silence. "I like her. She seems like a... unique person to have around."

Bones hummed in agreement. "A good Auror too, probably about as good as Alastor Moody was back in his day. It's a shame there aren't more like her in the department," she said ruefully.

"So, Madam Bones, not that I'm complaining or anything, but what did you want to talk to me about?" he asked curiously.

She looked away from where Tonks had gone and looked at him appraisingly. "Well, first of all, I wanted to personally thank you for getting that memory to me, trials such as the one we were just in happen far too often and it's always nice to get the opportunity to shut one down."

Harry stuffed his hands into the pockets of his jacket and leaned against the wall. "It was no problem, I'm just lucky that I know enough about the Ministry to record the memory before the Aurors came. speaking of which, is that cunt Griffiths going to get away with this?"

Amelia frowned at him reproachfully for the cuss but responded anyway. "Most likely. The man's a good Auror in a tight spot, but apart from that he's just a puppet for Fudge and, by extension, Lucius Malfoy," she grimaced at the name of the blonde Death Eater. "There was no proof of his actions so he'll probably be let off the hook as he always has before. I can't defy direct orders from the Minister."

Harry nodded, unsurprised. That explained the Umbridge speak as well...

"And what else? I mean I know I'm good-looking and all, but I doubt a high-up witch like you would speak to a miscreant like me without a good reason," he said cheekily.

"Indeed," she said with a small twitch of her lips. She paused for a few moments to collect her thoughts, polishing her monocle with her sleeve idly. "I watched that memory before the trial multiple times, and each time I noted that you acted quickly, efficiently and caught the person trying to end your life without panicking, all very rare traits in a young mage," she said, peering at him with steely eyes.

Harry tilted his head to the side, he wasn't sure where she was going with this.

'Is she coming onto me?'

Harry smiled impishly at the witch. "No offence Madam Bones, I love the compliments, and you're a good-looking witch, but right now I'm looking to date more in my own age range."

She took a few moments to process what he said, blinking rapidly again as if trying to reboot her brain, then scowled at him, a slight red dusting her cheeks. "I can see now why you and Tonks could get along, she has said similar things to me on occasion."

Harry barked a laugh. "Great minds think alike, Madam Bones."

She sent him a glare that, with her personality and looks, was actually pretty intimidating, then continued. "No, I was not propositioning you, I was *going* to say that we could use people like you in the Corps and that I would sponsor you to go through the training programme to join. We need people like you, people who can make snap decisions and execute said decisions reliably. From what I saw in the memory, you already think as an Auror should, your training would most likely be reduced from the standard 3 years."

Harry whistled appreciatively. That was a good offer, he must have impressed her. It also showed how desperate she was for reliable Aurors. She probably knew that a disturbing amount of the people in her department were corrupt and when she saw Harrison Slate, a capable, confident young man who won a fight and a trial against a Death Eater and publicly disparaged the group, she jumped at the chance. On top of gaining a recruit of considerable potential, it was a canny political move.

Unfortunately for her, Harry barely had to think before he answered.

"Sorry Madam Bones, but I think if I was put into an office with the people there currently I would kill half of them before the end of the week. Me and rules don't exactly have the best relationship professionally speaking," he said apologetically. He couldn't help but feel slightly guilty for turning her down, it was a good opportunity that many would kill for and the woman needed all the help she could get, but on the other hand, he was already on the brink of losing it as it was. If he was locked up in an office with assholes like Griffiths he would be on a killing spree within minutes. Not to mention the training which normally took years. He really couldn't be bothered to go through that again.

She looked disappointed, but not surprised. "I thought that might be your answer. From what I could see from the trial and your memory, you don't exactly seem the type to do something you don't want to do, especially for people like Griffiths who, unfortunately, isn't alone in his behaviour in the Corps," she said, faint amusement in her normally stern tone.

Harry shrugged. "Control over my life was something I used to struggle with, now I prefer to do what I want."

To Harry's appreciation, she didn't pry. "If that's your decision, so be it, but just know if you ever change your mind, the option is always there, I have a feeling you would be a valuable asset."

She had no idea.

"Yeah, that's my decision, but if you want a quick, but not exactly clean way of clearing out the corruption in your department feel free to send an owl my way," Harry said with a small smile.

"I'll be sure to keep that in mind," another small mouth twitch graced her stoic face, the equivalent of a broad smile for the strict witch. "Very well. Goodbye Mr Slate, I wish you good luck in your future endeavours, and do be careful. The people that Mr Burke worked for are most likely not pleased with his new situation."

Harry grinned and saluted, tucking his wand back into its holster from where he had been holding it behind his back. "Yes ma'am! See you another time ma'am!" He barked loudly.

And then he spun on his heel.

-oOo-

Amelia watched as the man turned on his heel. She briefly wondered if he was about to apparate, then just as quickly dismissed it, logic dictating her thoughts once more. There were strong anti-apparition wards up, nobody could apparate in or out.

It came as a surprise then when Slate's body seemed to blur for a moment, and he disappeared with a loud *CRACK*, making her step back and draw her wand in instinct.

Amelia stared at the place where Slate had just been in astonishment. Soon, alarms started blaring around the Ministry, warning the inhabitants that someone had just bypassed the anti-apparition wards. Which was something which normally took a large group of wizards to do, something which the slim man had just done by himself.

She blinked rapidly then brought herself out of her daze, now slightly humbled that it appeared he could have just apparated away at any time.

Nevertheless, she liked the man. Nobody needed to know about another of his impossibilities. She had done her own investigations and been told about him talking with the Dementors and the incident with the magic inhibitor cuffs from the two very shaken Aurors just after the trial. This seemed par for the course for the young Slate.

Amelia shook her head and holstered her wand again, drawing up her stern visage once more. Nobody had made her lose her composure like that in a long time. She glanced back at the bench, which she now noticed had a piece of paper with a smiley face on it. She snorted in amusement and set off down the hall at a brisk pace.

She would be keeping an eye on Harrison Slate, it would be entertaining at the very least.

Harpocrates

Chapter 4: Harpocrates

15th August 1995, 07:43 am

Flat 14, Fyfield Road, Brixton, London, England

Harry appeared with a crack back at his blank, boring corner apartment in Brixton and, upon landing, scanned the room for any threats. Chances were the Death Eaters were out for his blood after what he did. They could be waiting for him to come back to try and make him go bye-byes again. He wasn't worried, he could take care of himself, but he also wasn't in the best mood. If he got attacked there was a good chance he'd level the block of flats, and that was more trouble than he could be bothered to deal with.

But the flat was empty and silent, devoid of any personality.

Harry sighed and started to pack away the few personal items he had back into his trunk to move out again. They had known to come there once, there was no way he was going to be sleeping there again, and he couldn't be bothered to fidelius it. It wasn't worth the trouble.

He left a letter for the landlord on the way out with his trunk containing all of his worldly possessions shrunk and in his pocket.

As he descended the stairs to the ground floor a thought came to him and stopped him in his tracks.

'What now?'

He stood still on the third from the bottom step, one foot down and one up, pondering this question.

'What now?'

Well, obviously he couldn't let all that mess with Voldemort happen again and, unlike last time, now he was a fully-fledged dark mage hunter, not a scared teenager running for his life. Not that that would make it any easier, even in his many years of dark mage hunting very few had been as dangerous and influential as Voldemort was currently. Voldemort was at the level where even if you killed him, the destruction he had wrought and the influence he had would still cause chaos long afterwards. Indeed, that was how it had been in Harry's time. Unlike what some people for some reason expected, when the big bad man had died it hadn't all suddenly been all sunshine and rainbows. There had been years of repealing legislation and hunting down remnants of an army that wanted to continue what Tom Riddle had started, and a series of pretenders to go along with it.

So, that was the long-term goal, but what about the short-term? What about *now*?

Hmm, he could do with some food. He hadn't eaten since yesterday's slop in Azkaban, and it hadn't exactly been the most appetizing meal.

Harry nodded in satisfaction at his conclusion and continued his trek down the stairs, stepping out into the crisp morning air soon after. He took in a deep breath in and smiled. Everyone always talked about how miserable Azkaban made you feel, but they never seem to mention how the place smells like complete shit. After the damp and mildew of Azkaban, the fresh air, laden with scents of recently fallen rain and grass cuttings, was heaven to his senses.

He walked to the nearest alley, checked that there were no security cameras, and then apparated away to a familiar alley behind the Leaky Cauldron.

He walked in and smiled, the place looked as it always did at this time. Tired mages shuffled around cradling their coffees, Tom bustled behind his bar serving drinks and food and people in black cloaks had hushed conversations behind privacy wards.

"Mornin' young man, can I do summet for you?" Tom asked him from behind the worn and scarred bar, a wide smile showing off his crooked teeth on his equally worn and scarred face. Good man, Tom. When he died many years after the war in 2027, many had come to his funeral and then realised that nobody knew the barkeep's last name. He had no known relatives, and everyone just knew him as 'Tom the Barkeep'. It had been equally sad and funny.

Harry walked from where he had been standing in front of the door and up to the bar with an easy smile to reflect Tom's. "Yeah mate, full English please, I'm fucking starving," he said tiredly.

Tom grinned. "Right away..."

"Harrison."

"Right away Harrison, find yourself a seat it'll just be a minute," the old man said cheerfully.

Ten minutes later Harry was sat at a corner table with his back to the wall and a view of both entrances, making his way steadily through an English breakfast and a strong coffee, once again mulling over what he should do with his new life.

Umbridge was going to be teaching Defence Against the Dark Arts at Hogwarts this year. The thought of that woman made his fork pause midway to his mouth as he shuddered in revulsion.

Stopping her from doing that was as good of a goal as any. As much as he didn't want to ever set his eyes on the woman again he didn't think that he could in good conscience put all of those poor innocent souls at Hogwarts through the horrors of her teaching for a whole year again. Just the thought of the impressionable firsties having their lessons with her made him angry. When a teacher is so bad that the students resort to forming a rebel army to teach themselves, you know that something is wrong. There were 16 days until Hogwarts opened

her gates once more, he could more than likely figure out something in that time. Mmm, sweet thoughts of killing Umbridge.

'Slowly, don't forget slowly.'

'Yes yes, thank you, Harry.'

Speaking of Hogwarts, there was a certain insanely rare 65ft basilisk just lying around in its basement, and he could do with some money. Harry grinned at the thought. He had been frothing with rage when someone had found the chamber in his... last life. Some guy who had put together what had happened in his second year had blasted through the sinks in the second-floor girl's bathroom and claimed the basilisk for himself. How nobody had figured it out before that, he didn't know. Somehow he had completely forgotten the dratted thing after the chaos of the war and that prick Marius Ewing had made a fucking fortune off of it. Well, he wasn't about to let that happen again. It was *his*.

Oh yes, now he had two things to do.

Harry dropped his knife and fork to his now empty plate and stood, drawing on his jacket as he did. He frowned suddenly as he caught a whiff of himself. Ew, not pretty. Azkaban was in desperate need of some Febreze and liberal use of cleaning charms.

"Tom, could I have a room with a shower for a day? Need to be somewhere and I have nowhere to dump my stuff right now."

After a much-needed, 30-minute shower to wash off the dirty feeling of Azkaban in scalding hot water and a change of clothing, Harry emerged from his room, now without his trunk, and walked back out to the alley behind the Leaky with a wave and a called "cheers!" to Tom on his way out.

He entered Diagon Alley and once more smiled as he beheld the place in all its glory. It was still merry, still in denial that the Dark Lord had returned. People were talking animatedly and leading children around with their partners. It was only a matter of time before their fragile beliefs were shattered and the enormity of the fact that Voldemort was back would turn the alley into a group of huddled figures casting fearful glances over their shoulders, but it was nice to see it like this regardless. He smiled every time he saw the place where he had comprehended that he was going into a whole new world for the first time. It was a special place for him, this arch of brick at the end of one of the main arteries of magical Britain.

"You're blocking the entrance, boy."

Harry pulled himself out of his reminiscing and turned to see... the back passageway to the Leaky. Then he looked down. Ah, half-goblin, what a coincidence. Harry glared at him for calling him boy. He didn't like being reminded of Vernon. There's another person now on his shitlist. Harry weighed up the benefits and consequences of punting the rude man down the alley, judged it not worth the effort, turned away and proceeded to walk off towards a place that he ideally wouldn't enter again. But really, if he wanted somewhere with the knowledge and capability to cut up a basilisk there weren't many places you could go and even fewer who weren't lying about being able to do it. On top of that, goblin-forged blades were needed

to cut apart the beast, nothing else could penetrate that skin without causing damage. It was worth it for the cutthroat prices the little shits demanded for the process. 10% his well-toned arse.

Harry absently slapped away a hand trying to nick his money pouch and approached the doors of Gringotts in all of their golden, gaudy glory.

"Mornin' lads," he said cheerfully to the two ever-present goblin guards, he could never tell if it was always the same two on the front, they all looked the same. He normally called them Left and Right, most of the time in the order in which they stood. They gripped their spears and narrowed their beady little eyes at him distrustfully, not returning his greeting. As always.

"Rude..." Harry muttered as he strode past them into the even gaudier (in his opinion) Tellers' Hall for the second time since he had fallen from the future.

He ended up in front of a goblin that looked like all of the other goblins, except this one was a redhead. Not a good look on a goblin.

"What?" The goblin grated, pouring as much impatience into the word as possible.

"Harrison Slate, I need some goblins handy with knives and a large space to process a 65ft long basilisk, soon as possible if you would mate."

The creature jerked his wrinkled head up. He was probably surprised but it was hard to tell because goblins were always scowling. "Gringotts does not take kindly to liars Mr Slate, if you are not being truthful it would end most unpleasant for you" he growled, then he pressed down on something behind his desk with his dark yellow fingernail. "Fangcrusher will be here shortly."

"Sure thing, Red," Harry said distractedly, gazing around at the people surrounding him. Their threats were empty of course. They couldn't risk harming a hair on his pretty little head for fear of the Ministry coming down on them like a ton of bricks and starting another war. Goblins may detest mages, but they don't want another war. They wouldn't win it.

Red sneered at the nickname then waited in obvious impatience for a couple of minutes before a goblin with a heavy leather apron with knives of various lengths attached at the hip, presumably Fangcrusher, waddled out of a door behind the row of desks. The teller turned and addressed the newest arrival in harsh foreign words of goblin-speak. Not Gobbledygook. Sounds too silly apparently, rooted in wizards' mockery of the ancient language. Harry agreed with them. One of the few things he agreed with goblins about.

Harry caught the word *garanajka* in Red's sentence to Fangcrusher. Harry didn't know goblin-speak and didn't care enough to put in the time, as far as he knew the liaison to the goblins and Dumbledore were the only mages in the UK who spoke it. But he *had* gotten drunk with Filius one time and convinced his old professor and friend to teach him some curse words. As one could probably tell from their general disposition they had *a lot* of curses and insults. This one, *granajka*, roughly translated to 'shame to his mother and his mother's mother.'

Yeah, not something which Harry or Harrison liked, both of their parents having been murdered.

Harry frowned, his finger twitching for his wand, yearning to catch it from the holster with a flick and a thought. Pop, pop, squish, splat, two dead goblins, coming right up. "I'll tell you what, I'll let you little bastards have 6% of the earnings from the basilisk in return for me not ripping your fucking heads off your shoulders for what you just called me," Harry flashed the shocked goblins a smile that didn't reach his eyes, which were suddenly hard and steely. "How about that, Red?"

They were a lot more accommodating after that.

Still managed to wheedle 7% of the profits by the end of the negotiations in Fangcrusher's cramped office though.

Fucking goblins.

Gringotts permitted him to make a portkey to the chamber, after an oath that he wasn't leading them to harm and the assurance that he would be taking a separate one to the same place to ensure that he wasn't leading them into a trap, not that the goblins that they were sending weren't capable of dealing with any threats by themselves.

He and the three other goblins sent along with him, Rageblade, Hardgast and Värend appeared at the bottom of the long chute into the chamber. They were a long way below even the deepest dungeons of Hogwarts (which were pretty deep themselves) and the wards didn't reach down here, which is what let them portkey in. If they did reach down this far Hogwarts would probably have detected the class 5X beast nesting in its bowels. Although Harry didn't know if the ward that was supposed to detect dark creatures was even still up and running, it could have still been damaged from when Quirrell snuck in that Troll or adjusted when Dumbledore decided to house a Cerberus on the third floor.

'Hmm, Dumbledore fiddling with wards he most probably didn't understand would explain a lot. Like how a Death Eater sat comfy in the school for almost a year.' Dumbledore was a master of magic, but Harry doubted he knew wards as well as he thought he did.

"Where have you brought us, Slate," one of the goblins, Rageblade Harry thought, asked shortly. He was trying to hide it, but Harry could tell that he was curious as he looked about the round chamber. There were entwined snakes carved into the stone ceiling, torches flared by themselves and behind them was the entrance to the chamber, a deep dark hole reaching for the surface above them.

"Well, what do you know of the Chamber of Secrets?" Harry asked with a shit-eating grin on his face.

All three goblins turned to him sharply, their feet crunching the carpet of bones as they twisted. "Surely, you jest," Värend grated flatly, echoing his companion's sentiments. They were now looking around the chamber with sharpened eyes, most likely seeing the snakes in a different light now.

"Nope," Harry replied, popping the 'p'. "And if you know of Slytherin's Chamber of Secrets, can you guess what we're about to go cut up?" He questioned cheerfully.

"Slytherin's monster," Värend breathed, showing an uncharacteristic amount of emotion for one of its species. "A basilisk... fitting, I suppose."

Harry chuckled. "Indeed my diminutive friend, now let's be off fellas, time and money wait for no goblin and all that lark," Harry waved his wand lazily and cleared the bones in his path, leaving the way forward clean. The goblins hefted their packs stuffed with various sampling and measuring implements and followed Harry through the circular entrance.

They trekked along the dingy pipe—Harry using *scourgify* liberally the whole way—until they came upon the huge snakeskin lying dead and shed on the floor to the side. It was about 50ft long and yellowed with age.

Harry gestured to it with his free hand distractedly while he viscously cleansed the floor in front of him again. "You reckon we can do anything with that? It's probably about 200 years old, but it can probably be used for something right? It's still basilisk after all."

The goblin who had stayed quiet so far, Hardgast, ran a sharp nail along the scales and examined the tip, which hadn't managed to scrape anything off. "The skin is still strong, it can be sold for a cheaper price or ground down for potions, this will be included in our cut."

There didn't seem to be an offer or a question there. Harry just shrugged and gave the go-ahead. The deal they had was already good, allowing the skin to be included was better than renegotiating and potentially getting a worse deal. The three set about rolling it up and then loaded it into a bag that obviously had an undetectable extension charm on it, as the skin that was half as tall as he was when rolled up was eaten entirely by the sack now slung over Hardgast's shoulder.

They continued. Harry eventually got tired of the dim light from the torches and sent a bright strip of *lumos* running along the top of the pipe in a long line, casting a harsh white light onto their surroundings.

They soon came upon their first problem, that being the huge mound of rubble that they found after the pipe ended and emptied into a large room that Harry had forgotten was there. Harry had no clue how Ron's wand had managed to cock up an *obliviate* so badly that it took out the ceiling, but that was a question for another day. Maybe Lockhart was just that incompetent.

"Ahh shit," Harry muttered, tapping his wand against his leg and trying to figure out what to do with it. He peered at the small gap where he had crawled through the last time. No chance of him getting through that way now. Merlin, had he really been that small? A memory of the knobbly kneed, scrawny and bloody Harry Potter surfaced in his mind. Yes, yes he had.

He turned to look down at the goblins. "You guys live underground, right? Any ideas?" they turned to him with identical unimpressed looks. He wouldn't be getting any help from them. "Useless fuckers," he grumbled, wand still tapping his leg.

Harry thought for a moment longer then jabbed his wand at the pile, levelly incanting '*licens indu unus*'. A harsh white beam shot from the tip of his wand and struck the rubble. Harry concentrated and the beam stayed attached, unmoving. Then, slowly, the rock started to flow to the tune of his intent and the mound rose and narrowed, the loose rocks and dust coalescing, becoming smooth and more solid. Harry waited until the pile finished, the end result making it seem like there was a solid wall blocking the way forward. Harry didn't wait for one of the goblins to make a snide remark, instead, he slowly dragged his wand from the floor next to his left foot, up and over his head, then over next to his right foot. He did it with effort, pushing against invisible resistance.

The transfiguration was more intricate and took more effort than necessary, but by the end, there was a badass 8ft high arch with snakes decorating the edges cutting through the barrier that made the effort completely worth it. He even added a smaller, goblin-sized archway to the right of it for his new friends. Let nobody say that Harrison Slate isn't thoughtful.

Rageblade turned to look up at him from where he was staring at the smaller, goblin-sized entryway and scowled at him. Well, scowled at him deeper, he was already scowling. "I would gut you where you stand if there wasn't money to make, Slate," he growled.

Harry laughed, the sound echoing harshly around the cavernous room they were in. "You're welcome buddy, now onwards, to adventure!" Harry brandished his now-lit wand in front of him like a torch and skipped through his entrance, pausing on the other side to turn and watch as the goblins tried to get through the ward he had put on his door. After a minute they gave up and, with mutinous expressions and angry mutterings, the three reluctantly sidled through the smaller archway he had constructed.

Harry grinned, he always enjoyed taking the goblins down a peg or two. It was said of goblins that the only thing as unbreakable as their blades was their pride. He had always been good at breaking things.

Soon enough, they approached a huge metal door with carved snakes locking it in place. The entrance to the chamber. Seriously, Salazar's tendency to put snakes everywhere seemed a bit overkill to Harry. Snakes were covering the whole structure, including the ceiling, the girl's bathroom, in the door, engraved into the floor and even trailing along the sides of the pipes. Harry wondered if the founder had gone slightly insane in his old age. It would explain the abundance of snake decorations. And of course the huge 5X beast capable of killing whole villages in minutes that he hid under a fucking *school* that he founded.

Harry turned to his compatriots. "Right, I would prefer if you lot not divulge what you're about to hear here, it could potentially do some damage to my no doubt stellar reputation if this were to get out," without waiting for an answer he turned back to the door and hissed. "*~open~*". A small trio of indrawn breaths and the rasp of metal sliding against metal was the only indication that his less-than-revered magical talent had indeed carried over. He wasn't sure if he was happy about that or not.

He wasn't entirely worried about the three of them blabbing. Goblins didn't give a shit about mages, so most likely wouldn't bother mentioning it to one. Unless offered a sufficient amount of galleons of course, and even then mages were normally too arrogant to go to a magical creature for blackmail material anyway. And if people did find out, well, he wasn't in

school anymore and also wasn't a celebrity. He would probably get a few idiots calling him a dark wizard, but he didn't give a shit. For some of the things he had done to catch or kill dark mages, he probably *could* be considered one himself by some.

The snakes stopped their metallic song and fell silent. After a few more sounds of moving parts from inside the door, it swung open on silent hinges, revealing the legendary Chamber of Secrets in all its dark and depressing glory. And there, lying dead centre in the middle of the chamber at the end like it had only just been killed, was the basilisk. It wasn't as big as he remembered it being, probably due to him being significantly taller than he was then, but it was still a frightening sight to behold.

Harry could hear the goblins muttering to each other in goblin-speak as they approached the giant snake. He walked right up to the mouth of the thing, his footsteps echoing around the chamber intertwining with the shorter-spaced ones of his comrades. Snakes and wizards brandishing staffs leered over him from either side as he made his way down to the main event. It was just as he remembered it, dark green and all spikes tipped with yellow. Horns rose out of the top curving up to sharp tips.

He could still see his blood pooled on the floor from where he had been impaled and, away from the snake, the oily black mess left over from Tom's diary. It was as he suspected then. Like many rooms that people planned to remain undisturbed for a long amount of time, there was a strong stasis charm on this chamber. It was the only ward, probably to stop anyone from detecting the place. Harry imagined that it probably wasn't put in place to preserve the dead body of the monster it contained, most likely it was to stop cobwebs, moss and mildew from setting in. It was just a lucky side effect that it also perfectly preserved the extremely valuable dead snake along with everything else.

"Here we are gentlemen, one basilisk, as promised," Harry said with a flourish, gesturing to the still-glistening hole where one of the deadly eyes used to be.

Värend cast a beady eye over it. "It is in remarkable condition for something dead for two years, Slate," he paused then lifted an arm in the air, tracing shapes with a claw, eyes closed. A smile that was somehow scarier than the normal glare affixed his face. "An ancient stasis ward, almost definitely cast by Salazar Slytherin himself, this will increase profits drastically."

Harry shuffled away a little, the little guy looked about ready to bust a nut at the idea of profit. "Right, yeah, so can we start on the work? Time is money you know." He emphasized this by rubbing his thumb and fingers together.

The three goblins started out of their reverie and started unpacking their satchels, pulling out various measuring and sampling tools. Harry started on his part of the process and unpacked the eight stones that would be transporting the thing to a holding room. They were mainly used for international magical transportation of cargo, but they were handy for all kinds of things. The way they worked was you organised the stones, four in a rectangle on the floor and 4 above them around whatever you wanted to transport and it would send everything inside the area to a destination set beforehand by a mage, much like a portkey, but the portstones couldn't transport living things.

It took a while, and he almost crushed Hardgast when he moved the tail end of the creature to fit it into his rectangle, but eventually, he was done, and eight stones linked by a golden light entrapped the deadly serpent.

While he was at it Hardgast measured it, turns out the beast was actually around 67 feet long, so he would be getting even more money.

About the money...

To put it simply, basilisks were really, really fucking *rare*. In the last 1000 years, there had probably only been about 28 of them found and less than that killed. The ones that were found normally didn't last long, as a snake that killed people with a look tended to get noticed and hunted down by groups of angry mages rather quickly.

This one was definitely the largest one ever killed. It had been left to grow for at least 900 years, and it showed. Even with only a 7% cut, the goblins would be making a hefty sum from the sale of its parts, not to mention his cut. They would be releasing the parts to the market gradually to not make them worthless, but by the end, he would probably have enough money to make House Slate equal to one of the Noble families. Potion makers, experimenters and perhaps even the DoM would all be clamouring to get their grubby mitts on the venom and skin so they could poke at it.

He had ordered them to let him keep a 7ft long roll of the skin and a fang but the rest would be sold. He was almost tempted to keep the skull so he could hang it somewhere or maybe make it into a chair or something, but the lost value from doing that was in the thousands of galleons so he refrained.

Harry walked from the last stone he had activated over to the small group of goblins, who had been comparing notes and crawling over the basilisk for the last half-hour.

"Evaluation is done," Rageblade said, tapping a blood-stained claw on the parchment in his hand. "If the market values of the parts remain roughly the same, the whole basilisk should make a profit..." the goblin paused on the word 'profit', savouring the taste of the word. "...of around 316,000 galleons." The goblin let loose another unsettling grin, which looked more like he was bearing his teeth to eat a child. "A 22120 galleon profit for Gringotts, most satisfactory."

And that was about as much of a compliment as you could get from a goblin.

Harry grinned and tapped the stone next to him twice with his wand, causing the stones and the snake to vanish in a golden flash. "Good doing business with you lads, when can I expect the money to start rolling in?"

"We should be finished with rendering the basilisk by the end of the month, and the first payments will probably be deposited into your vault as soon as Gringotts starts distributing into the market, are you portkeying back to Gringotts?" Värend asked.

Harry looked around at the now snake-less chamber. "Nah, I'm going to do a little sightseeing."

They gave him one last collective sneer then portkeyed away back to Gringotts, leaving Harry under the eyes of the huge statue of Salazar Slytherin in all his monkey-like glory. Without the snake and the goblins, he suddenly felt very small. The stone walls arched up high into the darkness, and all of the statues were larger than life, making it seem like he was in a giant's world and he'd just wandered onto the threshold.

He hadn't been lying, he had actually stayed to have a look around. He reasoned that, even if Salazar had only built this to house his pet snake and look impressive, it wasn't likely that the slide was the only entrance into the place. Mages were a proud species by nature, especially the older ones. There was no way that the founder would have used something as undignified as a slide. It could be that he had always apparated in, but Harry doubted it. He was a Hogwarts founder; there *had* to be an entrance to the castle somewhere.

And so Harry spent the next 20 minutes tracing his hands over all of what felt like thousands of snakes in the chamber, straining for some feel of magic from one of them and whispering "*~open~*" at each one.

Eventually, he got to one snake that was sliding from behind the statue of Slytherin. It was as tall as he was and its tongue was flicking out as if to scent the air. Harry laid his hand on the tongue palm first, he could feel the magic around the mouth of the beast and could tell it was most likely an entrance to something.

It was.

The snake's mouth opened to reveal a dark passageway which, like the rest of the chamber, lit up with eerie light emanating from green flames the moment he entered. It ended after just two flights of stairs. Halfway up, Harry felt the heavy wards of Hogwarts wash over him. He paused to see if anything would happen, cursing himself for forgetting about them. When nothing happened, he breathed a sigh of relief. He didn't need Dumbledore noticing him right now and sticking his overly large nose into his business. The wards were based on identifying the magic of the former and current students, Harry realised, and his magic was one of the few things he had dragged from the future.

The passageway emerged into an unused classroom in an unused corridor on an almost unused floor, the 5th one to be exact. To Harry's knowledge, the only things that the floor was used for were the prefect's bathroom, and a place for a quick shag in a rarely frequented room like the one in front of him. He wondered if that was on purpose, if Slytherin had put something in place to discourage using this part of the castle.

Harry nodded and fixed the location in his head so he could come back to it sometime. He assumed that somewhere there would be a snake carved into the wall like in the girl's bathroom 3 floors below him.

Once back in the chamber, Harry observed the last place in the massive room that he hadn't explored; the huge metal door to the left of the giant statue of Slytherin that the basilisk had come out of on that awful day in his second year. He was reluctant to open it again, although he knew he was being unreasonable. After all, it wasn't as if the same thing was going to happen again.

Harry stared up at the door and glared into the eyes of one of the engraved snakes on the front of the door. It couldn't move, but Harry could swear it was giving him a mocking look.

"~*Speak to me Slytherin, greatest of the Hogwarts Four*~" Harry hissed.

Much like the entrance to the chamber, although on a much larger scale, the door was silent for a moment before the snakes drew back from the centre and the hiss of metal against metal once again rang around the chamber as the snakes sang their song. Once finished, the door swung open to reveal a pipe coated with slime and long dead skin. There were no lights within and it stank, Harry recoiled under the nasal assault and swore, casting a bubblehead charm on himself on instinct to filter out the awful scent.

"Right, let's see if the Chamber of Secrets is plural for a reason..." Harry muttered as he clambered his way up to the pipe, pulling himself up and into it. Harry wiped his hands and knees free from the muck with a quick charm then lit the way in front of him and started to make his way down the pipe, wand extended in front of him to light the way.

He had been walking for roughly ten seconds when he heard a sound that he *really* hadn't wanted or expected to hear again.

Harry froze as he heard the sound of something heavy sliding across muck and metal somewhere ahead of him, the sound echoing off the walls of bends in front of him. He was brought back to his second year, Tom Riddle with his arms outstretched as the same sound emanated from a dark hole...

"No fucking way," Harry breathed, his breath starting to shorten as he slowly began backing away to where he had come from, stumbling over a bone in his hurry.

"~*I smell BLOOD, mother said there would be BLOOD*~" A disjointed voice hissed in what he could tell was parseltongue, the rasping, wet noise was getting closer.

Harry scrambled to his feet, turned tail and bolted, cussing repeatedly and frequently as he did so. His mantra of 'fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck' bounded off the walls of the pipe and followed him tauntingly as he struggled to keep his footing amongst the debris in his way.

"~*Finally I can RIP and TEAR, mother always said*...~"

Harry didn't even pause as he reached the thankfully still open heavy metal door, flinging himself out of it and casting an *arresto momentum* on his way down, pure desperation powering the spell as he heard the sliding get closer and closer.

Harry hit the floor and rolled with it. His palms were cut from where he had slipped in his escape and stung against the impact as he pushed them into the floor to roll back to his feet. He spun to face the door. It took a few seconds of him staring at the mouth of the pipe blankly before he realised that he had no clue how to close the entrance again. Laughing slightly hysterically at his predicament, Harry turned around once more and ran from what he was desperately praying to Merlin wasn't real.

'Of course the basilisk had a kid, why not? I'm Harry fuckin Potter, I really should have expected something like this.'

Harry ducked behind one of the pillars to the side of the room and put his back to it, considering his options. He laid the back of his head against it as well and glared at the ceiling above him. He just knew that somewhere above him, someone was laughing at him.

"Fawkes? I could use a little help here buddy, for old time's sake?" he called into the air, feeling like a bit of an idiot.

There was no response.

Harry cursed. "I'm going to flush that fucking bird's ashes down the toilet next time I see it," he grumbled.

He couldn't let this Merlin be damned thing loose on the school. Even if there were no students around the teachers were still there, and he didn't want their deaths on his hands. Therefore, the only option left to him was to kill it. Again. He had to stop getting into these situations.

He'd done it once when he was twelve, how hard could it be? He chose to ignore the massive amount of luck that had gone into that. Seriously, if he wanted more money, he should rend his younger self down to potion ingredients and sell them as *felix felicis*.

Harry heard a dull thud from the entrance to the basilisk lair.

"~I can smell blood, so hungry... mother said there would be blood for me...~" Well, now he knew what gender the big one was. He wasn't sure what to do with that information.

Harry breathed a long-suffering sigh to the ceiling and conjured a blindfold, placing it over his eyes so he wouldn't get turned into a garden ornament. He then placed a charm that the Hit-Wizards used on his eyes. It hadn't actually been invented yet, having been made in 2012 by a spell-crafting witch who had been fiddling with *homenum revilio*, and accidentally came across a variation which briefly outlined everything in her surroundings instead. The Hit-Wizards used to use it when vision was poor and they couldn't risk using *lumos*. Since it gave him vision straight to his brain through his magic, and not through his eyes, he could see through his blindfold and would be able to see the basilisk without instantly dying.

As soon as he finished the incantation the world flared to life around him once more. Everything was fairly poorly defined but it was far better than being blind. The chamber became a mosaic of various shades of grey; it all had an odd shifting texture that reminded Harry of TV static that gave him a headache, but it was better than being blind or dead.

That was all he had time to plan for, as he heard the basilisk getting far too close for comfort. Teeth bared in a humourless grin that probably would have made anyone who saw it think he was slightly insane, Harry stepped out from behind the pillar, wand raised towards where he heard the snake still rambling manically.

The snake before him was possibly just above half the size of the last one, which of course didn't make it any less scary looking. Its head had two horns protruding from the top of its head in between its eyes, curved to point forwards and outwards, perfect for gutting prey. It had a line of spikes trailing down its spine and more hanging from its jaw and around its eyes. Harry of course couldn't tell what colour it was, but he assumed it was a deep, almost black-green like its dear mum old had been.

Without waiting, Harry started silently casting conjunctive curses at the eyes of the beast, walking backwards slowly to try and keep some distance between him and the snake, he wasn't some Gryffindor to go charging at it like an idiot.

After roughly 80 years of using a wand offensively, it was safe to say he had good aim. His new Red Oak wand was still new to him, however, so his first spell hit just under the left eye of the basilisk, making it hiss in annoyance and whip its head to the left on reflex. This presented him with a better target for the right eye, however, the outline of it through his magical vision painted a fairly obvious target for his wand. He adjusted his aim, stance sideways and solid to move to the new target, he took a deep steadying breath and cast. The second conjunctive curse hit it dead in its eye, causing it to start screaming and flailing. Harry was sprayed with a good amount of what had to be eyeball fluid, as it was only around 25 feet away when he hit it.

"Yah! Yah! There you go motherfucker!" Harry shouted, he started walking forward to press his advantage, casting strong *bombardas*, causing the basilisk to screech even louder and recoil as Harry repeatedly hit it with explosions that shook the floor of the chamber, trying to get a blasting curse into its new weak spot and blow up its head.

Suddenly, it seemed to collect itself and lunged towards Harry, mouth opened wide and its fangs dripping with venom in sync with the blood from its eye. Harry cursed, sent the strongest blasting curse he could manage into its mouth with one of his javelins following it, then stepped to the side back behind the pillar in time to narrowly avoid the mouth of the serpent, which struck the floor where he had just been, cracking the marble with a thunderclap that reverberated around the chamber. Harry could hear the snake screaming something, but it was so frenzied and crazy that he couldn't make out a word of it.

Harry grinned as he thought of possibly the most stupid thing he could do in this situation.

He swung himself around the other side of the column and climbed up onto the back of the huge serpent, using the spikes as leverage as he mounted it like a horse.

"Yee-haw! Giddy up, horsey!"

Harry grasped one spike at the back of the head of it and held his wand in the other, casting the strongest sticking charm he could to his feet as he struggled to remain in his position. The basilisk had cottoned onto the fact that he was on top of it and was thrashing and trying to get a look at him with its remaining eye. It was even angrier now, the blasting curse had done some damage to its tongue and mouth and the javelin seemed to have lodged in the back of its throat, occasionally making it gag. Harry could hear a low hiss as the venom on the inside started making its way through the metal of his conjured projectile.

Harry started casting the strongest cutting curse he knew, *sectilis*, repeatedly at the top of its head just inches away from it as it writhed and screamed in pain. Even with the close distance and the power he was pouring into the curse it still took five curses on target and three that missed to open a large gash in the top of its head, causing a torrent of blood to start spraying out of the top of it like some sort of demonic land whale's blowhole.

Harry blinked through the blood covering his face and wiped it free. He took aim with his wand, his other hand gripping the left horn of the crazed animal desperately, but the beast was still thrashing and screaming in pain and his wand was waving in front of him to waver uncertainly.

Just as he was about to send a javelin straight through the top of its head, the snake – perhaps feeling that the end was near – rolled over and tried to crush him under its massive weight, causing him to blast the javelin at an awkward angle into the wound, making it non-lethal, just hugely painful. Harry's eyes, rimmed with blood not his own, widened as he felt the motion shift sideways under him and he hurriedly cancelled the sticking charms on his feet before they unintentionally killed him. The sudden cancellation threw him bodily off the beast as he followed the direction of the serpent as it rolled, sending him crashing into the sharp rubble of a section of floor that the basilisk had destroyed in its panicked spasms.

He impacted the floor hard, and he clutched his wand to his chest on instinct to not break it as he heard a sharp *crack* as his right humerus was broken against a protruding block of stone in its place. The various other smaller bits of stone cut into him and opened gashes on his face and back as he bounced off the stone and landed on the floor, the warm blood coating his face and hands contrasting against the cold marble sharply.

Harry grabbed his wand with his other hand, thanking Merlin that he learnt how to cast with his left, gritted his teeth against the pain emanating from his right arm and stood again. He probably would have died there if the basilisk hadn't had to take the time to right itself from where it had rolled onto its back, as it was he barely avoided its second lunge at him as he dove to the left, throwing himself to the ground again and wincing when the jolt travelled through his right arm.

He scrambled to his feet and started running back to the lair, transfiguring some of the larger rubble into rough and slightly deformed Gorillas to keep it occupied as he scampered away, cradling his limp right arm as he went.

He heard loud hissing and the sound of shattered stone impacting marble as he sprinted down the centre of the chamber, desperately correcting his balance as slick blood on the soles of his boots tried its best to slip him up on the smooth black marble floor.

Harry raised one more wall between him and the basilisk, which was still occupied by one of the Gorillas which had managed to clock it around the face. He entered the main part of the hall, where the long entrance hall ended, and set his back against a wall out of sight. He pointed his wand at his broken arm, using a medical charm that set bones straight on it, causing it to snap straight.

"FUCK," Harry cried in pain, eyes closed, neck taunt and his left fist striking the floor in his agony. Not bothering to numb it before brutally wrenching it back into place had been a bad

idea. Harry, panting in pain, focused on his metamorph powers and slowly knitted bone and marrow together to how it should be, his intent paving the way for his powers to heal it in short order. Harry rotated his arm a few times then nodded in satisfaction. All that was left of the injury was a dull shadow of the pain of the break.

The satisfaction didn't last long, however, as the basilisk exploded through his hastily constructed wall, sending pieces of stone scattering across the chamber. It was a scary sight, it had blood running in rivulets on all sides of its face, with Harry's javelin sticking out the top of its head like an antenna. It was literally spitting mad, occasional drops of venom spinning from its mouth and sizzling angrily on the floor of the chamber, turning solid marble into oily black puddles.

"Morgana's saggy tits would you just fucking die?" Harry grumbled in irritation as he stood, wand in his right arm once again as he got to his feet. He rose it and blasted the floor in front of it, causing rubble and dust to fly in the air and hit it in the face and leaving a hole in the floor. Harry transfigured some blasted bits of marble into a dozen jagged spears and launched them with a strong banishing charm towards the animal. He followed with a storm of darts made from the smaller rocks. One of the stone darts struck it in the hole where its eyes used to be, and blood started pouring out of that as well. This was about the best he could do, the hide was far too spell-resistant for piercing hexes and most curses so he had to resort to brute force, something which he was fortunately very used to doing.

It hissed in pain and then swung its tail around in a whip-like motion, attempting to slam him across the room. Harry stood his ground as the end of the monster came careening to him and transfigured another section of marble to rise out of the ground in a triangular wedge, with the pointed end pointed at the flat side of the oncoming force. The tail hit the barricade with a sickening *crunch*. Harry winced. Its ridiculously strong skin had been its downfall, it was so strong that the barrier didn't cut into it and soften the blow. Instead, it hit it full force and the ribs and spine took the brunt of it.

Again, it screamed in agony. Harry's ears were starting to ring from the high-pitched bellows of the creature. It pulled away from the barrier, and Harry could see that the back portion of the creature was bent at an odd angle to the rest of it. It was turned with its other eye to him now, glaring at him balefully and trying to kill him with it again. All it did was give him another target.

He let the slightly dented wedge drop and started flinging conjunctive curses at its other eye, some *velox iaculum*s thrown in for good measure because he liked casting it. He got it on the fifth spell this time, as it was starting to spasm and droop as it started to succumb to its various injuries. The last of its eyes exploded in a shower of gore much like the last.

He could have taken off the blindfold and the charm then, but he didn't have enough time. He was already on the move, sending piercing and blasting hexes at the mouth of it as it screamed in pain. Some hit, causing flakes of skin and chunks of teeth to fly around the room. Harry had to dodge the bits of stone, one cut with that venom would kill him very quickly.

However, none of this was actually *killing* it. In desperation and annoyance, Harry marshalled a good amount of power, held his wand in a firm two-handed grip and yelled. "*Depulso!*"

The wand kicked back harshly, hitting him in the chest with the force of the charm. The bright yellow light struck his opponent halfway down its body and sent it sliding and spinning at a high speed across the chamber. The spell worked because it wasn't actually trying to penetrate the skin, instead just applying force upon it.

It hit the wall on the other side of the chamber *hard*. The sound of cracking stone and bone once more rang around the chamber as ribs and ornamental snakes were broken apart. As he had hoped, the snake was now lying lengthways along the wall underneath several huge snakes that arched over it. Harry transfigured three of them into huge chains and attached them to the floor, making them as tight as possible to keep the basilisk contained. It struggled and squirmed, trying to set itself free. Harry matched his will against that of the basilisks and gritted his teeth, tightening the chains more and more. The chains started to heat up and turned red, energised by the magic and negative intent that Harry was putting into his task.

Try as he might, the thing was huge. Even if it was injured it was also still extremely strong, and not much that he could conjure would contain ever be able to contain it. After a couple more minutes of struggle with the hissing of the red-hot chains burning the scales of Slytherin's monster complimenting the furious hissing of the snake itself, one of the links in the middle chain eventually snapped, and the chain fell limply on top of the snake and the floor. The other two around the neck and tail held for the moment, but they wouldn't for long.

Harry dropped the spell and started casting *sectilis* again, but the distance was too great and the skin too resistant and Harry stopped the futile endeavour after a short while. It probably was only tickling it. He cast his eyes around the chamber, looking for something large so he could transfigure it into an animal of equal size to the basilisk to challenge it, or maybe raise a golem, when he saw the huge statue of Salazar Slytherin out of the corner of his eye and did a double take. An idea that only he could think of entered his head. Harry smiled the same slightly insane smile he had smiled earlier when he had decided to ride the basilisk, only wider and maybe slightly more manic.

'*Perfect.*' There was some sort of beautiful irony in this plan.

Harry turned his wand from the still struggling dark creature and turned it on the massive statue of the 'Greatest of the Hogwarts Four', and cast the strongest animation charm that he could without killing himself. A dark blue light shot from his wand and impacted the stone face of the man, causing it and the rest of the body to glow the same blue for a brief moment. Harry felt the drain on his magic immediately, but in comparison to some magics he'd cast it was minimal. He gritted his teeth, the smile on his face was now showing all teeth and had gone slightly feral, and kept his wand trained on the stone giant as he dictated its movements.

Ever so slowly it came to life and started to move. Its right arm, the only one being free, began to clumsily try and push itself free from the wall it was attached to, impossible stone joints squealing harshly around its shoulder and elbow and letting loose chips of granite. There were a series of ear-splitting cracks of stone and loud rumblings that shook the whole chamber as the behemoth broke itself free from its confines, coming to life under the power of Harry's magical strength, creativity and, most importantly, his *intent*.

Meanwhile, the basilisk had managed to get break itself free of the last two chains and was now once more making its way to Harry, leaving a bloody trail behind it as it slithered its way

over. It was relying entirely on smell now, its nose leading it where the two sightless gouges where its eyes used to be could not.

Harry was starting to sag under the huge effort that it was taking to direct the statue as the snake got closer and closer to him, the sound of it sliding across the smooth floor was wet now as blood ran from its eyes and under itself, lubricating its passage.

"Come on... come onnnnnn...you old fucker," he growled.

Two loud cracks sounded through the chamber as Salazar separated his bare feet from the floor. The snake got closer.

"Come on, come on, come on..." He repeated, teeth gritted and jaw clenched.

The snake's head shot forward to Harry's distracted and bloodied form one last time, confident in its strike, confident that this time it would get a taste of the blood it had been craving for so long. Its jaw was open wide, smell guiding its fangs towards its prey.

Not ten feet from Harry, the basilisk suddenly jerked back and its head slammed to the floor, snapping its mouth shut with a *snap* as its momentum was stopped suddenly and forcibly. It turned to the right in confusion, not being able to see what had stopped it but being able to feel the pain of something clamped around the broken section of the back half of itself.

Harry let out an animalistic roar as he twisted his wand violently, causing the snake to be pulled back towards the reborn Slytherin. As it slid backwards the statue brought its other hand to bear and slammed it downwards.

The first impacted the top of the basilisk's head with the force of a falling freight train. The spear was driven all the way through the wound it had been jammed in and pierced the brain of the creature. It continued through the lower part of the mouth and dug into the floor, pinning it down like a display animal. It jerked violently at the suddenness of the forced stop and then lay still, unmoving.

"THAT'S THE FUCKING TICKET!" He cheered, his adrenaline peaked. "WOO! TAKE THAT MOTHERFUCKER!"

Harry limped over to it, healing multiple small cuts on himself as he did. He approached the front of the behemoth, the face of Salazar Slytherin lying sideways next to him, sightless eyes gazing ever forward. He flicked the nose of the beast and laughed.

"That's Harrison fucking Slate to you, *bitch*."

-oOo-

15th August 1995, 12:55 pm

Gringotts, Diagon Alley, City of London, England

Teller Flametop (known as 'Red' to those who wanted to piss him off) looked up sharply from a report from some debt collectors he was reviewing as he heard a commotion outside of the

bank. His beady eyes narrowed and his clawed hand drifted to his knife that he always kept to his side. He hadn't ever needed it, but it was better to be safe than dead. There were low mutterings and shocked exclamations, he could see a circle of people around a figure slowly moving towards his general direction as people scrambled to get away from whoever it was.

The crowd parted hastily to reveal a man heading straight for him with a slight limp, covered in blood, gore and what appeared to be bits of eyeball. His hair was matted with dried red ichor and his face was a pattern of lines from where he had tried to wipe it away. He looked like a vengeful angel, one of God's fallen.

Flametop recognised the man. He was the annoying one from the morning who had recognised Goblin-speak and brought Gringotts much profit. He wouldn't ever tell anyone, but the man had unnerved him. Goblins had a good feeling of magic; it was how they were so good with wards. And the magic he had felt from the man when he had got annoyed had been all-encompassing, he hadn't felt an aura like it since the old man, Albus Dumbledore, had waltzed into the bank. He had wondered at the time how everyone around the unnatural-looking man hadn't sensed it and looked askance. And then Slate had gone from genial to terribly dangerous in an instant when he found he had been insulted. Flametop did not want to be subjected to those quicksilver grey eyes again.

His feeling of unease was not in any way reflected in his expression, and yet inwardly it grew when he saw the ear-to-ear grin the man was wearing, showing two rows of perfectly white teeth against the stained red of his face. He didn't appear to care that he was leaving bloody footprints trailing along the perfect white of the floor behind him, or that everyone in the bank was staring at his blood-soaked and torn form, some in disgust, some in awe and some in fright.

Slate approached his desk, a wide grin still in place.

"Red, you're not going to fucking *believe* what just happened."

Flametop gulped.

Dionysus

Chapter 5: Dionysus

17th August 1995, 07:30 pm

Number 12 Grimmauld Place, London, England.

Nymphadora Tonks arrived with a small *crack* on the grimy front doorstep of Number 12, Grimmauld Place. As soon as she regained her coordination she snapped off a quick *homenum revilio*, just to make sure nobody saw her arrive or followed her.

Seeing no sign of life, she re-holstered her wand and walked up the last few steps and knocked smartly on the peeling black paint of the front door, making sure to knock three times slowly, and twice fast. After a moment she heard hurried footsteps and the door opened to reveal the matronly form of Molly Weasley, who smiled brightly when she saw her and opened the door wider to allow her entry.

"Oh, Nymphadora it is so good to see you, do please come in, the meeting is just about to start," Molly said warmly.

Tonks rolled her eyes. "Don't call me that Mrs Weasley, and you're supposed to ask me a security question, remember?" She had said exactly this at least four times already.

"Oh right, of course, dear," Molly said sheepishly, shutting the door again as if that would have helped at this point if Tonks wasn't who she said she was. "Well, what did I serve you for dinner at the last Order meeting then dearest," she asked, her voice muffled through the small gap she had left.

'And then she mentions the Order in the security question,' Tonks thought in exasperation. Molly Weasley was a good mother, a good cook and a fairly fearsome duelist but when it came down to things like this she was about as subtle as Hagrid in a glass store.

"Steak and ale pie," Tonks said, letting herself in when Molly nodded and opened the door for her again. The door opened into a dingy hallway lined with old paintings, dark oak flooring and peeling wallpaper that was probably elegant once. The walls in the old manor seemed to eat into the shadows, and Tonks swore she could feel the house frowning at her. She repressed the urge to shiver. She suspected that it was because of her mother's blood, she always got a distinct feeling that the house didn't like her.

"Hey girls," Tonks called brightly and waved to Ginny and Hermione, two girls who she had got to know reasonably well over their time at the old house. Ginny reminded her of her school friend Sabina Lewis from Hogwarts, another redhead with a fiery temper. Hermione was the bookish type, not one that she would have associated with in her school days, but she was still liked the bushy-haired girl.

"Hey Tonks," they chorused back with small smiles as Tonks made her way to the stairs, where they were leaning over the bannister.

"Up to your rooms girls, and you mustn't try and listen in, these are not things for young ears to hear," Molly scolded, jabbing a finger at them.

Hermione nodded and turned to leave without a fuss. After a few minutes of futile protest, Ginny did the same, scowling as she did. Tonks was mirroring her behind Molly. She wasn't sure about Ginny, but Hermione was a friend of Harry Potter, and she thought that she should be included, especially after what the Boy-Who-Lived had gone through last school year. Nevertheless, she waved goodbye to them again and continued onwards.

As was custom, she tripped on the Troll's leg at the top of the stairs on the way to the kitchen, where everyone was gathered for today's meeting. She had even watched it this time, determined not to trip on it, but at the last moment somehow her foot had connected with the ugly ornament. She was certain that it had moved to hit her. The sound of the umbrella stand hitting the floor and Tonks' loud cursing alerted the portrait of Walburga Black, setting her off into a frenzy of cursing and name-calling that reverberated around the house. It took the combined effort of her and Molly to shut the loathsome bitch up. Molly gave her a reproachful look over her shoulder as they went down the stairs to the kitchen.

"Really dear, you must watch your step, one day you'll fall and hurt yourself."

Tonks inwardly groaned. She hated being spoken to like a child, and that seemed to be Mrs Weasley's only tone when she was speaking to anyone younger than she was. She supposed it was an unintentional habit after raising seven children. It didn't mean she had to like it.

She was saved from giving a snappy answer that would inevitably devolve into an argument about the pros and cons of blasting the fucking leg to pieces by the door opening into the basement and kitchen of the ancient Black House.

The kitchen was the largest room in the house, taking up almost the entire basement floor. It was also one of few rooms without objects that could kill someone in a variety of absurdly creative ways. Most importantly it had a large, scarred wooden table in the centre, making it the best place for the Order to meet. Arrayed around the room were most of the current members of the Order of the Phoenix barring herself and Mundungus Fletcher, who rarely showed up for meetings. Tonks couldn't say that she minded that.

Tonks slipped in next to Emmeline Vance, a middle-aged, good-looking witch with long light brown hair and soft features. She had been one of the few in Dumbledore's group to get through the first war against Voldemort without getting killed or sent to prison and one of the fewer to rejoin the recently reborn Order. Tonks hadn't spoken to her very much, all she knew is that she was a good fighter and she worked somewhere in magical transportation at the Ministry. Next to her was her mentor, Alastor Moody, looking impatient as always. She didn't think she had as much respect for anyone as she did for the one-eyed man who had taught her everything she knew. He nodded at her in greeting and she nodded back.

"Ah Nymphadora, welcome, we can finally begin," a grandfatherly voice called from the other side of the room. At the far end of the kitchen, presiding over everyone else was the tall

form of Albus Dumbledore, dressed in some truly horrific honey-yellow robes with lime-green spirals.

Tonks' eye twitched at the use of her first name, but she couldn't be bothered to correct him, knowing he would just ignore her. The Headmaster had a strange sense of humour and probably found it funny. "Evening Headmaster, sorry I'm late, got held up at work for a bit, some idiot managed to blow up the front of his house trying to cut the grass," she said with a tired sigh.

She heard a bark of laughter from the right of the headmaster and her focus shifted to Sirius Black, probably her favourite person in this house and one of the few relatives she would admit to sharing blood with. He grinned at her and gave her a jaunty wave, looking happy to see her from where he was sprawled in a rickety old wooden seat, but Tonks could see the tightness in his eyes. The poor man had been locked up in this hellhole, a place where had been abused, for far too long, and he was starting to fray around the edges, and he hadn't been that mentally stable to begin with. Tonks' conversations with him had probably been some of the only reprieves for the dog animagus over the last year, everyone else was either too physically young or too mentally old for him. The only other people he seemed to have long conversations with were Remus and Harry, but the werewolf was rarely in the house, normally away on some mission for Dumbledore and Harry was never around him for very long. He looked worn and weary, but the spark in his eyes that was so much like a certain other man's was still there, even after so long in Azkaban. She waved back and reciprocated the smile.

The Headmaster's eyes twinkled merrily. "An easy mistake to make I'm sure, why I remember when I was a youth I inadvertently painted every fence in my neighbourhood bright yellow when I attempted to redecorate the front gate." He said evenly. "Now, onto what we have gathered here for. As you all know, a new year at Hogwarts starts at the end of this month, and we really must discuss who will be escorting the children to the station..."

Tonks, Mrs Weasley, Sturgis Podmore (a balding man of average height with mousy brown hair), Moody and Remus Lupin all volunteered to shepherd all of the kids to platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$. Tonks glanced sideways at the aforementioned werewolf, who was standing in the far left back corner of the room as if he was trying to become part of it. As always he looked tired and bedraggled, the scars that lined his face dipping and diving into deep lines around his brow and eyes.

She had been considering pursuing a relationship with him. He was, as far as she knew, a respectable man, even if he was a werewolf. She didn't find him too hard on the eyes and had never seemed to mind when she used her abilities. But now she couldn't help but compare the grey, defeated-looking man before her with Harrison Slate, a man who just seemed so *alive*. It had... opened her eyes, so to speak.

It wasn't that she was suddenly in love with the hurricane that was Harrison Slate, she had only had one conversation with him. But that one conversation had been enjoyable and entertaining and had left a good impression on her. He had made her laugh, and then moments later revealed that he was also not an idiot when he presented *logic*. Something that

people sorely lack all too often. Of course, it did help that he was also far from being hard on the eyes, and a metamorph to boot.

When she put her image of the man alongside Remus... well, it didn't exactly endear her to the older man... the much older man. It was like holding a lit candle to an extinguished one. He looked like he was around a Dementor constantly with the way he slumped and never smiled properly. If she didn't know Sirius or Remus, she'd be hard-pressed to choose which one had been in Azkaban.

Nevertheless, she had been attracted to older men before, mages aged better than muggles, after all, he seemed like a nice enough bloke and had showcased a sense of humour on occasion. She would reserve her judgement for the time being.

Tonks was brought out of her musings by Dumbledore starting the next segment of the meeting, the reports.

"Firstly, let me begin by saying that as you may have noticed, Hagrid is still away negotiating with the Giants for their guarantee not to join Voldemort in the war. As of yet, there has been no word back from him and we should all pray that he is still well," there was a shiver at the Dark Lord's name, and several people bowed their heads in acknowledgement at Hagrid's contribution. If the Giants fought against them, it would be a huge blow. Just recently the Belarusian Ministry had almost been quite literally toppled by a coalition of Giant tribes that had been chased out of Russia, the only reason it hadn't was ICW intervention.

"Now let us begin with the reports. Remus, would you like to begin with what you gathered of the status of the werewolf clans?"

Remus stepped forward, the soft yellow light from the candles throwing the harsh white of the scars on his face into sharp relief. "The Leader of the clan I have been in contact with in East Anglia told me that he has no intention of getting involved in the war. However, as always, Grayback is unsettling the lower ranks of the packs, the offer is just too lucrative for those who have given more into the wolf," he finished morosely, looking to the floor as if ashamed for some reason that Tonks couldn't understand.

Dumbledore nodded. "Good good, continue the brilliant work Remus, the more of them that we dissuade the easier it will be to repeal those awful laws restricting the rights of the race that that vile woman put in place recently," his voice was still calm, but there was a definite chill behind his words. Tonks and several others nodded and snickered, Umbridge was one of the few that could raise the ire of the ancient mage, the toad seemed to have a real talent for it. "Now onto our newest recruit, Kingsley do you have anything to report?"

Tonks smiled as she beheld the tall, always composed bald black man. He was one of her fellow Aurors and one of the few that she could stand. He had an air of calm and surety around him that never failed to both unnerve suspects and calm down fellow Aurors.

"I tracked down Travers to where he has been hiding, he is currently in a safe house on the Isle of Man while he coordinates with a werewolf clan in northeast Ireland. It is not feasible to attack the position, the wards were most likely laid by the Dark Lord himself, they are

strong and I don't think it possible to bypass them," his deep baritone seemed to fill the kitchen as he delivered this, and he showed no discernable emotion at the news.

Dumbledore nodded slowly. "Perhaps we could attempt to capture him outside of the safe house when he travels to the clan?" He theorised.

Kingsley's lips thinned slightly. "It would be difficult headmaster, he apparates from just outside of his wards to the edge of the camp, the window to capture him is very tight, it would most likely take a team of mages to complete such a task."

"Very well, maybe abandon Travers for the moment then and perhaps try and locate another of the Death Eaters, Remus could try and negotiate with the Donard Clan at a later date, once he has done all he can with the Anglians." Dumbledore offered. Kingsley nodded and stepped back against the wall where he was standing next to Sturgis Podmore. Emmeline, anything to report from your department?"

"Not much to report Albus, however, I believe Jerome Brookes in the floo office is being paid to report usage of select fireplaces," she reported gravely.

Dumbledore looked sad at that, the lines on his face seeming to deepen slightly. "Ah, I remember Jerome, a promising student... such a shame...please attempt to make a list of what fireplaces are being monitored and present them to me, perhaps we could use it to our advantage," Emmeline nodded and stepped back.

Dumbledore turned to address the next person. "Severus, what is the news from within the Dark Lord's ranks?"

Severus Snape stepped forward from the shadows of the back left corner, about as far as he could get from both Sirius and Remus simultaneously. His pale face held the typical sneer that it always did. Her mood fell as soon as he saw the hooked-nosed man, it was like he had a pet Dementor that he kept in his pocket. He had detested her since she had been caught imitating him in her third year and had made it his personal mission to make her time in Hogwarts miserable until she left. He still carried a petty grudge to this day. In her opinion, the man was a child. And that was something coming from her.

"The Dark Lord is still gathering strength and consolidating his forces, it is indeed true that he has acquired a contact in the department of transportation as Vance said, as well as others. Recently, however, he has been... preoccupied. The capture and imprisonment of Elias Burke seemed to anger him greatly, especially as the one who he was tasked to kill, who subsequently... captured him, was a wizard who survived a recent raid that Markus Avery coordinated." His lips curled into a cold smirk. "I do believe *poor* Markus is still twitching occasionally after the cruciatus he was subjected to for his failure." Tonks may have imagined it, but she thought she heard a trace of humour in Snape's silky tone at that.

Dumbledore smiled. "Ah, I do believe that was the work of young Harrison Slate, yes?"

"Indeed," Snape's voice definitely held a hint of humour now. "I have been hearing his name being cursed around the manor by the Dark Lord multiple times over the last week, it would seem that he has a new... passion project. I must say that I approve of this one far more, he

appears to be far more competent than Potter could ever be," he finished. There was the reason for the good mood. She should have guessed that it would have its roots in pettiness.

"Watch your mouth Snivellus, or I'll tell everyone here what happened in that fifth-floor classroom in our fourth year," Sirius growled, sounding remarkably like his animagus with its hackles raised.

Snape's smirk vanished from his face and was replaced with a sneer. "You seem to think that I *care*, Black, you insufferable-"

"Enough, gentlemen," Dumbledore interrupted, a hint of exasperation in his voice. There were some disappointed mutterings around the room. The verbal sparring between the two black-haired wizards was always entertaining to watch. "Now, about Mr Slate... I must say that I am intrigued by the man, you all heard what happened between him and Elias Burke?" He questioned.

There was a chorus of yeses and nods around the room. An Heir to a noble house getting sent to Azkaban was big news, and the Prophet had wasted no time in printing it. There had been some not-so-subtle jabs at Slate strewn throughout the paper, and it had hinted that he was some kind of blood traitor, but it had more or less reported what happened.

Dumbledore raised his hand and the room quieted immediately. "I found that young Elias did not have the Dark Mark, however, the memory shown at the trial depicted him in Death Eater attire, I therefore believe that he was sent to kill Mr Slate as initiation. His father is after all already a Death Eater, it is logical that his son would follow his path as so many others have in the past."

Tonks scowled, she knew that all too well. There had been a total of at least four raids on the Lord Burke's store and each time she was convinced that he had been pre-warned, as they would never find anything worth an arrest.

Sirius looked puzzled. "I'm not surprised Burke was trying to join, but why kill Slate? I heard he's a pureblood, doesn't that kind of go against their *modus operandi* or whatever?"

"I assure you, Black, that the Dark Lord is perfectly willing to kill any pureblood who is sufficiently irritating, you yourself are a perfect example of this," Snape drawled.

"Swallow a blasting hex, grease ball," Sirius shot back.

Dumbledore nodded, serenely ignoring their bickering. "Normally yes, it does, however, I found that Slate had been the sole survivor with his memories intact of a Death Eater raid on his home town of Digby a few weeks back, I believe that Mr Burke was sent to... clean up, so to speak."

Tonks grimaced at the bloody memory. "Saw the aftermath of that raid, it was pretty brutal, some idiot lost control of Daemonfyre and razed half of the town to the ground before it was subdued. It was a bloody mess."

"Slate dealt with the intruder well though, I approve," Moody said with a grin. "Although I would have preferred if he chose a piercer instead of a stunner."

"You only like him because he said 'constant vigilance' at his trial Alastor," McGonagall said in exasperation, choosing to ignore the homicidal tendencies of the man. The two were old friends and had fought in the last two wars together, so she was probably used to it by this point.

"It's a good phrase," Moody grumbled under his breath, thumping his staff slightly petulantly.

"So he probably hates Death Eaters, do you think he would be a good fit for the Order?" Sirius asked bluntly.

"I know not," Dumbledore said with a shrug. "I would need to meet the man so I could... get a good feel for him."

Tonks winced, she wasn't sure how Harrison would react if he found someone trying to legitimise him, which is what she was sure the headmaster was thinking of doing. She was fairly certain that he knew at least rudimentary occlumency, she couldn't think of any other way he could have gone through Azkaban and come out the same as when he had entered.

"He believes what you and Harry are saying about You-Know-Who being back," she piped up, hoping to distract him from the idea so Harrison wouldn't end up attacking the Chief Warlock. "I mean it would be kind of hard for him not to, having been almost killed by Death Eaters twice in a short amount of time."

"You're sure he believes that the Dark Lord is back? It could be that he just thinks the Death Eaters are gathering again," Molly asked, sounding doubtful. Lots of others around the room looked just as doubtful as she sounded. Tonks couldn't blame them. It was very rare for them to find anyone who believed what Dumbledore and Harry said was true. Despite its general incompetency, one thing Fudge's administration *was* very good at was smear campaigns and shifting blame. Something they did often.

She shrugged. "He told me himself, we had a chat after his trial. Said he wouldn't be surprised if he was back because they never found a body, and he was probably dark enough to accomplish it."

"Ahh, logic. Such a refreshing thing to hear these days," Dumbledore said wistfully. "If only the esteemed members of our beloved government could be so wise."

"I like him," Moody contributed. Everyone else rolled their eyes.

"I saw him, on the day of his trial," Sturgis said, surprising everyone slightly. Sturgis sometimes didn't even show up for meetings, being almost as unfaithful as Mundungus, and when he did he rarely talked. "I was getting a wand cleaning kit at Ollivander's and saw him walking down the middle of Diagon Alley covered in blood," Sturgis shook his head and shuddered. "He didn't even seem to notice."

Kingsley chuckled, the sound like rocks in a barrel. "I was called to respond to that with Savage, we had to wait outside of Gringotts for an hour for him to come back out, and then we identified the blood as not being human," he paused for a moment, frowning. "Actually, we couldn't identify the blood at all, it wasn't in the Ministry records, so we couldn't take him in for anything."

"Indeed, he sounds like an interesting young man, Nymphadora, perhaps you could approach him again and attempt to ascertain whether he is fit for the Order. If he is I have a feeling he could be a considerable asset," Dumbledore said, stroking his beard.

'You have no idea,' Tonks thought, thinking about his metamorph abilities. She was probably one of the Order's more valuable members, being a metamorph and an Auror opened a lot of doors that previously wouldn't have been possible to open. The only ones more valuable were probably Snape and Lupin. But she had already decided beforehand that she wasn't going to tell them about Harrison's ability. It was odd to her. She barely knew him, yet to tell anyone else about his secret felt like a betrayal. He had only told her because she was a metamorph herself. She knew how precious the gift was to her and so knew that he had placed a massive amount of trust in her to keep it secret. No, they would have to find out themselves.

Tonks smiled. "Sure, I can do that. I'll see if I can track him down," she replied, sounding maybe a tad more enthusiastic than strictly necessary. She snuck a glance at Remus out of the corner of her eye. He hadn't appeared to have any outward reaction to her eagerness to talk to another man, he still just looked tired. Disturbingly, Sturgis had looked more disappointed than he did. She didn't even want to *think* about that.

Dumbledore smiled at her "very good. Now, onto other matters..."

-oOo-

Harry took another sip of tea from an ever-warm flask that he had bought in Diagon Alley, checked the time, then shrunk and pocketed the flask in an inside pocket of his fancy new jacket. It was made from the skin he had saved from the second basilisk he had killed, as the scales were smaller and more manageable. It had a very nice effect, most of the time it looked black, but from certain angles, an emerald green shone through. He was under a slew of concealment wards near the edge of the wards of his target, who hopefully was about to emerge sometime soon.

He had got bored about a day after his encounter with the basilisks, and so had resorted to a favourite pastime of his, finding and killing dark mages.

It had taken three days for him to hunt the man down. He was one of Voldemort's inner circle, an ambitious first target, but the hat *had* wanted to put him in Slytherin. The trail had taken him to an island off an island off an island, a place called the Calf of Man on the southern tip of the Isle of Man. The air around the small island was frigid, the grass was white and crunchy due to the frost covering it. The sea around the small island was so flat it looked like a plane of glass, a rare sight for the normally tempestuous Irish Sea.

Harry lifted his wrist. Ink rose to the surface of his skin, the numbers of a clock shifting to tell him the time. It was about when his target normally emerged. He vanished the seat he had

conjured and crouched over his temporary rune stone. Normally he would erect the wards with a wand, but for this the timing and placement were paramount, he couldn't be wasting the time it took to cast it. He placed his wand on the top of a cube of solid stone with runes etched on all faces in preparation for activation. He would need to be fast.

Ten minutes later he was still hunched over the stone and was beginning to feel the chill of the British morning. Evidently, his warming charms had started to waver and fail. Just as he lifted his wand from the ward stone to reapply them, the door to the small slate-roofed shack he had been monitoring opened to reveal his target. Harry cursed and placed his wand back on the stone block, not fearing his target hearing it from outside of his silencing wards.

Cohan Travers was a man of average height and build. He was good-looking for his age with high, aristocratic cheekbones and a sharp jawline. His black hair was slicked back in the traditional pureblood style, and his goatee was neatly trimmed. Harry had no eyes for any of these details, however, instead focusing on the ward line surrounding the man with his mage-sight, watching with rapt attention as the man strolled ever closer down the path to the edge of his protections. Harry had watched him leave the night of the previous day and had gambled that the man would be careless and apparate in the same place again, at the end of the path down to the ward. It seemed his gamble had paid off.

'Moron,' Bill mocked in his head.

As soon as both of his feet passed the ward line Harry poured his magic into the ward stone and activated his own anti-apparition and portkey wards. The runes lit up with a purple and red light and Harry immediately felt the protections come into existence, the magic of the wards that he had used so frequently both as a hit-wizard and as a hunter for the ICW greeting his old magic like an old, reliable friend.

Travers, as he had hoped, didn't notice that the feeling of the wards hadn't changed when he exited them and tried to apparate away as he had done every other time, only to ram head-first into the newly erected wards. His body blurred as it was blocked against his expectations. It was one thing to try and intentionally apparate out of an anti-apparition ward and entirely another to try and do it believing that it would work. His body blurred for a moment before he snapped back into reality with a loud crack and stumbled backwards at the magical backlash of the blocked apparition. Travers, however, recovered quickly and soon had his wand out and began looking around frantically.

Harry sent off the first spell when Travers was distracted silently before he was seen, a piercer aimed straight to the temple, a shot to kill. It was approaching from the side, but the Death Eater still sensed it and leaned backwards to dodge it, almost losing his nose in the process. Regaining his balance, he spun to face Harry, his wand already making movements to cast a spell. He wasn't in the inner circle for nothing; he was quicker than the average mage.

No matter how quick he was though, he was no match for Harry. He had been killing mages far more powerful and skilled than Cohan Travers his whole life.

Thirty seconds into the dual, Harry was still untouched and had hands from the earth clasped around his opponent's lower legs, keeping him from backing away into the safety of his own

wards. Travers was bleeding from multiple cuts and had a shattered thigh bone, Harry's earthen shackles were the only thing keeping him upright and the black-haired man was now cursing colourfully while desperately trying to defend himself whilst locked in place, not a position any mage wants to be in. In his desperation was dipping into gradually darker magic and using shields more and more frequently. He couldn't avert his eyesight from Harry's wand movements to break the hold on his forelegs for fear of missing a spell and getting killed.

Harry dodged an organ-liquefying curse and began walking towards his target steadily, casting blasting curses in-between bone-breakers at a blistering pace as he did. His wand was a blur as it went through the motions. As the purple and grey lights left his wand his lips were unmoving beneath the cowl of his basilisk-hide cloak, face hidden by a concealment charm that kept it wreathed in shadow.

Travers growled from behind his shield, he was being forced to permanently hold it up now Harry had got into a rhythm and if he dropped it he would be felled instantly. Harry kept up with his onslaught, the blasting curses to erode the shield and the bone-breakers to catch him as soon as it dropped.

Eventually, his shield broke, and he was immediately hit in his right shoulder by a bone-breaker with a large amount of power behind it. His arm was almost ripped from its socket as the joint was shattered entirely and blood and tiny bits of shattered bone sprayed from the back of his shoulder. The skin around it sagged as it alone bore the weight of the rest of his arm, which had now released the wand it had been holding as the owner screamed in agony.

His feet were still being held by the earth up to the knees, so the Death Eater fell backwards awkwardly, holding his shoulder with closed eyes and a clenched jaw as the pain flowed through him in waves.

Harry approached the downed man and stood over him, looking at the rictus of pain spread across the man's face dispassionately from under his cloak.

"W-who are you," Travers growled out in-between gasps. "Do y-y-you know who I am... the Dark Lord..." he broke into a fit of coughing, blood falling from his lips in clumps.

Harry ignored him and picked up the fallen man's dropped wand, twirling it around his hand a few times before pocketing it. He could start his collection again now, he had never liked breaking wands. This one was Ebony and he thought he could sense a Nundu heartstring inside it, a fairly uncommon pairing and one suited for the darker side of battle magic. From the look of the weird black goo and various other wounds in the earth around him, he thought it suited its owner.

He turned back to Travers. "Yeah, unfortunately, I know exactly who you are mate, and you really aren't in any condition to be making threats," he said with no discernible emotion in his voice as he walked over and rose his wand, jabbing the tip into the downed unfortunate's unnaturally smooth forehead, which as now beaded with sweat.

"Then you know that I have money," he said desperately, handsome face not so handsome now as it twisted in desperation and pain. He pushed up against the press of Harry's wand,

eyes desperately manic. "I could give you enough money that you wouldn't have to work another day in your life, I could get you favours with high-up people, I can get you girls, young ones if you like them like that... anything, anything you want," he gabbled in-between pain induced gasps.

Harry's dispassionate face dropped into a scowl in the shadows of his cloak. He knew all too well about Travers' business.

"*Legilimens*," he hissed, doing his best to inflict bodily harm through a single word. It was one of the few spells that had to be said out loud. As soon as the spell connected images of various safe houses and faces of people who had been under the man's imperius flashed through Harry's mind, and much more. Some of the information would probably be made worthless after it was found that Travers was dead, but lots of it was useful. He tried his best to ignore the flashes of memories of some of the more depraved things the man had done, of which there were many.

After what felt like hours but in reality was just a few seconds Harry emerged from the twisted mage's mind and shook his head free of images of burning bodies and crying children, using heavy occlumency to banish the unwanted, foreign memories that probably would have driven him to either insanity or a killing spree. Or both. Cohan Travers' chiselled features had slackened and his eyes had gone from pleading and fearful to utterly blank. Harry hadn't bothered being gentle with the man's mind and had torn through his admittedly rather impressive mental shields without any subtlety, instead opting to invade his mind in a method akin to driving a bus through a paper wall. He withdrew his wand, absently noting it had left a small triangle burnt in between his eyes like a bindi while he collected himself.

He stood rooted to the spot for a long time, the entire world seemed to have paused and all that could be heard was a steady *drip, drip, drip* of blood falling in droplets from Travers' various wounds. His thumb rubbed the leather grip of his wand in an attempt to calm his thoughts. A futile endeavour, he found as memories of the past wrapped around his mind and cut into him like barbed wire. Soon enough, he lost his battle with being merciful.

"This is for Katie Bell you sick fuck," he growled. He jabbed his wand violently at a face that had taunted him in nightmares too many times and a bright white light flashed from the end of his wand. The piercer that emerged entered between Travers' eyes and came out of the back of his head, leaving a clean hole about an inch wide through his skull and about a foot into the ground behind it before it lost its energy and dissipated. The hole quickly filled with blood and pink flesh.

He could still remember Katie's dead eyes and awkward, shivering gait after they had liberated her from Travers Manor after Tom Riddle had died. When they found her, she had been in the dungeons with several other girls, all bereft of any clothing, all with dead eyes and all showing signs of sexual and physical abuse. The image of Katie specifically had always stayed in his head, however. When she had been at Hogwarts she had always been excitable and bubbly, and they had been good friends, but he had lost contact with her in his sixth year when he had fucked off and went off on a merry jaunt around the world and she had gone on to try and join a quidditch team. When she had next seen him after he had found them in the dungeons of the manor there had been no recognition in her eyes, only fear when

he started to approach her as she cringed away from his touch. She had gone through intense therapy and emerged with scars, but still damaged. Last he heard Neville had been treating her well.

Distant memories, ones he had already processed and gotten over decades ago, but they still held the ability to cut him when he went over them. Blades, left alone for years, still could cut.

Harry growled and clutched the sides of his head, trying to dispel the images. Again he lost and he kicked the fucker as hard as he could in the balls, the steel toe caps in his boots ensuring that even if the man had still been alive he would no longer have had the ability to bear children. The memories that his face had brought up had made him angry all over again. He hadn't had the pleasure to kill the rapist last time, the honour had gone to an unnamed Auror on the attack on the manor. Not that he was taking any pleasure from this, just grim satisfaction.

"Auror! Identify yourself!" a deep voice called behind him. Harry withdrew his boot from the dead man's crotch and turned to see the tall form of Kingsley Shacklebolt emerge from the treeline, wand pointed at him. Harry grinned, his anger disappearing like it was never there. He knew he had been there, it had been quite entertaining to him. Judging from the magical residue where Shacklebolt had been hidden he had been surveying this place for quite some time but never had sprung any kind of trap. He had known that the Orders methods were ineffective, but it was something else seeing it confirmed first-hand. He knew for a fact that Dumbledore could have done the same thing he just had, although probably more elegantly and minus the brutal murder. The old man just didn't have the balls.

He had counted on Shacklebolt not coming out until Travers was dead. The unshakable Auror may not have shown it, but the man had a ruthless streak when it came to Death Eaters. Harry had had a few long conversations with the future Minister and had found out that Shack's cousin had been killed in a raid on a wizarding commune in Kent in the first war and the man had a very healthy dislike for the group. From what he could remember, it was the reason for his recent induction into the Order of the Phoenix alongside Bill, and he wasn't yet entirely convinced that their methods were effective.

Harry made a negligent wave with his wand behind his back without looking, and Travers' body careened away from them, bounced off the ground once and then landed with a faint splash in the ocean several dozen feet away. It was an accident of course that he had foolishly forgotten to release his legs, which had been left behind.

"Would you believe me if I said it was self-defence?" He tried, raising his wand hand in the air to show he wasn't a threat. His voice was distorted as the concealment charm worked to make him completely unrecognisable.

Kingsley kept his wand trained on him and gave him an extremely unimpressed look. "I just watched you trap him, put a hole in his head then dispose of the body, now identify yourself before I stun you."

He ignored the last part. "You don't sound too distraught about it, plus not all of the body was disposed of," Harry commented, his head cocked to the side.

Kingsley's eyes flicked to the two stumps that Travers had left behind. "I suppose that is true, however, I am still going to have to take you in for questioning," he said firmly.

It was at this moment that Harry's wards finally faded, a bit later than he intended but it was almost impossible to make it that exact. Kingsley also felt the wards fail, but Harry was already twisting and, with a cheeky salute, silently apparated away. A stunner from Kingsley's wand travelled through where had been moments after he had already departed.

Kingsley stood frozen, his wand still pointed where the stranger had been moments before. Feeling something warm underneath his feet, he looked down to see that the blood pouring from the stumps had pooled around his feet. He grimaced in disgust and vanished the blood.

After a moment of consideration, Kingsley looked around tentatively. There was of course nobody else on the island.

Kingsley flicked his wand and the legs followed the body of the dead man, the transfigured earth having shattered with the departure of the mystery assailant. Two splashes sounded in the distance, following their previous owner.

A broad smile encroached upon the dark-skinned man's face. "Oh dear, it appears all evidence of Lord Travers' tragic murder has mysteriously vanished," he said cheerfully. Without further ado, he turned on the spot and apparated away.

-oOo-

21st August 1995, 06:01 pm

It was four days until Tonks managed to track him down, and to her frustration, it was completely by accident.

She had been looking for him for 3 days, using every bit of her Auror training to find out where he was so she could have another conversation. Like every other time she was presented with a challenge, she tunnel-visioned completely on the task and devoted as much time to it as she could without getting fired from her job.

But despite her best efforts, all she had managed to find was a bit of information from a waitress at a patisserie that said that a man matching Slate's description routinely tried to chat her up. Tonks had set up at the place but he had never turned up.

And then, completely out of nowhere, she had been walking along David's Way, a smaller version of Diagon Alley in Wales, and had spotted him through the windows of one of the bars there. She hadn't been sure if it was him at first, having only seen the mop of distinctive black hair, but her suspicions were confirmed when he seemed to feel the eyes on him and turned to fix her with those mirror-grey eyes and a grin. She couldn't help but smile and wave back.

Next to her, her friend Sabina Lewis frowned and peered into the bar, searching for who she was waving to. "Who're you wavin' to Tonks?" she asked, her Scottish accent bleeding through.

In lieu of replying Tonks grabbed her friend's hand and dragged her towards the door of the pub.

"Hey, why're we goin' 'ere? I thought we were goin' to the Cildraeth y Ddraig," Sabina whined. The Cildraeth y Ddraig was a restaurant further up the alley. It was a more upper-class establishment than the one Tonks was pulling her fiery-haired friend into, and they had already booked a table there, but Tonks wasn't going to let this opportunity pass. She had been trying to find the bastard for ages. She looked up at the sign to find that it was still completely illegible. There were a lot of rumours around David's Way about what the black smudge on the board was. Nobody knew what it was called either, as the letters had also long since faded.

"Just saw a friend I ain't seen in a while Abby, want to say hi," she said, not looking at her as she pushed through the door.

"Paid four galleons for that table," Sabrina grumbled under her breath. Tonks ignored her and walked towards where Slate was sitting.

He was lounged casually on a stool, leaning back with both elbows on the surface of the bar as he watched them approach. He was wearing an expensive-looking black blazer with a plain shirt underneath it and a pair of skinny jeans. His hair was messy as ever. His good looks certainly hadn't diminished from the last time she had seen him. The soft lighting of the bar highlighted the elegant features of his face, giving him a dark beauty.

He waved them over to two seats next to them. Tonks made sure to grab the one next to him and smiled as she sat. "Afternoon sir, fancy the company of two gorgeous ladies?"

"Afternoon Tonks, it's good to see you again," he said warmly. He looked her up and down appreciatively. "And no, I don't think I mind at all. You clean up nice."

Tonks had chosen to go out with bushy shoulder-length curly blonde hair and violet eyes. She was wearing a white blouse and light blue skinny jeans, she thought it made her look like a hot secretary. She had to make use of her ability to fight a blush, the way he looked her up and down wasn't in any way creepy or lecherous, more like he was complimenting a fine piece of art. Considering her powers, it was accurate.

She gave him a slow look to his feet and back to his eyes in return. "Thanks, you don't look too bad yourself." She meant it, he still looked dangerously attractive. Now that he was in the light of the bar and completely relaxed, not at a trial, getting arrested or sitting with her in a dimly lit hallway she could tell that he had all the features of someone that she would probably end up doing something stupid for.

"I try," he replied, straightening his jacket with mock care. He changed where was looking to just over her shoulder, where Sabina was sitting in a pretty green dress and matching heels, her fiery hair pinned up artfully. "Did the Weasleys have another kid while I was away?"

Sabina jumped, apparently having been staring at him the whole time and rolled her eyes. "Honestly, the Weasleys are only ninety per cent of the red-head wizarding population,

there *are* more of us you know," she turned to Tonks, her blue eyes shining with curiosity. "Tonks, who's the jokester?"

"Right, introductions. Harrison, this is my best friend Sabina Lewis, Sabina, the guy who thinks he's a comedian is Harrison Slate," she responded, gesturing to each in turn.

"The bloke that put Burke in prison?" Sabina asked with an arched eyebrow as she shook his hand over the table. "You're everywhere in the papers, I didn't realise you knew him, Tonks." Tonks heard the slight hint of an accusation in her tone, they had always shared gossip at Hogwarts and afterwards, she wasn't sure why she hadn't told her best friend about him.

"The one and only," he replied dryly. "Want an autograph?"

"It depends where you would sign it," she said flirtatiously.

Harry looked from Sabina to Tonks and grinned. "I like her."

"Sabina, if you could refrain from flirting with one of my friends for three seconds," Tonks huffed. "It's good to see you too Harrison, it's been too long."

He nodded his agreement. "Yes, we did say something about meeting again, didn't we."

"And if I recall correctly you said something along the lines of 'try and stop me,' so what stopped you?" Tonks asked, punching him in the arm.

He shrugged in a negligent way that infuriated her. "I was out hunting."

"You were out hunting animals... since your trial." Tonks deadpanned, not believing a word.

He hummed in confirmation. "Well, just the one animal so far, but to be fair it hadn't left much of a trail to follow." Something about the offhanded way he said it made her Auror senses tingle but she didn't know why.

"Anything to do with you walking down Diagon Alley covered in blood?" Tonks asked in a flash of inspiration.

He looked confused for a second before he laughed and responded. "Oh no, I wasn't hunting that one, that one found me," he looked her in the eyes and Tonks was suddenly struck dumb under the scrutiny. "What's this interrogation about anyway, am I under arrest again?" he looked like he had suddenly realised something. "Whatever Griffiths said happened, it was nothing to do with me," he declared heatedly.

Tonks was thrown for a loop. "What? No, you're not under arrest, I was just worried you managed to get yourself killed." She thought that sounded better than admitting that she had been attempting to find him to interrogate him for Dumbledore.

"Oh," he said shortly. "Well, in that case, I have no idea who that guy I just mentioned even is."

"Riiight," Tonks said doubtfully, eyeing him speculatively. "But 'hunting' doesn't explain why you completely disappeared off the face of the Earth since I last saw you."

"Well, part of the reason was that it was funny watching you camped out at my favourite patisserie trying to look like you weren't looking for me," he responded, seemingly careless of the way he had just destroyed her confidence in her tracking skills.

"Tonks! You went Auror mode and tried to track him down?" Sabina gasped in delight. Tonks groaned, this wasn't good. "Oh Circe that's gold! You don't normally get that obsessive until at least the fifth time you meet someone!" She burst into loud laughter.

"Why didn't you just walk up and say hi if you knew I was looking for you?" She asked in irritation, peeking through her fingers to look at him and trying to ignore her hysterical friend holding her shoulder for support.

He gave her an apologetic look. "I was kind of busy Tonks, and I like you, but it's still a bit disconcerting having an Auror trying to find you, if you wanted to meet me you could have just sent me an owl," he pointed out.

"I tried that," she said, throwing her hands up in frustration. "It took the letter and just began flying in circles."

'The rest of that was reasonable, though.'

"Oh right, shit, I should probably disable that ward," he muttered, then pulled out and enlarged a small case of stones. He pulled one out and it glowed green briefly before he placed it back in the case and pocketed it again. Tonks recognised the case and the stones. Moody had a similar one. Some of the more paranoid wizards carried them around so that they could maintain low-level wards around themselves permanently. In a society where everyone was carrying a deadly weapon, they made sense, but most didn't bother.

The three of them had a talk about wards for a couple of minutes and ordered drinks. Tonks was impressed with his knowledge of them. Some of the things he was talking about were either way over her head or amazed her. One of her favourites was an intent-based ward of his own creation that only projected his voice to those whom he was intentionally trying to talk to, a very unique way of preventing eavesdropping. She thought that he and Bill could probably talk about wards for hours if left alone in a room. Bill hadn't followed Charlie down the dragon route, but he was just as obsessed with wards as Charlie was with dragons. They moved to a table near the fire and from there the conversation moved onto his experience with Burke, and from that onto the topic of Voldemort.

"I reckon If he's back like what Potter and the Headmaster say then my parents are gonna make me move to America with them," Sabina said, looking nervous. Tonks knew that her parents were very overprotective of her, as they had lost a son in the first war.

He cocked his head at her, lowering his glass back to the table. "You think he's back from the dead then?"

"Well, I dunno," she said, taking a nervous sip from her sparkling bright blue cocktail and glancing at Tonks. "But Dora says he's back, and she's normally right about that kinda stuff." Tonks was happy enough at the compliment not to hex her for calling her Dora.

"What about you Harrison, are you going to stay in England if it's confirmed he's back, or would you leave the country as well?" Tonks asked. He had said that he would be surprised if You-Know-Who was back, but hadn't commented on whether he would do anything about it. Dumbledore had asked her to see if he was a fit for the Order as well, and this was certainly a good question to ask for that purpose.

He scowled and downed the last of his drink. "Nah I'm staying here I reckon, that prick tried to get me killed, even worse, he's indirectly responsible for killing my *fucking* dog," he growled. "Vaelin was a good dog, and I'll find out who killed him if it's the last Merlin-be-damned thing I do." He scowled at the table for a few seconds before his countenance changed entirely, his scowl scurrying away from his brow and his face relaxing suddenly as if the outburst had never even happened. He smiled brightly at her. "How 'bout you Tonks, going to stick around for the fight?"

It took her a second to recover from his abrupt mood swing before she nodded in the affirmative. "I'm an Auror, wouldn't look good if I just turned tail and ran would it?" Well, that was true in her case, but she knew that some of the more cowardly Aurors would do exactly that if it turned out the Dark Lord had returned once more.

It didn't surprise her somehow that he intended to fight, he didn't seem the type to back down from anything or anyone. The more she learnt about him the more he seemed to be suited for the Order, even if his reason for fighting was slightly odd. Her only misgivings were that he would probably end up killing Snape minutes into the first meeting, and she also had a feeling that introducing him to Sirius could be... explosive.

The three of them continued to talk over drinks that got higher in percentage with every round. Tonks found it harder and harder to discreetly dig for information for the Order and was beginning to just enjoy the conversation, an easy thing to do as he seemed to effortlessly keep up a dialogue between the trio the whole time. More and more however Sabina was unintentionally excluded as she and Slate seemed to connect much like they had last time, although they had much more time this time around. The conversation between the two of them was fun and interesting, and as with any conversation that Tonks took part in she made flirtatious jokes the whole while. Except with him, he returned them as good as she gave, which meant that their table was a constant stream of increasingly suggestive jokes that had the effect of turning Sabina the same colour as her hair on occasion.

After they had eaten a hearty meal of toad in the hole and mashed potatoes Sabina excused herself and left. It was admittedly a dick move on Tonks' part to ditch her friend and stay, but she was having far too much fun and thought that Sabina would understand. Among the news of the Dark Lord rising and the Death Eaters running amok again, there were very few conversations like this left. She also instinctively believed that she could trust him not to try anything untoward whilst they were alone, even if she didn't know why. She was guiltily pleased that he didn't look too displeased to see Sabina go, instead just giving her an amiable goodbye and a wish that they could meet again.

Around eleven they decided that some fresh air was in order and got up to leave. Once outside in the cool Welsh evening air Tonks applied some warming charms and turned to him. "I don't think any other place is open, so I guess..." She trailed off when she saw his grin under the lighting rune above the bar door. When she saw him in that light in her inebriated state she wanted to kiss him there and then.

"You're only thinking of the wizarding world my dear Tonksie, you must know that there are other places that close far, far later. I can take you there."

"In the muggle world?" Tonks asked in sudden understanding.

He nodded, his eyes shining mischievously through the locks of his hair. "In the muggle world. Are you in or out?" He asked, raising his hand for her to take. Tonks, remembering something her mother told her when she was small about not apparating with strangers, hesitated for a second.

'Oh, fuck it.'

"Sure, why not," she smiled and took his hand, her small one fitting easily in his. He apparated her, and she noticed that even when both of them were drunk the process was much nicer than what she was used to.

"Tonight," he said in the alley behind a brick building that she could hear music thumping from. "Tonight, we can be whoever we want." And before her eyes, for the first time, she saw him morph. His sharp, defined looks dropped away into something simpler and more... human than his previous arrangement. His hair became short and brown and his eyes became the same colour. She couldn't help but miss his previous state.

Nodding in understanding, with excitement shining through her violet eyes Tonks did the same, but with long pink hair and green eyes, and they walked into the building to begin their night again. They waited in line for the club and by the time they entered it was midnight, and things inside were just starting to pick up. It was nothing like anything she had ever seen. The music playing was overwhelmingly loud and chaotic in a way that Tonks adored, and everywhere she looked people were dancing and having fun.

He led her by the hand to a bar where they were serving drinks, as anything he tried to say to her was lost in the music unless shouted directly into her ear and it looked easy to get lost in the crowd. At the bar he bought six shots of something that set her insides on fire so harshly that she thought for a moment that it was fire whiskey, but when she asked him he laughed and said it was just something called Jagerbomb, not magical at all. She was fairly certain they had more than six of those.

From there all she could remember was dancing with him and just having a good time, getting entirely lost in the music and the atmosphere of everyone enjoying themselves. One image stood out of him grinning at her from the middle of the floor as they danced like idiots, completely out of it. Everything about him looked different apart from that familiar spark in his eyes that set him apart from everyone else around him.

Harry was pulled from his sleep as a tooth gets pulled from a gum. Painfully. His head throbbed like his brain was trying to escape its enclosure and his mouth felt like he had been eating sawdust for the last few hours. He prised open his gummy eyes and was immediately blinded by a lurid pink swathe of ceiling. He groaned and shifted his arm to rub his eyes and found it trapped under something warm.

He used his other hand to rub them then opened his eyes once more, blinking a couple of times to adjust them to the light. He turned and got another faceful of pink, but this time it was made of hair. He only knew of one person in the world with pink hair, and apparently, she was curled into his side on a throne-like office chair right now in...

Uhm.

'Where the fuck am I?' He looked around him and coincidentally came to a similar conclusion. There was only one person who would use pink in such horrible abundance in a single room. He was sitting in an oversized chair behind a comically large desk. Tonks was wedged between himself and the edge of it snoring into his chest in a very cute way. She seemed to have shrunk herself to mould into him, which he certainly wasn't complaining about. He sat there, bearing his throbbing headache to watch her for a while. He was still a bit doubtful if any of this was even real, if maybe the fucking ritual in that fight had broken his shields somehow and invaded his mind then made a new reality. But Tonks was so *real*. He had been a bit dazed when he had entered his past and had gone through the motions. He imagined if he had been a bit more lucid he would have killed Burke and just ran, but in his state, he had just gone along with it.

Tonks had been the first familiar face he had seen, and it had grounded him somewhat. She was full of life and had, if not completely made him believe what was happening to him, made him want it to be real.

"Tonks, wake up," he whispered, his words brushing some strands of her hair into her face. It didn't seem to affect her state, instead just causing her to burrow further into him. It took a huge amount of will to muster the will to try again, this time poking her in the ribs and repeating his previous words. Gods, but was she gorgeous.

This time she woke and, for her part, didn't even look too embarrassed at her current position. She sat up and unwrapped her arms from around him and rubbed her eyes blearily. "Merlin's balls, my head," she groaned. She was still pressed into him, apparently not bothered by the position.

"Here," he said, digging a flask from the inside of his jacket and taking a swig from it before handing it to her. "Hangover cure," he explained at her questioning look, grimacing at the taste of it.

She took a sniff and nodded, then took a healthy gulp of it herself. Good, she wasn't an idiot. She sighed in relief and then looked around them, sitting up slightly more when she saw all of the pink.

"Harrison, why are we in the undersecretary's office?"

Harry looked around them in disgust. "Don't know, to be honest, there are far nicer places to sleep."

"... Oh Merlin, I'm never drinking again," Tonks groaned, letting her face fall into his chest.

"Now now Tonks, neither of us believes that," Harry teased, nudging her.

"Would you be serious for a second?" Tonks' growl was muffled by his chest as she punched him back. "This is *bad*, I could be fired for this."

"There are worse places we could be," he argued.

"Really? Like where," Tonks said doubtfully.

Harry considered that for a moment. "Well, we could be in Slough," he offered.

She looked up at him blankly "I don't even fucking know where that is Harrison," Tonks said in exasperation, rising from her seat and pacing back and forth whilst clutching her head. "Oh Morgana, we are in so much shit."

"You're not going to arrest me, are you? I did break into the Ministry after all," Harry said, leaning languidly back in the chair with a raised eyebrow.

"I'm off duty, not my problem," Tonks said dismissively. "Plus from the looks of it I, for whatever reason, broke in with you."

Harry vaguely remembered something about a truth or dare game and was about to comment on it but just then there was a knock at the door, causing both of them to stop and stare at it. There was no sound for several seconds and they both were stock still before a second knock sounded alongside a called. "Madam Umbridge?" The voice sounded slightly familiar to Harry, but he couldn't quite place it.

"Oh... *shit*," Tonks hissed.

Harry came up with an idea that made him grin. "Tonks, get back behind the desk, quick."

She did so quickly, sitting with her back against the drawers at his feet. She watched from below him in mild horror and pity as he morphed the top half of his body into an exact copy of Umbridge and transfigured his jacket into the woman's often-worn pink monstrosity. He coughed then called out in an exact copy of her voice. "Do come in."

Tonks was impressed, he'd managed to morph his vocal cords to match a voice exactly, something which she still struggled with.

Harry had to fight a grimace as Griffiths walked through the door and walked up to the desk, looking disgruntled. All his gear was polished smartly and his hair was styled in a mimicry of the pureblood style, which looked out of place with the formal Auror robes.

"Ah, Auror Graham, what can I do for you today?" Harry asked in the most sickly sweet voice he could muster.

"Griffiths, ma'am," he replied stiffly, his eye twitching.

"Right, so silly of me," he giggled, hating every word coming out of his mouth. "So, Auror Griffiths, what did you want?"

His eye twitched again. "I was wondering if perhaps you could assist me with restoring my office to its previous condition with some... outside help."

Harry fought a grin and instead tilted his (her?) head curiously. "Could you do me the service of reminding me what occurred to your office, so silly of me, I seem to have forgotten," he paused for a moment then added a giggle as an afterthought.

He looked at her strangely but answered anyway. "The gravity in the room has been reversed, everything is now on the ceiling and nobody can figure out how to dispel it," he scowled. "The department of mysteries has been studying it for two days now, taking notes and calling it an incredible piece of magic, I'm not sure if they are even trying to get rid of it." Harry stifled a snort. He did not doubt that the DoM was not trying to undo his magic, he had left a password embedded in the ward just for them that they would have found in moments. He did like those guys.

He glanced down and saw that Tonks had cast a silencing charm on herself and was laughing, her hair cycling through various shades of yellow as she did so. "Ah, that does sound like a problem, do you have any idea who the culprit could be?" He asked innocently.

He was perversely pleased to see the pompous arse go red in anger at the question. "I believe it is the work of that brat, Slate," he spat.

Harry rose his eyebrow. "Oh? Why would you think that?"

His face transferred from red to purple. Harry found it hilarious that he had managed to make him do that again with the man not even knowing he was there. "When I first arrived there was a large pile of what we later identified as Griffin..." he seemed to fight an internal battle with himself as he began to shake with fury. "... excrement, I believe it was a reference to a nickname that he was fond of calling me by." Harry felt a weight against his leg where Tonks had rolled onto her side and was clutching her stomach in mirth.

Harry had to deploy occlumency strong enough to probably make him permanently depressed if he wasn't experienced in the art to prevent himself from smiling as he levered a frown onto his unfamiliar face instead. "Disgusting, I would expect nothing less from a mudblood like him," he said with the air of someone who believed themselves vindicated.

He coughed into his hand. "Ahem, ma'am, isn't he a pureblood?" Griffiths said, looking like it was paining him to say it.

Harry completely ignored him. "Well, I will see if I can get Lucius to assist you, after all, he is a well-connected, wealthy, high-standing, pureblooded and extremely handsome man," he said, sighing wistfully at the last comment.

"Right... thank you, ma'am," Griffith said uncertainly, looking distinctly uncomfortable. Harry continued to look dreamily at one of the cat paintings in the corner of the room before he shook himself, feeling the odd sensation of his jowls quivering as he did so.

"Very well, if that is all Auror Graham, you are dismissed," Harry said, waving his hand towards him in a shooing motion and bending over papers that he had no business looking at.

His eye twitched violently, but he didn't comment on Harry's intentional slip-up, instead turning on his heel and marching off with the little dignity he had left.

As soon as the door closed behind him Harry immediately sent the strongest locking charm he could at the door and let his transfiguration and his morph fall back to what they were before.

"Oh Merlin, that was fucking beautiful," Tonks gasped, having finally let her silencing charm fall.

Harry grinned down at her. "You think I got her down accurately? He didn't seem to notice."

"It was perfect," she assured, sounding awed. "I have no idea how you did it, it was like sitting in the room with the woman," she sounded slightly disgusted at the thought.

'Probably because I have spent far too much time with the bitch myself,' Harry thought grimly. The phrase, 'Wouldn't wish that on my worst enemy,' came to mind.

"Did you actually do that to Griffiths' office?" Tonks interrupted his thoughts, grinning widely. She was now standing and leaning against the edge of the desk in front of him. The effect the contact had on her thighs distracted Harry for a second before he pulled himself together.

"I will neither confirm nor deny such an accusation," he said in an official-sounding monotone.

Tonks rolled her eyes. "Of course not, although I think it might please you to know that everyone in the Ministry is calling him Griffin shit, which I didn't realise the reason for until now."

"That's awful," he said, not meaning or sounding like he meant a word. "I'm sure he did nothing to deserve such harsh name-calling."

She snorted and checked the time with a *tempus*. "Ahh, bastard," she cursed. "My shift starts in half an hour, it's later than I thought," she dispelled the glowing clock and looked to him. "I have to go home to get changed and wash, you coming with?"

"To wash?" he asked with a raised eyebrow. "I mean if you're offering, sure."

"Maybe another time," Tonks replied without a pause. "Right now it's just for a walk to the apparition point."

"Oh," he replied, disappointed. "No, I think I'm going to stay here for a little longer if you don't mind, I'll make my own way out," he said with a charming, innocent smile.

She shrugged. "Sure, just don't leave any evidence or I might have to try and find who did it."

Harry wasn't planning to cause any damage, but it was nice to know she would let him commit crimes against people she didn't like. "Thanks for the advice Tonks, that's good to know."

Tonks pulled him up to his feet and grinned up at his much taller form. "Thanks for last night Harri, I had a blast," she said happily, then gave him a quick hug. "I needed it, to be honest, stuff has been a bit stressful recently," she murmured into his chest.

Harry unwrapped his arms from around her back and pushed her away gently by her shoulders. "Glad I could help, we can do this again if you would like?" He asked, hoping she would say yes.

She hummed in consideration as she walked to the exit of the room, putting far too much sway in her hips than necessary or fair. "I'll think about it," she finally said, her smile saying that she had already decided.

"We could break into the Minister's office next time," Harry offered, only half joking.

She laughed and flashed him one last smile. "I'll see you soon Harrison," with that, she applied a disillusionment charm and opened the door after he got rid of his locking charms, cautiously stepped out and closed the door behind her with a soft *click*.

Harry stood there staring at the door for a count of ten seconds before snapping into action and making his way over to a large drinks cupboard on the left side of the room, where he had remembered leaving something he needed to attend to last night.

He crouched down in front of it and opened the dual doors to reveal the gagged and bound form of Madam Dolores Jane Umbridge curled into the cramped space. She was glaring at him hatefully and probably screaming obscenities at him behind the gag, but thankfully he had put up a silencing ward long ago.

-Flashback-

Harry led Tonks down the hallway, both of them giggling madly and falling over each other the whole way.

He held Tonks back with a hand as he dispelled the privacy ward clumsily and peered into the room with a one-way window charm. He looked over to Tonks, who was attempting to reattach her shoe. He quickly opened the door, stunned Umbridge, bound and gagged her and levitated her into a nearby cupboard after vanishing the insides. He sent a strong silencing charm at the cupboard for good measure.

"Fucking buckles, I'm never getting shoes with buckles again," Tonks grumbled, getting up from the floor.

"Come on Tonks, you said you would give me a galleon if I could break in and I intend to do just that," Harry said, holding the door open for her.

"I didn't think you would actually do it," Tonks replied, giggling as she entered.

-End Flashback-

"Hello, Dolores," Harry said with false sweetness, the ice in his eyes contradicting his voice entirely. "I think it's high time we had a conversation about your employment status."

-oOo-

As Tonks neared the apparition point after taking a rather long time sneaking through the entire length of the Ministry an alarm suddenly blared to life around the building, the colour denoting it as the one that indicated that the anti-apparition wards had just been breached. Tonks stopped and turned back to where she had come from. She stared back along the long corridor for several seconds then grinned and turned around again to hurry to the apparition point. Somehow, she just knew that he had something to do with that.

Lycaon

Chapter Summary

oh my...

Chapter 6: Lycaon

27th August 1995, 08:22 pm

Gwithian, Cornwall, England

The night was pitch black, the type of absolute darkness that could be almost tasted or run through your fingers. The only light came from the more determined rays of moonlight that made their way through the thick cloud cover, which highlighted a lone figure crouched upon a sole hill that rose above the rest of the forest surrounding it, as if in defiance of any limiting factors of elevation that constrained its brethren.

"Bollocks," the lone figure said gruffly into the night, the ancient trees surrounding him accepting the bad language without complaint. He stood from where he had been studying a single footprint, the last one of a long line that came from somewhere within the forest to the south. He stood with a sigh and looked around him, his wand twirling around long, slender fingers as he did so. Piercing grey eyes studied the surroundings one last time before he sighed again then twisted and disappeared with nary a whisper of sound.

Harry smiled tiredly when he felt the presence of his wards wash over him, the feeling making him feel safe as it always did. Moody would have approved, the house was probably on a level with Gringotts with the amount of obscure protective wards around it, some of which hadn't even been invented yet. He did not doubt that Voldemort or Dumbledore themselves would be some of the few able to break through, along with some of the more talented curse-breakers currently floating around and maybe some Goblins, but even then they would be sitting there for a long time doing so. He had almost magically exhausted himself when he had set them up, making them as strong as possible.

The new house he had bought was a detached one this time. Payment for a few of the investments he had made and the remnants of the two Basilisks had come through and that, coupled with his new family's already respectable pile of gold, had easily enabled him to buy a humble two-bedroom bungalow in Cornwall in a small seaside town called Gwithian. He had always loved the sea. It always calmed him down when he came back from particularly brutal missions and now he even used the image of it to calm his thoughts when using occlumency.

"Good evening, Toady," he said, leaning forward to look into a glass tank, where a particularly ugly green toad with pink spots was sitting. He tapped on the glass to get its attention and it began screaming at him in ugly, wet croaks, although Harry still found the noise far more pleasant than the ones it made previously. He smiled and chucked in another pile of spiders. "Dinner time, Toady, eat up," he said sweetly, then laughed and got back up, continuing his path down the corridor.

He walked into the laundry room and chucked his muddy boots, combat trousers and jacket into a basket where they began to be washed by invisible hands. He grimaced as he peeled his sweaty t-shirt off of him. He'd been trying to find Greyback's pack in eastern Germany but the bastard was as slippery as he was brutal. It wasn't pleasant to find out that Greyback possessed a shred of intelligence, he hadn't known of it last time as he had never had to fight or kill the werewolf directly. From what he heard Ron and Neville had managed to defeat the guy at the final battle. He supposed he had been the one who had ended up leading the werewolf portion of Voldemort's army, so it made sense in a way. His intention behind finding Greyback's pack was to try and eliminate them before they became a threat to Britain, thereby depriving Riddle of one of the most feared components of his future army. He was doing it for personal reasons as well, however. The scars that he had given Bill had never faded, being of a dark nature, and Lavender Brown had been killed in the final battle by the pack, along with many more.

And of course, Remus Lupin's life had been ruined almost from birth by the man. That alone signed his death warrant.

Harry dragged himself into the bathroom to wash free of the dirt and cold, turning the shower up to scalding temperatures and scrubbing himself until he emerged red and raw. He got dressed into a pair of soft jeans and a basilisk-hide lined knee-length overcoat and apparated away to a place where he had been getting food nearly every night recently in the small wizarding enclave in Dundee.

He arrived at the ancient cobbled apparition point and strode out of the circular area into the commune of Dundee, the second oldest commune on the isle. The buildings lining either side of the road were squat and the foundations were dug into the ground slightly as if they were hunching their backs against the harsh northern winds of eastern Scotland. Harry turned his collar up against it, stuffing his hands in his pockets.

He quickly made his way to the place he was seeking, another low-roofed building that was spilling warm light into the street. He opened the heavy oak door and was immediately assaulted by the low-level chatter and noise of the customers of the Merlin's Staff Inn, which was predictably the source of many a joke.

He moved through the room to his customary table in the corner, but as he got closer he started to slow down until he stopped. From the direction of the table, he could feel the presence of someone *very* powerful, the feel of the mystery mage's magic seeming to fill the room with a static buzz that rose the hairs on his arms. He wondered how nobody else was noticing it. He looked to try and spy out the source of the aura, but every time he tried to look his eyes seemed to slide over the area like it was repellent to sight.

Harry knew the signature signs of a notice-me-not.

Frowning, he looked around then discreetly drew his wand and manipulated the protective circle to allow himself into the ward, which was surprisingly easy considering the obvious strength of the mage that he felt before him.

There were very few in Britain with such power, but Harry couldn't imagine Voldemort sitting in a cosy inn in Dundee, which left very few people...

The person was sitting with their back to him, apparently unconcerned about the breach in their wards. As he rounded the table and got a look at who it was he had to suppress a sigh. The long white beard was all the confirmation he needed. Evidently, Tonks had talked about him at an Order meeting.

'Fuck.'

Albus Dumbledore looked up from his steak and chips with a kindly smile and gestured to the seat opposite him. "Mr Slate, just the man I was hoping to see. Would you grant an old man the honour of a conversation and a slice of your time?"

Harry had to try very hard not to show any emotion at the sight of the man who had been like a grandfather to him, the first authority figure who had shown any kind of care for a boy starved of it. This was the second person that he had met that he had seen in death, the first being Tonks. That had been weird enough, and he hadn't even known her that well before.

But he had spent hours in the headmaster's office talking about his personal problems and the war. He had shared things with Dumbledore that he hadn't shared with anyone else in his life. Harry knew that the headmaster had his faults, in his opinion he was far too passive and didn't take action enough, the Calf of Man incident being a prime example. His tendency to give second chances was a moral that he could respect, but not one he shared. He had found that the decision to give second chances was, as with all things, situational. Sometimes, when some were given a second chance, it was only another opportunity for them to do the same shit again, only worse. In his experience, you had to judge if someone would actually repent before you let them off, and people rarely changed. No, normally it was better just to kill them.

Dumbledore also tended to hold his secrets close to his chest to the point that it would get people killed, something which had personally happened to him, even if he hadn't stayed dead for long. When he had been younger he'd despised the headmaster for keeping the secret of the horcrux in his head from him and not saving him from every potential life-threatening situation at Hogwarts. As he got older, however, his reasons began to thaw under the ministrations of time and began to sound more and more childish. No matter how powerful he was and how wise he seemed, Dumbledore was not infallible, and could not be everywhere at once. He, like every man, had his faults. Fortunately, in Dumbledore's case, his faults were vastly outweighed by his better traits.

He didn't hesitate for long, but he knew it was long enough that Dumbledore already had several theories as to why. "Of course headmaster Dumbledore," he said respectfully as he inclined his head, careful to keep his voice and face free from any discernible emotion. He sat in the seat indicated and cocked an eyebrow at the wizened old man, not willing to be the one to start the conversation.

Dumbledore didn't seem fussed by his lack of speech and finished off his meal before wiping the corners of his mouth with a napkin and smiling genially at him. "You seem most adept with wards, my boy. You were able to bypass my own rather easily."

Harry scowled. "Yes, I suppose I am, however, I doubt that that is a coincidence that it was so easy to do so."

Dumbledore chuckled and leant forward, his fingers steepled and his elbows on the table. "Indeed, you are a hard man to find Mr Slate, it was only by chance that my good friend Roran Gaylehall described a man of your description eating at this delightful establishment. You must forgive me for my little test, I was curious if you would... notice it, so to speak." His eyes twinkled at his joke.

Harry's other eyebrow joined the first at Dumbledore's straightforward admittance that he had been looking for him. From what he could remember he had always been far more discreet than that. "And just why were you looking for me? From what I've heard you are a busy man, what with all of those titles you hold."

"That is true, and it is in my capacity as headmaster that I'm visiting you today," he replied, his eyes twinkling.

'Please say that this isn't going where I think it's going.'

"You see, I seem to have found myself in a rather aggravating predicament Mr Slate," he continued. "I was unable to find a teacher this year for the defence against the dark arts position, as I have for many years now, and I had to resort to asking for a teacher from the Ministry. They provided a teacher, but days ago she mysteriously disappeared, leaving me once again with nobody to fill the position." He looked at Harry with a small smile and a look that suggested he knew that he had something to do with it, and didn't mind.

It was while he was looking at Harry like that that he felt the whisper of a tendril of legilimency brush against his mental shields. Not a full attack, just enough to read surface thoughts and intentions. Harry frowned and batted it away with nary a thought, very used to legilimency attacks after years of fighting dark mages who thought they were special because they learnt the mental art.

He saw Dumbledore wince slightly, confirming he was the one behind the attack, not that Harry was surprised at that. He had always suspected the old man of legilimising people to get hold of information he shouldn't have been able to. He was almost tempted to draw his wand and hex the bastard for daring to try, he valued his mind greatly and didn't appreciate people trying to read it, but he couldn't bring himself to do that. Also, if the two of them were to duel Harry did not doubt that it would probably level a building or five around them.

He glared at him. "Please refrain from trying to mind-rape me in the future headmaster, I shan't be as gentle with banishing the next probe you send my way." His wand had found its way into his hands through basic instinct, and he could feel his magic roiling violently underneath his skin despite his better intentions.

Dumbledore smiled at him like he hadn't just committed an offence that carried multiple years in Azkaban. "I see you are skilled at occlumency as well, you are learned indeed Mr Slate," he nodded slowly and peered at him approvingly over half-moon glasses, as if Harry had just scored top marks in a transfiguration quiz. "Yes, I believe you will be perfect for what I have in mind."

'Does he know how creepy that sounds?' He probably did. He had always had a weird sense of humour.

Harry sighed in resignation, his anger disappearing like a leaf in a gust of wind. "And what exactly did you have in mind, Albus? Do get to the fucking point."

He didn't show any visible reaction to the use of his first name but a quirk of the lips that suggested he was amused. "Well, to 'get to the point,' as you put it so delicately, I believe that you would be a good fit for the position."

He had half expected it, but it surprised him nonetheless. The DADA position was the most infamous in Britain. Hogwarts was not the only school in the country, but it was the only one that people took seriously. To get a position there as a teacher in arguably the most important subject at the school was a big deal, there was a reason Lockhart had grabbed the opportunity with both perfectly manicured hands. As the position was freed every year the mystery of who would be the next DADA teacher was always a hot topic to the general public, and the person chosen would inevitably be posted in all of the papers. Harry had always wondered what Dumbledore had bribed Remus with to take the position, the man had hated it.

He hadn't taught anyone since the DA in fifth year, or next term depending on how you looked at it. But now that he thought about it, there was probably no one in the world currently who knew more about defence against the dark arts than he did. It had been his job after all, just not in a teaching role. Not that Dumbledore knew that.

He had been sitting there silently for a few seconds while he processed what the headmaster was asking of him. Dumbledore was sitting there in his magenta robes, looking entirely unfazed if he said yes or no.

"Why me?" He finally asked.

"Well..." Dumbledore seemed to consider the question for a second, but Harry knew that in reality he was most likely choosing what to tell him and what to omit from his response. "From what I've seen and been told, you are a competent wizard who is well versed in magic. There is also your encounter with Burke to consider, you are well known for it through the papers and I believe hiring you, someone who defended against dark arts and survived, would send a good message to the younglings," his eyes twinkled again, and Harry mentally braced himself on instinct. "You know, some are looking at you as a symbol of resistance. Yes, despite appearances, not all of the wizarding population are willfully blind, and many have ascertained what happened that night."

He grimaced. That was far too reminiscent of his time as Harry Potter for comfort. He had held the desperate hope that as Harrison Slate perhaps he could fly under the radar, but here he was, sitting in front of perhaps the most recognisable face in all of the magical world after

having his own pretty mug splashed all across the papers after not even a month of belly-flopping into this new world. It seemed that his tendency to stick his head into the path of the nearest blasting hex had followed him through the fields of time along with his other abilities. He had always thought that Potter luck was a real, hereditary thing and this was just proof.

'It's not all bad, Potter, some of those seventh years...' a familiar voice said suggestively in his head.

'Fuck off Seamus.'

He really needed to stop having conversations with people that didn't exist in his head.

'Even in the wizarding world, hearing voices isn't a good sign, Harry.' Another voice chimed reprimandingly in his mind.

'Fuck off Hermione.'

"Yes, and I'm sure that the fact that the board of Governors wouldn't look further than 'pureblood' on my profile before they sign off on it had nothing to do with it," Harry said dryly.

"I may have included that pertinent bit of information nearer to the top half of the report, yes," Dumbledore said, sounding distinctly amused.

Harry snorted and began drumming his fingers on the table with nervous energy. Sitting in the vicinity of the magical powerhouse that was Albus Dumbledore with his aura flaring was enough to make anyone slightly twitchy. The feeling was oppressive. "Aren't you fussed that I was home-schooled? I didn't even attend your precious school, none of us Slates have." But Harry Potter had.

"Schooling is not a problem, you're O. and N.E. were admirable," Dumbledore said offhandedly, waving a hand in dismissal of Harry's objection. "Far better than the previous applicants were," a small frown turned the lines adorning his forehead downwards in what seemed to be mild disgust. "I believe she scored a Poor in defence against the dark arts."

"Not a big fan of Dolores Umbridge?" Harry quipped. "I'm sure she would be devastated to hear the news."

"I'm sure she would, that is if she is still capable of feeling such things." Dumbledore sounded uncharacteristically uncaring for someone that always advocated for second chances, Harry wondered if he had found someone above the wizened mage's forgiveness other than Tom Riddle. If it was anyone, he thought that Dolores Umbridge was probably a good candidate.

He scowled.

'Bitch.'

He inwardly thought of her current amphibian state and fought down a smirk, instantly feeling better.

Harry hummed, neither confirming nor denying the indirect question, instead considering the earlier proposal. He had not foreseen this happening when he had gotten rid of Umbridge, but he supposed it made sense from Dumbledore's point of view. Those who weren't stupid would have come to the same conclusion that Harry and most likely Dumbledore had, that Burke was a death eater in training and was sent to kill him. Hiring him to teach the children would send a message out there that he was opposing the Death Eaters through educational means and indirectly undermine Fudge as well, as it had probably been that fat prick who had got him into Azkaban in the first place. Harry also knew what Dumbledore had left unsaid, however. The manipulative old man was most likely attempting to keep him close so he could keep an eye on him. Harry was, from his perspective, new to the wizarding scene and therefore pliable to the beliefs of the Order of The Phoenix, and had already shown his competency in high-stress situations. This meeting was almost definitely to judge whether he was fit for the Order as well as to offer him the DADA position. That was probably what the legilimency probe was for.

He wouldn't be able to hunt down the horcruxes or Voldemort's followers as well from Hogwarts, but the opportunity was just too good to pass up. One of the horcruxes was at the ancient school after all. They could wait, the bloody things weren't going anywhere.

Plus, he would be in a position of power over Draco Malfoy.

'Well, I think that's a good enough reason,' he thought, inwardly cackling at the thought of some good old revenge for the ponce's actions in his school years.

He shrugged. "Sure, I'll do it."

He could hunt the others down in his spare time.

Dumbledore beamed. "Brilliant, I am so glad you agreed, I must say that I was beginning to become desperate."

Harry cocked his head. "That's it? Don't you need to interview me or anything? I could be completely incompetent for all you know." He knew he was far from it, but it had to be said. He was beginning to understand how a spastic like Lockhart had been hired.

"As I said, your test scores were good, an O in defence against the dark arts is an admirable feat, especially considering you did not go to Hogwarts," well, there was the subtle rebuke to Harrison's dead parents that he had been waiting for. Dumbledore suddenly fixed his eyes on him again, looking far, far sharper than they had moments before, the normally soft blue irises hardening into something akin to a hawk's gaze. "You showed your competency by noticing a ward that shouldn't be noticeable, but most importantly, the way you observe your surroundings is telling. You are looking for threats at all times, your wand is always close to hand in that handy holster of yours, even this table that you choose to sit in is a good vantage point over the entryways of the room," he gestured around himself expansively while still looking into Harry's own eyes, who hadn't moved a muscle. "And yet, you do not seem fearful of such danger entering said room. You, my boy, have all the characteristics of a man of war. How that came to be, I have not the faintest idea. It was all but confirmed in the memory that I was shown, you were composed for the whole event, defended against dark

arts with little hesitation or fear, and didn't resort to using the dark arts themselves to do so. The last two points are my main reasons for my attempt at hiring you."

Of course, he would pick up on that. The man had served in two wars of his own in his long life and more than likely knew noticed what he was doing as soon as he saw him. Dumbledore himself did the same as him, although Harry noticed he did it far more discreetly. He reminded himself that the man before him had been a soldier himself, once. Like him in a way, but the war Dumbledore had fought in had been far less twisted, far less knives in the back from dark corners.

"When at war headmaster, I find it advisable to always be aware of those around you, I'm sure you understand," Harry said, leaning back in his chair.

Dumbledore looked surprised, but not dismissive. "You believe we are at war?"

'You have no idea what's to come, Albus,' or maybe he did, it had always been hard to tell what the headmaster did and did not know.

"Perhaps not right now, although after having my house burnt down and my life threatened two times, all by people in the same uniform, I would not be surprised if there is one on the way," Harry said with a grim smile.

"I was aware that you believed Voldemort to be back once more, I did not know that you thought this as well," Dumbledore said, leaning back in his chair in a similar manner, his hands now clasped on his lap.

Harry's grimace tightened, he wasn't sure if he liked Nymphadora reporting everything he was saying to the Order, the idiots were likely to fuck something up with it somehow. "I see you have been talking to Tonks, I was not aware that the two of you knew each other," actually, he had no clue who Tonks did or didn't know, but he enjoyed making the old man uncomfortable.

To Dumbledore's credit, he showed no visible sign of panic, instead replying smoothly. "Nymphadora was a favourite student of mine when she was in school, as a transfiguration master, naturally, her ability intrigued me, and we kept in contact after school and have the odd conversation when we happen to bump into each other."

A little bit of an over-explanation, but other than that it was an ok lie, Harry thought. Probably a 9/10 on his Slytherin scale of deception.

He gave Dumbledore a doubtful look, enjoying making the old man be on the receiving end of the scrutiny for once, but eventually decided to get back onto the main subject. "And you're so certain that I will be hired? I can think of a few who would want to block my hiring to the school if they by some miracle look past my blood status."

Dumbledore shook his head. "The headmaster has the ultimate say in hiring a new teacher, it is merely a formality for the board of governors to approve of the selection. If they are unhappy with the choice, the most they can do is be a nuisance and block other proposals I put their way out of spite."

He wasn't sure how he felt about that. Harry wouldn't like people like Lucius Malfoy having anything to do with choices at the school, but he thought that perhaps if some vetting was done before some of his teachers had been hired some disasters could have potentially been avoided. He found it ironic that if Malfoy had been in charge of the hiring process he might have had fewer attempts on his life by DADA professors.

"But it's jinxed, right? Can I just be on a one-year contract so I can avoid being forced out of the position forcefully?" Harry asked. He was reasonably sure that would negate Riddle's curse.

Dumbledore smiled. "My boy, I think that if you had gone to Hogwarts you would have been a good Slytherin."

'Almost.'

"We can arrange for you to be on a one-year contract, however, if you happen to somehow manage to break the curse I'm sure we can manage for you to be rehired." Harry thought he could probably break the curse if he wanted to, he was reasonably sure that it was tied to the diadem horcrux in the castle. It took some serious power and negative intent for something to affect an entire subject for so long, it was probably one of the few magical objects that could do such a thing. It would also explain why Dumbledore had never been able to break it, Harry was fairly sure that Dumbledore had never found the Room of Requirement.

After he had destroyed the diadem in the war there had never been a problem with the position, however, that could have been attributed to either Dumbledore's or Riddle's death as well. He was also very interested in an academic sense. however much of a bastard Riddle was he was a truly brilliant wizard, and creating such a long-lasting jinx on such a vague concept was an incredible feat of magic for his age at the time.

"Alright," Harry said, then realisation hit him like a rampaging troll and he groaned, tilting his head back and clutching his forehead. "Hecate's ass, I only have five days to create a whole syllabus for the brats."

"Yes, I'm certain you will do an admirable job," Dumbledore said, his eyes twinkling.

"Yeah, I'm sure you're going to have a great time watching me toil from your golden throne," Harry snarked. "At least tell me the pay is good," he said, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"Thirty galleons a month, I think you will find it more than adequate," Dumbledore said, looking amused at his accusation but not denying it like the bastard he was.

He did not need more money, he was already stupidly rich from the basilisk carcasses, and money from some of the completely unfair investments he had made was beginning to roll in, but he was still impressed with the pay.

"More than enough," Harry replied, absently wondering how Hogwarts even made any money. He assumed it was from the Ministry through the board of directors. He looked around him, suddenly hungry and felt that the wards were still up. "If that's sorted could you

lower the wards? Believe it or not, I didn't come here job searching," Harry said, eyeing a roast turkey that had been set on a table across the room.

Dumbledore nodded and drew his wand to dispel the notice-me-not. As soon as Harry felt the ward fall he turned and called over a waitress that looked surprised to see them there, and even more so when she saw the headmaster and a man that had been spread all across the papers recently casually sitting together. Harry irritably waited for her to stop fangirling over the old man so he could order his food. As soon as he finished he continued staring at where the wand had been stowed up a loose magenta sleeve.

That was *his*.

"That's an interesting wand you have there headmaster," Harry commented idly. "How many know what it actually is?"

A slight widening of the eyes was the only indication that he was taken aback by Harry's statement. "You know of the tale behind this wand?" He asked, answering Harry's question with his own as he so often did.

"Yes, the tale of the three brothers," Harry said, unconsciously licking his top lip. "It has always interested me how truths can be hidden in stories." He was still staring at where the wand was. He wondered if its blood trail had finally ended with him and it had been destroyed, or if it was still lying under a layer of blood-soaked sand in Algeria, waiting to be found by its next master.

"How did you come to know of such a thing? It took me and my... partner, many years to even find a hint of where it was located," Dumbledore looked even more surprised now, which Harry was having more and more fun doing.

Harry tore his eyes away from the wand and looked back at the headmaster's bright blue eyes, aware that he was probably appearing slightly obsessed. But he couldn't help it. That wand had been by his side for decades, it was *his*. Ever since he had wrenched the Elder Wand from Voldemort's cold dead hands it had stayed by his side and saved his arse more times than he could count. Oh, he still loved his holly and phoenix feather wand, but even that he owed to the Elder Wand, given that it had repaired his old wand. The Elder Wand had always just felt more... right in his hands than his previous ever had. He had never liked to think about why, it was probably for the same reason Thestrals loved him, the same reason his patronus and fiendfyre took on the form of the skeletal horse, the same reason his magic seemed to sing in belonging in areas where there had been death.

"I am curious by nature headmaster, and when you travel the world as I have you inevitably find the consequences of its existence as you move from place to place. Mass murders, feats of magic that shouldn't be possible, it leaves a trail. Mostly bodies, but a trail nonetheless." It was a half-truth, on missions where he had to go to dark places to find some of the more elusive and darker bounties he had stumbled across pieces of magic that could only be explained by the existence of the Elder Wand. Some had been used as weapons against him, which was ironic as said weapons were always destroyed by the wand that created them.

There was a heavy pause, both of them thinking on the various atrocities that the wand had caused, well, at least that was what Harry was thinking about. What Dumbledore was thinking was normally several steps ahead of everyone else. "I must ask that you not reveal this to anyone else, Harrison," Dumbledore said solemnly. "If word were to get to certain people I do not doubt that the aforementioned trail of bodies would continue, although not by my own hands, but by the hands of those who desire it. There are those who would commit horrendous acts for such power, I find it attracts the worst and corrupts the best."

"But you are above such corruption?" Harry asked with a smirk.

"I would like to think so," he replied, raising the wand to inspect it. "Although I have no doubt that I, as any other man, am susceptible to falling for the trappings of power. It is in our nature, after all."

'Like that fucking ring.' Harry was going to enjoy killing that particular horcrux. Maybe if it hadn't lured in the headmaster the war could have been over far quicker. Harry intended to find out.

He was prevented from answering by his food arriving, a steak with a nice beer from one of the German distilleries.

"I shall be off then, as you said I am a busy man," he stood with the grace of a young man. "I shall owl you the details of the petition in due haste." And with that, he twisted and apparated silently straight out of the inn before Harry could even formulate a response through the steak in his mouth.

"Fuckin show off," Harry grumbled, ignoring that he tended to do the same thing but far more dramatically.

"Was that Albus Dumbledore?" An awe-filled voice asked from next to him.

Harry looked up from his meal and scowled at the man, who was gazing worshipfully at where Albus-of-the-many-names had just been. "No, it was Voldemort, who else do you think wears pink fucking robes?"

-oOo-

Dumbledore arrived at his own office back at the school and moved to sink into his chair, thinking about the meeting he had just had with the mysterious Harrison Slate. Instruments whirred and clinked around him as he pondered on his newest staff member, intense blue eyes staring into places unseen as he considered his options.

The boy was powerful. Very powerful. Albus thought that he was at least as magically powerful as himself, possibly more. He had been keeping his aura suppressed, but he could still feel the power simmering underneath when he had attempted to read the boy's thoughts and it had risen to the surface, backlighting those odd grey eyes. It suggested he was in tune with his magic in a way that most couldn't manage for many decades, but this boy was in his early twenties. It shouldn't have been possible. It was rare that people were able to sense auras at all.

Albus never thought that he would see the day when there were three magical titans in one country. Himself, Tom and now this new man, Harrison Slate. All from different generations. He did not doubt that Harry would one day join their ranks as well, making them four. He could feel the child's magic grow steadily every day.

Without a doubt, he would be important in the oncoming conflict, of that Albus was certain. It was why he had chosen to keep the boy close, he couldn't have Tom taking away such a valuable asset for the Light before his potential was proven. Although Albus had a feeling that Harrison could probably defend himself if it came to that, evidenced by the Burke incident. The secondary goal had been to try and bring the newcomer to his side and bring him around to the beliefs of the Order, but it seemed that that had taken care of itself. The boy had shown admirable amounts of logic and from what little he had been able to glean before he was thrust from his mind, he was willing to fight.

The third goal had been to procure a good teacher, (which, now he reflected on it, probably wasn't the best order for a headmaster to be thinking in, but alas, they were at war. Corners would have to be cut). The boy was young, but Albus had a feeling that he would be an adequate teacher. At least better than a choice few other teachers that he had hired to teach the art. He chuckled. Maybe this year Harry could go a full three terms without an attempt on his life by his DADA professor.

The occlumency had been another surprise. Nymphadora had warned him after the meeting that she suspected he knew at least some rudimentary occlumency, and he had listened, but he hadn't truly believed it. Occlumency was an extraordinarily hard piece of magic to learn, and as such not many bothered with it, as there were even fewer legilimens in the world, and there were amulets for protection against the mind arts. But the walls around Slate's mind had been among the strongest he had ever seen, rivalling even Serverus' own, and he had been ejected from the area seemingly without effort. He rubbed his forehead. It hadn't been a gentle ejection either. He wondered why Harrison had bothered to go through the trouble of learning the art. He was young, so he must have been learning it from at least the age of 19.

And then he had gone and revealed that he knew exactly what the wand that he owned was. Albus had been openly carrying it ever since his duel with Gallert, not fearing anybody recognising the legendary wand due to the general public belief that it was just that, a legend. A story.

Sometimes he wished it was as well.

He supposed it would have happened eventually, and at least the first to do so was someone that he believed would keep its existence and owner a secret. The way the boy had looked at it had been slightly concerning, however. He had looked almost possessive, as if he had stolen it from him.

All in all, the boy was a mystery.

He plucked a lemon drop from his bowl and popped it into his mouth, smiling in anticipation at the challenge.

He had always enjoyed puzzles.

With a violent stab, Harry inked the last full stop on the end of the last sentence as if it had personally insulted him, then looked over the small stack of parchment that was his syllabus for the first to seventh years. He hadn't done any writing for many years, his previous job not exactly requiring the stuff. He sighed and leant back into the sofa he had been hunched over on.

It had been mind-numbingly boring, but now it was done, and just in time as well. The term started the next day.

'Fucking Dumbledore and his shitty hiring practices.'

He looked over the beautiful view of the sun setting over the top of the cliff in front of his house, soft orange light caressing his front lawn. He needed some boredom reliever, he had never been good at sitting still for long amounts of time, if he did so for too long he normally ended up blowing something up out of sheer boredom.

'Hmm, some werewolf hunting would be nice.'

Grinning in satisfaction at the idea, Harry stood and unhooked the basilisk hide overcoat he had worn when he met Dumbledore from a coat stand. The stuff was one of the few things that would prevent a bite from penetrating, and was also the warmest piece of clothing he owned.

He gave one last look in the mirror to check he had everything he needed, then took the portkey he had made from a spoon in his kitchen and disappeared with a *crack*.

An hour later he was making his through a patch of forest in northeastern Germany, where he had managed to track the pack down to the general area. They were doing an admirable job of covering their trail, however with a group as large as theirs they were bound to leave some trails behind, and all of that could be picked up by a charm Harry had over his eyes that highlighted where humans had trodden. They had a slightly amusing tendency to piss against the side of tall objects such as trees like dogs, which made tracking them fairly easy.

It appeared that Greyback had already begun shepherding his forces towards England. Harry hadn't been aware that they had mobilized so early last time, and he wondered if that was his fault, if his presence in the world had already wrought such a change. In the end, he decided it didn't matter. Harrison Slate surviving that fateful August night had probably changed the course of everyone's future and his past beyond recognition already. The butterfly effect was real, and every single move he made was a snowflake that resulted in an eventual avalanche.

He paused mid-stride when he heard a piercing scream echo through the forest, causing all of the birds in the area to startle and fly away in a cacophony of panicked fluttering. He peered into the pitch black surrounding him, attempting to see if there was any threat nearby him, and snapped off a *homenum revilio* with far more power than necessary, lighting up the forest in a wide radius. It revealed a mass of distant blue glows that indicated a human presence, a larger group if he wasn't mistaken. Never one to waste time, Harry started forward again, making his way purposefully at a light jog to where he had heard the noise, making sure not

to trip and break his ankles on the roots snaking their way across the forest floor. As he did so he caught a glimpse of the moon through the prickly foliage of the spruce trees surrounding him and noticed that it was almost full, only a hairsbreadth away. He cursed colourfully, he hadn't been paying attention, too busy thinking about his new situation at Hogwarts. The wolves would be stronger than usual tonight, only slightly less than they were on a full moon. Not quite enough to make them transform, but enough to make them unnaturally fast and violent.

'If Dumbledore's ass backwards hiring methods get me killed I'm going to haunt his wrinkled behind for the rest of time.'

He didn't stop, though. Even if he wasn't Harry Potter anymore, he still had a saving people thing. Low-hanging, sharp branches whipped at his face and chest as he dashed through the forest like a deer smacked on the arse.

The trees finally parted to reveal a clearing with a lone house in the centre that had smoke curling up through the tiles, the flickering orange light shining through one of the windows hinting that a fire had been started inside. Just beyond the treeline surrounding the property, Harry sensed an extremely rudimentary set of wards. From what Harry could sense it was just enough to keep any muggles from entering. The shoddy wards were supposed to keep wizards away as well, but they were poorly crafted and it took him no effort whatever to trick them into thinking he was already inside and part of the scheme.

After he had finished fooling the wards and crept to a large tree to oversee the area around the house the source of the piercing scream was revealed to him. A large, older-looking woman was being held by the arms by two huge brutes of men, looking uncomprehendingly at a mass of blood and muscle that took Harry a few seconds to identify as human, or what had once been human. From the size of the pile, it was an adult, most likely her husband. Harry's eyes darkened.

'Monsters.'

The woman started gabbling frantically in German and struggling in the iron grip of the two holding her when she sighted two more men emerge from the now smoking house with the limp form of a smaller sandy-haired figure held in their grip. Harry growled low in his throat in irritation. He knew exactly what was planned for that child. Grey eyes flashed in the black.

"Bitte, nicht mein Enkelkind, ich werde alles tun! Bitte!" The woman cried out to her unforgiving audience. Harry didn't know much German, but the pleading tone and the desperate tears were enough to guess that she was begging for the kid's life.

"We'll bite the small one tomorrow, should be enough to turn him then, if he survives it," a voice growled authoritatively. The source of the voice was a man significantly more muscled than the rest, hunched over a chunk of meat. The light from the fire reflected off of the blood running from his mouth over his chin and through his beard. Harry couldn't tell if it was human or not, but wouldn't be surprised either way. Fenrir had given in fully to his wolf long ago, along with the rest of his pack. "Muggles are always more delicate. Just kill the bitch, her moaning is starting to piss me off," he said, tearing a smaller chunk from the meat he was

holding. He was obviously the alpha in the pack, as all the others didn't question his words, moving to carry out his orders immediately.

'That's my queue, I think.'

Before they could slit the still screaming woman's throat with a jagged blade Harry summoned her and then the child to him, their paths to him making the ones holding them fall over as their legs were taken out from under them. Harry bound them both in ropes and put them under the strongest temporary ward he could so they wouldn't do anything stupid like run through a forest from a pack of pissed-off werewolves. They wouldn't get very far.

"Wizard!" A werewolf growled in warning to the rest of the group.

"No shit, genius," Harry snarked, turning back to them. "What gave it away, the summoning charm or the wand?" He looked around the group of werewolves sitting around the fire, now he was closer, he could see there were roughly fifteen of the bloody things, and all were looking at him like he looked at treacle tart.

'Slightly more than I anticipated,' Harry thought. He had thought that Greyback would split his pack up to make their path through Germany less obvious, but evidently, he was mistaken. They were only missing a few of their eventual number, no doubt the ones that would come to them once they arrived in the UK.

"Leave now wizard, and we will let you live, the child belongs to us," Greyback said, standing from where he had been sitting on a downed tree trunk. He was an intimidating sight, nearly 7ft of pure muscle with blood running from his mouth, down his chin and making its way across his chest in rivulets of red.

"Somehow, I doubt that," Harry said dryly. "No, I think I'll stay right where I am. That child will not be infected, you know as well as I do that infecting a muggle is almost a death sentence for them," Harry replied, his tone flat. He was pleased, however, that none of them had appeared to recognise him. He hadn't bothered with a concealment charm this time, werewolves had the tendency to fight until either their target or all of their number was dead. Either he left this clearing the only one alive or he would die, negating the use for a disguise. His gloved hands were empty and spread on either side of his thighs. He could hear the muffled shouts from behind him as he placed himself between the pack and the remainder of the family.

Greyback grinned, showing off the bits of meat and gristle in between his red-stained teeth. "I was *hoping* you'd say that," he said lowly, voice gravelly. "More meat for the rest of us. Nadal, take care of our intruder," he said dismissively, sitting back down to watch the show. Harry's left hand moved to a holster on his thigh and gripped the object within.

"Gladly," the black-haired man that had warned the others said in a voice that cracked with misuse whilst he eyed Harry predatorily, which he returned with a raised eyebrow. His hands were already red with blood, presumably from the pile of what used to be a human next to the house. He began to stalk towards Harry, wolfish in the way he seemed to lope with his shoulders hunched as if he had four legs instead of two. "Foolish little wizard," he laughed. "You don't even hold your wand, what are you going to do to me without one of your

precious little sticks?" The group behind him laughed cruelly. Harry remained rooted to the spot, his stance firm. "Wizards," the werewolf snorted. "So arrogant. Did you really think you could best a were-"

The first bullet caught him in the stomach from around 10 paces, just enough so Harry could be sure he wouldn't miss. The second went through his chest, where the heart was, cutting off the man's cries of pain before he could even get into it.

'One...'

Immediately the camp descended into roars of fury as they saw what they thought would be a spot of easy entertainment turn on its head violently as Nadal lay dead and bleeding, prostrated on the cold ground. Harry didn't hesitate. He turned the Desert Eagle he had drawn from his left holster on the group camped around the fire and began unloading it into them indiscriminately as they rose, the buck from the hand cannon jolting his shoulder painfully even as he used his metamorphmagus abilities to build the strength in the appendage. It was unpleasant, but the thing was one of the few weapons that had the stopping power to pierce a werewolf's hide, even with the silver bullets he had crafted. One bullet tore through the face of the woman nearest to him, entering savagely through her cheekbone and taking nearly half of her face off. Two hit the man behind her in the chest and killed him instantly along with his friend. Both toppled over, the momentum from standing up causing them to fall forwards and begin roasting in the fire, which hissed indignantly at the new material being added to it.

'Two, three...'

Two was all he managed before they were all on their feet and advancing on him, their speed enhanced by the closeness to the full moon. There were about 25 metres between them and him, and as they ran towards him now in a pack of twelve, Harry drew the second Deagle from his right holster and began firing at them akimbo, the force from the two monstrous .50 cal's forcing him to take a few steps back and making his palms numb, even through the padded leather gloves he wore.

They dodged the shots with inhuman speed, but these were bullets, not spells, they were faster and smaller, harder to see. Some more were hit as Harry fought to remain accurate against the violent recoil of the cold steel pistols. He saw one catch a bullet in the stomach, another in the jaw and a third in the shoulder. All were downed, two laying still and one writhing in pain, taking its time to die.

'Four, five, six...'

He dropped the left gun to the ground when he heard it click, the chamber empty, and swapped the one in his other hand to take its place, finally palming his wand in his right as the first werewolf, a woman with lank brown hair and narrowed black eyes, drew near. He leant back from the swipe of her sharpened nails, almost cutting his nose from his face, then he stood straight again, landed a solid punch to the face with the pistol grip, placed the barrel of the gun firmly into the fleshy part under her chin, and pulled the trigger. He twisted away as the top of her head exploded like a fucking pumpkin, showering the surrounding area with blood and bits of skull and brain. He clenched his jaw and continued his spin, rotating fully back to dig his wand into the belly of the seventh kill and blast her away from him point

blank. She took out a few of them but the one behind her jumped over it. Harry sent off a powerful cutter, which the werewolf dodged easily with a graceful spin, only to catch a bullet in the neck after he finished the rotation. Blood spurted in an elegant arc as he spun to the ground.

'Seven, eight...'

He pulled the trigger to kill the next, only to hear it click and fail for the second time. Cursing, he instead threw it at the next one up, clocking him hard in the face. The bald and heavily scarred man just shook it off with a shake of his head and an annoyed grunt as if he had been hit by a Puffskein and not a 2kg piece of metal and continued his sprint at Harry. He leapt into the air, lips pulled back in a snarl to reveal sharpened teeth that Harry mocked for the full millisecond he could for looking completely stupid and being entirely over the top. In the next millisecond, he fell backwards, using the movement to bend and draw a *very* sharp silver dirk from a holster on the outside of his calf with the hand he had dropped the gun with. The man couldn't stop his momentum and slid onto the blade chest first with a gurgled cry of alarm. Harry could feel the edge of the blade grind against ribs as it was driven through under the force of the man's weight. He braced his back against the ground as the now wide-eyed, slack-jawed man slid down the length of the short blade, hands clasped uselessly around it as if that would make it go. Harry stared into his bulging eyes and watched as the light went out in them.

"Nine," he snarled.

Harry strained to hold the body above him with his left as with his right he tightened his hold on his wand and jabbed it into the ground over his shoulder then banished it away, causing him and his skewered friend to shoot back up to their feet. As soon as he was standing again he felt the impact of a spell hit the body he was still holding in front of him, a cutter from the looks of it. Even if he hadn't had his meat shield in front of him, the spell most likely wouldn't have been powerful enough to get past his personal wards. Harry looked over the shoulder of his improvised shield to see that one of them had drawn a wand and was sending curses at him while the other five were spread on either side of him, approaching slowly all at the same time. Much better than what they had been doing previously, which was coming at him one at a time so he could kill them all in the same way.

Harry looked into the blank eyes of the man impaled on his blade. "Looks like they've smartened up baldie, I think it's time you went on a little adventure," he stabbed his wand into the man's stomach and banished him as hard as he could, sending him careening to the short man waving his wand and generally making an arse of himself. Harry could understand why the wards had been so abysmal now. Really, how was it even possible to fuck up a blasting hex? The spell was one word and a jab. He made a mental note to emphasise this in his upcoming lessons. No student of his would end up like this idiot.

The body took out the man's legs and with a high-pitched yelp he fell to the floor, the wand falling from his grip. Harry had to work hard not to roll his eyes even the remaining five began to run at him. The first lesson any mage learns is *don't drop your sodding wand*. Well, maybe the second, after *hold the wand by the thick end*.

"May as well be a fucking muggle," Harry said derisively, dropping the dirk in front of him and banishing it in the same motion with a flick of his wand. Years of practice aiming with his steel javelins had made him very accurate with banishing things, and this time was no different. The dirk sang a sharp song as it spun and hissed to the downed man and took him in the side as he attempted to crawl to his feet, burying itself up the hand guard in between the man's ribs.

'Ten...'

He didn't hesitate or make any speech to the remaining five. He could say some movie-worthy shit like 'I'll give you one last chance to run bucko,' or some such rubbish, but Harry had stopped giving chances long ago. In place of mercy, he opened a pouch on his belt and focused all of his intent on a single charm.

The effect was immediate, bodies, trees and dirt around them were torn once more as the bullets that lay inside flew from their resting places in response to his summons, leaving a very strange exit wound in some cases. Twenty or so bullets responded, the Desert Eagle not having a very large magazine. From the pouch, Harry had opened though, around thirty very sharp, flat, six-pointed stars emerged and coalesced in front of him. A few of the bullets grazed the five remaining werewolves as they drew closer, drawing pained growls from their mouths. Harry pulled his wand to his chest and the mass of silver, dripping with blood from their previous victims, grouped into a tight ball in front of him.

A few seemed to see through their bloodlust and skidded to a halt, looking slightly hesitant through the madness that clouded their minds, perhaps recognising the threat that Harry's improvised weapon posed. But the other three kept going, blind, animal desire for violence turning their reasoning into something maybe only a shade away from insanity.

"Cover yourself!" One shouted, the warning far too late to be of any help to the three others, who were already far too close.

When they drew to around five paces away Harry slashed his wand from the left to the right, and the ball exploded. The two who had started to slow had just enough time to shield their face, but the other three weren't as lucky. The silver shurikens peppered them, at least five pieces entering various parts of their bodies like a shotgun shell. One was taken care of immediately, a taller black man with a long silver scar down the side of his face catching a bullet straight through the throat and several shurikens in his stomach, chest and legs. It was far from a gentle death.

'Eleven...'

The other two kept on coming, although one was faster than the other having had the luck *not* to have his kneecap turned to dust by a bullet. As he stumbled and began to reach for him Harry transfigured the earth and made it hold the wolf as he had done for Travers. The man began to struggle immediately, and cracks began to show in his earthen shackles, but Harry was already animating the tree that was looming over himself and the two he had saved. Gnarled wooden arms reached down and wrapped their arms around the man and drew him over Harry's head, hugging the struggling man into itself and wrapping him in more and

more branches to keep him imprisoned in its leafy embrace. He snarled and began writhing uselessly, but Harry had already turned his attention to the remaining three.

'Hehe, tree hugger.'

The one who had taken silver to the knee was still crawling towards him, his face contorted in hate and pain. Harry sighed and summoned all of the silver to him again, drawing pained screams from both in front and behind him. This time he formed it into a wide, thin arc around five feet long made from all of the loose pieces. He flicked his wand and a scythe-like blade arced around to the right, sliced across in front of him and decapitated the man where he had knelt.

'Twelve...'

He looked up at the remaining two and kicked aside the head that had rolled to his feet. He began to walk forwards, his blade coming up to hover beside him, the blade now stained with red. He stepped onto the headless body and walked over it, raising an eyebrow at the pair.

They ran.

Harry laughed.

"Fetch doggie!" He shouted gleefully and began peeling bullet-sized bits of silver off the blade, sending the individual pieces at the one on the right as he continued to saunter towards them. His target was downed on the third, which struck him through the back of his head in the soft spot just above the neck.

'Thirteen...'

He performed a complex transfiguration and formed the rest into a spear and took aim carefully, carefully judging the distance between him and the last woman, who was highlighted by the campfire that she had run past.

Aaaaand right about... there.

He deepened his voice to an announcer's baritone. "Now up, the hotshot Harrison Slate from out of Surrey, we've seen his amazing performance today as he lines up the shot... Slate shoots..." He swung his wand over his head in a wide arc and launched it at a blistering pace. It passed just above the fire, wrapping the flames around itself. It hit her in the lower back as she ran away, passing straight through to emerge from her stomach and hitting a tree in front of her with a muffled *thump*, quivering in place. His target took a couple more stumbled steps and then fell to the cold, harsh ground. "... AND SLATE SCORES! THAT'S FOURTEEN POINTS FOR ENGLAND!" He yelled triumphantly, throwing up his hands in the air in celebration, the cheers of his audience loud in his ears.

He chuckled and flicked his wand lazily, making the tree throw the man ensconced inside it over to him, which caused him to bounce across the ground a few times and slide before he came to a rest a few paces away. Harry summoned and then banished the dirk into his chest, killing the already almost unconscious man instantly without hesitation.

'Fifteen.' He thought in a sing-song voice.

He gazed around at the carnage, the only sound he could hear was the loud *badump-badump-badump* of his heart in his ears. His gaze landed on the only silhouette still moving in front of the fire.

'And then there was one.'

"Hello Fenrir," he said as he stood over the infamous pack alpha and mass murderer. He was still bare-chested, so it was relatively easy to see where the bullet had entered even in the darkness of the night. It had hit the meat of his shoulder, not a place where any vitals were, but where the bullet had come back out definitely had done some serious damage, its path having gone through his whole chest and come out under his left armpit. It was honestly a miracle he was still alive. He had been one of the ones hit in the initial rush, the only one who hadn't died instantly.

"Wizard," he growled. "When I find out who you are boy, I will find you and rip that pretty little head from your shoulders and fuck the hole, do you understand? The Dark Lord—"

"Fenrir, Fenrir," Harry admonished as if he was scolding a child. "First of all, that's fucking disgusting, second of all, you seem to be labouring under the delusion that you will leave this place alive," he said, wagging his finger rebukingly. Greyback's face contorted in rage, and he lunged at Harry, his potentially lethal wound apparently forgotten.

"Ah ah!" Harry rebuked his wand shooting forward in a blur of motion, sending a spear through the open wound where the bullet had entered and pinning Greyback to the floor. "None of that, you see I need you to remain still for this, so be a good dog and sit," he said, wandlessly conjuring a rolled-up newspaper and bopping him on the head. He wasn't sure if Greyback heard him over the sounds of his howls of agony, but he didn't really give a shit.

As Greyback lay pinned to the ground Harry wandlessly summoned one of the guns from where he had dropped it and caught it by the grip with a satisfying *clap*. With his other hand, he dug into his jacket pocket and withdrew a silver bullet with a single word etched into it. He cocked back the pistol and loaded the bullet straight into the chamber.

"You see, dear big bad wolf," he continued, the slide stop making a nice *click* as it moved back into place. He hefted it and grinned down at Greyback. "I have a bullet with your name on it."

He pinned one of the monster's arms down, which was probably only possible due to the severe loss of blood, and jammed the barrel into his mouth roughly. Greyback's other hand scrabbled uselessly against the tough skin of his jacket and the cannibal spluttered incoherent words past the barrel of the gun as Harry leant in, his grey eyes sparkling.

"Remus John Lupin," he growled. He saw the comprehension settle in Greyback's eyes after a few moments.

His grin grew wider.

"I see you understand."

The blast from the gun was muffled somewhat as it was let off at the back of his mouth, but it was still loud enough to scatter the braver birds who hadn't already fled at the previous noise. The flash lit up the small clearing for a moment, highlighting the single kneeling figure in the centre of fifteen dead bodies.

He drew the gun from Greyback's mouth and looked around at the carnage, grimacing when the smell of burning corpse reached his senses. Scowling at two and three, who were still lying face-first in the fire, he flicked his wand and dragged them out of it. The sound of the melted meat on the face of the corpses sizzling against the damp grass filled the now silent clearing for a few seconds before it settled. Harry looked up into the cloud-filled sky and let out a long breath, then grinned.

'Fifteen, a new record, not so bad if I do say so myself.' This was by far the largest pack he had ever had to wipe out. As a worker for the ICW, werewolf packs were one of the more common bounties, and normally they were around six to eight in number. Fifteen... fifteen was a lot of werewolves. Too many for most.

He supposed he could have just waltzed in, AK'd all of them and then tried to get out before the Aurors arrived, but on top of that just being boring, he didn't like using the curse, even when he had had clearance to do so. It was a handy thing, but it had a tendency to corrupt the best of men, and Harry was far from a good man.

Harry rolled his shoulders and let out a tired sigh. It hadn't been that draining magically, but physically it had put his new body through its paces. His shoulders in particular felt like they had been hit by one of Madam Pomfrey's infamously strong numbing charms.

Shouts from behind him brought him back to the present, and he looked over his shoulder to see the struggling forms of his two innocents, who had thankfully not been harmed in the chaos. With all the shit that had been flying around, it was a minor miracle in Harry's estimation. He placed the gun he was holding in a holster after very carefully wiping off the saliva on it, then summoned and did the same for the other, grimacing at the amount of blood on both.

He approached them and noticed that it had only been the woman shouting, the boy was still passed out. *'Probably for the best,'* he thought grimly, looking at the corpses strewn around him. As he walked back he picked up the wand the man had dropped. Willow and Phoenix feather, a loyal and delicate wand that would most likely be good at charms and warding. Almost definitely stolen from some poor sod somewhere in Germany. Its loyalty was probably another reason why the wards had been so flimsy, but he didn't have much faith in the previous owner either. He pocketed it, another wand to add to his new collection.

He applied a translation charm with his own wand and approached the woman, untying both her and the boy with a flick and vanishing the vomit with another flick and a grimace.

"You two both ok?" He asked, knowing that she would understand through the charm.

She didn't seem in a hurry to rise from the floor. Her wrinkled face was drawn and pale, and there was a dribble of vomit trailing down her chin, but she pulled herself together admirably at his question. Her sharp blue eyes met his and she took in a shaky breath before responding and turning the kid's head to show him the other side. "No, my little Rigel is hurt," indeed, there was a long, deep cut hidden among the golden locks of the child, who couldn't have been more than seven. Evidently, that was what had knocked him out.

"I can heal it, if you let me?" he asked, his hands spread in an effort to look unthreatening, which was probably unsuccessful considering he was covered in blood.

She drew the boy, Rigel, further into her lap and curled her arms around him protectively but nodded curtly, letting him approach. Harry looked at the wound, it was against the skull but hadn't pierced it, meaning it hadn't done any permanent damage. He cleaned it and disinfected it then sealed it up under the watchful gaze of what was most likely the kid's grandmother, who looked half amazed and half relieved.

"What were those... those *things*," she whispered. The clearing was quiet now, the only sounds were the chirping of insects and the crackling of the fire as the house slowly fell apart.

Harry looked over his shoulder at the bodies. "Monsters," he said back, the volume of his voice sounding out of place in the juxtaposing calm. "Like the ones from the stories, but there's no happy ending here."

She took that in for a few seconds, her gaze falling on the massacred corpse that Greyback had been feeding from then shooting away from it with grief etched across her face plain to see. She looked at Harry's still-drawn wand and from there slowly tracked her gaze up his arm to look into his face, where two bright grey pupils looked over the chaotic scene levelly. Unbeknownst to him, they were glowing slightly, as if backlit. A common occurrence for mages of exceptional power, the magic tended to leak through the eyes after intense spellcasting.

"And... and you?" She enquired, only a slight quaver in her voice indicating she was scared of his reply. "Are you one of the monsters, too?"

Harry turned back to her and tilted his head in thought, taking the question seriously for once. He had never really been one for questioning his morals. He had been killing people for money for seventy years, he was well past the point of such things. He was a glorified hitman, not a philosopher. He looked down at his blood and dirt-stained hands, responsible for so many deaths. He wondered if the fact that he felt no guilt meant there was something wrong with him.

He was still kneeling.

"I hunt the monsters," he said slowly. "I hunt the monsters that prowl in the dark so people like you can sleep safely behind walls, ignorant of the horrors that lay outside of them," he thought for a few moments longer. "I guess some would say that I am one of those monsters for the things I do," he shrugged. "It does not matter to me, what matters is they die, and I live." There were always those that would look down from their presumed high ground with unbloodied hands and proclaim that violence only begets violence, that by killing Greyback

and his troupe he was only causing more death. Harry thought that those who said such things had never been in a war.

She pulled Rigel even closer into her bosom. "If you are a monster, you are one of the good ones," she said firmly. Her ice-blue eyes flicked over to the first who had died and a shadow of pure grief passed over her face again. "T-they killed my Leon," she choked on the name and took a few seconds to compose herself, making no move to stop the moonlight-filled teardrop leaving a pale trail through the fine layer of ash on her cheek. "He was my husband, and a good man," her shoulders set again. "I was a girl in world war two, and I know that what you did here is just, some people are beyond redemption and must be put down."

Comparing Voldemort's troops to the Nazis was far more accurate than she most likely knew.

Harry didn't know how to respond to that, so instead, he just stunned her, catching her body so her descent to the cold hard ground wasn't too rough.

He had never been good with crying women.

He looked at both of them, feeling slightly ashamed of what he had to do next. He despised messing with muggles' minds, they were just so defenceless.

Nevertheless.

He raised his wand at the woman first. "*Obliviate.*"

-oOo-

Remus Lupin flicked over to the next page of his book, an interesting one on the subject of deflecting curses. He took a sip of tea and relaxed slightly more into the couch he was on, then stiffened as his overly sensitive ears picked up the noise of flapping wings from outside. It was the day after the night of the full moon, and his senses had yet to die down.

He cautiously let in the Tawny Owl, who dropped a package down on the table in front of him and then promptly left as quickly as it had come in. Befuddled at the creature's odd behaviour, he looked at the package and instantly caught a slight hint of blood. He could almost taste it, the iron tang sweet on his tongue.

'*Control yourself, Remus,*' He rebuked himself.

He took a deep breath and regarded the parcel with deep suspicion. He cast every dark detection spell on it he knew, only for it to come up all empty. Carefully he unwrapped the brown paper wrapping, revealing a shiny white card box with polka dots covering it, resembling the one you would get to house a wedding cake. On the top, in thick black marker was written:

To Remus John Lupin:

Happy belated Birthday!

I hope you like the present, it was quite difficult to find.

And then there was a huge smiley face under that.

Confused, as his birthday had been almost six months ago, and wondering at the mental state of the person who had written, he cautiously opened the lid.

And most definitely did *not* scream like a girl when he saw what was inside. Remus Lupin did not scream.

"What the *fuck*?" He shouted into his empty flat. The smell of blood was overpowering now, and he really did not want to look at it again, but curiosity and animal instincts propelled him forward even as logic tried to drag him back. He peeked over the side of the box and gazed upon a face.

A face he recognised.

One from his nightmares.

"Merlin's red and itchy sack," he murmured, then got a hold of himself and darted over to the fireplace in his small apartment, throwing powder into it and yelling. "Headmaster's office, Hogwarts!"

He buried his head in the coals and shouted. "Albus, Albus are you there?"

There was a surprised shriek and Remus could hear a faint. "Sorry, Miss Perks, I shall attend to this and we shall return to our conversation in short order," then Albus Dumbledore came into view and smiled genially at him. "Remus my boy, please do tell me what is so important that you had to interrupt my conversation with one of my student's parents?" There was a hint of rebuke there, but Remus didn't care at the moment.

"Albus, I just had Fenrir fucking Greyback's head mailed to me through owl post," he said bluntly, looking over at where the box lay to check it hadn't grown legs or something. The change in Dumbledore's demeanour was instant, his face transforming from the normally friendly and genial look into one of surprise instantly. He then responded in a manner completely out of character of the normally eloquent and many-worded headmaster.

"What?"

Erebus

Chapter Summary

school time!

Chapter 7: Erebus

1st September 1995, 07:15 pm

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Scotland

Harry sat at the Gryffindor table with a satisfied sigh in between Ron and Hermione, as was custom. He glanced over at the Ravenclaw table and spied the bright blonde of his odd new friend, Luna Lovegood, who had sat in their compartment and proceeded to confuse them for the length of the journey. She was an odd one, but Harry liked her despite her disparaging remarks about Hagrid's teaching abilities.

'Speaking of which...'

"Hagrid isn't up at the staff table either," Hermione said with furrowed brows. "You don't think he's left, do you?"

Harry looked up to the table where a seat far larger than the rest was noticeably empty. "nah, no way," he said firmly. "Hagrid would never leave Hogwarts. He likes it too much here."

"I guess, but then where is he?" She asked. They lapsed into silence, all worriedly pondering where their giant friend had gone.

"Maybe he's just not back from that mission Dumbledore gave him," Ron offered.

"Must be that," Harry said, nodding.

After a couple of moments of silence, Ron spoke up again. "I wonder who the new defence teacher is going to be?" He was trying to lift the mood, one of the better traits that Ron and the twins shared.

Harry scanned the table and noted the second empty chair on the table where the DADA teacher usually sat. "Don't know, I hope it's not another Death Eater though, I'm a bit tired of my DADA teachers trying to kill me," he said moodily.

"Lockhart didn't try and kill you," Hermione offered.

"I think he counts through sheer incompetence," Harry muttered. Hermione looked torn between her loyalty to teachers and her knowledge that what he said was far too true for comfort.

Just then the woman they had seen earlier arrived from a door to the side of the hall and walked along the staff table until she eventually took a seat at the very end of the table, where Hagrid *should* have been sitting.

"Firsties must be back," Dean commented from a couple of seats down. Sure enough, mere minutes later the large main doors to the Great Hall opened to reveal the severe, black-haired form of Professor McGonagall leading a troop of terrified-looking children in her wake. She was carrying a stool with a pointed, tattered brown hat perched on top of it. The sorting hat.

"Christ, were we ever that small?" Harry said under his breath, watching one particularly titchy blonde boy who was visibly trembling. He recalled how scared he had been when he had entered the same way and felt sympathy for him. Having someone barge into your living room, turn your sofa into a penguin then ship you off to a giant castle without your parents or anyone familiar was enough to make anyone nervous.

"You were smaller I think, mate," Ron said, grinning at him. "Surprised you didn't get lost between the cushions on the Express on the way up."

Harry snorted and punched him in the shoulder. "Fuck off, Ron."

"Language Harry," Hermione said automatically, still paying rapt attention to McGonagall who had placed the stool at the forefront of the room in front of the staff table. Harry rolled his eyes and aimed one last glare at a smirking Ron before he settled back to listen to the song.

Within moments of it being put down, the hat grew a crease just above the brim that formed into a mouth, bursting into song:

In times of old, when I was new,

And Hogwarts barely started,

The founders of our noble school

Thought never to be parted...

[I refuse to put the whole song here]

...And we must unite inside her

Or we'll crumble from within

I have told you, I have warned you...

Let the Sorting now begin.

"Well, was ominous," Hermione commented.

"Branched out a bit this year hasn't it?" Ron said with a smirk.

"Too right it has," Harry said, Normally the hat only sang about the traits of the four houses, it had never issued a warning before in his time in the school from what he remembered.

"I wonder if it's ever sung a warning before now," Hermione mirrored his thoughts.

"Indeed it has," said a posh-sounding voice from behind them. He and Ron jumped, but Hermione just looked back in interest at Nearly Headless Nick, who was half inside the floor behind them. "It has done so in the past when there was the possibility of—" he was interrupted by the calling of the first name to be sorted. The ghost put a finger over his lips and gestured toward the hat, where McGonagall was giving the four tables all a warning look to shut up. Hermione turned around to pay attention, but Harry could see she was primed to jump on Nick to dig for more information the first chance she got. He almost felt sorry for the old ghost.

"Abercrombie, Euan!"

The terrified-looking boy that Harry had noticed earlier stepped forward haltingly and was sorted into Gryffindor. Harry cheered loudly with the rest of his house, which made the boy look slightly less like he had just been put up for execution.

After the sorting had finished, during which Ron's stomach had been protesting loudly the whole while, Dumbledore stood to address the hall. Harry's head rose from where it had fallen onto the table and looked at the old man, who looked like he was genuinely happy to be there. Harry's feelings for the man were conflicted, memories of Dumbledore completely ignoring him after the trial coming to the fore, but it was still reassuring to see him there. The hall quietened immediately when he stood, even Ron's growling stomach had fallen silent at the sight.

"To our newcomers, welcome!" he said, arms spread with a wide smile, "and to our returning older students, welcome back! There is a time for speech-making, but this is not it, tuck in!" He clapped his hands and food appeared.

Harry clapped and laughed along with the rest of the hall, happy to finally be back to something familiar to him. Hogwarts had been what he considered home for four years now, and it had always given him a fuzzy feeling to be back in its halls. Despite its intimidating exterior, he had always found it more welcoming than the Dursleys, but then so was a Troll's cave in comparison.

After they had finished eating and the food disappeared from the tables (with a disappointed groan from Ron) the headmaster stood and spread his arms again, beaming at all of the assembled children before him who were looking at him expectantly in most cases and terror in the case of the first years. Especially the muggle-born ones, who had always been warned about strange old men trying to hug them.

"Now that we have finished yet another delicious feast, and our stomachs are all full, we must now begin with the start-of-term notices," he said, eyes twinkling as always. "First years ought to know that the Forbidden Forest is aptly named and just that, forbidden, as certain older students have found out." Harry glanced at Ron, who looked disturbed and slightly pale at the reminder of Aragog.

"Secondly, Mr Filch has asked me to remind you that no magic is permitted in the hallways between classes, as are many other things, all of which can be found on the extensive list on Mr Filch's office door." Dumbledore bowed his head to Filch in probably the only show of respect the curmudgeonly old caretaker would get for a year. Harry didn't think that anyone had ever gone to that office voluntarily, apart from maybe Hermione. She had always been a stickler for the rules.

"Next," Dumbledore continued. "We have two changes of staff this year, Professor Grubbly-Plank will be taking the place of Hagrid as the new Care of Magical Creatures teacher," he paused and everyone apart from Ron, Harry and Hermione applauded politely. Harry glared at the people who looked pleased about it. "And I am sure you are wondering who the next Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher is..." his eyes twinkled at the affirmative mutters echoing around the halls. "And I shan't leave you in suspense for long. We are delighted to introduce to you our new DADA teacher, Professor Slate!" He gestured grandly at the doors.

There was a moment of confusion as everyone looked about to see who he was talking about, and then the huge doors to the hall were flung open with a loud *BANG*, which caused more than a few to jump and a couple to shriek.

The doors revealed a tall man with striking features, the type that you would note in a crowd. His hair was the colour of pitch, falling in delicate rivulets around his head. Eyes like liquid mercury contrasted his hair. Every feature was clear on his face, from the shadowed rim of his eye sockets to the swooping wings of his cheekbones. Harry didn't swing that way, but the only way to describe him would be terribly, almost unnaturally beautiful. He was wearing expensive-looking wizarding robes, black with white lining and an all-black overcoat that were cut in a way that wouldn't impede movement. Harry thought that it looked like the robes that Lucius Malfoy had worn, but more practical. The overcoat in particular looked far thicker than it should be, perhaps indicating some kind of armoured lining.

He grinned unrepentantly at the students, teeth flashing. "Always wanted to do that," he said, tucking his wand back up his sleeve with a minute twist of his wrist. He began walking down the middle of the hall as if entirely unfazed by all of the people looking at him, moving in a way that gave off the impression he was entirely sure of his steps. Harry wasn't experienced in analyzing people, having spent most of his life locked away from them, but he *had* seen one of Mrs Figg's cats hunting a squirrel once. He was reminded of the unconscious grace of that cat now.

"Isn't that the guy from the papers?" Harry whispered to his two friends, "The one who had a trial against a Death Eater? I saw it at Grimmauld Place." It had been oddly soothing seeing someone other than him get an equally farcical trial.

"Yeah," Ron whispered back, sounding awed, "He's the real deal. D'you remember what he said at his trial?" Ron muffled snickers behind his hand. "Fuck you all very much, and your

mother twice, right at their stupid pureblood faces," Harry fought down a snort, he and Ron had had more than one laugh over the transcript Tonks had managed to get a hold of for them.

"You're a pureblood too, Ron," Hermione reminded in exasperation.

"Yeah, but I know I'm stupid, those lot try and deny it," Ron shot back. Hermione just huffed and considered their new teacher once more.

"He's a bit young, don't you think?" Hermione said, eyeing the admittedly very young-looking man critically. Harry understood what she was worried about, that perhaps he wasn't experienced enough to teach them what they needed, but he didn't care either way. It could be worse, they could have had that toad at his trial, Umbridge, for a teacher. Harry suppressed a shudder at the thought. He had been quietly very pleased when the news came that Umbridge had vanished without a trace.

"He got attacked by a Death Eater and caught him," Ron said, sounding oddly defensive. "I say that makes him a better teacher than most of the ones we've had." Harry wondered if this 'Harrison Slate' had replaced Viktor Krum as Ron's idol. He hid a smile. How long would it be until a new figurine joined his friend's collection?

"I suppose you're right... Oh, Merlin, it's like having a male version of Fleur Delacour all over again," Hermione groaned, looking around her in disgust. That was when Harry noticed many of the girls in his year, and those above and below were looking at Slate as though he were a particularly juicy steak. He frowned when he saw Cho Chang looking the same. Faint whispers of things such as 'he's cute,' and 'you think he follows teacher-student relationship rules?' could be heard throughout the hall, and one particularly brave seventh-year Gryffindor even cried out 'Marry me!' Then flushed a deep red when everyone turned to look at her, including the new teacher, who winked at her and gave a cheery wave to everyone else.

"Yes, yes, I'm sure that you are all pleased to see someone who has proven that they are experienced in dealing with the dark teaching your DADA class," Dumbledore said, eyes twinkling merrily. The headmaster turned to the man, who had just sat down in a chair in between Professor Sprout and McGonagall. "Do you wish to say a few words, Professor Slate?"

The slender man raised a single elegant eyebrow and glanced over at Professor Grubbly-Plank. Rightly so, Harry thought. Dumbledore hadn't extended the same offer to her. Nevertheless, he shrugged carelessly and acquiesced, stepping up to the platform to smile sharply down at them all like they were all toys that he was going to have lots of fun playing with. The students fell silent. Harry found himself grinning back.

"Lo kiddies," he began, "As the big man himself said, my name is Harrison Slate," there were a few mutters about the use of 'big man' around the hall. "Now, as far as I'm aware, only two of your last seven DADA Professors have been at all competent," he frowned. "Although one of them turned out to not be the person who was *supposed* to be hired, so I don't think that one counts. Although it does say something about the teaching standards."

Harry had to agree with that. Barty Crouch Jr had actually been a brilliant teacher, if a little psychopathic. Lupin had probably been the only good one he had had in all of his school

years.

"As for the other good one, as far as I'm aware he did dark creatures and how to defend against them," that was true as well, Harry acknowledged. Slate's eyes gleamed in excitement. "Therefore I am going to be your first good teacher for actual *defensive magic*." His eyes roamed over all of them, settling on Harry for a few moments longer, the mirror-like eyes that reminded him so much of Ollivander's seeming to bore right into his soul. "My goal is for you to be ready when you get out there, and not just sit there like an idiot *if* you are ever attacked. My goal is to get you lot to be able to get out of a situation like that *alive* and maybe, just *maybe*," he flashed a shark-like grin. "You could take a couple of them out before you do." Behind Slate, Dumbledore looked like he had just stubbed his toe.

Harry listened with rapt attention, as was the rest of the hall. *This* is what he had been wanting for so long. He could have done with this guy a couple of years ago, maybe then he could have saved Cedric.

'Cedric...'

A green light. Dead eyes. A dripping knife. A grotesque rising from a blood-red cauldron. The echoing voices of his parents.

"Bow to death, Harry..."

"Hold on, Harry..."

"Hold on for your father...it will be all right..."

"Take my body back to my parents. . . ."

"...Harry..."

He swallowed the memories down.

"Something is brewing out there, something dangerous," Slate continued, his gaze dragging across the hall, "I'm sure people on both sides have felt the effects of it as I have, and for those who don't believe that something is happening, I don't particularly care. I will teach you to defend yourself regardless of whether you believe more or not, and you will be prepared either way."

Harry sat up a little. That sounded like he believed him about what had happened in the graveyard, that Voldemort had returned. He shot a smug look at Malfoy across the hall, who was glaring at Slate hatefully, along with a few others in his house. All children of Death Eaters, Harry bet.

"And I believe that's about it," Slate said, looking considerate. "Oh yeah, firsties, my classroom is on the west side of the castle on the third floor, the serpentine corridor. Try your best not to be late." And with that, he stepped down and gracefully sat down into his chair once more.

Harry looked at Ron and Hermione and grinned, "I have a feeling this is going to be a very, very interesting year," he said.

-oOo-

Harry stood behind his desk and watched with a wide smile as the fifth-year students began to filter in. He had already taught a lesson for most of the other years, the seventh-year students being the last ones to go after this one.

It had been some of the best fun he had had in a long time. He had enjoyed teaching in DA, but he had forgotten just how much so. He almost felt sorry that he was taking the experience away from... himself? Hmm, maybe there was something he could do about that.

'Merlin's hairy testes this is weird,' he thought, watching as his second self walked through the door and looked around uncertainly before settling somewhere in the middle of the room next to Ron.

Now there was a man he hadn't seen in a long time. All of them had dealt with the war in different ways once it had finally finished. Some with shrinks, some in work, some in charity. Most turned to family.

His oldest friend had turned to the type of solace that some found in the bottom of an empty bottle of fire-whiskey. He hadn't seen the guy for almost thirty years, and he had been too deep in his drink to even register that Harry hadn't seemed to have aged since their five years on the run.

Not that he had stayed for all of it. Ron had left in the third year of their adventure, leaving him and Hermione to complete it by themselves. He had been tired of the stress and the sleepless nights, and increasingly worried about his family, one of whom had been left stuck at Hogwarts by herself. Harry had been furious at the time, but now with the experience of a long life behind him, he couldn't find it in himself to blame his old friend. They had been young, and Ron had been the only one who had had a family to worry about. The Weasleys had been high up on the kill list for the Dark Lord, all having been dangerous mages in their own right. Ginny especially had amassed quite the kill count once out of Hogwarts.

Those five years had been dark and depressing, the ever-present likelihood of them being caught by snatchers or Death Eaters was always looming over their heads as they scrambled around England in a madman's search for objects hidden and protected by one of the most powerful and skilled wizards to ever be born. Those five years had enabled Riddle to take the whole island in a stranglehold, and that hold had been absolute. Many muggleborns and half-bloods had died over that time, and it was only by offering foreign mages financial rewards that they had managed to bring in enough people that the population hadn't collapsed entirely. By the end of the five years, Harry and Hermione had emerged as hardened soldiers, skilled at wards, evading capture and most importantly with the mindset of people that would kill without hesitation, as they had had to do more than a few times together. It had most likely been those awful years that had enabled him to advance through the ranks of the Hit-Wizards with such speed.

Speaking of which, Hermione was on the other side of his clone. A formidable witch, and his most loyal friend. Her way of coping had been, as always, to bury herself under a mound of knowledge so deep that only Harry ever seemed to be able to pull her out of it. She had bickered and threatened her way into the centre of the Department of Mysteries, burrowed into it then stayed there, inventing things that nobody thought could be invented and sending hexes that had been out of use for centuries at anyone who dared come too close to her lab.

Their relationship had been odd. After Ron had left Hermione had been heartbroken and emotionally unstable. Turns out she'd been in love with Ron since third year. Times had been tough, and they had been a male and a female in their late teens alone in a tent running for their lives for two whole years. High emotions, a desperate need for comfort no matter what form...

It had been inevitable.

For a few years after the war, when they had needed to escape from the memories they had slept together on occasion, but that had stopped after they had become more mentally stable and Harry had begun his work as first a Hit-Wizard then a hitman for the ICW. She'd eventually settled down with a colleague from the DoM. His eyes fell on her as she leaned over the side of the desk to pick up a mound of books.

Brown hair spread across a lavender pillow, face flushed and rosy lips parted, panting in pleasure as she bounced against him.

Harry shook his head free of the unbidden flash of memory of that time in that dingy Travelodge in South London, feeling oddly perverted with her fifteen-year-old self in the room.

One of the last to walk in was Draco Malfoy, and at the sight of the boy sharing a whispered joke with Crabbe, he was yet again drawn into a memory. He didn't resist.

His boots echoed rhythmically on the black and white marbled floor of Malfoy manor; his meeting with Narcissa and Lucius Malfoy finished after a long talk. It had been a heavy one, and he had gained a reluctant respect for Lucius afterwards. The man was taking responsibility for everything attributed to his wife and son, admitting to doing things that they had done even if he couldn't have done them.

He would be in Azkaban for the rest of his life, but his wife and son would remain free. At least the Dementors wouldn't be there anymore. Harry had taken care of that.

Near the end of the corridor, a door was slightly ajar, golden light spilling into the darkened hall. Harry slowed then stopped before the door and looked through. The sliver of room visible revealed the tall, thin form of Draco Malfoy sitting hunched on an elegant golden gilded stool with his left sleeve rolled up, staring at the scarring left behind by the dark mark with a blank face. All of the wealth and opulence surrounding him couldn't protect him from the guilt of being responsible for the deaths of those he had crossed The Great Lake with as an innocent, wide-eyed child, once upon a time. He seemed to sense Harry was there, looking up to meet the vivid green eyes staring impassively back. Draco's eyes were red-rimmed and darkened by heavy black circles.

Harry continued walking.

He looked away from Draco and picked up a parchment, the memories stopping as he did so.

He took attendance and pretended not to know every face in the room off by heart, pretended not to feel his heart threaten to tear into pieces as he read names from the attendance sheet that he had read from too many gravestones all those years ago.

He had lived longer than most.

"Good afternoon, and welcome to your fifth year of defence against the dark arts," he began, looking over the whole class. "You will call me Professor Slate, sir, or an acceptable variation of the two for the remainder of the time that I will be here, understood?"

There was a chorus of affirmative noises. Harry grinned and clapped his hands. "Good, then we can begin with this." Harry waved his wand over his shoulder and the words 'Defence Against' vanished from the huge chalkboard he had placed behind him, leaving the words 'the Dark Arts' by themselves on the board. He saw a few Slytherins perk up.

'Foolish Children.' The things he had seen, the things he could teach them of the dark arts would make them swear off it for the rest of their lives.

"Now tell me," Harry said, placing both hands on his desk and leaning forwards. "What are the dark arts? If we are to learn to defend ourselves from it, we should probably understand what it is."

Hermione's hand shot up in the air, and Harry ignored it and picked out Tracey Davis instead, knowing that future Hermione would have found it hilarious. "Miss Davis."

"Magic which hurts people?" She asked hesitantly.

Harry grinned, "you are halfway correct Miss Davis," he said, then summoned one of the dummies lining the right side of the room to his left. "To demonstrate why it is only half correct, I will ask this question, would you consider the banishing charm dark magic?" He arched an eyebrow at them.

The incredulous looks and many negative responses were enough to ascertain their response. Although he was amused to see that Crabbe and Goyle looked around uncertainly at the question. He still thought that it was hilarious that blood supremacists continued to ignore the difference between those two imbeciles and mages like Hermione Granger. Or maybe they thought she directly stole their magic? She was definitely twice the mage they were.

"Correct, of course," Harry said, beaming at them. "And yet..."

He jabbed his wand sharply and banished the dummy, sending it crashing through the window and spinning three floors down to its inevitable demise. There were loud gasps and a few shrieks from both the male and female audience, including Malfoy, which Harry tried hard not to laugh about.

The dummy was summoned back into the room before it accidentally squashed someone on the ground and Harry repaired the window with a negligent flick.

"Why in Merlin's name did you do that?" Ron demanded, his ears red.

Harry frowned, internally giggling madly. "Two points from Gryffindor for speaking out of turn Mr Weasley, but the question was a good one nonetheless." He looked over all of them again, "Would any of you like to provide an answer to Mr Weasley's question?"

There was a noticeable few seconds of silence as everyone processed that before another Slytherin rose her pale hand. "Yes, Miss Greengrass?" He asked, gazing upon what had been known as one of the most beautiful women in high society Britain in his time. He'd like to say that she'd given him the time of day, but she'd looked at him once at a Ministry ball and turned her nose up at him like he was the most repugnant man alive.

"The banishing charm is not dark magic, and yet you demonstrated that it could be used to harm someone or possibly kill them, contrary to what Tracey said," she replied, sounding as cold and composed as she was known to be, but Harry could see the excitement burning in those ice blue eyes.

Harry smiled. "Very good, five points to Slytherin," he praised. "And do you have an alternative argument to what dark magic is, Miss Greengrass?" He asked.

Her mouth quirked slightly, as much of a grin as anyone was ever going to get from the girl, "the Ministry defines dark magic as any magic that it has prohibited," she said, a hint of derisiveness entering her tone.

Harry laughed, "a definition which many of you find ridiculous, no doubt," he said, noticing that along with many Slytherins, Neville also nodded. Harry wasn't overly surprised, Augusta Longbottom was a very pragmatic witch.

He also noticed that many of the Gryffindors, including himself, looked conflicted between a dislike for the Ministry and a dislike of Slytherins.

"Yes yes, another five points to Slytherin for another correct answer," Harry said. "According to the Ministry, if we follow their definition, the portkey creation spell is dark magic if it is performed by anyone other than the Department of International Travel, as they banned it after it was abused in the war against Grindelwald." Something which Dumbledore had ignored entirely on multiple occasions, Harry recalled with amusement. "Which is of course, ridiculous."

Seeing that they understood, Harry continued, "The Ministry labels all of the banned magic 'dark' because the word has a bad reputation, and it gives them a way for them to control what mages can and cannot cast. Many of the banned spells and rituals are not, in fact, dark at all, the Ministry just banned them after the wars due to paranoia and public outcry," Harry shrugged. "It was seen as perfectly reasonable back then, but now the list is out of date."

He was pleased to see everyone scowl at that, Harry was pleased that he had managed to encourage house unity through the collected hatred of Ministry politics.

"The definition of dark magic that I, and people that actually know what they are talking about, is completely different," he stated. "Any ideas?" This time the class remained silent, although Harry could almost hear Hermione screaming in frustration in her head at not knowing the answer. Her face was screwed up in a frown and she was flicking through the textbook he had left on the desks at a speed that was surely too fast to even read what was on the pages.

He smiled at them reassuringly. "That's ok, the truth is that the definition is vague at best, but the basic idea is that any spells that would not work without the intent to kill, permanently maim, cause extreme pain or bend to your will are considered dark. This is why those who practice the dark arts slowly become more obsessed with it and begin to show more homicidal tendencies than before. They intend to kill or disfigure with every spell they use and that does things to a mage's mind, it makes them want to do it more, and therefore attracts them to more of the same type of spells." He looked over them solemnly. "It's an endless and destructive loop, and one that an unfortunate amount of mages get caught in." He did not mention that it could be almost entirely negated through the use of occlumency. Anything to discourage children away from that path was essential. "Do any of you have any questions?" He asked after letting the silence stretch on for a while.

Hermione rose her hand and Harry pointed her out.

"Professor, what if you put negative intent into spells that aren't dark? Will they still work?"

"A good question Miss Granger, take five points. I believe for this we can use another example." He looked over the class, pretending that he hadn't already decided who he wanted to torment for the year.

"Mr Potter, why don't you come up here and be our example?" He said, trying not to sound too gleeful.

He, uhm. Harry...

'Fucking hell man.'

Smaller Potter scowled and got to his feet, obviously angry at having been singled out again. Harry smiled wolfishly at his younger self as he approached the front of the classroom. He had to suppress a wince, though, as the feeling of the Horcrux embedded in the kid's skull drew nearer, seeming to twist the very air around it to his senses.

'Nothing like a piece of an insane man's shredded soul in the morning.'

"Now," Harry said as he summoned another dummy to sit about twenty feet away from them, "I want you to send a stunner at that dummy," he said, his arms crossed.

Puzzled, Harry Junior nodded and cast a strong, "*Stupefy!*" at the dummy. Harry grimaced at the use of verbal magic. He would have the better ones on non-verbal by the end of the year, which included little Potty. He held high standards for himself, after all.

The dummy rocked back at the force of the spell, and Harry's past self looked at him for approval. "Not bad," Harry said, then he drew his wand and cast a bit of conjuration that would have made McGonagall proud, dressing the straw dummy in a distinctive pink poncho and dress capped off by a wig of curled brown hair.

"And for our next trick," Harry said, waving his wand elaborately in the general direction of the dummy in a Lockhartish manner, "Mr Potter, I want you to cast the spell again and think of the person that this dummy resembles, who I have absolutely no clue who could be," Harry said, eyes twinkling. He heard various students laugh into the crook of their elbows around the room.

"With pleasure Professor," little Harry replied, a slightly vindictive look on his face. Harry had the odd sensation of feeling proud of himself but not really... himself.

'I'm going to get a fucking migraine.'

He sent a stunner at the dummy again, but this time the red jet of light sizzled angrily as it hissed towards his dummy, far faster than the last one had. It hit the straw Umbridge and sent the thing flying backwards to hit the wall hard, its wig left behind in its hasty exit to fall gracefully to the ground.

"Brilliant!" Harry cried, clapping his test subject on the back, who was looking at his wand like it had just conjured piss. "Five points to Gryffindor Mr Potter! Now, can the rest of you tell me why the spell reacted differently the second time?" He glanced back at himself and noticed that his clone was now looking at the pile of pink robes with a satisfied look. "You can sit down now by the way Potter, you can practice doing that again in your spare time," he whispered. Smaller Potter gave him a grin and went to sit down next to Ron again, who was looking at Harry in a way that made him very uncomfortable. He thought he had gotten away from worshippers when he became a different person.

"Was it because with the second one, the intent behind the spell was different?" Dean said after Harry picked him out.

"Exactly, five points to the red side," Harry said, "Mr Potter when you cast the first spell, what was your intent?"

"Uhm, I wanted to stun it," he said, sounding uncertain in the way that only those giving a very obvious answer could.

"And with a *stupefy*, that's all the intent you need to make it effective, although when faced with the image of a person who most find to be unnaturally irritating, his intent changed. Did it not?"

Looking like he was trying his hardest not to laugh with Ron, who wasn't even trying to hide his laughter, Harry replied, "Yes, sir."

"And the result of adding negative intent to a non-dark spell caused it to do more damage to the target," Harry concluded, looking over them all again. "Everyone understand?" He saw all of them nod. "Good, part of what I will be teaching you this year will be regulating your

intent to control the spells that you use, and that was a good introduction to it." He had them, he knew it. Even Malfoy had stopped glaring at him and looked interested. "Any more questions?"

To his slight surprise, Ron tentatively raised his hand. Harry had to remind himself that his old friend wasn't an idiot, and just a bit clueless and lazy. "Sir, if all of them need bad intent and you have to want to kill or hurt someone, what makes the unforgivables different? aren't they just kind of the same thing?" He said. Harry saw Hermione look at him as if he had just coughed up a Nargle.

"Another good question," Harry said, making Ron puff up in pride. "What makes the unforgivables different is that not only does your intent have to be even more malevolent, but unlike the other dark spells there is also no way to shield against any of the three of them, nor a counter curse, unless you count throwing off the imperius a counter curse of course." He was a pro at that particular feat.

His tone lowered with import. "That is why when you see any of those three curses, you dodge or conjure, do not try and raise a magical shield, something which your last teacher told you, yes?" Everyone nodded. "Good. Last question now before we begin, anything else?" There was silence around the room. Harry continued.

"Intent is, along with magical power, without a doubt the most important part of casting a spell properly, if used properly and honed efficiently, intent can shape your magic to your will and accomplish incredible things, such as this," Harry pocketed his wand and raised his left hand, the desk next to him rising with it. "I have complete control over my magic, my emotions and most importantly, my *intent*," he grinned at their open amazement and rotated his hand minutely, causing the desk to spin. Was he showing off? Most definitely. Did he regret it? No. "My intent was strong in its belief that I could lift it, and my visualisation was also strong enough that my magical power backed it up and completed the task."

He lowered the desk back to the ground. "That calibre of magic is far beyond you at this point, but my goal over this year is to get you all to a place where you have a solid foundation that you can build upon so, in the future, you can perhaps do the same." It was an easy way to get them motivated for the class, the Gryffindors were probably thinking of all the shenanigans they could get up to with wandless magic, and the Slytherins were attracted by the power, evidenced by the gleam in many a green-robed mage's eyes. Daphne in particular looked like she wanted to eat him.

"But first of all, we must go back to basics," he said, a predatory grin spreading across his face that made some shift uncomfortably and some lean forward.

"So, let's start by testing your shield charms."

-oOo-

Harry walked into the headmaster's office without knocking, negating the charm that told Dumbledore his name so he could do his fancy little trick. "Sorry I'm late headmaster, the brats managed to set fire to the whole left side of the room and I had to repair the desks."

"We do not refer to the students as 'brats,' Harrison," McGonagall sniffed over the rim of her tea cup.

Harry scowled petulantly as he took a seat next to Filius. "What? How come Snape gets to call them that and I don't?"

She turned a hard glare to Snape. "Neither of you should be."

Snape glanced at Harry in betrayal and he heard the words 'deserve it,' 'insufferable,' and 'Potter,' tumble from the man's mouth in a spiteful mumble.

"No worries my boy, and may I be the first to welcome you to the first staff meeting?" Dumbledore said, ignoring Snape's hatred of children as always.

Harry had been surprised when he had been told about the staff meetings, although he supposed it made sense that they all came together at some point to make all the garbage decisions that they had made in his school years.

"You may."

"And how has your first week of teaching treated you, Harrison? From what I hear the students have been working hard," Dumbledore popped a lemon drop in his mouth.

Harry shrugged. "They're children, so they are irritating. But I've got to say I'm having fun trying to educate the little guys, even if they are depressingly behind where they should be," he scowled. "I'm honestly beginning to think Crouch Jr only revealed himself so he wouldn't have to teach years behind where he should be any more." He heard Snape exhale through his nose in a mockery of a laugh, but nobody else looked very amused.

Right, it had only happened not even a year ago for these people. For him, it had been almost eighty since Cedric's death.

'Fuck sake, Potter, why don't you crack one about Dumbledore's sister while you're at it,' A voice that sounded a lot like Malfoy drawled in his head.

"I was not aware that they were that far behind," Filius said into the slightly awkward silence that followed. His little face had wrinkled into a frown. "My Ravens have never complained about being behind, although I admit that teachers in the last decade or so have been sub-par for that particular subject."

'Understatement.'

Harry nodded. "The fourth and fifth years got the worst of it, two of the worst teachers having been their introduction to defensive magic. They're decent on the offensive side of things due to faux Moody teaching them the main jinxes and minor curses, but on the defensive side," Harry sighed wearily. "A few of them can't even cast a basic stunner, and more cannot cast a shield strong enough to stop one."

They all look shocked at that, and Harry was shocked that they were shocked. "What, you didn't know?" He questioned incredulously.

"No complaints have been made to me about the state of their education," McGonagall said, setting down her tea with a clatter.

"Nor I," Snape said, looking fairly annoyed at the fact. Sprout and Flitwick also voiced the same.

"Well," Harry breathed in exasperation, leaning back in his seat tiredly. "The fact of the matter is that the foundations of the fourth and fifth years' magical defence are shaky at best, and the sixth and seventh are barely better, at least this year's firsties and second years are going to have a solid starting place this time around. For the rest of them, I'm going to have to revise previous years before I can start on the new stuff."

Snape scowled at him darkly. "You seem very... confident in your abilities for one of your age, Slate."

'Ah, and there it is.' Snape was infamous for being jealous of anyone who manage to get the DADA position, it was widely known that he wanted the position very badly for himself. Harry decided to rub it in a little. He was in this new situation whether he liked it or not, and he couldn't think of a better way to make use of it than to piss off Snape.

He shrugged nonchalantly. "Sure I am, I'm fairly certain that I know more about the Dark Arts and defending against it than anyone else in this room, including sparkles here," he nodded towards Dumbledore, who indeed seemed to have glitter strewn throughout his robes.

Snape sneered, "I very much doubt that."

"And yet I'm in the Defence Against the Dark Arts spot, and not someone else," Harry smiled at him condescendingly. "I'm sure that if there was a better option, they would have been chosen, no?"

"Just so, Harrison," Dumbledore said, smiling genially as if he hadn't said that on purpose just to annoy Snape. "I was particularly impressed with the tales of you using wandless magic, is there any backing to that rumour?" He sounded intensely and unabashedly curious, which made Harry smile. The headmaster was a sly one, and beyond clever, but at heart, he was still a scholar and a Gryffindor and wore emotions on his sleeve when he didn't need to hide them.

"You tell me," he said with a smirk, a ball of flame erupting from his upturned hand and floating in mid-air. Gasps sounded across the room, and for a good reason. Not many had the necessary power or control over their magic to do wandless magic, although admittedly not many bothered to try. Wandless magic took about triple the amount of magic that using a wand did, and many found it an unnecessary and impractical skill to learn. Harry of course knew it was a useful skill, as it had saved his life in the Sahara not even a month ago. Well, he died a bit after that, but it saved his life for a bit.

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled as he observed the flame. "Incredible, to see one so young in such control."

Harry snuffed out the flame when he closed his hand and rose a challenging eyebrow at Snape, who scowled and looked away.

"It has saved my life on more than one occasion, headmaster, as I'm sure it has yours."

"Indeed it has," Dumbledore said, still looking impressed.

"What else can you do?" Filius asked, looking intrigued. "I never had the power to make such a thing useful in duels, although I always thought such a thing could be useful."

Harry grinned. "Cast a stinger at me."

Flitwick looked at Dumbledore for permission, who hesitated for a moment before nodding in acceptance. Flitwick drew his wand and silently cast a stinger at Harry. In response he casually rose his hand and slapped it away as if swatting at a particularly annoying wasp, making it fly away in a completely random direction.

An angry hiss came from Snape as the stinger collided with his leg.

"Fascinating," Flitwick said, looking in interest at Harry's palm as Snape cursed in what sounded like ancient Greek in the background. "*Protego regressus* over your palm?" He asked, looking at Harry for confirmation, who nodded and angled his hand to show the shimmering silver shield covering the front on the front of his hand. Flitwick poked the shield a few times with his wand before leaning back and stroking his beard. "Fascinating," he repeated, "I imagine that being able to deflect spells with one hand while still being able to cast with the other would result in a distinct advantage in a fight."

"I'm sure it is. However, we are getting off topic," McGonagall huffed, scowling at them all.

"Minerva is, of course, correct," Dumbledore asserted, "I am, in fact, rather interested in how Mr Potter is doing in his lessons?"

Harry looked at him blankly, the sheer iron balls needed to blatantly ask about one specific student in front of all of the teachers...

"Well, I'm not sure why you want to know about Potter specifically," Harry drawled. "He's good at the practical side, being one of the few to be able to conjure a shield that could stop more than a thrown wad of paper and cast a decent stunner. He would probably be good at the theory side if he stopped copying Miss Granger's work instead of doing it himself."

This was just too good, he had always hated himself for being a lazy shit in school, taking the easiest subjects and doing the minimal amount possible. Grassing himself up was just too good, and he felt completely vindicated since it was himself doing it. He had been attacked every year at Hogwarts, and somehow the thought hadn't managed to get through his thick skull that *maybe* he should consider trying a *bit* harder to raise his magical talent.

'*Take that you little shit,*' He thought gleefully.

"Oh, is that true?" McGonagall asked, looking like a cat with its tail pulled.

Harry didn't bother to smother the wide grin. "It is, it seems your golden boy has a bit of a plagiarism problem, Minerva." His grin vanished all of a sudden and his eyes became intense, and he looked at Dumbledore completely seriously, which he noticed with pleasure made people shift uncomfortably around the room, "I do have one question about the boy, however, Albus."

The old man rolled his hand. "Of course, my boy, do ask away."

Harry morphed his face into the most innocent facade he could muster, which with his current features was nigh impossible. "Why is there a soul shard in the boy's skull?"

This was part of his plan. However much he planned to fuck with himself, he was thoroughly against letting something so vile remain in any child. He hoped that revealing this to Dumbledore would lead to him being able to remove it. He had been on the fence originally, as he was fairly sure that it was AK insurance, but then he had felt the magic emanating from it and the idea had been kicked out of the proverbial window post-haste.

He had found in the future, much to his displeasure, that the Horcrux *could* be removed. He had found the knowledge in a book from the personal library of a particularly fucked up individual that he had read and then burnt with extreme pleasure.

Dumbledore went completely still, and around the room, everyone else fell silent after shocked gasps and covered mouths.

"Everyone is to leave the room, immediately," Dumbledore said in a cool voice just above a whisper, his eyes piercing Harry's with unnatural intensity. The temperature in the room felt like it had warmed by a couple of degrees, and Fawkes cried nervously from its perch and shifted. Nobody moved for a few still, quiet moments. It felt as if time had frozen.

"Now."

There was something undeniably hard in that voice, it caused everyone in the room to snap out of their reverie and come back to the present and they filed out of the room with many a backwards glance. Harry stayed in the chair before the headmaster, eyes still locked on the older man's. McGonagall paused by the door and looked back, "Albus..."

"Go Minerva," he cut her off firmly, and that was that. The door shut behind her with a soft *thump* and then the room was entirely silent.

"Explain what you are talking about, Harrison."

Harry scoffed and looked at the old man incredulously. "Please, don't tell me you don't already know, I could feel the evil emanating from that boy as soon as he entered my classroom, and I had to make a conscious effort to make sure the wards surrounding the room didn't kill the child in the first period." He gave him a significant look, "I know for a fact that you are one of the few who can sense the same."

Sensory magic was a rare talent, and if one did not make a conscious effort to develop the skill most mages would never be able to feel the magics surrounding them as he and the

headmaster could. The horcrux was evil and twisted, but it was also subtle, its intent causing it to remain hidden even in its unconscious state. He did not doubt that he was one of few in the country, or even the continent to have honed the skill to a level where he could sense such things. Albus Dumbledore and Tom Riddle were two others, and there were more that he didn't know about dotted around the world. Nicolas and Perenelle Flamel almost definitely could as well, but then again those two were practically gods in their own right. He had found that the two were, contrary to the headmaster's opinion, very much alive almost sixty-five years after the events concerning the Philosophers Stone. He could still remember the roiling, ancient magic that had surrounded them both, it was like nothing he had ever experienced before.

"There is something evil in that scar, something entirely against the natural world order, something torn and dastardly in a way that only a perversion of the soul can be." The only thing he'd ever sensed that was even close was the very ritual that had sent him back in time.

Dumbledore gazed upon him with an unreadable look, and Harry thought he might be weighing up his options, deciding how much trust to put in this stranger who had crash-landed into the halls of his school. Or perhaps he was preparing to obliviate him, it was hard to tell.

Finally, Dumbledore let out a deep sigh and seemed to get ever so slightly closer to his actual age. "Very well," he said, voice falling into the easy tone of a teacher. "On the fateful night of the 31st of October, 1981 I believe that Voldemort tore his soul upon the murder of Harry Potter through the use of the killing curse. What he could not account for however was the ancient magical power of love and sacrifice intertwined, and the curse backfired, tearing his soul from his body. As its container was destroyed, I believe it latched onto the strongest magical object in its immediate vicinity, which regretfully-"

"Was ickle Harry Potter," Harry completed. Frankly, he was surprised that Dumbledore would reveal such information to him, and he wondered what he had done to earn such trust. "That explains *how* it got there headmaster, but that is not what I asked."

Dumbledore rose a single bushy eyebrow. "Oh?"

Harry nodded, "I was not asking *how* it got there headmaster, I had already deduced that, as I already know how a horcrux is made," he heard a slight intake of breath at his revelation, which he ignored. "What I wanted to know is why it's *still* there."

Bright blue eyes scrutinized him carefully, perhaps wondering where he had obtained such information. "If you know how such a thing is constructed, then you surely know that the only way to destroy one is to destroy the container, and in this case, as the container is a child..."

Harry raised a hand and Dumbledore trailed off, surprised at such a brazen gesture. "What if I were to tell you that I knew of a way to remove it from the boy without killing him? It will be painful, of course, but I assure you he will not die."

Dumbledore started, and something that looked like hope gleamed briefly in the man's eye before it was smothered through what Harry assumed to be the reluctance to accept false

hope. "Truly? And what is this method you speak of?"

Harry let the wolfish grin shine through finally, and leant forward, eyes gleaming. "A cleansing ritual, one powered by blood."

Thin shoulders slumped, and a heavily lined brow creased. "Rituals," he almost spat the word, voice rumbling like a roused stormfront. "A vile subject, and most dark. I do not desire to use such a thing."

Harry frowned he knew that Dumbledore was a firmly light-sided wizard, but he wasn't aware that he was to the point of being blind. It made sense, now, that the old man had never found the solution. All knowing he may be, but he was still far light-sided and not the type to collect the type of books that Harry himself had found the necessary information. *Cështjet e Shpirtit* was a particularly rare and malignant book that Harry was sure that nobody at all light-sided would possess, no matter how hard they searched.

"Even if it was possible to save the life of the child? I assure you, I can do the ritual and I can do it well. His eyes bored into Dumbledore's, willing the man to understand he was sincere. He tapped a finger on the desk in emphasis. "*He does not have to be sacrificed, Dumbledore*, if that is what you have planned. I do not see how you could turn this down, even with your misguided ideas on the nature of blood magic."

Dumbledore looked over steepled fingers, obviously deep in thought. "I must think on this, Harrison," he said finally. "If you could, send me the notes on the ritual and allow me and other experts to analyse the ritual to see if it is safe, I will give you an answer at the end of term."

Harry nodded. Dumbledore couldn't know that he *was* the expert, but it was probably the best he could get.

"I must insist, however, that I perform the ritual myself."

'Ah, now that is a problem.'

Harry glowered at him. "No disrespect, but I seriously doubt that you have the necessary experience required to perform such a thing."

Dumbledore arched an eyebrow. "And you do?" he sounded faintly disapproving.

"Yes," Harry answered shortly. "If you try and perform it, I do not doubt that you will either kill the child, release a demon or both," he tapped his finger on his chin in consideration. "Probably both."

Dumbledore was looking at him with something akin to... disappointment? Harry wasn't sure what he was disappointed about, he had never made any claim of being a light-sided wizard, and he didn't know Harrison Slate. There was silence for a moment, then Dumbledore seemed to snap out of a trance. "Apologies my boy, you just suddenly reminded me of another young man who travelled the world immediately after schooling, coming back with knowledge he should not have."

Harry tried very hard not to immolate the man on the spot.

'Did he seriously just compare me to Tom Riddle?'

"I shall think on your offer," Dumbledore decided, ignorant to Harry's mental battle on murdering Britain's equivalent to wizarding Jesus. "For now, you must not tell anyone of what you have discovered, especially not young Harry himself, I shall have to have the other teachers swear oaths."

Harry shrugged, his anger disappearing when he realised he didn't care. "Kay."

"You may go now Harrison, I thank you for your offer, it could save many a life," Dumbledore said in a low, hopeful voice. "It could change everything."

Harry grinned. "You're welcome," he responded as he stood. "I'll see you when you decide, headmaster, I'll send the ritual notes soon enough." Dumbledore nodded, and he left, pondering on what kind of mischief this little change would cause.

-oOo-

"Can we trust him, Albus?" McGonagall asked, taking a nervous sip from her tea. "He seems... unstable. And far too knowledgeable about the darkest of magics, I don't even want to know where he heard of such awful things."

She had come back up after Slate had left, and he had revealed all about Slate's offer and Harry's condition. To say she was distraught was an understatement, Harry was one of her favourite students, and it had taken a subtle wandless calming charm and several cups of tea before she had settled down enough for civilised conversation.

Albus sighed. "To be perfectly honest Minerva, I have no way of knowing," he shook his head mournfully. "His occlumency was far too strong to gleam any surface intent, and I know next to nothing of his past." The fact was mildly disconcerting to him. As headmaster of the most popular school in the country, he normally knew most people he met. Slate was another story.

He watched in mild displeasure as she raked her nails along the arm of the chair she was in, like a cat sharpening her claws. "I don't like it, Albus, from what you said the boy is powerful, more powerful than you even, and he does not seem entirely light-minded."

Dumbledore scowled, she wasn't entirely wrong. Harrison's magic was violent and barely constrained, raging like a malignant storm under a thin surface of absolute control. On the outside, he was flippant and mischievous, but his magic was entirely another matter. He hadn't felt such an aura since he last met Tom.

'Or Gellert.' The thought made him shiver.

"I do not believe he has turned to the dark," he said slowly, rolling a lemon drop in between his fingers. "I think his magic could be defined as grey, perhaps."

"It does not matter what bloody *shade* his magic is, Albus, he is teaching *children*," she looked furious, but he could tell she was worried. Minerva was one of the rare and special kind of teachers that loved all of her students, even if she didn't show it all the time. "If he were to lose his mind, lose control of his magic..." The implication that students could be harmed did not need to be mentioned.

"That will not happen, Minerva," Dumbledore said firmly, the boiled sweet cracking under the sudden pressure of his closed fist. "For all of his power, he is still young and inexperienced. I have many a year on him." For some reason, the words rang false in his mind. The man seemed to have an affinity with his magic that should have only been possible after four or five decades and knew things that should not have been possible to learn from just one trip around the world. It seemed to soothe Minerva however, and to his relief, she stopped gouging long marks into his second favourite armchair.

"I still do not like it, Albus," she repeated stubbornly. "We will be putting a lot of trust into someone we don't know, who somehow appeared from nowhere and has already raised to the position of Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher within not even a month, and he's already got close to Nymphadora," she worried her lip. "Don't you think he might be attempting to infiltrate the Order?"

It was a reasonable thought, and it gave him pause. It was true that Harrison Slate had appeared from nowhere, and quickly managed to get close to both himself and another one of the most important members of the Order. On top of that, he had also managed to get into a position that Tom had coveted for a long time, it gave a new perspective to the disappearance of Dolores Umbridge. Not that he hadn't already suspected that he was responsible or cared.

"I do not think he poses a threat," he said slowly. "He did, after all, put a Death Eater in prison, and he did look genuinely irritated, if not surprised when I offered him the DADA position. Not to mention his offer to help Harry."

"The Dark Lord is not the only one attempting to get a spy in the Order Albus, as well you know. Amelia Bones has been trying for as long as she has known about it. For all we know, Nymphadora and Kingsley already do so."

That was also true. Albus knew that Fudge was also attempting to do the same, but the man's attempts were about as subtle as a rampaging Hippogriff and were able to be ignored without effort. Amelia Bones, however, was most definitely a snake in Badger's furs. The woman had managed to find out that the Order had reformed, and had been making irritatingly subtle attempts to try and find out what they knew ever since.

He sighed. "We have no choice but to trust him, Minerva," he said in resignation, his forehead palmed in both hands, "He has offered, with no request of repayment or favours, to save Harry Potter's life, and despite how much I have learnt of magic I doubt I can perform what he intends. That area of magic has never been my expertise." He looked down at the runic circle and ingredients etched into a piece of paper that had somehow made its way onto his desk with no owl twenty minutes earlier, just one more thing he couldn't explain about the young man.

Minerva sighed as well. "Then we have no choice but to trust him," she said, resigned.

"So it would seem." There was a long silence, the only sound the clinking of china as McGonagall reached for her tea again and took a sip.

"That is enough on the topic of Mr Slate however, we must talk of other things," he continued, focusing on Minerva again. "I have some important news for you," he stated gravely, "Fenrir Greyback has been killed, along with all of his pack."

-oOo-

Harry slid into the seat and offered the woman opposite him a warm smile in greeting. "Hiya, Tonks, long time no see."

She looked up at him and returned a bright smile of her own before her face turned stony, adopting a haughty look along with an elongated nose to better look down at him. "You are late, Mr Slate," she declared coolly.

Harry tried to look contrite. An impossibility. "Apologies my Lady, I was busy trying to unstick a third year from the ceiling, little brat said he wanted to walk on the walls like Spiderman. It appears my instruction on the permanent nature of the sticking charm didn't quite get through to him."

"That's what they all say," she dismissed. "Your apology is reluctantly accepted, however."

"How gracious of you," Harry said dryly. He smiled at her. "It's good to see you again, Tonks, you're looking good."

Her bright, bubbly smile returned and Harry felt his heart beat a little faster at the sight. He hadn't been lying, she did look good. More than good. Her hair was a cobalt blue, falling to her jaw and framing alluring pink eyes set in smooth, porcelain skin. She looked like something plucked from a fantasy.

Together, though both unaware of it, they were positively ethereal, demigods amongst men.

"Good to see you too Harrison, I suppose you're alright yourself."

He scoffed, "I would bloody well hope so with the advantage I have. How's the job?"

Her face scrunched cutely up in annoyance, which Harry watched Like it was the eighth wonder of the world. "The Ministry is a bloody mess," she complained. "One of the blokes from Fudge's bloc has disappeared without a trace, so half the time they're running around like idiots and ordering us to try harder to find him, and the other half of the time they're moaning about Potter and Dumbledore."

'Ah, it seems Travers' disappearance has ruffled a few feathers.' He had anticipated it but had simply not really given a fuck. The Travers house wasn't a Most Ancient and Noble house, just a Noble one, but due to its alliances with houses much more powerful and important than itself such as Malfoy, Avery and Lestrange it had been dragged up a few ranks in the Wizengamot and consequently held significant political sway with a nice pile of gold to boot. The death of Cohan Travers would personally piss off and spook Fudge, who would

inevitably get paranoid and flail around like a deranged baboon. He wasn't worried about them finding out how the man had died. Kingsley had no reason to tell anyone, and on top of that Cohan had probably been covering his tracks himself due to the nature of his business on the island.

Harry laughed and accepted the beer he had ordered, the deep red swirling by itself in the glass like a small whirlpool. "You think they would have better things to do than slander a fifteen-year-old and an old man."

"Not everyone is buying their shit anymore," Tonks reminded, grabbing a handful of salted peanuts from the glass bowl. "Your trial woke a few of the sheep up, I even got one of the posters that Puddifoot has been selling," she grinned cheekily at him and stuffed the peanuts in her mouth, completely unashamed at the inelegance of it.

He arched a single eyebrow. "Oh? For when the nights get lonely?"

She laughed. "You wish. I need *something* when the toilet paper runs out. How's Hogwarts?"

Harry smiled at the barb and shrugged. "Kids are fucking annoying, but other than that it's alright, definitely a step up for an ex-prisoner and accused attempted murderer."

"You can't be worse than some of the other teachers," Tonks grouched, "I had a teacher in my NEWT year with a stutter," she looked at him flatly. "A wizard, with a stutter. He had to say spells at least three times before he could even cast one, it was a bloody nightmare." It was a good point. Next to a missing hand or fingers, a speech impediment was about as bad as things could get for a mage. Any injury that prevented casting spells was almost as bad as death. Back in a less civilised age, cutting a mage's tongue out was considered the highest form of punishment.

"You seem to have done well for yourself nonetheless," he pointed out. "Good position in the Aurors, friends in high places..."

Pink turned a hard magenta behind blue strands of hair, "What do you mean by that?"

He shrugged, "Well, you seemed rather close to Amelia Bones, and just the other day I had a peculiar conversation with Albus Dumbledore himself. Odd thing, he repeated things to me that I had only told you."

Her eyes widened slightly, but she played it off well. "Me and the headmaster have kept up since school, I think I was a favourite student of his or something. Whenever he drops by for a Wizengamot meeting we talk. You came up, seeing as he was hiring you. Sorry if it got you in trouble."

Harry hummed and gave her a shrewd look, which made her visibly squirm in her seat before he relented. "I don't really care Tonks, but I would prefer it if you didn't relay everything I tell you to my new boss, some of the things I say to you might get me fired," he laughed.

She looked visibly relieved at his abandonment of the line of questioning. "Oh really, and what are you planning on saying to me that would scandalise the headmaster so much?" She

asked, the impish grin hitched back onto her face.

Harry's eyes made a languid journey up and down her form, tracking the elegant swoop of her throat. "I can think of one or two things."

"Like what?" She asked a single pure black eyebrow arched.

"Hmm. Blue doesn't suit you."

She snorted and flipped him off, taking a sip from her lime green cocktail as she did so. "Well one of us has to switch it up, seeing as you're always on tall dark and handsome mode," she quipped, taking another hasty sip before setting it down. "What colour do you think suits me then?" she asked curiously, her hair starting to shift already.

He didn't even need to think. "Pink," he said without hesitation.

Her hair shifted to a pastel pink colour immediately. "And whys that?"

He shrugged. "When I think of you, I think of you with pink hair, it's just who you are."

"I didn't know you thought of me so often, or that you knew me that well."

He smiled thinly. "I'm a good judge of character."

It was then that he felt a twinge in his magic from one of his personal wards, and it made him tense up ever so slightly, his hand twitching in anticipation of drawing his wand from years of practised instinct. From the feel of it, it was one of the intent wards he had powered up earlier in the day. It was a clever one, sensing when negative intentions were being directed to the caster and alerting said caster to them. It was roughly based on the runes that made up the sneakoscope that Moody liked to have in every room in his house. The only downside was that it did not show where the intent was coming from.

"Well obviously you are, you seem to have taken a liking to fabulous ol' me, after all, makes me wonder how much of me you want to get to know." He heard Tonks reply with her permanently flirtatious lilt to her voice in the back of his head, but he wasn't paying attention. He scanned the room surreptitiously, eyes flicking around in search of whoever was watching him with negative intent. He thought he caught a flash of something dart from a corner of the window that faced into the back alley of the pub, but he couldn't be sure.

"-rrison, Harrison," his gaze snapped back to Tonks, who had gone straight-backed and was watching him intently, "what are you looking for?" She whispered harshly when she saw she had his attention again. Her eyes dashed to peer over his shoulder then back to his own as if to check he wasn't being snuck up on, something which he would have found funny if it wasn't a distinct possibility. He noted that her eyes had gone a navy blue in her sudden seriousness.

He smiled at her. "Nothing, Tonks, just admiring the view." His tone was playful, but his eyes were hard as he tried to tell her that they would talk about it later through them. She laughed and smiled back at him, but he saw her give a small nod in affirmation of his unsaid response.

'Smart woman.'

He nodded back, the pleasant smile still on his face. "Don't know about you Tonks, but I'm fucking starving. Feel like a curry?"

The rest of the subsequent meal was happy and idle chatter floated over the table freely, both of them comfortable in each other's company. Harry enjoyed himself, but the whole while he couldn't quite shake the slight tenseness in his muscles and the feeling of foreboding permeating his entire being. He had learnt to trust his instincts many years ago, finding that more often than not they were right. On this occasion, his instincts were telling him that someone had been watching them.

-oOo-

They walked silently through the main street of Hogsmead. Tonks was pressed into his side with her arm linked through his own. She said it was because it was cold outside, but he wasn't so sure. She seemed to have sized herself so she slotted perfectly against him, which was a particularly satisfying feeling. Under the soft lamplight of the street they shone, his darkness a contrast to her brightness.

"So, are you going to tell me why you weren't all Auror mode back then?"

"Not right now, Tonks," he replied, looking around and over her head at the few people still wandering along the town. "Let's find somewhere private first, I don't want us to be overheard."

She giggled from his side. "That's the first time a man's tried to get me alone like that," she said coyly. "What are you planning to do that's going to be so noisy, good sir?"

He grinned down at her. "Mind out of the gutter Tonksie, I just want to take some precautions, for now anyway," he steered her into a small alley that he remembered led to a dead end, a small square between houses with a fountain that had the founder of Hogsmead in its centre.

"Nice place, I got stood up here once," Tonks commented idly, looking around at the ivy-covered bare brick walls and the gurgling fountain, all lit by buttery yellow lighting runes.

"Evidently, they were a fucking idiot," Harry commented, throwing up a privacy ward around them to prevent being overheard. His personal ward that normally did so was back at his office. Having it activated in a classroom was impractical, and he'd forgotten to take it with him.

"Their loss," she agreed, then looked up at him, half her face lit by wavy yellow light from the fountain. "Now tell me what you were so panicky about."

He tried a pout. "I don't panic, I'm always calm and composed," she gave him a look, and he sighed. "Negative intent ward went off when I was in there," he explained. "Someone was watching us, someone who wanted to either hurt, control or kill me."

"Shit," she breathed, her eyes dropping to fix on his chest in thought. She placed two hands against it, fiddling with his collar. Harry tried not to get distracted. "You think it could be Death Eaters again?"

Harry shrugged. "Dunno, but I thought I caught someone watching through the window for a moment, I reckon it was them. But it could have just been a harmless bigot somewhere in the pub who read the papers about me."

"I guess," she said uncertainly, mirroring his own doubt in his head. "I don't think so though," she eventually decided, "Certain... others have better reasons to want to hurt you, the Dark Lord isn't the type to let what you did go without recompense. I'd be careful if I was you, assume the worst."

Harry nodded and drew his ward case from the inside of his robe, enlarging it wandlessly as he did so. "I thought the same, which is why I'm giving you this," he opened it and proffered a cubic obsidian stone, the runes on it still glowing a dim red. "It's my negative intent ward, so it'll alert me if you get attacked. I have no doubt that they would sink to doing something to those closest to me."

She glared up at him. "I don't need your help, Harrison," she snapped. "I'm not some hapless bint who doesn't know how to use a wand, I can defend myself. Don't—"

"This isn't a fucking game, Tonks," he interrupted, annoyed. "This isn't about personal pride or me thinking you're incompetent. If you're really so offended, think of it as backup instead of me thinking you're useless, which I don't, by the way." He sighed and ran his other hand through his hair, looking to the side at the water in the fountain in an attempt to calm him down. "Look, Voldemort doesn't fight fair, he works by stacking all of the odds in his favour until the outcome is almost definitely a good one for him and him alone. He doesn't *care* about things like *dignity* or *pride* in a fight, he cares about results. I don't want you getting hurt, Tonks, so please, just take the fucking ward," he turned back to her, his eyes backlit by magic in his passion.

Her face had relaxed into an unreadable expression by the end of his speech, and she was looking into his eyes intently, the only sound in the courtyard the soft gurgling of the fountain.

"Fine," she relented, causing Harry to sigh in relief. She grabbed the stone and stuffed it in her pocket. "I suppose it's your turn to rescue the damsel in distress anyway, no?" She asked cheekily.

"Very funny," Harry huffed as he removed the ward with a careless flick of his wand. "Just remember to power it up every morning yeah?"

"I know how these work, Harri," she said tiredly. "Moody taught me how to use them. He would have my hide if he knew I didn't already have some, to be honest."

Harry nodded. "He's right, the things are dead useful, just one more thing preventing you from getting cursed in the back."

Tonks nodded sagely and they began walking back to the main street towards the apparition point, neither making much of an effort to get there any time soon.

"What do you want to do, after Hogwarts?" Tonks asked as a conversation starter, shattering the comfortable silence that had fallen as they walked down the mostly empty night-time road.

Harry sighed. "Well, there's a war coming, and I kind of have a personal grudge against the one perpetrating it, so maybe I'll spend my time trying to do something about that somehow."

"Your dog, right? Vaelin?" She asked, sounding amused.

Harry scoffed. "Yeah, but it's more than that now, fuckers almost killed me, twice. I don't think I'm going to get a day of peace until I kill 'em back."

"I'm just going to pretend I didn't hear that," Tonks said flatly.

"Hey, if you want to get into uniform and put me in cuffs I won't complain."

"In your dreams, Slate."

Harry nodded. "In all the good ones, yup."

Tonks laughed, and he smiled as the sound echoed around them and made the few still walking the streets either scowl or smile fondly at the two of them. When the laughter faded, they walked in companionable silence for a minute or so before Tonks broke it once more, Harry being happy to stay silent.

"Did you mean that? What you said earlier?" She suddenly asked, as if she had been trying to work up the courage to do so.

He looked down at her. It was rare that she didn't sound confident. He drew her into his side, wrapping one arm over her opposite shoulder. "I said a lot of things, Tonks. You're going to have to be a bit more specific."

He felt her body shift as she instinctively changed the shape of herself so she slotted into his side comfortably. "What you said about him going for those closest to you, am I really one of those people?" She didn't seem to be in any hurry to move from her position.

He looked pointedly at their quite literal closeness and rose an eyebrow at her. "Well, right now it most definitely appears to me that we are pretty close."

She rolled her eyes. "I didn't mean that and you know it, asshole. Now tell me," she demanded.

He chuckled and then fell silent, thinking about how to answer the question. In the end, he decided on a half-truth so he could feel half as guilty.

"Of course I meant it," he said lowly. "You're the closest anyone's got to me in years," he admitted, not mentioning that he was thinking about decades and not singular years. "When

my parents died I left England to travel the world, and it was a solo venture," he shrugged. "There were women, here and there, and a few brief friends, but nobody close, not like you." She was looking at him now, bright violet eyes searching. He was taken aback by the intensity of the look, so in classic fashion fell back on humour. "It could have been worse, I mean you're just about bearable, in the grand scheme of things."

For once, she didn't smile at his joke. "It is the same for me, although for different reasons," she admitted, a thin smile on her lips. "The life of an Auror isn't exactly conducive to a healthy relationship, y'know? And I do... other things outside of being an Auror that take up even more time. Sabina and my cousin Si-" she stopped herself abruptly. "My cousin Simon are the only people I talk to regularly apart from Madam Bones, but she's my boss."

'Simon?' Harry had to disguise his laughter as a sneeze into his free arm.

"Two peas in a pod then aren't we?" Asked Harry as he grinned down at her. "You think we're soul mates?"

"Dunno, why don't you kiss me and find out?" She challenged, grinning up at him mischievously, "I remember my bedtime stories, when the Warlock kisses the Damsel in the tower there's lots of bright sparks and the like," she waved her hand over her head randomly to demonstrate.

Harry hummed in consideration, then bent down and pressed his lips to hers firmly before pulling away quickly, leaving Tonks with her lips still parted staring at him in shock, which he pointedly ignored, instead looking above them into the starry night sky.

"Huh, no sparks," he commented innocently. "Bad luck Tonksie, looks like we aren't gonna live in that castle you wanted after all."

She stared up at him from his side, and Harry idly wondered if she was choosing which hex to use on him before his thoughts were interrupted by the front of his jacket being yanked forwards. He was pushed backwards to impact the stone wall of the building they had been walking past, not that he put up much resistance.

"I thought you might be the type to like it rough, Tonks, but don't you think this is a bit far?" He teased as he grinned down at her. She was pressed into his front with her hands still balled into his coat, and her eyes had darkened into a deep chocolate colour.

"Oh just shut up and kiss me you idiot," she murmured before she leaned forward and captured his lips with her own without hesitation. He smiled into it widely and reciprocated, his hands making their way to her waist to draw her in even closer. He felt her hands release him and run through his hair as it deepened.

Eventually, they came back up for air and reluctantly separated, staring into each other's eyes as they both breathed deeply, foreheads resting against each other. Harry's grip tightened around her waist and flecks of gold once more entered his eyes as he sighed, his words suddenly serious.

"I need you to stay safe, Tonks, yeah? Promise me. I don't know what I would do if..." A curious lump rose in his throat at the thoughts, and he clenched his eyes shut, unconsciously holding Tonks tighter in his grip. He hadn't been afraid of losing something for so long, but now he'd found this witch, and he couldn't imagine what he'd do if he got her hurt or killed.

She nodded and rested her forehead against his own. "I promise Harri," she whispered, "But only if you do the same. If you get yourself killed I swear that Merlin himself won't stop me from dragging you back through the veil and kicking your arse."

"I promise, after all, if you can kiss like that I think I may as well keep you around," he joked weakly as her head fell from his own to rest under his chin as he cradled her.

She looked up at him with a raised eyebrow and a twitch on her lips, "I'll think about it," she replied.

Her tone was light, but she had a certain look in her eyes that made his heart skip a beat in a way he hadn't felt in decades. A look that said she had already decided.

-oOo-

"My Lord...."

'Pathetic.'

He looked down at the prone, shaking form of the low-level Death Eater that had delivered the news, his inner fury making no appearance on his entirely calm exterior. An angry red glow got steadily lesser in intensity on the end of a cruel bone white wand, the intent to cast the torture curse making it seem as if the wand was ready to cast it again within a moment's notice. He didn't even know the name of the man before him, he was just another low-level minion that he had sent to converse with the werewolves in Travers' place.

"I want you to repeat what you just told me," he hissed, almost dipping into parseltongue in anger. "And I want you to say it very... very clearly."

"M-My Lord, I know not where Fenrir Greyback's pack has gone, they did not arrive at the organised meet-up point, and I have found no trace of them anywhere, p-please my lord..." the man broke off into pained whimpers as he rocked himself.

Rage barraged through him, not that some could not sense it. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Severus twitch slightly at the leaked emotions flowing into the room. No matter how much he might despise the creatures, they would have been a key component in the oncoming war in terms of both physical prowess and intimidation and were a prominent feature in many of his plans. Now, with Travers presumably dead, they had lost their best contact with the werewolves. The man had been considered a friend by the packs that emulated Greyback's ideologies due to the odd wizarding child the man had given them from that distasteful organisation of his. That had been bad enough, but now with Greyback himself also presumed dead along with a whole pack... it was not ideal, to say the least.

"This cannot have been the work of Albus Dumbledore, it is far too ruthless for him," he murmured under his breath. "The incompetent old fool would not have allowed any of the beasts to be killed even if they deserved it. No, this is something... new. A new player in the game perhaps." He snapped his crimson eyes to Severus, internally delighting at the tightening of the man's features under his scrutiny. Nobody was able to remain unafraid under the gaze of Lord Voldemort and he revelled in the fact. "Severus, have you heard anything from Dumbledore about the packs... disappearance?" He asked softly, his voice still easily carrying in the silence of the room even over the whimpers of the man still curled at his feet. Several people shifted uneasily around the room. When the Dark Lord was screaming and casting *crucio* at anything that moved was one thing, considered normal to most. But when his voice dropped into the cool, composed drawl it was a sure sign that one wrong move would result in a not-so-swift and extremely painful death.

"No, my Lord," he answered smoothly, unflappable as usual. Severus was good like that, even when they were mired in the most arduous and dangerous of tasks you could rely on the man to always keep his cool and disparage everyone around him simultaneously.

Voldemort turned his gaze to a Death Eater with long, flowing blonde hair coming from behind his mask that defeated the whole purpose.

'Really, why does he even bother wearing a mask with that ridiculous hair exposed, he looks like a veela at a masked party.' He sneered at the thought of the disgusting half-breeds. He had attempted to reach out to them to bring them to his side, offering better rights as a reward. However innocent their beauty may imply, they were dangerous in their shifted forms, and even if they were not they would have been a good moral booster for the men. Unfortunately, Dolohov had been laughed out by the coven with nothing but burn scars on his back to show for it.

"And Lucius, have you heard from our contacts in the German Ministry? Perhaps they found and apprehended the creatures?"

"I have heard nothing, my Lord, they would surely have told me if they had done so, my contact is reliable," Lucius replied just as silkily as his friend.

"Interesting, interesting," he contemplated, his fingers steepled as he leant back in his throne and thought on the possibilities. "Does anyone else have anything to report?" He asked offhandedly as he pondered.

"M-my Lord, I have news on Harrison Slate," a quavering, nervous voice spoke up from the back of the room. Voldemort could tell who it was from the cowardice leaking from the man's tone immediately, and his eyes lit up as the report immediately snapped him out of his contemplations. Harrison Slate had been yet another source of immense irritation to him. It had been the first hitch in his plans since the Potter brat had escaped his glorious return to the living alive. The man responsible for letting Slate live had suffered greatly for his incompetence. Still, he had brushed it off as a minor hitch until the incompetent fool sent to kill the man had managed to somehow get overpowered and then sent to Azkaban, sending suspicious whispers among the public as a consequence. The loss of Burke had also upset his father and, as a consequence, his access to some of the more... *interesting* things sold in the shop had been withdrawn. And then on top of that, the man had been hired into the position

that he had desired for so long. It was a slight that could not go without punishment, and he had ordered the rat to follow Slate if the man ever left the castle to find an avenue of attack. Just killing him wouldn't do now, Harrison Slate needed to *hurt*.

"Oh? And what have you found, Pettigrew?" He purred, crimson eyes gleaming in anticipation.

The rat's double chin quivered as he swallowed nervously, glancing at the still twitching form at the Dark Lord's feet before he looked back at his master. "Y-you asked me t-t-to watch him, milord," he stuttered out, "I followed him t-to the T-Three Broomsticks where he m-met with a woman, a woman h-he seems close to my Lord," the man bowed his head in supplication.

The smile that broke out on his face was lipless and unnatural. "Perfect, perfect, and what is this unfortunate young woman's name?"

The man gulped again.

"N-Nymphadora, my Lord. Nymphadora Tonks."

Charon

Chapter 8: Charon

20th September 1995, 01:02 am

A Cave, Norfolk, England

Harry hummed in a mindless tune and took a deep drag from the joint in his mouth as he kneeled before a stone wall in a chilly cave, tracing intricate runes into the stone where the wards were embedded. The sound of waves crashing against unyielding stone was the only sound apart from the light rasping sound of Harry's wand against cold stone. The air was heavy and damp, salt and seaweed hanging pungently in the air.

It was a Saturday, and he had decided to go after the locket. It had been one of the earlier ones that Dumbledore had dealt with before he had died. Harry had been forced to take it from his old mentor's dead body to destroy it later. He had heard that someone else had once betrayed Voldemort and tried to get it himself to destroy it with the help of a house elf, but had died to the protections and failed. He and Dumbledore, however, had succeeded. Then again, with Albus Dumbledore at your side, it would be surprising if you failed to do anything.

"Aaaaand, there," he said in satisfaction as he completed the last linked rune in the array he had drawn. Each rune was made to counter one of the multitudes of wards, of which the punishments were many and varied. Harry wasn't sure why there was a ward to turn him inside-out when his throat would already have been cut by that point, but Voldemort always had a flair for the sadistic. Breaking them was much easier now than it had been for Dumbledore, who had had to come back multiple times to break them. Harry was from seventy years in the future, and wards and methods to break them had advanced in that time.

The runes glowed a deep purple and Harry began to pour his magic into it, feeling the array strain against it as he attempted to overpower the magic Voldemort had put into the wards himself. Eventually, he felt the wards shatter, and with a smear of blood and a quick healing spell, the wall melted before him. With an audible groan, he stood and took another, deep drag from his joint to nullify the effects of the drain on his magic. Shattering wards in a way that made it so the caster wasn't alerted always caused quite a rough magical backlash on the one shattering them. It was worth it though, he didn't need Tom showing up halfway through. He was all for fighting Voldemort, but he'd rather do it when he knew Voldemort wasn't cheating with his silly soul containers.

He strolled in and immediately leant back from a steel arrow that sliced off the tip of his joint.

"Fuck, almost forgot about that one," he muttered as he brought his wand up and lit it again.

He continued to walk along the corridor more carefully now, dodging the very cliché swinging axes and highly overpowered cutting curses that lined the rough and irregular walls.

If he hadn't developed his sensory ability he did not doubt that he would have died after the third trap. The last time he had come here he had only lived because Dumbledore was with him, and he assumed that the house elf had done the same for Regulus Black. House elves were creatures of magic and were bred to recognise their magical bonds from birth, as such their affinity to magic was much better than most mages and could sense things around them as well as their intent.

And now he was doing the same, only alone.

"Harry Potter always goes left when others go right," he mumbled to himself as he knelt and pressed the deep reddish-brown of his wand into the wall to his right. A bright red glow spread in a small circle around the triangular tip of his wand and a worm of magic burrowed into the rock, finding and destroying the stone with the runic array that would have grabbed him and suffocated him in the wall.

Hearing the crack of the ward-stone splitting in half, he preemptively cast a shield in front of him to prevent the stones that exploded from the side from crushing him. He stepped over the rubble and finally reached the end of the corridor, coughing when he inhaled pure ash.

"Fuck," he swore, flicking the burning roach away and coughing a few times to clear the sensation of burning in his throat. He had been distracted and failed to realise that the joint had burnt to the end, although now he felt a pleasant buzzing sensation and he had the sudden urge to laugh.

"Right, let's get this shit over with," he said happily, twirling his wand as he entered the unnaturally dark chamber. He could feel the tendrils of the stuff caressing his body, the only light in the room coming from the lit tip of the second joint in his mouth. With a last puff of smoke, Harry rose his wand and a bright ring of light came from it, forming a spherical shield that expanded and ate away at the darkness to reveal the details of the rest of the room. The room was large and bare, roughly hewn rock arching above him into the darkness, far higher than the cliff was capable of actually containing. In front of him was a large circle of runes, currently inactive, but they wouldn't remain that way for long.

Harry observed the invisible magic of the ward line just in front of him with extreme displeasure. He would need to trip the activation ward on purpose if he wanted to advance further, as the ward that locked the door had been tied to the creature within it in some way that Harry still hadn't figured out how Voldemort had managed even with his extra years of experience. The Dark Lord really was far too smart to have the mental stability of an asylum patient and the empathy of a troll.

'Ever onwards, Potter.'

'Slate now, mate. Get it right.'

With one last resigned sigh, he stepped over the ward line, watching on in detached anticipation as the runic circle immediately glowed a bright white. The feeling of immense and otherworldly magical power twisted through the air towards him, almost suffocating with its presence. Slowly, the runes sunk into the floor, and where they had been an inky black

slime crawled out of the chamber floor, rolling its way towards the centre of the room to form what could have been called a leg if one was being generous.

He scowled at the sight, taking one last, long drag from his joint before he flicked the half that remained aside and swirled his wand between his fingers. There were few things that he genuinely hated, the many years having made such an emotion useless in the grand scheme of things when he had had to deal with such deplorable things on a weekly if not daily basis for his work. Hate clouded the senses and affected intent, and to him such a handicap on his magic was unacceptable. As the creature before him gained a torso and two other legs and began to rise to heavy, clawed feet Harry's scowl deepened further as he glared at it.

"Yeah, rise while you still can, bitch, 'cos soon enough you're going *down*, buddy. Down and out. Mark my words, set your watch by it."

He didn't hate many things, but by Hecate he *despised* demons.

For him and most other mages, the idea of a god was laughable. Why worship beings that could work such fabled miracles when any mage could replicate the same with the flick of their wand? And so instead mages worshipped magic itself, that which had given them the blessing to work miracles. Many believed magic to be at least semi-sentient and bowed to it as a physical being, and others just respected it above all else, channelling their belief through revered mages like Merlin, Morgana and Hecate, but the general consensus was that magic was above any other object of deference.

And so things like demons, creatures which twisted magic and defiled it in the most horrific way imaginable was equivalent to blasphemy to him and the few others that knew they existed. It was generally agreed upon that demons should never be summoned from the land of the soulless into the world of the living. The land of the soulless had once held another name after all, and every magical child knew of what had happened to Atlantis and the people who had once lived there.

And so of course Voldemort had ushered one in as a glorified guard dog, standing sentinel to protect another perversion of magic that shouldn't exist.

Not that it wasn't effective. It was a simple but very effective trap. Someone would enter into the pitch black, trip the ward line, and then have to fight a demon they couldn't see. He knew how to get rid of the effects of the Peruvian darkness ward, but he doubted many others did. As the being continued to form and he was forced to wait for it to finish he glanced to the right, where he knew to look for the pile of bones that had still been there in two years when he and Dumbledore had come this way. Regulus Arcturus Black's skeleton was slumped against the side of the chamber, pieces of long-since dead flesh still hanging off it in places. The only way they had been able to identify the man had been a mere three letters in a bloodied name tag on the torn black robes of the skeleton.

R.A.B.

His eyes flicked back just in time to see the *thing* finish forming from the sludge emanating from the ritual circle on the floor. Bright white, swirling eyes gazed upon him balefully like two homicidal spotlights from a body of pure black. It was vaguely canine in shape, only it

resembled one that hadn't eaten anything for a year and was around the size of an elephant. The air around it seemed slightly hazy, resembling heat rising from flagstones on a hot day. It was as if reality itself wasn't sure how to contain the new element in its midst, which Harry knew it didn't. Demons just didn't belong.

It let out a low, harsh noise like the collision of cargo ships that vibrated around the chamber, opening its mouth to bear its pure black teeth. More black sludge fell from its mouth like drool to hit the floor with a wet slapping noise, the small droplets quickly scurrying to reconnect with the monster it had once been part of.

"Fucking hell, it's uglier than I remembered," he muttered as he rose his wand, sending a long plume of bright red flame at the beast. Last time it had taken the form of some sort of demented octopus, complete with tentacles that had done their level best to kill both him and Dumbledore. It seemed that even the inevitable consistencies of time couldn't constrain something like *it*.

In response to his attack it shrieked, the pure volume of the noise causing the head of Regulus to fall off and Harry's brain to vibrate in his skull. It opened its maw impossibly wide and promptly swallowed his conjured fire whole. There was a split second where a dull roar emanated from the belly of the beast, and then it spewed his own fire right back at him, only faster and it had been turned black.

'Fuck, forgot I can't use normal spells,' he berated himself in his head. It had been too many years.

He cursed and slashed his wand, the flames forming into a lumbering troll, the creature still on his mind from his earlier thoughts. It lumbered back towards the demon and swung an insubstantial fist, scoring a hit against its leg before it was batted aside and dissipated into tongues of flame at the force of the blow. The monster screamed and immediately began to charge at him.

Harry stood his ground, his heart thumping erratically in his ears as the eldritch creature drew ever closer, its talons tearing up the stone underneath it as the sharp claws cut through hard rock like butter. It had picked up an unnatural amount of speed before he acted, and when it was a mere ten meters away he thrust his wand up. The demon collided with the stone pillar that had risen from the floor hard, the entire circular stone chamber shaking with the impact, causing dust and rubble to fall from the ceiling.

Harry acted immediately afterwards, twirling his wand in an intricate motion as he danced to the side to get a line of sight then jabbed it at the creature, which was just getting up from the impact with the rock.

The top of the stone pillar arched over and pinned it down, and from his wand, a beam of pure energy emerged, the bright yellow beam like an intensified ray of sunlight as it burst from the tip of the red-oak wand in a constant stream. It struck the side of the demon, and immediately it began to shriek and writhe in pain as the spell, aptly named Apollo's revenge, began to steadily burn a hole into the inky black of the demon. It was one of the few known spells that could harm a demon, although it took a significant amount of power to do so. Elemental spells in general were a go-to to deal with the accursed things, Apollo's revenge

was just one of the more powerful ones. Demons were a violation of nature itself, so it was just... *natural* that spells heavily connected with such a force were more effective. Nature wanted it gone, and so the spells were more powerful and effective against them, as if Mother Earth was aiding him.

Harry kept up the spell, pouring all of his effort and intent into it as he channelled the power of the sun itself through a mere stick of wood and formed it to his will. Sweat began to bead off his forehead as the heat began to make its mark on him, crackling and heating the rock around it to a dull red colour.

To his annoyance, it began to slowly rise to its feet once more, straining against the sheer kinetic force of the beam of light as it turned and regarded him viciously with two swirling pools of light, the bright orbs almost lost amongst the bright yellow of his sunbeam. With slow, painful footsteps it began to gain on him, even as he began to walk backwards to put some distance between them. The stone that had been trying to hold it down lost its grip and fell sideways off onto the floor.

With one last agonised screech it lunged forward, one arm swiping from the side and extending at the same time, which allowed it to have much more range than it should have. Harry cursed in what he later dimly recalled could have been Arabic. He hadn't known that it could do that, the uniformity of the tentacles from the last time having hidden any signs of extension that it could have accomplished. He was caught off guard, but his seeker reflexes still held up after all the years. He snapped up a pale blue shield intended to stop any kinetic energy from physical objects. It was strong, but it wasn't strong enough, the minuscule amount of time given to him not having been enough to conjure up his normal amount of power or intent needed to completely halt it.

The result was that, even if he wasn't splattered against the paw of the beast in a thin red paste, he was still sent skidding across the chamber, cursing in several different languages as he did so. He eventually came to a not-so-gentle rest next to a familiar skeleton, his head cracking against the stone wall quite hard. Having already felt slightly lightheaded from the weed, it really wasn't a pleasant feeling.

He groaned and cast a charm at his head to heal it, careful not to miscast in his pain and vanish his brain instead. The wand movements happened to be irritatingly similar. Instantly, the dizziness went away, but he could feel a lump forming on the back of his head, throbbing incessantly.

He sat up and looked to the side at the skeleton, its skull now in its lap.

"Wish me luck, mate," he said with a giddy grin, fist bumping the curled fist of the late Black with the hand still holding his lightly smoking wand, which promptly fell apart into separate, tiny bones.

The skull didn't respond.

He huffed. "Bloody hell, what's a guy got to do for a little encouragement around here?" He complained over the loud screaming of the demon, which had been thrashing in pain until then. Apparently, it had figured out where it had sent him.

'Talking to yourself now, Potter? And I thought that you were merely an idiot, I had no idea you were also insane,' a silky voice drawled in his head.

'Yeah yeah, make fun of the mentally ill you greasy bastard, hope you feel good about yourself.' They say that any reinforcement is positive reinforcement, after all.

Harry stood with a grimace, rolling his head around his shoulders as he jumped up and down a few times before settling into a stance. His eyes had gained flecks of gold in them as he concentrated, his entire being focused entirely on his opponent as they faced off across the chamber. Harry wasn't sure why it was hesitating, as he was fairly sure that demons didn't have the necessary emotional range to comprehend showdown tropes from old western movies, but he wasn't complaining, it gave him more time to try and block out the throbbing in the back of his head.

"This town ain't big enough for the both of us, cowboy," Harry said as he flicked his wand over his shoulder, doing his best to suppress the inexplicable urge to laugh. Now was most definitely not the time. Cracks sounded around the chamber as stone knights clad in cruel helms and armour pulled themselves out of the walls and marched on either side to him, pikes raised to the fore and pointed at their foe. His wand darted from side to side as he added various enchantments to them. It began batting them away without effort, but more and more took their place, and they began to weigh it down, piercing it with their sharp stone pikes and swords until it resembled a hedgehog more than a dog. The knights were much larger than normal people, but they still could only pierce the lower side of its belly, spilling black ichor onto the floor and weighing it down, restricting it. While it was occupied Harry knelt and focused, his wand raised in the air as he focused everything he had into a spell so ancient that he doubted his grandfather's grandfather had ever heard of it. Above him, even over the noise of the cracking of rubble hitting stone and the screams of the demon a distant, primal rumbling could be heard. As a particularly bold knight swung itself onto the back of the beast and jabbed downwards, Harry said the only word that he needed to complete the incantation.

"Pruma." The language was ancient and guttural, the word a Norse one that only had one intent, to rain down holy fury on the English defenders as the Viking battle mages attacked from their longboats.

An ear-splitting *crack* once more echoed through the chamber.

'Really, I'm going to lose my fucking hearing at this rate.'

The entire area was lit up in a bright white flash, and through a newly formed deep crack in the ceiling, lightning came. This was not a simple lightning curse, this was Harry once more channelling nature itself and bending it to his demands, calling lightning from the sky to strike at whatever he desired.

It arced from above and struck the creature on its back, gouging a hole straight through it and into the floor, where it left a deep crack that almost reached Harry's feet. It also had the unintended side effect of shattering several of his brave ser knights, sending them flying into pieces around the chamber to join their fallen brethren. Harry had to bat away a particularly dangerously aimed bodiless head that was aimed straight for his own with a carefully placed banisher.

It was weak now, the two spells having torn enough of it apart so it currently couldn't move at all. When Harry had come with Dumbledore the man had trapped it in a continuously spinning pool of water, which kept the pieces inside from forming into one again.

This, however, was not the best way to permanently deal with a demon.

Immediately, Harry sprang into action, transfiguring a couple of the more whole knights into huge coils of iron chains to wrap around the demon and bind it, then applying a fire charm to all of them to add some of the elemental magic that they hated so much. It shrieked again from its mangled mouth and struggled a bit, but the chains held firm for the moment.

Harry didn't waste any time, he stalked forwards and drew the first set of runes on the floor as carefully as he could while still being as quick as possible. As soon as he finished he moved over to the next, and then the next. Soon enough he had seven clusters of runes surrounding the demon, each one glowing the same white as the ones that had brought it to earth. It was fortunate that the ritual scheme was relatively simple, or the beast may have managed to break out before he finished.

Banishment was a more simple concept than bringing in, after all. Well, it was less bringing in and more of it breaking and entering. He wondered if he could have charges brought up against it for trespassing on the Mortal Plane, he could imagine the Bones woman staring it down while she read it its rights.

Harry knelt next to the first rune cluster he had drawn and lightly tapped his wand against it, using his magical power as the sacrifice for the ritual as most rituals did. Not every ritual required a limb like Pettigrew's had. It immediately glowed brighter, linking the other clusters around it with a circular line as well as a seven-pointed star in the middle. As he powered it, he also brought all of his intent to the forefront, pitting his intent to cast it from this world against the demon's stubborn, rabid intent to stay so it could eat Harry's face.

It was completely alien and untamed, and Harry almost broke off the ritual so he didn't have to come into contact with the bloody thing. It faintly reminded him of the one time he had tried to legilimise a dragon. Predictably, that had gone terribly. He had heard of one insane French bloke called Bayard who had managed it, but apparently, the kid had somehow formed a personal demon made from his own hate miasma, so it wasn't really that surprising.

The demon was stubborn, but even it knew it didn't belong here. Harry had ninety years under his belt, which of course meant he had ninety years to steadily become more and more mulish. The intent to kill was no match for the stubbornness of an old man who wouldn't die.

Somewhere, deep in whatever it had as a brain it recognised that it was about to lose and began to struggle with renewed ferocity, some of the chains already snapping under the stress. Harry stared at the sight and began pouring more magical power into the ritual. The air around the demon began to gain more definition and the shrieking became more frequent as it continued to struggle. A few chains snapped after a particularly violent convulsion and his knights were sent flying around the chamber.

'Fucking demons,' Harry scowled. The things could be hurt but would never truly stay hurt, they could only be rid of if they were removed from the world they had been brought into. It

made them a complete pain in the arse if they were brought into a battle. Luckily, they were rarely used for such purposes as they were just as likely to kill the people on your side as they were to attack your enemy.

Much like it had when he had been pummelling it with the full force of the sun it gradually got to its feet again, sending chain links flying around the room, thankfully not striking him and breaking his concentration on the ritual. It began to prowl towards him, some sort of force in the centre of the ritual seeming to hold it back like a ship dragging anchor.

Its mouth was wide open, unnaturally so. He got the stench of rotting flesh and spoilt milk emanating from its maw as it poised to lung, preparing to snap down and decapitate him. He was still on one knee, the air around him humming with the power of his magic as he channelled a good chunk of it into the banishment ritual.

It stopped and began to be dragged backwards, its mouth closing just in front of his face with a resounding *snap*, sending black goo spraying into his face. A tear had opened up in thin air behind it, the inside nothing but a deep black. It glared at him hatefully from its pools of white, its rage thrumming in the air. A new arm extended from its back as the other two scrabbled for purchase on the floor, something with which they weren't having much success at. Before its new appendage could strike him, however, the new arm was pulled into the portal to Atlantis and the strength of the summoning got noticeably stronger.

With one last, warbling cry it was grasped by the rift and then pulled inwards, as if something on the other side had grabbed its tail and yanked it backwards. It fell impossibly into the hole in reality, the tear seeming to be far too small to accommodate something of its size. When it was all the way in Harry rose his wand from the runic activation cluster of the ritual and stood on slightly shaky legs, watching as the hole sealed itself up like a zipper on a jacket.

"I know exactly how you feel, buddy," Harry grumbled as the last of the dimensional magic vanished, memories of the Sahara blossoming like fungus in his mind.

The chamber finally fell silent, the only sound being the more precarious piles of rocks falling over to tumble along the floor. Harry sighed and arched his back, pressing both hands into it to crack it slightly. He paused when he felt something warm flow through his fingers, and quickly brought his hands up to his face. His left hand was covered in blood.

Drawing a logical conclusion, Harry looked down to his side to see a long, deep gash that travelled from the bottom of his ribs around to a similar place on his back. As the adrenaline faded in the face of seeing the first injury on his nice new body he began to feel the sting of pain shoot through him and cursed, taking out one of his shrunken trunks and enlarging it to reveal racks upon racks of potions and vials holding ingredients, some of which were still moving.

Harry took out a Tupperware box of Murtlap Essence and smothered the cut with it before dragging his wand along the deep, smiling gash to apply a basic sealing charm to make it stop bleeding. It would still leave a scar, as demons were beyond dark magic, but at least it wasn't as bad as a bright red lightning bolt on the forehead.

He sighed and let his shirt and armoured vest drop back down. The shirt could be fixed with a couple of easy charms but the basilisk hide vest could not, being resistant to magic enough to resist repairing charms. The gash on it would have to either be patched or he would have to send it to someone to recycle the material and make a new one.

He took another joint out of its stasis charm from within the medicinal trunk and lit it with the tip of his wand once more, feeling the need for one at the moment. He had never liked dealing with demons, they were far too unpredictable and strong for him to come up with a consistent plan to deal with them. Sometimes they could breathe fire, sometimes not. Sometimes they were just an amorphous blob that consumed everything they touched, sometimes they took on the forms of creatures. It was infuriating, and the whole while it was torture for him. The wrongness of the magic emanating from them always unsettled and angered him, his sensitivity to magic for once being a downside. Weed always seemed to calm those erratic emotions, preventing him from outbursts that he would regret later. He was a wizard, and a powerful one. If he lost control he was the equivalent of a human bomb. One annoying dickhead in a bar after dealing with something that made him irrationally angry like a demon could result in people getting seriously hurt or killed, especially if said dickhead happened to be blonde.

Sighing once more, he shrank and pocketed his trunk again and walked languidly over to the exit, the cruel slash in the otherwise smooth rock looking like a giant had taken a pickaxe to it. He stepped over the remnants of his granite army and moved to it, stopping before the carved stone door that was there. He gave it a rather withering look and wiped the hand he had clutched his wound against across the door, smearing his blood across it liberally, causing it to open. A flicker of a smile, barely visible in the gloomy green torchlight of the cavern, flitted across when he remembered Dumbledore's disparaging remarks about the elegance of the mechanism. He was fairly certain that Riddle had implemented that when he was considerably younger and had added the extra wards and guards after gaining more experience.

He strolled through into the darkness and gazed over the lake as he walked alongside it, waiting for the magical sign of the chain so he could cross onto the island he knew lay just beyond the mist that draped over the water like a heavy, sinister blanket. Eventually, he came across it and pulled, the rickety boat coming to the shore without complaint. Harry clambered in, very careful not to touch the water, and lay back in the boat as it began his journey, legs crossed over the bow as he blew rings in the air and then twisted them into dragons to fight off the fog with his magic. It was possible that at this point he had begun to once more lose his grasp on the seriousness of the situation.

He almost jumped out of his skin when the boat grounded on the shore of the island, the jolt and the harsh rasping noise bringing him harshly out of his fascination with his smoke battle with almost 20 dragons currently ongoing, all of which disappeared when he lost his concentration. He had completely forgotten that he was supposed to be doing something important.

Shaking his head, he stumbled out of the boat and made his way to the top of the island, then stared at the crude stone bowl with the odd liquid that seemed to be reflecting the light from the emerald torches at odd angles.

Correction, Harry hated *two* things. The bowl was the second, in case that wasn't evident. He had come back after the war to check out the wards on the thing and had been irate to discover that it was some of the best warding he had ever encountered. His rage at not being able to break it had ended up with a rather large cave-in that had completely confused the muggles, who had had no idea that the cave had existed in the first place. Ah, the follies and short emotional range of youth. Sometimes he missed it.

Almost without thinking, Harry rose his wand and sent a blasting curse at the base of the basin, which flared up an oval shield of light blue and absorbed the blasting curse, dark purple ripples emanating from the place of impact. Harry tilted his head to the side to avoid a piece of rubble and scowled. "Of course not, couldn't be that simple," he grumbled, walking towards it.

He drew another steel box from an inside zipped pocket of his overcoat and enlarged it, opening it to reveal a green toad with pink spots. It was ugly, even for a toad, and also fast asleep.

Gingerly, careful to not let any of it touch him, he levitated it out of the case and put it on the floor. It didn't have any poisonous qualities or anything, he just didn't want to touch Umbridge any more than he had to.

He undid the transfiguration and immediately bound her, then cast a silent *enervate* on her. Immediately, her dull eyes opened and she looked around wildly, her gaze eventually falling on him. Her eyes became fearful, and Harry smiled.

"Y-you!"

Harry nodded. "Me," he agreed, rising his wand to point at her. "Not long now, just one more thing," he kept his wand there, his face entirely blank, then frowned. "Right, uhm, what's the word again?" He lowered his wand and tapped it against his leg, deep in thought. His brain seemed to be a few steps behind his wand, and everything was in odd focus.

"Oh, right," Harry laughed. "That's it," his arm snapped back up without hesitation, his face suddenly serious.

"*Imperio*."

Her piggy eyes became glazed and she relaxed in her bonds, which Harry released with a wave of his non-wand hand.

"Drink everything from that basin with this bowl," he nodded to the crystal bowl in question, and she stood without question and picked it up, walking with pudgy legs to begin drinking. Before, even after 5th year, he wouldn't have wished this on even her, no matter how unnaturally irritating she was. But then it had been found that, using a network of lower-level employees in Improper Use of Magic Office, she had sold the addresses of muggleborn children to the highest bidder and it wasn't hard to guess who most of the winning bids had been. Many had noticed that fewer muggleborns had attended Hogwarts over the years, but none had ever connected it to Umbridge coming into office. It had been one of the biggest upsets of the wizarding world, and it was safe to say he had no sympathy for the woman.

Harry hummed in satisfaction and conjured a sun lounger, facing away from the slurping noises as the extreme pain and nightmares battled with his control.

After a while he got bored and stood to take a piss, his mind lost elsewhere. The sound of water hitting water echoed around the lake for a while, and his gaze wandered around the lake idly as he relived himself, contemplating where he should take Tonks next. She had mentioned something about the Weird Sisters at one point, he wondered where their next concert would be. In the background, he heard the sound of disturbed water, but just put it down as the sound of Umbridge drinking. Maybe he should just ask her. It was odd, what he was doing. He wasn't sure what that was in the first place. He liked Tonks, he knew that, but was he really willing to draw her into his fucked up life? Did he like her that much? Perhaps the question should be if he disliked her enough to do that. She was certainly funny, their conversations were entertaining and by Merlin was she hot, but was getting into a relationship with her worth it? Knowing his luck, he'd probably end up getting her killed through association with him. Eventually, he'd have to tell her who he really was. Would she be able to take it? The idea of pushing her away brought his mind to when he had been unable to do the same when she had taken him and kissed him in Hogsmead, and suddenly the idea lost a little bit of conviction.

He was suddenly broken out of his thoughts by a hand gripping his ankle.

Looking down, he blinked in shocked incomprehension at the pale naked body prostrated across the gravel, half of itself still in the lake.

Harry did most definitely *not* yelp.

Panicking, he booted the snarling beast in the face, the hard steel toe cap separating its head from its body with a wet *squelch*, sending it flying into the water behind it. In classical fashion, it continued moving even without its head, the magic that created it powering it where blood could not.

Right, he had forgotten about the whole 'don't touch the lake, it raises the dead,' thing.

Harry moved his hand away from where it was still gripping his manhood and drew his wand, sending a cutting curse at the arm and stumbling away from the other inferni that were steadily streaming from the lake around him.

"Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!" Harry shouted, shaking his leg to try and dislodge the stubborn arm that was still firmly grasped around his ankle. He attempted to set it alight with a burst of fire to kill it, which worked, but also succeeded in setting his trousers on fire.

Letting out a stream of curses in ancient Toltec, Harry put out the fire with a burst of water and kicked away the still-burning hand into the slowly approaching mass of bodies. He let out a sigh of contentment at his success, then was thrown forwards as a loud screech sounded from behind him and a large weight collided with his back. For a moment Harry thought that the demon was back, then logic kicked in along with his instincts and he bent forward, letting the body fall over his head, straight into the pack of zombies.

Harry looked at the now screaming pink lump, realising that his focus had been broken in all of the confusion, not that it was that focused in the first place. Hmm, maybe smoking weed wasn't the best preparation for combat? Shaking his head, he rose his wand to summon the bitch back, then paused.

Did he really want to save her?

"HELP, HELP!"

He looked back at the basin, doing his best to ignore the inferni running towards him behind it. It was still at least a quarter full. He grimaced.

'If she dies, I have to drink the rest of that shit myself.'

Umbridge bounced across the floor as she was brought back to his side, a determined inferni still clamped on her arm coming along with her. Not really caring what damage it did, Harry banished it away, the inferni taking a chunk of the arm with it. Harry put her back under the imperius so he didn't have to listen to her wails anymore and sent her to continue drinking. Her movements were slightly jerky now, but she drank all the same.

As she drank the last of it, Harry entertained himself by letting off long plumes of flame at any inferni that got close, bathing them in crimson licks of heat and killing them instantly for the second time. The others he banished into the ones behind them. Inferni weren't a threat if one knew their weaknesses, relying mostly on obscurity and intimidation in numbers to be effective, which normally worked. It had taken a year for someone to finally figure out the best way to counter them in the first war, as Voldemort had been the first to use them in centuries. Many had died by then.

Once he heard Umbridge finish drinking he set up a ring of fire around them and turned to retrieve the Horcrux within, scowling the whole while as the magic oozed out of it and attempted to coil around his own. Even when inside a container of its own, it still attempted to manipulate the beings around it. He could still remember the diadem twisting Hermione into somebody he hated before they realised what it was doing and destroyed it. He placed the dratted thing inside a metal box covered in six sets of identical rune clusters on each face that were designed in twenty years to dampen the effects of active dark magic on the mind. The malignant aura from it vanished as soon as the lid closed, the box disappearing inside one of the many inside pockets of his overcoat. He placed a fake locket of his design within the basin, filled it up with a liquid he had made in preparation for exactly this that resembled the potion but had none of the effects then stepped back, satisfied. He hoped he could see either Voldemort's or Dumbledore's face when they found his message, he imagined it could probably fuel a pretty good patronus.

Harry closed his eyes and relaxed, satisfied in a job well jobbed. The warmth from the fire was nice if you discounted the smell of burnt flesh that accompanied it. Harry frowned and opened his eyes from where he had rested them in his self-pride and looked down to see what was causing the odd feeling. He scoffed and, after looking around to make sure nobody saw, tucked his dick away and zipped up once more. He was lucky the inferni had chosen to grab his leg and not choose somewhere further up. He didn't fancy becoming celibate at the young age of ninety... something. Frowning, Harry tried to recall how old he was and came up

blank. Keeping track of two ages was hard, and when you got to a certain age you stopped caring anyway. He knew Harrison was 25, but only because Harrison had kept track.

Pushing the oddly painful thought from his mind he swept his wand across his chest, causing a semi-circle of fire to rage away from him in a wide swathe of flame that incinerated the inferni instantly. He whirled his wand upwards, and the flames formed a path to the boat still floating idly in the water. He smiled, walked onto the boat and stood facing backwards as the horde of inferni completely ignored him and swarmed over the pink blob that was slowly getting further away.

He couldn't think of a more fitting death for a woman who valued blood above all else than to die to creatures that had no blood at all.

-oOo-

Harry looked down at the ash that had once been Slytherin's locket, feeling the glare of the ancient oaks heavy on his back, indignant at the Fiendfyre he had unleashed within its folds. He was in a heavily warded clearing deep inside the deep, leafy folds of the Forbidden Forest, so deep that if he climbed a tree all he would be able to see until the horizon was yet more trees. He had not wanted to risk bringing such a thing into the wards of Hogwarts. He was of the opinion that the horcrux currently in Harry Potter's head had melded with the boy's soul enough not to be detected, and the room of requirement must have been hiding the other one somehow. Merlin knew that there were enough dark artefacts in that room to kill the whole bloody school.

'When did I start thinking of Harry Potter as a different person?' He thought as he watched the metallic ash begin to swirl and blow away in the wind, tangling in the long untamed grass as it attempted to escape him. He didn't feel like Harry Potter anymore. He didn't know *what* he was anymore. He wasn't motivated by anything, he had simply arrived and continued where he had left off, cleansing evil where evil existed. Only now it wasn't a job, he was just a shadow leaping at other shadows far away from the eyes of anyone who cared. There was no reward, he didn't want to claim money for that would reveal him as the one who had done it, and would inevitably get to both Voldemort and Dumbledore. He wouldn't particularly care if they did, but it would make things more complicated than he could be bothered to deal with.

He was Harrison Slate now, but who was that?

He pondered this as he apparated to just outside the wards of Hogwarts and made his way to the ancient school, careful to not trip in the hazardous lack of light in the near midnight, which hid the twisted roots that knotted across the gravel path snaking up to where the ancient school perched on the edge of a cliff.

He realised now that he had no substance in this world. It was an odd feeling, as his celebrity status had made it so he couldn't have been ignored if he tried. But now he was Harrison Slate, a man with no history and nothing to tie him down but a semi-official contract for a years work at a school and a moral obligation to rid the world of a particularly difficult Riddle. He was beginning to realise now that this was an opportunity, an opportunity to make something of himself without his love-induced homicide tarnishing it. The path he had

chosen to run from his fame the last time had been isolation, the job as a bounty hunter keeping his accomplishments secret along with his identity. His reputation had spread all the same, the tales of a single man with a silver leg putting down monsters that teams of mages had failed to kill spread like fire. He had been called Mercury, as the only thing they knew about him had been the leg. They didn't know who he had been but it had been fulfilling all the same.

But now, now he had an opportunity to build an actual life, to build something for himself that wasn't *tainted*. He had already begun that, with his ascension to the post of DADA Professor, but he wanted *more*. He had never claimed to not be ambitious but also hadn't said aloud that he was, the trait having been villainized due to its association with Slytherin house. It was just that his ambition was different. Most dreamt of reaching fame and glory, instead he dreamt of escaping fame he thought of as unfounded and making a name of himself for his own feats. It was why he had dreamt of entering the Triwizard tournament in that fateful fourth year. But to get there once more he needed motivation. He wanted to have something that motivated him. Maybe Tonks would end up being that thing, maybe not.

"Professor Slate?"

He was jolted out of his contemplations by the dreamy voice, and he belatedly realised that he had been walking in the direction of the Gryffindor dorms completely on autopilot. Blinking, he looked down to see a mess of dirty blonde hair atop a pale-skinned, silvery-blue-eyed fourth-year Ravenclaw girl. And she had no shoes.

"Miss Lovegood, it is almost three o'clock, why are you still outside of your dorm?" he asked, a polite mask hiding a spike of anger. He knew exactly what she was doing out here at this time.

For some reason, she looked surprised that he had asked. "Oh, I was just looking for my shoes," she looked down and wiggled her toes. "I do believe the Nargles took them, they are very mischievous."

Harry nodded sagely and conjured a pair of flip-flops for her to wear with a warming charm on them so she didn't get hypothermia walking around a castle with no central heating in September. "I've heard of them, I heard that they smell really, really bad."

She nodded gravely at that, as if someone had just confirmed with her that the sky was blue.

He took her shoulder and began to lead her towards where he knew the Ravenclaw common room was, the clapping of the flip-flops the only sound for a while as he led her through the darkened halls, the paintings lining the walls doing their best to look like they were actually sleeping and not spying on them. Eventually, Luna began to jabber on about blibbering-humdingers and rotating apple-crests, and Harry nodded along, doing his best to give off the impression that he thought she was perfectly sane.

Luna was frightfully intelligent, like her mother, and wasn't in Ravenclaw for nothing, but unfortunately seeing her mother die before her very eyes only a few years before attending Hogwarts and then immediately getting bullied when she arrived there didn't do wonders for her mental health, which she had told him after the war had already been pretty insubstantial

even before her mother's death. She then had to go home to a father so lost in his grief that he had also lost his sanity. He had always felt guilty for just playing it off as her being a bit... loony. It had taken a good few months of sessions with a mind healer for her to become even slightly better, and trauma from the war hadn't helped in the slightest. He dreaded to think what would have happened to her had he not taken her under his wing.

The painting of the raven on a stack of books swung open before him, his status as a teacher allowing him entrance. He swept into the empty common room, let off a canon blast from his wand and waited, rocking back and forth on his heels and whistling merrily as Luna somewhat comically mirrored his movements exactly next to him.

In a few minutes, some of the shallower sleepers of the house of Ravens were gathered on the many balconies lining the seven floors of the cylindrical Ravenclaw house, gazing down at him and Luna with sleepy, confused stares. Luna waved up at all of them merrily.

Harry pressed his wand to his throat, amplifying his voice as he placed a hand on Luna's shoulder, he almost had to lean down to do so but she went on her tiptoes to help him out.

"I found this girl, wandering the halls in almost sub-zero temperatures, and let me tell you she had a most interesting tale to tell," he saw several people pale among the crowd and shrink back to try and hide behind their dorm-mates. "A tale of..." he looked down at Luna. "What were they called?"

"Nargles."

"Nargles," he repeated, glaring up at all of them as if that was condemnation in and of itself. "Nargles that stole her shoes and several other things, including a photo of her mother, who died not too long ago," multiple faces who had timidly peeked back around the necks of their friends jerked back to perceived safety, and the common room remained as silent as it had been since they arrived, some looking slightly horrified and ashamed.

Harry let the silence spiral out of control for a few seconds in a method he had learnt from his trainer at the ICW, a hardass called Frank Castle who would stare people down until they either shit themselves or he moved on to terrorise his next recruit.

"Now," he continued in a deadly whisper that was so different from his previous tone that several people visibly flinched. "I hope that I do not need to tell you that, if you foolishly decide to continue this behaviour, I shall relocate all of your beds to the bottom of the Black Lake, and I may be unfortunately careless in checking for any occupants before I do so, do you understand?" There was a series of frantic nods around the common room. Harry noted with interest some of the paler-looking prefects. That would need to be remedied.

"I want every single one of Miss Lovegood's possessions piled outside of her dorm room by the end of..." he looked down at his watch. "Today I guess, Miss Lovegood, do you require something else?" He asked, looking down at Luna, who didn't seem to have realised that anything was going on.

"Some ice cream would be nice," she replied dreamily.

He looked up at them, his visage stern. "You heard the woman, get her some ice cream as well." More nods.

"Mr Slate, what do you think you're doing?" A stern voice called from behind him. Harry turned, his wand halfway through a blasting curse before he realised it was just McGonagall coming through the portrait hole.

"Oh you know, I was just... educating," he responded, waving airily at all of the students above him, who were now frozen, watching the new confrontation with interest.

Her eyes hardened somewhat at that answer, perhaps recalling the ferret incident, from the previous year, and her eyes darted to the still shocked-looking students before they settled on him with a harsh glare, her arms folded on top of her red and gold robes.

"Were you threatening the students?" Her voice rose in pitch near the end of the sentence, edging on shrill. Harry withheld the urge to wince.

"Noooo, no," he waved her off. "I would never do something like that, right Miss Lovegood?"

She nodded. "I heard no such thing, Professor."

"See?" He said, gesturing to Luna, who had begun humming something that sounded awfully like it was made up.

"He said he would drown us, Professor!" A voice called from either the seventh or sixth floor.

Harry sent off a silencing charm in the general direction of the voice. "Don't listen to him, he's a liar, everyone knows it," there was a series of nods around the room. McGonagall turned her glare on them and the nods turned into negative shakes.

"Mr Slate," she said coolly. "We do not use spells on students, and we most certainly do not threaten them! Why would you even think to do such a thing?" She demanded.

Harry scratched the back of his head. "Well, they were taking this kids stuff and locking her out of the dorm with no shoes," he gestured to Luna, who was now staring down a first-year who looked utterly terrified, a malicious smile on her face. "From what I've heard they've been taking her things and hiding them around the school for about three years now."

"And do you have any proof?" She asked, her nostrils flared. But Harry thought her ire had been split between him and the other students now. By the shuffling feet and 'aw shucks' routines they were playing they knew it too.

"Uhm," Harry thought for a moment, then raised his wand. "Accio Luna Lovegood's things," he said clearly. There were yelps as a trunk and other assorted objects came flying out of the fourth-year girl's dorms and arrayed themselves neatly at Harry's feet.

McGonagall looked at the pile at his feet, to him, then the pile then back to him again.

"Really, Harrison? Do you really think a summoning charm like that would work over the whole school—" she had to stop to move aside from the portrait as a mass of assorted clothes,

textbooks, pieces of parchment and things that Harry couldn't name flowed through the portrait hole in a steady flow.

McGonagall stared at the now three-foot-high pile of Luna's things. The only indication that she was shocked at the summoning charm that should have been impossible was a slight widening of the eyes as the stream of things slowed to a trickle, the last onion ear-ring tumbling forwards to land primly next to its partner atop a lurid green backpack.

"Oh."

"Right you lot," Harry said, pointing up at the people who had hesitantly begun to try and leave. "I just did your job for you, so instead I'm going to have Miss Lovegood here write me a list, and those on the list are all going to be having a detention with me, get it?"

A chorus of sleepy 'yes sirs' echoed from around the room, and several people shivered. Harry had quickly got a reputation for some particularly inventive detentions including, but not limited to, polishing the windows outside the Divination tower, mucking out the thestral stables, cleaning up after ghost parties and sorting the telescopes to distinguish which were Boxing telescopes made by Fred and George and which were normal ones. Coincidentally the latter had been for Fred and George, who had made the mistake of trying to prank him with a charm that would make his eyes actually reflective, a play on the colour of eyes. He had not been amused. Charms that modified his body were particularly dangerous due to his metamorphmagus abilities and it could have gone very, very wrong. Their eyes afterwards had changed colour, although the spectrum had been limited to blue for the most part with some purple strewn in.

He sent Luna to bed and exited with McGonagall soon afterwards. They walked for several minutes through the dark, empty halls of Hogwarts before she spoke up, her voice unmoveable and firm.

"Detention with me tomorrow, Mr Slate," she stated, not even turning to look at him.

Harry nodded. "Yes Professor."

-oOo-

28th September 1995 11:35 am

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Scotland, United Kingdom

Harry leant back in his office chair and looked out the window at the frankly astounding view that he had in his accommodation. It looked over the area of the lake closest to the castle with the quidditch pitch on the other side. Rolling hills could be seen until the different coloured smoke of Hogsmead could be spied above them along with crooked towers and houses that reached further up. It was the first Hogsmead weekend, which had surprised him because he remembered the one in his fifth year being a week afterwards, even if he hadn't been allowed to go. He assumed that Umbridge had managed to delay it somewhat, Merlin knew the woman had done her best to make everyone miserable.

Ever since he had destroyed the locket he had been drowned in schoolwork, which he hadn't anticipated to be so intensive. He had spent all of the spare time that he could be trying to track down Pettigrew, which annoyingly was turning out to be one of the hardest hunts he had ever conducted. He knew that Pettigrew was a shit wizard and always would be, but his animagus form and his skill at hiding made it virtually impossible to even begin looking for a trail to follow.

Shaking his head in annoyance, not wanting to think on the rat for any longer than she had to, he reached over to the small circular table with the carving of a griffin on the top and picked up his second annoyance of the week, a folded letter with deep creases that indicated how many times it had been opened and re-read. He scowled at the contents.

Dear Mr Slate:

We of House Boot would like to offer our congratulations for your victory over the unfortunate events of the seventh of August and your consequent elevation to the coveted position of Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher subsequently.

This letter, however, is not just for congratulations. I do believe that, like myself, you are a man that would prefer someone in such an unexpected letter to 'get to the point,' so to speak. And so I shall.

Recently, through an informant that I'm sure you understand we would prefer to keep anonymous, we have been informed of a large infusion of galleons into the coffers of the Slate family vault, the amount of which elevated you to the twenty-third richest man in Avalon, which is another feat that I and my companions must congratulate you for. We were, I admit, most curious as to how you accomplished such a remarkable achievement. It is not often that mages gain such a large sum of money in such a short time frame.

There are, however, consequences to this that you may know of even if you had not considered them. As you may know, what defines a Noble house is not as complex as many would believe, the only requirements being that the house is of a certain age and maintains a set minimum amount of gold in its vaults. I do believe that House Slate was founded in 1724 by your ancestor, Iroc Slate, after he made a significant amount of money selling healing potions and other supplies during the War of the Spanish Succession against the regime of the tyrant Minister Ortiz.

With the new, expanded size of the Slate coffers, this subsequently enables you to be elevated to the position of Noble in the eyes of the Wizengamot. We of House Boot, by request of the head of the leading family of what many call the grey faction of the Wizengamot, Lord Cyrus Greengrass, would like to formally extend our own and our allies' offer of backing for your ascension to a seat on the Wizengamot.

We believe that you hold the same opinions and values that we of the grey do, and that your views on magic and the use and misuse of it also line up with our own from what we have heard from your lessons. My son in particular has high praise for you. With your recent accomplishments, you have also become a recognisable figure to most in Avalon, as I am sure you have found out. We of the neutral faction think that you would be a considerable asset, and so henceforth we would also like to invite you to the Yule Ball on the 24th of December at

Greengrass Manor over the winter holidays, as I do believe that you will be free from work at that time. You may bring another mage of your own choice.

We hope you give our offer proper consideration.

Best regards,

Sherwood Boot, Lord of the Noble House of Boot

"Fucking Goblins," he growled, tossing the opened parchment back on the table and resisting the urge to burn it to a crisp. When he had sold Gringotts the Basilisks he hadn't even considered this as a possibility, not having known the requirements for a house to ascend to Noble status. Apparently, all it took was owning a property, being an old family and having a fuck-ton of money, all of which he now had. It was how Borgin, Burke and Ollivander were able to get seats of their own. The mage community was small, and so individual shops and organisations had much more influence than they would have on the muggle side, thus making political ascension more legitimate in the eyes of the public.

Someone in Gringotts had evidently leaked his monetary status, probably bribed by people investigating him after his crash landing back into magical Britain. The wrinkly little shits would do just about anything for the right amount of money and it pissed him off to no end. If there was one thing he despised over everything else, it was politics. The only thing worse in his opinion was politics and Goblins. Gringotts had never forgiven them after he blew up most of their fancy bank. The Wizengamot was borderline useless with all of the bribery and corruption, and he would sooner break into their nice mansions and slit their throats than sit amongst them arguing about the thickness of cauldron bottoms. The only reason he could think of for doing it was that it would make Fudge turn that colour of red that he found so funny. That alone made it almost worth it to him.

What interested him, however, was who had offered the ascension to him. He thought that out of anyone Dumbledore would have tried to pull something like this so he could get another seat and therefore more influence in the Wizengamot, but the offer coming from Cyrus Greengrass was something he wouldn't have anticipated, even if he was a better fit for the grey than the light. If the Lords of the Light knew of the things he had done and the size of his kill count they would sooner see him in Azkaban than in the Wizengamot chamber.

The grey was a small faction, half the size of the other two, but also the most important. Due to the partisan nature of the conservative and liberal factions, votes often ended with all of the Light voting for one side, and all of the Dark voting for the other, leaving the Grey to decide many of the more controversial bills. Unfortunately, this meant that they were also the most susceptible to bribes, another consequence on top of that was that he was fairly sure some houses only pretended to be in the grey so they could profit from said bribes. Cyrus Greengrass himself was a reliable man and he had a healthy amount of respect for him, but he wasn't so sure about the rest. From the letter, Boot sounded like a decent bloke, though, and he remembered Terry was a nice kid right up until he died in the final battle.

Huffing in irritation at being dragged into politics even when he wasn't even Harry Potter anymore he lifted his thoughts out of the dirty stinking pits of wizarding politics and looked

back out of the window, taking a sip from a cup of tea he had left on the same table. The cup paused on his way back down, and Harry frowned out of the window.

Plumes of black smoke were rising from Hogsmead, more than there had been minutes ago and thicker.

"This isn't right, this is different," he muttered as he stood, an odd feeling in his gut twisting his intestine into knots. That smoke was not normal.

"ALL STUDENTS ARE TO REMAIN INDOORS AND RETURN TO THEIR DORMITORIES, I REPEAT, ALL STUDENTS ARE TO REMAIN INDOORS AND REMAIN TO YOUR DORMITORIES, IMMEDIATELY," the voice of Minerva McGonagall echoed throughout the castle, reminding him viscerally of the day that Hermione had been petrified. Her Scottish accent sounded stronger than usual, as it always did when she was in a high-stress situation.

He was already moving to his trunk when he heard his fireplace roar behind him and he twisted to see the face of Albus Dumbledore in his fireplace. The man's relaxed facial expression was gone in place of the face of the old battle-hardened mage that Harry respected. Even through a fire call, Harry could tell the twinkle was absent.

"Harrison, Hogsmead is under attack, all of the teachers are required to defend the students, you must get down there now," Dumbledore commanded, sounding more serious than he had ever heard him.

Harry was already moving, opening a blood-locked trunk and taking out his favourite basilisk hide overcoat as he replied. "I'll be there immediately headmaster," he said, swinging the coat over his shoulders and checking his holsters. Dumbledore didn't reply, and the head disappeared in a woosh of flame as quickly as it had come.

'Fuck fuck fuckidy fuck,' Harry mentally chanted, tightening the belt he donned and lacing up his boots. This was wrong, Voldemort hadn't done this last time. This was proof that he had already caused something different to happen, and if any students got hurt...

He swallowed and drew the knot on his boots tighter than what was necessary. It was pointless on dwelling on such a thing, this was all beyond his control. It wasn't worth even thinking about.

"The Hogshead," he stated clearly, stepping into the fireplace and immediately appearing in the dingy pub. He had flooded here because it was on the edge of town, making it easier for him to take out opposition from the outside instead of flooding into the Three Broomsticks and being surrounded.

As he entered he immediately took stock of the situation. Many had upturned tables and were hiding behind them, with a crowd of what looked like a mixture of sixth and seventh years protecting some third and fourth years. Harry saw the distinctive bright red hair of Ginny Weasley with the twins, who were attempting to keep her behind them. Ginny had always been a fiery one. He was pleased to see some of the more clear-headed students had carried

out some of the exercises that he had taught them for guarding someone. They looked slightly bewildered when he awarded them house points for it.

Harry looked to the bar, where Aberforth Dumbledore was present as always, his wand out and also pointed at the door. Aberforth was a soldier back in the Global Wizarding World, he knew what he was doing, even if now he was a washed-up barkeep who seemed to be content to live the rest of his life pouring drinks in a shithole.

"Abe, what's the situation here," he asked briskly, eyeing the front entrance of the dingy bar suspiciously as he approached, trusting the man would be able to give a good report.

"The cowards are out there casting at children, masked but not in Death Eater regalia," the old barkeep growled. "Most of 'em are walking down the main path from the apparition point, but I seen a few run by 'ere a coupl'a times," he nodded towards a dirty window. "D'you know if my dear brother is going to get off his pampered arse and come help?"

"He's on his way, you have a back door?" He asked, ignoring the jab at his boss.

"You're going out there, kid?"

Harry nodded, casting a spell that turned a chair into a spider that crawled to rest above the doorway, ready to strike. "I'm the Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher, wouldn't look very good for me if I didn't defend my students against the dark arts, would it?"

Aberforth looked him over and then returned a short nod. "Good man, I'll stay here and start getting these kiddos through the floo back the castle. Try not to get yourself killed kid, you're an annoying little shit, but it would be a waste of a good wand if you kicked it. Back door's back there lad," he said, jabbing his off-handed thumb over his shoulder at a door that had just appeared from the woodwork. A nice illusion.

Harry laughed despite himself and moved to leave, making sure to leave his floo open. "Thanks for the vote of confidence, I'll try my best not to, Abe." He had been down to the Hogshead a few times to scout for some of the more low-down targets he had been after. He had forgotten how much of an entertaining conversationalist Aberforth was. Unlike his brother he didn't waste time spinning up an intricate web of words and doublespeak, instead choosing to just say things how they were. In the wizarding world, it was a breath of fresh air.

He exited the back of the bar as the first whooshes of floo travel sounded and moved towards where he could hear the sounds of spellfire. The alley he was in was narrow, dark and stank of urine and damp goat hair. He cast a couple of pretty harsh intent-based locking charms on the back door then hurried past the shelter where the goats were sheltered, checking every corner. He was just about to step into the centre of the town when he felt something that he was really hoping he wouldn't.

There was a subtle tug in his magic, distant but still noticeable. The ward he had given Tonks was going off, the one that only activated around Death Eaters. It would have been pretty fucking stupid to not only give her his only intent ward, but to also give one to an Auror. It would have activated every other day.

Tonks was under attack by Death Eaters, and school kids were under attack at the same time. This was not a coincidence. This had been planned. This was his fault, revenge, maybe? It would be a classic Riddle move to go after the only person he liked on this god-forsaken rock the people call Britain just to spite him while simultaneously advancing his own position by causing panic.

He stood stock still, almost as if physically trapped between the two choices he had. Stay and help the students or leave and help the only person he felt anything for in this whole country? It was an impossible choice.

Harry looked up into the sky, only a thin strip of grey visible through the leaning houses. A stray spell shot across the sky like a purple shooting star.

"Bollocks," he breathed.

Orpheus & Eurydice

Chapter 9: Orpheus & Eurydice

Tonks stared down at the report she was writing, looking but not seeing. She was bored, as she always was when she wasn't on a mission. Giving up on the illusion of actually paying attention, Tonks leant back heavily in her chair, spinning her wand idly in her fingers. This was the worst part of being an Auror, the parts in-between the action.

As it had for the last week or so now, her mind once more wondered to Harrison. Or more specifically one night with him in particular. It had been a good night, among the better dates she had been on even if it wasn't the best, not quite up there with the one she had gone on with Charlie when he had let her ride a dragon. They had talked, and she had learnt about him, and he learnt about her in return. Family, hobbies, their jobs, tastes in the opposite sex, they had talked about it all. She had found it easy to talk to him, helped by the constant stream of drinks they had consumed.

And then they had left, and he had revealed that he thought they were being watched and had given her protection. Tonks brought out the ward stone and rolled it in her palm. It was still powered up, even though she didn't think she needed it. He had been so intense when she had denied she needed it at the time, so serious. It made her realise just how rare it was for him to be so. It was odd, it was like everything was normally just one huge joke to him, as if he were floating just above the rest of them and disconnected from the concerns of everyone else. Apart from when he was with her. She had denied that she needed it, indignant that he thought that she was incompetent, and then his mood had flipped entirely. It had been both terrifying and thrilling at the same time. She still remembered the sudden thrill of terror that had gone through her, the static in the air rising the hairs on her arms. He was a dominating presence, like a storm in a bottle.

"I don't want you getting hurt, Tonks."

His eyes had been so serious that she couldn't help but believe that he seriously meant it. The wordplay about it being backup and not help hadn't swung her decision in the slightest, but his eyes had.

And then she had kissed him.

Tonks pocketed the ward stone and buried her face in her hands. She had kissed him, and it had only been their second date. Some would call it the first. What must he think of her? He probably thought she was easy. She just hadn't been able to help it. He'd given her that peck on the lips as a joke and she had completely melted. He had looked so good in the lamplight, so carefree and yes, handsome, that she hadn't been able to stop herself.

'You were drunk,' she consoled herself. 'And he kissed you first'

Tonks groaned. She didn't need this right now. Things were heating up both in the Auror office and in the Order. The dirty underbelly of magical Britain was getting restless. Dung

had reported sightings of Death Eaters making deals with known smugglers and mercenaries in Knockturn Alley, and Snape's reports were just as damning. She didn't need any more trouble right now, no matter how good-looking the trouble was. Something was coming, something big.

As if summoned, the voice of someone she despised sounded from the entry to her stall.

"Auror Tonks."

She grudgingly swung her swivel chair around to look at the tall, stocky man. "Griffiths, what a pleasure," she acknowledged sweetly, forgoing the official title he so loved to enforce.

His eye twitched, but he didn't make a retort. "You are called to back up an Auror at the Hinkeypunk's Hideout, now."

Tonks frowned. "And who am I going with?"

She missed the gleam in his eye. "No partner is needed, you shall meet up with Auror Savage at the scene. Owner's kicking up a fuss about some food stores that were stolen."

Tonks' frown deepened even as she stood. "That's not proper procedure, are you sure that--"

"You either do it, or you get put out on your arse for defying the orders of your Senior Auror, get it? We would all be pleased to see you go," Griffiths sneered. "Just do your job Auror, I don't want to hear anything about you complaining when you get back," and with that he turned and left, confident she would carry out his orders.

Tonks sighed and shouldered on her red cloak. This was a regular occurrence in the office, even under Madam Bones the lower-level Aurors could still be negligent and get away with it if they had the backing of Fudge, although some had got knocked down a few pegs after the collective prayers of the masses were answered and Umbridge disappeared. Unfortunately, however, the threat of her getting sacked was still a legitimate one.

She strode out of the office and walked to the apparition point, cursing Griffiths and his ilk the whole way. She apparated away and landed at the Diagon Alley apparition point, continuing her brisk walk, determined to get into the action. She hadn't been allowed to patrol Hogsmead, where she had wanted to be, and it was severely ticking her off. She had a feeling that something was going to happen soon, and as Hogsmead was a pre-planned event it was a good opportunity as any for anyone looking to cause trouble. The Order had agreed with her. She took a left into Knockturn Alley and marched the few paces it took to get to the Hideout, the very few people still in the Alley scattering before her quite obvious state of annoyance and flame-red hair.

Still irritated, she barged straight into the restaurant, not paying attention as there had been no indication of any threat. The crime had already been committed, it was just a domestic dispute. When she entered, however, she paused. People were inside, all eating, but something in the air was off. Still glancing around, she drew her wand from her holster and took a tentative step into the room.

Deciding that it was just because of her bright red Auror robes among the shifty crowd she continued down the cleared path down the centre of the dirty black and white patterned tiles of the grimy restaurant, the heel of her boots clicking on the floor on her way. Still, nobody looked up to her or acknowledged her presence as they ate their food.

"Oi," she called to the acne-ridden teenager behind the bar at the back of the room. "Where's my partner?" It was only when she got closer that she saw his wide eyes and the two knives driven through his hands pinning him to the desk behind a display showing the different beers on offer. His mouth also seemed to have been stapled shut, and none too gently. Blood was flowing from his lips and some had ripped out, probably under the stress of his hyperventilation.

"Shit!" She swore, instantly backing away and drawing her wand, her other hand flying to her comm-stone in her ear. "This is Auror Tonks, requiring backup at the Hinkeypunk's Hideout in Knockturn Alley." She quickly summoned the two knives from his hands and stunned the teen to prevent the pain, the bloody knives sent sliding into the corner when she had done so.

Behind her, she could hear the sound of the shutters raise over the windows and the door, the paranoia of Knockturn Alley being used against her. At the same time, the hum of anti-apparition wards rung against her senses. Not good. Not good at all.

'Why the fuck is nobody answering?' Nobody had returned the message from the comm-stone. *'Shit shit shit shitshit.'* This was a trap, one that Griffiths had just sent into. How could she have been so *stupid*? She knew he was dirty, but for him to go as far as directly facilitating her murder...

"Homenum revelio," she muttered under her breath while she backed away to get a vantage point over the whole room. The charm washed over the room and revealed four white blobs beginning to move towards the entrance to the main room of the restaurant from the back rooms. Even with all of the commotion nobody in the room had stopped mechanically eating their food. A shiver went over her at the unnaturalness. It was like she was invisible.

Taking aim, Tonks let loose a silent blasting hex through the wall at one of the blobs and was rewarded by a startled shout as the hex travelled through the thin wall and sent whoever was there flying across the room. Tonks moved her aim to the next but before she could fire everyone in the room suddenly rose at the same time, blocking her view of the doorway. Tonks cursed colourfully and backed up further until she was against the wall, her wand moving across the room for any sign of attack.

Through the crowd of people, she saw a row of three black-robed figures with white masks move into the room. She didn't even have time to cry out before there was a flash of bright, awful green in the area where the teen had been. She tried not to think about the fact that she had stunned him and left him there, helpless.

'Death Eaters.'

"Nymphadora Tonks," a smooth, cultured voice called from the front of the room. "It would be easier to just hand yourself over now, you have no way out and we far outnumber you."

Tonks had always found it odd as a girl when her dad had taken her to see muggle movies as a girl and the baddies had always gone off on long speeches revealing all of their plans and gloating, giving the good guy the chance to escape and capitalize on the convenient information they had freely doled out. She had thought it illogical and fanciful. That was until she became an Auror. It turned out people did it in real life too, against all logic.

"Such a shame that your Auror partner didn't make an appearance," the mystery asshole said condescendingly. "I'm sure that perhaps if we were actually any good as an Auror, perhaps they wouldn't have disposed of you without a complaint." If Tonks ever got out of here she was going to rip both Savage and Griffiths limb from limb.

'While the idiots monologue, and trust me they will monologue, find a way to kick their arse while they aren't paying attention,' the memory of Alastor Moody growled in her head. Oddly enough, the memory of a man who had infuriated her more times than she could count calmed her somewhat.

"Don't call me Nymphadora," she grumbled low enough so they wouldn't hear and give her away. With an upwards flick of her Rowan and Ijiraq heartstring wand, all of the tables and chairs were lifted upwards, blocking a few curses aimed her way when they saw she was moving. Next, she used a wide area banisher, hoping that one would manage to hit one of the Death Eaters. It probably wouldn't, but at least it knocked out most of the imperiused crowd so she could focus on her enemy better.

She managed a single blasting curse at the ceiling above them before she had to dodge one curse and shielded the other two, luckily for her whoever she had hit had been knocked out and not revived, so at least she didn't have to deal with a fourth. The blasting curse only affected one of them, the big brute on the side that was slow to draw. Tonks hoped it was a Crabbe or preferably a Goyle. Not many had the build of a troll. He didn't quite have the speed to bring up a shield to block it and was hit by bits of debris. Amusingly, he seemed to forget he was a wizard and shielded himself with his arms.

It was enough for her to drop the shield, dodge an angrily yelled *crucio* from one on the far left and drop the wizard with a stunner powerful enough to send him crashing into the wall behind him to slump stiffly to the floor. Tonks wouldn't mind if the stunner was powerful enough to stop his lungs from moving as well.

She had to use her powers to contort her body fast enough to dodge to the side of the first curse thrown at her, but the second one still hit. She hissed and fell to one knee briefly as the skin bubbled and broke all across her leg, pale brown puss spraying across the worn floorboards of the restaurant even as more curses splashed across her shield. She applied a stasis spell to it, not having the time or attention to find the counter curse to it.

She had to spend a fair bit of power banishing everything around her away again as people had begun to stand once more and draw wands. She wasn't exactly sure who was controlling them, but she imagined they couldn't possibly be in the fight. It took far too much attention to hold so many. Not many had mastery over the imperius strong enough for something like this.

Ducking another *crucio* and doing her best to ignore the flutter of her heart at the sight of the dreaded curse, she moved and sent two high-powered blasting curses at the counter in front of them and summoned the bottles behind them to leap off the shelves and shatter against their heads. The one on the right managed to shield from the blasting curse and narrowly miss a bottle purely through luck, but the other got hit by a bottle behind his shield, sending his cutting curse awry.

It was the only reason it hit her.

She had dodged where she predicted it wouldn't go, the enclosed space meaning she had to rely on prediction instead of speed. Of course, that meant she moved right into it. It sliced open the meat just under her ribs and she cried out in pain, spinning with the momentum of the spell. The next curse also hit as she was turned away and in pain, and suddenly all of the air was taken from her lungs and she couldn't breathe.

Moody would do this all the time to teach them not to panic. She could be sitting at her desk and she would suddenly not be able to breathe. The first time he had done it she had caused so much property damage that they couldn't repair the office with charms.

But this was different. Her leg hurt, her side hurt and she was in a fighting situation with no backup and no escape. Desperately, she banished away everything around her towards where she could see the indistinct blob of black through eyes blurred with tears. Unfortunately, this included a few innocents. She thought she had him when she blinked away the tears and saw everything coming upon him, he hadn't even raised a shield. But then, completely catching her off guard, he apparated.

'Keyed into the wards. Shit.'

She rose a shield, but it didn't stop what came.

"*Crucio*," he hissed, hate gleaming in the holes of his mask. Tonks would remember that mask forever. It was a cruel, chipped skull with horns coming from the top and curling around to the cheek. She hated it with every fibre of her being as she watched the bright red curse travel through her golden shield and hit her with all of the force of Moody's bludgeoner.

Immediately, pain sliced through her entire being, the sensation of millions of red hot knives piercing her everywhere almost breaking her hold on reality instantly, her vision darkening around the edges. Unseen to her through the pain, her body rippled like waves on the ocean and her hair and eyes flashed a spectrum of bright colours.

Tonks was, of course, a metamorphmagus. She could manipulate every single part of her body to whatever she had in mind. This meant that she was constantly subconsciously aware of every part of herself far more than mages were, so when she was hit by something that afflicted pain everywhere in one's body, specifically manipulating the mental connection to the nerves? It was bad.

Already, Tonks could feel her mind slipping, her thoughts dulling, and it had probably only been a few seconds. It could have been an eternity for all she knew.

Eventually, though it lifted, and Tonks realised that at some point she had fallen to the ground. Her whole body was shifting uncontrollably, her control lost in the haze of her pain as she twitched uncontrollably on the floor.

"You fucking bitch," the voice hissed above her, one arm clutched to a deep cut in his bicep, not that Tonks could see that through the blood flowing over her vision from behind her eyes. "You stupid fucking bitch."

He didn't say anything else, instead, he grabbed her. Distantly, she felt the pull of a portkey, and then she was away.

-oOo-

5 minutes earlier, back at Hogsmead

Harry shook his head and continued walking. Tonks was a big girl, she could take care of herself for a time while he dealt with this problem. She was an Auror with combat training, the kids in this village weren't so lucky. He ignored the pang deep in his heart at the thought of leaving her to be attacked, but it was the lesser of two evils in his mind.

He emerged onto the main road and looked around, immediately spotting a Death Eater sprinting from an alley chasing after a child who he recognised as either Padma or Pavarti Patil. Her dress was torn, and Harry could see the man's belt was loose as well. Not even hesitating, he rose his wand and cast a powerful severing curse. Suddenly, Nearly Headless Nick had a companion to commiserate with.

"Get into the Hogshead!" He barked at the girl, who was staring at the head rolling after her in horror even as he pushed her behind him to continue. He didn't bother to look back to see if she did so, she could hear her 'yes sir,' and the wet slaps of quick steps in the mud as she ran in the general direction.

He glanced down at his opponent as he walked towards another group he could see in the distance. He was wearing a balaclava with a green coat. It seemed Aberforth's assessment had been correct, Riddle was being cautious. He imagined it was more for the benefit of the Ministry than the populous. The public wasn't dumb enough to not connect the dots if they saw Death Eaters casting spells at children in public.

As he advanced on the group he animated a broken window to take the form of a wolf, the broken shards and smaller pieces rising from the mud and silt to form a formidable canine with dully glowing red eyes. He sent it skulking around to go behind the houses to his right as he got closer, close enough to see who was fighting who.

Five men were casting curses at a small huddled group of some of his sixth years, three Ravenclaws and a Slytherin were holding up their shields desperately, a trio of younger Hufflepuffs cowering behind them. Harry could already see the shields beginning to flicker. He was glad that apparently, these were some of the less morally corrupt Death Eaters.

He let loose with a flame whip, dispatching two of them with one swoop, halved bodies sliding to the floor. The other three immediately spun to face him, and Harry could see the

students behind collapsing from the relief of not having to hold it anymore.

"Slate," one spat. "The Dark Lord will be pleased that I—"

He was cut off by the blasting curse that hit his shield, the force of it spraying up the dirt in front of him and his partners. Harry's face remained blank as he lowered his wand and waited.

The dust settled, revealing the two men and the sixth years shepherding away the third years away from the fight. Harry made a mental note to let Dramond off of his detention tomorrow.

"What's wrong Slate, you scared?" One taunted, raising his wand.

'Tosser.'

Harry didn't respond, instead watching as the wolf he had formed earlier sprang from the shadows of the nearby alley and bowled into them, biting and slashing indiscriminately. The sharp glass cut the one on the far right's face to shreds and he screamed, his hands scrabbling at the sides of the creature spraying rivulets of more blood from his hands and wrists as he cut himself open on the unyielding creature.

Harry took advantage of their distraction and cast a piercer and a bone breaker at the other two, felling one with a hole in the chest and the other collapsing to the floor with a broken leg and a cry of pain. Harry walked past them, sending a thin beam of electric blue light through the forehead of the downed man without looking as he continued onwards.

Hearing sounds from his right, Harry raced forwards into the small alley that they were coming from. More students were under attack, three of them holding off two adults in the cramped alley. Harry pointed his wand down at the ground and flicked it forward. A rumble echoed through the ground and it split apart and raced forward as if something had burrowed down and was forcing its way through. The two adults couldn't even react before they were pulled into the earth itself and disappeared with shouts of shock and pain.

"You lot okay?" He asked, approaching them. As he got closer he saw the mass of bushy brown hair and a bright orange one, and where there were two there were always three.

"Yes sir," younger Harry replied, looking down at the blood seeping from the ground distrustfully. "Thank you."

"No worries," Harry said dismissively, then ducked as he felt a swell of magic from behind him. Purely on instinct his arm shot forwards and caught the yellow curse on the tip of his wand before it could strike younger Harry inches from his face, glasses reflecting the unholy light of the spell. He spun and flung it back at where it had come from. The mage who cast it stumbled to the side just in time to dodge the organ-melter, not having expected his own spell to be sent back at him so fast.

Harry fell into a fighting stance and began casting furiously, weaving in transfiguration and charms in between the piercers and blasting hexes. "You see kids, you always must keep on the offensive once your enemy is on the backfoot," he lectured as he scored a painful hit on

the man's leg, severing his ankle down to the bone. "If you can dodge without putting yourself in a worse position, always do so, shields take time and energy to cast and you cannot return fire if you get stuck behind one," he continued as he transfigured a large stone that had fallen off a building into a swarm of bees that raced towards his enemy. "As you can see, my enemy is currently on the defensive, but if he does manage to get off a curse—" Harry predicted the curse that came his way, this one designed to send his bottom set of teeth through the roof of his mouth and batted it away with his off-hand while still directing the bees with his wand. "—I am prepared for it, and just like that I'm back at an advantage."

The now heavily bleeding man once more dodged the curse sloppily, hampered by his mangled ankle leaving him vulnerable to the bees. They swarmed into his mouth and down his throat, stinging the whole time as he screamed and clawed at his face and neck in an attempt to get them off, his wand forgotten. Once he judged enough of them to be inside Harry let go of the transfiguration, and all of the bees turned back to rock inside the man's body. The sudden increase in size killed him instantly and he fell to the ground with a much heavier *thud* than usual for a corpse.

He turned back to the three kids, who now all looked pasty and horrified, and smiled. "Now, I want thirty inches of parchment of what you would have done better if you were that unfortunate gentleman over there on my desk by Tuesday, capiche?"

They looked at him as if he was entirely insane. Or maybe they didn't know what 'capiche' meant. They nodded all the same and Harry smiled wider. "Good, now you lot go off to the Hogshead and stay safe with the other kids, if you try anything stupid like going back into the fight I will know, and you will get detention, off you go now!"

"Yes, sir," they all said at the same time. Ron and Hermione looked an unhealthy shade of green as they stepped over the heavily bleeding body on their way out, but as he predicted, his younger self only gave it a cursory glance before he moved onwards. He had been a heartless bastard towards his enemies, even as a kid. It took a certain ruthlessness for a twelve-year-old to be able to incinerate a man with his bare hands and not even feel a pang of regret afterwards. Harry made sure they were making their way in the general direction of the Hogshead before he headed in the opposite direction, his wand spinning in-between his long fingers in a practised motion that always calmed his battle nerves.

'Get your arse in gear, dickhead, your girl's in trouble,' something snide remarked in his head. Harry reminded it that it was a figment of his imagination and therefore not entitled to an opinion then hurried up anyway. Any advice is advice worth considering, after all. And he was being a bit of a dickhead. But he trusted Tonks to take care of herself for a while while he made sure the students were safe. Moody was a tough fucker, she couldn't have turned out bad.

He moved around the fringes of the town, taking care of the odd mage terrorising running students in a fashion that left no doubt as to whether they would be returning to the fight. Bodies followed his path as he crept disillusioned through the narrow alleys like a shadow, felling every masked individual he saw with a perfectly aimed piercer or blasting curse. Some of them were taken down by his glass wolf, blood now dripping off its clear jagged edges until someone scored a hit on it with an animation-cancelling charm. Harry sent all the glass

into the man's stomach in recompense. Every student he saw was sent to the Hogshead so they could floo back to Hogwarts until he was satisfied he had cleared the perimeter.

He entered the centre of the town with an entrance that nobody missed. It was, after all, fairly hard to ignore the giant Golem formed from what had used to be Madam Puddifoots (purely a coincidence, of course) with half of what had once been a person still held in one beefy hand. It was a crude thing with long legs, a short, burly torso with long arms and a heavy head with no neck that jutted out forwards. Small beady black eyes observed the surroundings dispassionately and it threw the body at a nearby person. It hit the ground and bounced, coming to a rolling stop at the feet of an innocent bystander who had just worked up the courage to come out of his shop and help, probably a Gryffindor. The man looked down in horror at the intestines spilling out of the bottom half of the once beautiful woman and promptly ran back inside to throw up.

All of the Hogwarts staff were in a corner of the courtyard, maintaining a large shield that had what looked like all of the students of Hogsmead that he hadn't sent to Abe cowering behind it. Around it was arrayed the rest of the attacking force, perhaps ten to fifteen of the fuckers surrounding the shield and trying to get in. Harry wasn't prepared to wait for one of them to get the bright idea of using a killing curse. Nobody had used one yet, as he was fairly sure that this was supposed to be a distraction, but he wasn't about to take any chances.

The blasting curse to the back of the head of the one nearest to them definitely caught the attention of those who hadn't already somehow not noticed the nine-foot Golem looming behind them.

"IT'S SLATE!" One yelled. Immediately, all the wands were pointed at Harry, which he thought was totally unfair.

His Golem moved in front of him to kneel and bring his arm up, blocking all of the curses aimed his way, and he was mildly pleased to see that they were taking him seriously by the vivid green splashes of light illuminating the edges of his improvised shield. Evidently, old Tom was suitably pissed at him. He wouldn't have it any other way. As he crouched behind it, ignoring the loud cracks and hisses striking his construction's shield, Harry began to cast spells, sending one into the ground beneath him and two over his head.

His Golem was eventually destroyed under the onslaught of five consecutive blasting curses from the half of the group still focused on trying to kill him while the other half stalled the teachers. Cries of triumph rang out as their curses struck his body and slammed him backwards onto the ground.

"Peekaboo!" He cried gleefully as he appeared next to them.

'How nice of them to line up all nice and tidy for me.'

The cries weren't nearly as triumphant now as an arc of crackling silver energy burst from Harry's wand and separated three sets of legs from three bodies before the fourth in the line dragged up some hastily conjured survival instinct and twisted to bring up a shield to stop it before it bisected the next two of them. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw his illusion

dissipate where it lay on the ground among the ruins of what had used to be his comrade. He would miss him, they had had such fun crushing skulls together.

The shield was all the man got to raise before the ground under him erupted and he was swallowed whole by a stone shark also formed from behind his Golem, revealing the one behind him. Harry batted away the curse the last of his opponents cast with his off-hand, again using the trick he had shown Flitwick, towards the back of his next set of enemies. The bright purple and yellow curse pulled some poor sod's brain from his mouth, freeing up Flitwick to help McGonagall while Dumbledore held off five mages at once with apparent ease. Harry reckoned the only reason they weren't already neatly trussed up with a bow tie on their noggin was the man was having to maintain a shield around all of the students behind him at the same time.

Harry rolled to the side to avoid the next curse and aimed a powerful summoning charm behind another who had tried to spring a trap on him from the alleyway in front of him, causing all of the cobblestones and other assorted debris to pile drive into his back before he could dodge it. Harry stunned him and bound him so he could be questioned. He did need to leave at least one person alive, after all.

The last three all seemed to realise that their situation had taken a turn for the worst. Two of their number were dead by Harry's wand and another two were bound or stunned by the staff, on top of all of the dead people they didn't know about in the other parts of the village that Harry had taken care of. Harry managed to catch one of them in the back with a bone-breaker, severing his spine in two as he portkeyed away. Harry amused himself by imagining the faces of the receiving party when one of their number arrived and then dropped dead immediately.

"Harrison!" Uh oh, Dumbledore didn't look happy. "What on Earth do think you are doing? In front of the *students*?!"

Harry glanced at the shell-shocked faces of the school kids and back to Dumbledore, his face cold.

"Look Albus, I have no fucking time for this, if you think the little shits are going to piss their panties because a couple heads popped then you can obliviate them for all I care, right now I just need you to do one thing."

"Harrison-"

"SHUT THE FUCK UP!" He roared, his wand letting loose a gout of flame before he got a hold of himself. He fought to maintain his composure. His eyes had gained an unholy light and his hair was moving under an invisible wind. The gravity around him felt stronger, as if his mere presence was pushing everyone below him. "Look, Tonks is in trouble, I'm going after her, I need you to put a tracking charm on me," he said firmly, glancing to the right to see the other teachers escorting the kids, whose looks were split between watching the showdown between himself and Albus with interest, looking at him as if he was a serial killer and looking at the bodies lying around the square in horror.

Dumbledore's face morphed from anger and disapproval into a completely blank mask.
"Harrison, how do you know?"

"I have no fucking time to tell you a fucking bedtime story, Dumbledore, either you put a tracking charm on me and I go, or you don't and I go anyway, and if she gets hurt or killed because of you I'll *personally* come back and turn you into a smear on the ground, get it?" Harry snapped.

Dumbledore blinked, looking like someone had been hit with a body bind for a precious few moments. If Harry wasn't so furious, nervous and admittedly a bit scared he imagined he could have laughed, but right now his mind was too focused on the image of Tonks' dead body to even come close to happiness.

Eventually, though, he nodded stiffly and applied the tracking charm. Even in his unbalanced state, Harry noticed that he was using a particularly powerful and complex one that probably hadn't been used in a few years.

"Report to me on Nymphadora's situation as soon as possible Harris-"

That was all Harry heard before he disappeared away with a thunderous *crack*, his emotions fuelling the speed of the apparition instead of the theatrics.

He appeared with a similar volume as close to the edge of the apparition point of Diagon Alley where the ward had been triggered, causing several people around him to jump in shock at the sudden sound. He didn't care. He shouldered his way through the jabbering crowd at a dead run towards what he realised with a twinge of apprehension were the looming shadows of Knockturn Alley. The buildings leant over him, and he felt like they were laughing.

His apprehension grew further as he saw a crowd around where the ward had activated. He spied the worn lettering of the Hinkeypunk's Hideout above a perplexing scene. The crowd was surrounding a warded-off area, inside which was an assortment of random people seated on the floor or laying on stretchers. Harry ignored them, shoving through the crowd to exclaimed protests of annoyance which he also ignored in favour of breaking through the ward by using occlumency to convince them he wasn't there. Auror barrier wards were one of the few that were visible, a bright red waist height line. It wasn't made entirely to keep people out magically, it was supposed to be intimidating.

He saw the tall, broad shouldered and pompous form of a man he considered so irrelevant that he barely recalled his name stand and approach him, face splotchy red and furious. "You! You need to get out, this is an active inve-"

Harry made himself a bit heavier by making his bones denser and shouldered Griffiths aside as if he wasn't there, instead making his way through the doorway and looking into the room. It was a mess. Tables were strewn around the corners of the room in pieces, there were holes in the counter and the bottles were all smashed.

"Out," he said firmly to the room, which still had a couple of investigators inside it, including one he recognised as Dawlish.

They looked at him oddly, belatedly realising he was out of place. It wasn't quick enough for him. In a flash of pure, intent-driven magic all seven people were bodily thrown from the room, colliding with Griffiths on their way out who had just managed to get up to try and stun him in the back.

'Prick.'

Harry set up a temporary protection ward around the doorway and then, as an afterthought, a silencing ward behind it to block the irritating sounds of the impacting spells against it as they tried to get in. Harry caught a glimpse of Griffiths' furious face before he turned to the rest of the room.

Tonks was not here. Nor were any of her attackers. He tried not to think about what that meant.

Muttering varied curses that would have made a Goblin blush Harry moved around the room, looking for any trace of something that could be tracked. There was a piece of chipped white porcelain in one of the corners of the room, the material that Death Eaters used for their masks. There was an arched line in the corner separating the dust from the unnaturally clean floor. Someone had been using cleaning charms before he interrupted. Destroying evidence. He recalled the Aurors hunched over in this very corner.

He stood, breathed in, breathed out again and steadfastly decided that going outside and slaughtering everything wearing red would be far too time-consuming.

They had not yet rotated to the area nearest to the door, and there Harry found what he was looking for. He had missed it when he had stormed in and gone straight to the opposite side of the room. There, on the floor, was a pool of still glistening blood.

Harry knelt next to it, hard leather boots creaking in protest as the armoured knee of his trousers made contact next to the pool.

He pressed the tip of his wand into the pool and closed his eyes, picturing the owner in his head as he chanted and pushed his magic into it. He got the feeling of shaping and changing, of constant, giddy excitement and bubblegum pink hair. Blood carried magic, even when outside of the body. This consequently made it extremely useful and simultaneously extremely dangerous if someone with less than honourable intentions got a hold of it, as evidenced by the Foetusmort incident. Mages tended to go to great lengths to protect their blood.

Satisfied with the result, Harry conjured a crystal vial, siphoned the blood into it and stoppered it promptly. He cast one more look over his shoulder at a certain fuming Auror and dropped the silencing ward, opening up communications between them.

"If I find out you had anything to do with this, you flask of anal seepage, I will personally hunt you down and pull your fucking head off with my bare hands," he said flatly, his gaze unflinching. Griffiths still stood strong and angry, but Harry saw the flash of fear.

Happy with the reaction, he disappeared with a crack, the sound of the Diagon Alley anti-apparition ward sirens sounding in his absence.

He appeared in his study and without hesitation strode over to a large set of drawers, opening one to pull out a large grey stone bowl from it. He levitated it out, pushed all of the paperwork and clutter off of his desk onto the floor, ignored the sound of smashing glass and thumped the bowl onto the leather surface of the desk. Inside the bowl there were hundreds of painstakingly etched runes which all glowed a dark green briefly when Harry slit his palm open and placed it on the inside of the bowl, channelling his magic into it to activate the seer bowl.

Taking out the vial of Tonks' blood, Harry unstopped it and looked at it, his face tight. Slightly disgusted, but determined.

"Always hated divination," he muttered as he cast a quick cleaning charm over the vial. With one last fortifying breath inwards he downed the blood, swished it around in his mouth a few times and spat it back into the bowl, immediately casting a mouthwash charm on himself afterwards to rid himself of the salty tang on his tongue.

The Runes in the bowl this time glowed a bright purple, and when Harry added the mashed magical pimperl root and crushed the mixture together with a mortar it glowed once again with a satisfied sunshine-yellow.

Harry pressed the tip of his wand into the mixture and closed his eyes once more, much as he had with the blood back at the Hinkeypunk. This was not a coincidence.

"Unum mecum es, unum tecum sum, ostende mihi ubi jacet objectum cordis mei," Harry muttered the ancient Italian tracking magic under his breath, feeling the tug on his own magic as it took what it required. He summoned up all of his feelings for Tonks to reinforce the power behind his intent, the intent to find Tonks. In his mind the image of an empty valley between two gently rolling hills materialised, the area it was showing was much larger than he would like. It should have shown her directly, but evidently, she was behind some pretty heavy wards. He almost despaired, if he couldn't see her the magic wouldn't link them, he wouldn't be able to find her. But then he saw the surroundings.

He had been here before.

"Shit," he muttered, pulling away from the bowl with a heavy frown on his face. He began to twist away, but before he did so checked one more time over himself to make sure that he had everything in place. Looking around, he hitched a fighting knife onto his hip as a precaution before he once more turned away and disappeared away from the room with a sharp *crack*.

-oOo-

Silas Bentley trudged down to the edge of the wards, his brows knit together in a heavy frown. Someone had just announced themselves on the edge of the wards, asking to be let in. It was confusing enough that someone would ask, as almost everyone he knew was already keyed in, but the fact that someone not keyed in had managed to find the place was just as befuddling. Nobody should have been able to find the Manor.

Cautiously, he pressed his wand to the ward to reveal himself to the man, knowing that whoever it was wouldn't be able to hurt him over the ward line.

"Yaxley?" he asked in surprise. He knew for a fact that the man was keyed into the wards. He was one of the inner circle, far above him in station. Travers had been friends with the man, he recalled, before he had disappeared.

The man looked up, black eyes meeting his own. He had long, straw blonde hair and a narrow nose that were both so common in the Yaxley family.

"What are you doing standing outside, aren't you keyed in?" He asked, his wand drifting to point at Yaxley.

"Strengthening ritual," Yaxley grunted, careful hands drifting out of his robes to show that they weren't holding a wand. "Altered my magic, had to adjust my house ring to allow me into my own house. You know how it is."

Bentley relaxed a little, it was a valid reason, many rituals caused wards to reject them once the caster's magic was no longer recognised, but it was also a suspiciously convenient one. Silas was raised in Slytherin, he wasn't about to just believe something upfront. He had also been raised in the magical world, he wasn't about to just believe that what he saw was real.

"Forgive me Corban, but would you acquiesce to a few revealing charms? We can never be too careful these days, only a mere month ago we lost Travers," he gestured around him at the expansive grounds, never taking his wand and eyes off of Yaxley. "Although at least we got the house."

Yaxley smiled thinly. "I'm sure I can endure it."

For the next five minutes, Silas ran every charm he could remember the Dark Lord teaching them over the man. There was a Polyjuice detection charm, a glamour-revealing charm and even one to reveal self-transfiguration. Once all of them failed, he resorted to one last one that Snape had invented to detect muggle makeup, which also failed.

Yaxley proffered his arm and drew up the left sleeve, revealing the dark mark twisting on his wrist. His eyebrow rose. "Happy?" His dark eyes darted to the manor behind him. "I heard you have a metamorph up there, I've always wanted to have a go on one of those creatures," he sneered. "Especially that bitch, she's caused far too much trouble in the Auror office to not be... damaged."

Silas grinned. He had been thinking the same. The woman hadn't been awakened when he had left to go to the intrusion, but he was looking forward to when she did. He hoped the others would give him a turn before she was disposed of, she certainly was attractive. He was almost angry at Flint for damaging her so badly that she had to be healed to wake up, but only almost.

"I wholeheartedly agree," he said, proffering his arm through the wards. "Welcome back to Travers Manor, Corban, I do hope you enjoy the entertainment."

Yaxley grasped him by the forearm as he did in return and slowly, as if the wards were resisting him, the big blonde man was dragged through, the gesture keying him into the wards because someone else who was also keyed in had done it.

Once inside, Yaxley brushed off his black robes and looked around appreciatively before returning his gaze to Silas. He smiled, and the gesture seemed to strain the face as if it wasn't made for the expression. It was too wide, with too many teeth.

"Thank you."

Suddenly, the black eyes became a bright, unnatural grey. And the grey was cold and dreadful. Silas went to rise his wand back up, his mind a fog of panic, but the movement pulled on something in his stomach and he looked down to see a long knife buried into his small intestine, blood already flowing from the wound in a slow, steady stream from the gash.

'Fuck, fuck is this really happening?' All thoughts of attack were driven from his mind now, his focus entirely focused on the inevitability of his own death and the slow, sharp stab of pain in his gut.

Yaxley, or whoever it was, pulled him forward, grey eyes inches from his own, filling his vision with mirrors.

"Die in agony, wretch," the man whispered, then twisted the knife, drew it back out and shoved him to the floor, where he cried out in agony and lay twitching, the feeling of blood leaving him and filling up his lungs driving his mind into a blind panic.

Silas Bentley, who had never left any impression on the world apart from misery and a record of attendance, died there on the grass at the hands of the man who had also killed the man who had once owned the grounds he died on.

His last thought was, *'was it all worth it?'*

-oOo-

Harry rolled over the dead body of whoever he had just killed and considered the clothing and the face. He conjured a body-length mirror and levitated the corpse alongside it, blood still dripping from the sharp leather shoes of the man. His face shifted and morphed, the feeling of cheekbones and nose cartilage moving and crawling across his face like a hoard of spiders until he resembled the bald man perfectly. With an expansive downward swish of his wand, his clothes also were transfigured into the black Death Eater robes that were standard among the scum. He felt dirty just wearing them.

With one last look over his shoulder at his new twin, Harry drew the cloak together to ward off the September chill and marched off towards the house, occasionally having to shake his left hand to unstick the blood covering it from the inside of the pocket.

He paused outside the wards and then knelt on one knee, beginning to chant an anti-magical transport ward to block apparition and portkeys. He didn't want the owner of the wards to

apparate away before he could get a hold of them, he wanted to make sure they were taken care of.

Apparition and portkeys were one of the easiest pieces of magic to block, a simple ward being enough to block either one, requiring a mage to put roughly double the amount of power that had been put into the ward in the first place to break through due to the exponential efficiency of the ward. Once he felt the familiar hum he stepped forwards, pushing the heavy dark oak door open with one hand while his red oak wand twirled slowly in his other. He was coming to love the wand above all his previous ones. It felt solid and reliable, firm and easy to aim. His first wand had been tainted when he learnt why he had got it in the first place, and the Elder Wand was more of a brutal weapon than a personal wand, not that he hadn't loved that wand as well.

He slipped in, shaking his head as he did so. These arrogant idiots were so confident in their wards that they didn't even bother locking doors. His opinion of the Death Eaters lowered further. Compared to the group of terrorists he had been fighting from the Magical Union of Kalmar three years ago these guys were truly idiots, a product of a conceited upbringing with no practice defending against actual threats. This was a product of Dumbledore's reactive nature in wartime.

"Silas? Who was at the wards?" A gruff voice called from a side room as he walked down the passage a few steps. He had the composition of a bear and was midway through polishing his wand.

'Silas? Well, I guess that's me.'

Harry cocked his head at the heavy-set man. Travers' memories dubbed him as Lance McLaggen, a low-level Death Eater that Harry had no memory of.

"It was Harrison Slate," he said plainly.

His eyes could only widen before he was cut down by a vicious slash of the wand that opened him up ear to hip, an ugly sight. The resulting scream and the sound of him being banished into a mirror on the side of the room probably could have woken up the whole manor had anyone been sleeping, instead it most likely just made everyone aware that something was wrong.

Had he been aiming for stealth, he would have been dismayed by this. Unfortunately for everyone trapped inside the Manor with him, Harry was extremely, unequivocally pissed, and his current intentions had nothing to do with subtlety.

"What the fuck is going on ou-" a woman came stomping out of a room further down the hall then froze at the sight of the recognisable man covered in blood and the torn apart body on the floor. She was clutching at her chest with her forearm, which was the only thing keeping the bra on. Obviously, he had interrupted something. "Silas?"

It was all the hesitation he needed. His features melted back into his own along with his clothes as he moved, the man being too short and fat for his own taste and balance. A table to the side of the room was banished at her, trapping her between the door frame and the table.

It was followed up by a piercing hex through the heart, her wand arm still trapped. She slumped forwards onto the table and then was promptly animated to strangle the man who had been scrambling away behind her, the both of them falling to the ground. Harry didn't even look as his steel spear exploded from his wand and nailed the two of them to the floor.

Two more moved out of another room further down, both of their wands drawn and aimed at him. The sounds of their friends dying had finally allowed them to pull their heads out of their collective behinds it seemed.

The first spell was deflected into the wall next to him and the next whizzed by his nose as he spun to avoid it like a rugby player dodging a tackle. His wand was brought forward and moved, pointing at one wall then the next then drawn down in a sharp downward motion. The walls on either side of the two suddenly clapped together with an almighty *crash*, causing the roof above it to sag and fall also, leaving a hole in the roof into the corridor above. Blood began to leak from under the rubble, but Harry ignored it in favour of applying a weightlessness charm to himself and jumping up through the hole, cancelling it when he was level with the floor so he didn't collide with the ceiling.

'Homenum revilio,' he incanted in his head, revealing three blobs moving down the corridor behind the rubble, a couple more further down the house and a small mass surrounding a blob that wasn't moving in a place that Harry remembered as being the location of the dungeons. His heart quickened. He knew what happened in those dungeons. He needed to be faster.

Applying a one-way window charm to the floor, Harry watched as the three moved slowly down the corridor, eyeing the door to the kitchen that would circumnavigate the pile intently.

'Wrong way fucko's.'

The floor was blasted away in front of him, the rubble catching the man in the back full in the face. The next, a fat man who had no business wearing combat robes, was cut down in the confusion by a fire whip. The last actually managed a spell, but it sailed over his head in the confusion, the only injury it inflicting being the sting of plaster against the bare skin of his neck. They were then roasted alive by a plume of conjured fire and left to burn on the floor. Harry dropped down to the next floor and rolled, cool marble contrasting with the heat from the still burning and screaming man to the left of him.

He walked past, uncaring. His wrath was an almost physical thing, a terrible presence in the air that quaked knees and clouded minds with dread. In his tattered black robes, seraphic features gilding his face, he appeared a vengeful angel, one of Lucifer's progeny.

The next he encountered in a slightly more awkward situation. He wrenched open a door into a room that he knew would eventually lead to the stairs to the dungeons only to find a man blinking stupidly back at him, his hand outstretched to reach for the doorknob, his wand held in the other.

Harry moved first.

The ten-inch blade of the knife found its home inside the skull of the young Death Eater through the roof of his mouth. He was fairly sure had been a seventh-year Ravenclaw last

year. A shame.

He felt the impact of a spell hit the dead body and pushed it forward, rolling to avoid another. This place seemed like it was some kind of smoking room, evidenced by the heavily scented clouds hanging in the air. The haze revealed another in the corner, holding their wand in a two-handed death grip.

"Hello," Harry said cheerfully, pearly white teeth shining through the shining crimson coating his face, the salty tang of blood on his tongue. "My name's Harrison."

He didn't ask what their name was, they wouldn't have replied anyway. Too busy with the knife in their chest. Harry ripped off a chair leg, transfigured it into a trident and banished it into their neck, the fork the only thing holding up the limp body.

Harry hissed as a piercing hex hit his jacket, feeling it partially go through the Basilisk hide and burn his flesh with the heat of the dissipated magical energy.

I only just got that *fucking* repaired, asshole. Do you have *any* idea how much Basilisk hide costs?" He demanded of the unseen source.

The next spell was much uglier than the first, uglier in the sense that it was unforgivable.

"Ok, if that's how you want to play it..."

Harry summoned a chair cushion in the way of the killing curse and transfigured the explosion of feathers into needles before banishing it in the general direction of where he thought the spell had come from. A bright white shield shimmered into existence from in front of a dark green door in the other corner of the room, so Harry returned the favour with a killing curse of his own, murmuring the incantation under his breath so he wouldn't be warned.

There was no sound, no blood, no flashy explosion of gore or bright lights. There was only the muffled thump of a body falling to the hardwood flooring. Harry stopped in his tracks, shocked at his actions. The thought had entered his mind that he was under heavy wards and no longer detectable, and that was all his mind needed to justify the use of the killing curse for the first time since he had come here. He closed his eyes, the feeling of black magic sending a pleasuring thrill through him before he suppressed it. That was slightly concerning.

He moved to the door, a negligent flick of his wand sending the glassy-eyed man skidding across the floor so he could open the door. Halfway through what seemed to be a sitting room leading to the stairs Harry had to dart to the side to avoid a spell that came from the suddenly open door. He batted away the next spell, almost hitting the target.

'I'm starting to get really fucking sick of people getting in my way.'

He slid under the next spell on his knees like a football player celebrating a goal then snapped back up to his feet again, using the sofa he had slid by as leverage. Now within arms reach of the wizard he used his abilities, causing the skin on his knuckles to peel back,

revealing the bone beneath. The bone rose outwards and melded together, leaving behind a chunk of hard material with four pyramid-shaped studs in it. Built-in knuckledusters.

Even as these changes came about his fist was coming around in a brutal left hook, the swing further powered by his abilities which contracted the muscles in his shoulder faster than usual, resulting in a brutal, dull thud of bone against skin and bone as his makeshift knuckledusters split the Death Eater's cheek open, sending him flying to the left with a heavy cry. His skull cracked against the mantle of a black marble fireplace and he fell still, his mouth slack.

Harry cast a glance his way and slit his throat with a severing charm for good measure, just in case.

Flexing his fingers, Harry watched with careful attention as the bones separated and retreated into his hand. Once finished, he summoned the knife from the other side of the room wandlessly, the soft hiss of blade against bone sounding briefly against its holder's ribs. Harry examined it, wiped it clean then held it carefully in his offhand with his wand in the other. Wands were, mostly, better at medium range and in some instances long. Things tended to get awkward at closer range, which is why Harry preferred to bring a knife along when he knew that the situation required it, such as this one. Even though mages lived with magic their whole lives and disparaged muggle fighting when things got ugly, up close and personal they were human in the end and reverted to base instinct. Let it be said that bringing fists to a knife fight was never a good idea.

Before he opened the door Harry cast one more *homenum revilio*. More blobs appeared on his floor, and the same group was still huddled on the next floor down. One of them was moving towards him from that area.

Harry grinned, wand and knife rotating around his fingers in a spiralling, hypnotic pattern in synchronisation.

"Oh, you lot are *so* fucked."

He kicked down the door, and once more the bell tolled.

-oOo-

Tonks came to life with a shuddered breath, the feeling of her lungs rubbing against the flesh in her chest making her gasp. Every movement hurt, every contact felt like she was being held under the curse once more. Even her tongue hurt in her mouth against her aching teeth.

Her hair was suddenly pulled backwards, and Tonks couldn't help the strangled yell of pain that emanated from her lips. Above her was a thin-faced man with a ridiculous-looking goatee on his chin and a pencil moustache.

"Welcome back, bitch," the man said, his voice smooth and soft. "You know, by now you should be coming to the realisation that you really, really fucked up," he said calmly.

Tonks responded by jerking her head forward and headbutting him, the excruciating pain that blossomed from the contact completely worth it to her.

"Eat a dick you spineless little worm," she hissed, her throat spasming at the use of the words, her voice raspy.

Her head was slammed roughly forwards as he clutched his nose, blood leaking from his nostrils freely. His hand pulled away and he examined the blood curiously, a throaty chuckle escaping him.

"My, my," he said, closing one nostril with a finger and forcing out a clump of blood as he walked around to crouch in front of her, his dark eyes regarding her in amusement. "Spirited one aren't you? I don't think you would be, if only you knew where you were, but at least it will make you a bit more fun to break." He reached out and traced the length of Tonks' jaw with the back of his unblooded hand. Tonks pulled away jerkily, and without warning, he backhanded her roughly. Again she cried out in pain, the force of the blow amplified to the point of torture due to the after-effects of the unforgivable.

The man continued as if he hadn't just done what he had done, a serene smile still on his ferret-like face. "Do you know what these cells were originally used for, girl?" He gestured around the room, which indeed resembled a prison cell more than an actual room. Multiple people were arrayed around the edges, leaning against the walls. All were watching the interaction with either interest, blankness or open lust. Tonks looked away.

Tonks drew up all of her courage and spat in his face, her eyes having gone completely black with no white and her hair a bright, angry red. "I don't give a fuck where you and your boyfriends bugger each other!"

That was as far as she got before she was backhanded again, and he continued as if she hadn't spoken. "This, Nymphadora Tonks, was once the domain of Cohan Travers," he watched her face carefully, now hunched over her lap on a limp neck. When he saw the widening of her eyes he smiled, and it was sharp. "I see you understand what that means." His fingers began to trace down her neck as he licked her saliva off his cheek, and no matter how much she tried, how much she shifted manically in the seat she couldn't stop him from cupping her breast and squeezing it. Tonks would have thrown up, but she hadn't eaten lunch the day before, so all that came into her mouth was the sour taste of bile.

"So here's what is going to happen to you, Nymphadora Tonks," the man said, his other hand running up the inside of her thigh under the Auror robes she was still wearing. "Me and my friends here are going to... use you as we wish until you break, and then we are going to dump you outside of Hogwarts for your boyfriend to find," his hand cupped roughly between her legs, but Tonks felt no pleasure, only dread.

'Harrison, please...' She begged, casting her eyes at the ceiling, as if taking her eyes away from where his hands were would somehow stop what was happening. She was still in far too much pain to control her abilities, or she would have perhaps retracted certain elements of herself to stop it, but she couldn't, she was in too much pain, she couldn't... She closed her eyes, not listening to the words the man was saying anymore, the cruel words fading to background noise as she fell into memory.

"I suppose it's your turn to rescue the damsel in distress anyway, no?" Words of a child, she had been so clueless. She had had no idea at the time how true her words had been. How true his words had been.

'Harrison, please...' She repeated it like a mantra. He had given her the ward, she had to believe that he would bring help, maybe even Dumbledore.

She felt his hand slide under, making contact with bare skin and rubbing against the bottom of her bra. "... Slate should never have opposed the Dark Lord, but I suppose that it doesn't matter now."

"Can you hurry this along Rockwell? I have places to be," an irritated-sounding female voice snapped from the corner of the room. Tonks rolled her eyes upwards to see an aristocratic-looking woman leaning against a table in the corner, a cigarette held in a delicate white-gloved hand. She was wearing an ankle-length dress with multiple layers of smooth baby blue fabric in steadily lighter shades, entirely out of place among the dingy stones and brutes. "Just do what you need to do and get the poor girl out of here already. I barely tolerated these things when my husband was living, now I just find it offensive," she said disgustedly, making a shooing gesture with one hand while she took a drag with a cigarette with another.

Tonks silently praised the woman when the hands were drawn away from her and the man turned to glare at the woman. "Lady Travers, need I remind you that the only reason the Dark Lord allows you to remain is that you control the wards," he snapped, sounding resentful.

"No, let him continue," Tonks gasped out, forcing a mocking grin onto a face that only wanted to scream. "This is probably the first time he's touched a woman in years."

The man growled and went to reply with another raised fist, but was distracted by Lady Travers suddenly stiffening and pushing up from the desk she had been leaning upon, a contrite look on her face.

"What's wrong with you?" A man asked from the left side of her impatiently. Around the room, people drew their wands as well. Tonks remained still and observed, glad for the distraction.

"The wards," the woman said, her eyes closing as she concentrated. "Someone new just got allowed into the scheme."

There was a brief pause before the Rockwell glanced to the side at a balding man who looked more like an accountant than a Death Eater. "Who did we send to answer the announcement?"

"Silas... Silas Bentley that is," the accountant said, his eyes and hands twitchy. Tonks recognised the name. He was from a moderately rich family, not on the Wizengamot but with more money than lots of the families that were. They had always expected Silas, the second son, of being a Death Eater but they had never been able to prove it, especially with the Ministry's current policy of denial.

There was another pause. "Why would Silas let someone *new* in?" A blonde who she could only just see from the corner of her vision said in confusion. "There shouldn't be anyone new."

"I'm sure he had a good reason, the Dark Lord taught us how to catch imposters and it's impossible that Bentley's the traitor." Rockwell seemed to gain confidence in his own words as he spoke. His gaze moved to Lady Travers, who was in the middle of taking out another cigarette. "Do the wards tell you who the new guest is?"

She gave him one of the most condescending looks Tonks had ever seen, like he was an inconvenient piece of dirt on her red-bottomed heels. Tonks memorised the expression for future use, if she ever got out of this place. "No, as you *should* well know there are no such wards that do such a thing."

The mousy man didn't reply, but Tonks thought she heard him mutter 'bitch,' under his breath. "Robertson, go out there and meet with Silas to make sure the idiot didn't cock up the charms," he turned to her once more, a leer on his face. "I'll stay here and take care of the prisoner."

The blonde man grunted his assent, catching his wand from a holster before opening the heavy iron cell door with a *clang* and exiting into the dark passageway beyond, the sound of his footsteps echoing off the cold stone the only thing left behind in his absence.

"Right, now before we begin with the more... pleasurable side of things," Rockwell said, dark eyes glinting in the gloom. The Dark Lord wants to know one thing, and one thing only," he leaned in, this time far enough away that Tonks couldn't headbutt him, much to her displeasure. "Who is Harrison Adrastus Slate."

"I have no idea who you're talking about."

He backhanded her again, this time causing a lump of bloodied flesh to leave her mouth. "Don't be stupid, girl, we saw you together, you're close. Now tell me what you know about Harrison Slate!"

'Merlin Harrison, you have pissed off the wrong people.'

She shrugged as best she could with her hands tied behind her back. "Tall, dark hair, handsome, funny. Enough to make a runt like you develop an inferiority complex."

"She's stalling," the woman said over the sound of the second backhand, drawing out the words into an almost sing-song tone. She retrieved something from behind her and threw it underhand at Rockwell, who caught it. "Ask her what this is, some of the runes are familiar, but one face had a cluster that I don't recognise."

Rockwell turned over the familiar obsidian cube, hissing in pain when he touched it with his left hand. He dropped it then, his right hand clutching at the underside of his forearm as he cursed fiercely. "The fucking thing bit me!"

Lady Travers stepped forward and plucked the cube off the floor, turning it in her gloved hands while analysing the two glowing faces of the cube intensely. "Fascinating," she murmured, casting a glance at Tonks. "It seems to be some way to identify the dark mark and..." she turned it over to the opposite face, also glowing a dark red. Her arm dropped, and she scowled at Rockwell, who was still massaging his wrist. "You blithering moron, you brought a tracked ward into the house!" She spat, throwing the ward to the ground, where it was destroyed with a blasting curse from her wand.

"Can't be tracked here, wards prevent it," Rockwell grunted, rising to his feet.

"Yes, but now someone knows that a Death Eater attacked," she snapped, her fists balled into her sides, the cigarette crushed in between the tightly clamped fingers.

"Stop crying like a little girl, Travers, you're just being paranoid, we'll take care of the prisoner and then everything will be fi—"

He was interrupted by a loud, blood-curdling scream from somewhere in the manor, followed by muffled crashes and more shouts.

Tonks felt a glimmer of hope. Had Harrison managed to find her and bring the Aurors?

"That's right," she said into the now silent and still room as they all strained for more noise. "That personal ward can break through these paltry protections, I bet anything the whole Ministry is coming down on your thick heads right about now." It was all bluster, half hope half prayer.

"Shut the fuck up, you're lying," Rockwell snarled, his wand gripped tight in his hand.

Behind him, Lady Travers suddenly turned and blurred in the air before snapping back into reality and stumbling to crash into the table behind her, sending several objects off of the table, including, to Tonks' intense observation, her wand.

"Bloody bugging Hades," the woman said, her voice raising in panic from where she sat amid the folds in her dress on the floor. "Someone's put up anti-apparition wards."

"We don't have portkeys either, didn't think we would need to escape anywhere," the accountant observed as he shuffled away from the door sideways in a manner that he might have considered inconspicuous.

"Did you idiots really think you could kidnap an Auror and get away with it?" She taunted as another series of screams and shouts and the sound of rocks falling sounded in the distance. "You guys are so, so fucked. They're going to lock you in Azkaban for so long you'll forget your name." She laughed, the action causing pain throughout her chest, but it was worth it for the uncertain shuffling around the room.

"Bullshit, Griffiths assured us he would clean up afterwards, you should be more careful who you take orders from girl," he sneered, then turned back to the Lady of the house. "Travers, key us into the wards so we can break the anti-apparition, we can't do it against two sets," Rockwell snapped.

'If I get out of this shithole Griffiths is dead.'

"I can't!" She cried, her voice shaky like her hands. Her chest was rising faster than usual, the first signs of fear breaking through her facade. "Cohan never taught me the chant to add someone into the anti-apparition wards!"

"Fucking useless bitch!" He roared, blasting her across the room in anger where she hit the wall with a startled cry. Tonks couldn't summon up any pity for the woman who had looked so strong and arrogant before now. Rockwell, obviously the leader, took a deep breath before speaking again. "You and you," he pointed at two tall men who hadn't spoken until then. "Take her to the back of the room and keep a wand trained at her head, we can still get out of here if we use her."

Above them, more screams and dull thuds sounded, getting ever closer. The Auror team was getting closer to where she was. Tonks had no idea how they had managed to find her, but she wasn't about to complain.

Their room remained silent, listening in dim horror as the screams and shouts got louder and the sounds of spellfire and bone breaking could be heard the whole time.

"You know," she observed candidly. "Alastor Moody has always been quite fond of me, I was a student of his you know, he's probably up there right now, taking care of your buddies. Maybe your daddy's told you, maybe not, but you should know that Mad-Eye Moody doesn't exactly deal with Death Eaters mercifully."

"Shut the fuck up," one of the brutes on her left said, but she could see they were unsettled. Moody had probably put away or put down a relative of every single person currently in the room, he had become something of a boogymen for them. It helped that he looked terrifying as well.

Dust fell from the ceiling as more muffled shouts and cries of warning sounded above them over the panicked muttering of Lady Travers, who was backed in a corner as far from the door as possible with her wand trained on it, and then there was silence.

From the corridor, the sound of someone running manically echoed, a far cry from the calm strides of Robertson. Everyone in the room tensed, their wands aimed at the door. As soon as whoever was outside rounded around the doorway a volley of spells shot towards the door, all of them lethal. The man—for that was all Tonks could ascertain before he shot backwards – let off a startled yelp and backed away, barely missing the flesh-rending curse that hit the wall with a fierce sizzle.

"Wait, guys, it's me, Silas!" The man yelled.

"Silas? What the fuck is going on out there?" Rockwell called.

The man named Silas came around the door, his hands held up and empty. There were a few indrawn breaths around the room, the man was covered in blood.

"It was Slate, he's here," the man said, his voice trembling as he came further into the room. "You have to help me, he almost killed me."

"Slate? Only Slate?" Rockwell asked incredulously, his wand sagging slightly.

Silas nodded and glanced at her as he edged around the room in her general direction, past the table. "you have to stop him! He got everyone else!" he said desperately.

'Harrison? By himself?' Tonks was confused. Surely he couldn't have done this by himself. Sure, she got the impression he was powerful and competent at fighting, he wouldn't have lived through the Burke incident otherwise, but from what she had observed, researched and been told by him he seemed to be an average 25-year-old otherwise, not the type to break into a heavily warded Manor all by himself and take out multiple opponents.

Rockwell turned away dismissively from Silas and faced the door, his wand raised at it. "Slate! We know you're out there! Come out and give yourself to the Dark Lord and maybe we'll let the girl go!" He called into the hallway.

Behind her, Tonks heard a very faint sound of spellfire and the presence of a wand at her head vanished. She glanced around. Everyone was looking at the door and she was at the back of the room, where Silas Bentley had come.

"Hello there Tonksie, fancy seeing you here," a familiar, light tone whispered into her ear as the vibrations of the ropes being cut from in-between her hands ran up her arms. "Quite the predicament you've found yourself in."

Tonks tucked her neck to her chest to muffle her words to the rest of her room, her dull brown eyes suddenly gone a swirling purple as her heart leapt in her chest in hope. "Harrison?" She whispered. Of course it was him, she had somehow completely forgotten that he was a metamorphmagus in all of the panic.

"In the flesh, love. Now it's about time we got moving, dontcha think," he whispered back. Streaks of yellow suddenly appeared in her hair when she felt the heart-rendingly familiar feel of her wand press back into her now freed hands.

"I didn't get myself into shit, this is all your fault," she hissed back with minimal actual anger behind it, too relieved to be truly mad at him. "They were after *you*." She watched with slight amusement as Rockwell cast a *homenum revelio* and got no result. Confusion ensued.

"You keep telling yourself that Tonksie, now I think we should start taking out our opposition, no? I already dropped the two morons that were next to you, you start on the left and I'll start on the right, yeah?" He asked. Tonks nodded. "Good, now on three. One."

Tonks shifted the grip on her wand so it would be pointed the right way when she brought it forward. "Two."

She thought of the first spell and which target. The accountant was closest, she could get him with a stunner then chain the bodybind for the next, then a blasting curse for the next two maybe.

"Three."

She felt him rise behind her to the right so he wouldn't blast her head off when she did the same, her wand coming around to the fore. Luckily, it wasn't as she had worried and the pain wasn't as bad as it had been earlier. It was still there and still extremely painful, but not so much that she dropped her wand.

The accountant dropped to the floor under her stunner, and the redhead next to him fell in a similar manner. Good, two for one. Not that it was hard to aim, what with their backs to her in the small-ish room.

She was then distracted, however, by the huge swathe of flame that engulfed the right side of the room. Immediately, everyone who wasn't already stunned started either shouting in surprise and pain as their flesh was seared and, for the few who hadn't had flame-repellent charms woven into their robes, their attire was set alight. Harrison, now back in his normal form, followed this up with one of the most brutal attacks she had ever seen.

Volley after volley of highly overpowered blasting curses chained with a curse she recognised as a *very* illegal dark cutting curse nicknamed 'the bonesaw,' tore into the small, now panicked, crowd of five, turning them into a red mist in seconds. Tonks remembered Moody showing it to her with a rather graphic accounting of how it had taken his leg. He didn't need to do more than two of the combos before they were all dead, the screams ringing in the room far too loud for her liking. It was ruthlessly efficient, the art of death in all of its sickly glory. Tonks felt like throwing up.

Such was her shock was that she didn't let off her own, much less powerful variant of the blasting curse, and thus she was almost killed by the killing curse that flew towards her, the only thing saving her life being the fact that in his panic the Death Eater missed and the fact that even had it been on target the body that Harrison summoned in its way would have blocked it.

The last two were then dealt with by Harrison, Tonks' short burst of adrenaline now overpowered once more by the pain of the cruciatus stabbing through every part of her body. She watched with muted horror as he danced around their curses like he had been doing it all his life, shielding both himself and her when needed as he harassed them until he got a shot in. He managed to throw a knife into the foot of the man with the moustache, Rockwell, with his offhand and used the blood that flowed from it to crawl up from the wound and choke him until a piercer through the stomach downed him. The other saw what happened to his colleague and fell behind a shield in a purely defensive manner, trying to edge their way to flee through the door. All it took was the darkest blue shieldbreaker Tonks had ever seen for it to shatter along with the man's skull when a bone-breaker hit him behind the eyes, and then he was still.

She watched from the chair she had slumped back into as Harrison moved into the last person still moving in the room, Lady Travers.

"Please, please don't kill me," the woman whimpered as Harrison drew nearer.

"Harrison, don't," Tonks said, desperate to stop him. "She didn't do anything."

He looked from Travers to her, his head tilted. The face she had found so mischievous and delicate had an entirely different look now it was smeared and speckled with blood. Now, it looked sharp, cruel and demonlike, a dagger instead of a trick wand. And those eyes... they were one of the most terrifying things she had ever seen at that moment. The colour was eerie in and of itself, but what sent a shrill scream through her brain and a beat to skip in her heart was the complete lack of anything resembling remorse or regret for the people he had just massacred.

At that moment, Harrison Adrastus Slate was the most terrifying thing Tonks had seen in her life, and despite herself, she was drawn to him just as much as she had been when he had sat calm and innocent underneath the soft yellow candlelight of the Three Broomsticks.

He tilted his head at her. "I wasn't about to kill her, she isn't bad enough for that, just a bit of an idiot," he aimed his wand at her and stunned her with an almost colourless beam of red light without looking. "Now, we need to get you out of here."

He came over to her and made to pick her up and before she could protest that she could walk herself, which she knew she couldn't, his arms were under her knees and behind her back and he picked her up like she was nothing. He walked past the bodies, levitating the stunned ones behind him as they left to walk back up the stairs. After a moment, Tonks shrank herself to be easier to carry—doing it as slowly as possible as every transformation was still agony—and wrapped her hands around his neck. She would have found the position romantic if it weren't for their current situation.

As they moved through the rooms, Tonks became more and more horrified. There were dead bodies littering the rooms, all of them wearing dark robes. More and more kept coming and it took Tonks several seconds to process that this was all the work of the man holding her. She was an Auror, she had seen bodies, but never had she seen them in such large numbers.

"You did... you did all of this?" She whispered as they passed a man pinned to the wall by a trident through the neck, blood still dripping from his boots to the floor. There were blown-out walls, transfigured objects and curse marks on every wall she could see, and above all else there were bodies. Corpses, some not even recognisable.

"Mhm," he affirmed nonchalantly as he kicked a desk blocking a doorway, letting the body pinned to it fall to the floor. "They were pretty shit, to be honest, I would hope that my students would do better. Honestly, no semblance of teamwork at all. An Exceeds Expectations at most."

She looked up at him in disbelief. He was making jokes? Now?

"Are you fucking insane?" She blurted out before she could stop herself, although it didn't seem to phase him as he kept walking. "Harrison, you just killed how many people? And you're making a joke?"

He frowned. "They deserved it. They took you."

She looked away at the grounds they had emerged onto, not wanting to confront the possibility of any truth in those words.

"I can walk by myself, now," she said, not wanting to be near him. The smell of blood and smoke was too thick around him, as were her conflicting emotions. She was of course thankful for him saving her, she dreaded to think what would have happened had he not, but he had also just massacred a whole house full of people and didn't seem to find that morally wrong.

And the worst thing, by far the worst, was that she still wanted to kiss him all the same.

"No you cant. You can't walk, you're still suffering from cruciatus exposure," at the look she gave him he explained. "I can still feel you shaking in my arms."

Tonks didn't reply.

On the outside of the wards, they encountered Dumbledore, who rose his wand to them almost before they had even escaped the ward line, only relaxing when he saw who it was.

"Harrison, Nymphadora, are either of you hurt?" The old man asked, sounding worried at the amount of blood covering both of them. He gave a sharp look at the blood-covered jacket that Harrison was wearing but otherwise did not comment.

"Not my blood," Harrison said as he levitated the three out of the ward behind him. He nodded at her. "A lot of hers is her own though, she's got a deep gash on her left side, cutting curse I think, some pretty bad cruciatus exposure and Gardon's boils on her leg, you need to take her to Mungo's." Tonks was distantly pleased that he sounded concerned.

Dumbledore nodded and, when Harrison put her down on unsteady feet, he gently took her arm, ready to apparate away. Before he did so, he looked at Harrison, who had turned away. "Where are you going?" He asked. "And what do I do with these three?" he gestured to the three unconscious people on the floor.

Harrison stopped and looked over his shoulder at the both of them. "Just cleaning up, I'll take care of them later."

"Harrison," Tonks said, uncertainty in her tone. She wanted to say it before she left.

He rose an eyebrow at her.

"Thanks," she said weakly, her reliance on Dumbledore's arm more urgent.

He gave a short nod and a grin then he was through the wards.

She and Dumbledore stood there, watching the space where he used to be.

"He killed so many," she said, her voice low. "Who is he?"

Dumbledore shook his head, his face solemn. "I'm afraid that only he can answer that question, Nymphadora."

She didn't say anything more, and neither did he. They just stood there, staring after a man they were beginning to realise they didn't know as well as they had thought, and then they

twisted into the air and were away.

-oOo-

Harry pushed through the door of the hospital, his face drawn into a grimace. He was wearing a suit for the first time in decades. The material felt itchy on his skin. He felt awkward, like a street hound picked off the street and groomed. But he felt it appropriate.

Her family would be there, her friends, her colleagues. All people that knew her, personally. He knew he belonged there, he had rescued her after all, but he still couldn't help but feel like he wasn't supposed to intrude.

"Harrison Slate, I'm here to see Nymphadora Tonks," he said to the receptionist. She looked like a Melonie to him. The short, rotund woman with the brown bob cut gave him a slightly apprehensive side-eye as she scanned the parchment with a finger. It was a common occurrence now. Nobody knew exactly what had happened when Nymphadora Tonks had disappeared, but what they did know was that he had barged into the scene, blasted away an Auror, apparated through the Diagon Alley wards then the same woman who had disappeared had come through the doors of St Mungo's bloody and bruised not long afterwards, and several prominent figures in both the underground and pureblood scene had mysteriously gone missing. Harry spied the Daily Prophet lying on a desk next to her, the picture of Travers Manor burning to the ground spread large across the front page.

They probably could have arrested him for intruding on a crime scene, but they wouldn't be able to make anything else stick. The deaths at Hogsmead were obvious self-defence, and nobody had seen him enter or leave Travers Manor apart from Dumbledore, who wasn't about to throw away someone who had just removed a large chunk of his opposition no matter how many disappointed looks he had sent his way in the past few days. Lady Travers had awoken with the memory of a narrow escape from a terrible house fire and nothing else, the other two stunned had also mysteriously disappeared after some choice questions were asked.

On top of that, the news finally got out about him speaking with dementors and the magic inhibitor cuffs falling off, and nobody was sure if anyone would be able to arrest him even if they wanted to. It was an odd kind of stand-off, like two men who knew the other wanted to murder them but couldn't quite bring themselves to draw wands because they weren't sure what the other could do.

"Of course, Miss Tonks is in the magical curses ward on the second floor, ward ten," she said it quickly, as if he would curse her if she didn't tell him fast enough.

Harry nodded then drew his wand and swished it down himself, ostensibly to clean off any detritus on his suit that didn't exist. If the fact that the woman fell off her chair in fright as he walked away warmed his cruel, dead heart just a little then that was nobody's business.

Harry knocked on the door of ward ten three times and waited. Muffled footsteps sounded from beyond the thick white wooden door and it was opened to reveal another short healer, a man this time, in green robes. He looked up at Harry's much taller form, but this time didn't look phased.

"Harrison Slate, I'm here to see Tonks," he said.

"I know who you are," the man replied, not moving.

Harry stared at him for a few seconds. "I hope you understand that you standing there isn't going to prevent me from entering."

The man, Konstanz Draut judging by the tag on his left breast, drew himself to his full height, which was still under Harry's chin, and looked ready to give a hot retort but was denied by a sharp female voice sounding from behind him.

"Let him in, It's fine," Andromeda Tonks said as she came into view. She addressed the medi-wizard, but was looking over his head at Harry as she said it.

The man bristled further. "No more than two visitors-"

"I have studied the healing arts far longer than you have, Konstanz, I can prove it by naming every single bone in your body as I break them, would you like to try it?" She asked, her glare turning to the shorter man.

"I would listen to her mate, she's got the height advantage as well," Harry said consolingly.

The man scowled at both of them, huffed, then turned and left, muttering something incoherent under his breath.

Harry stepped into the ward and closed the door behind him with a soft *click*. He and Andromeda stood studying each other for a few moments. She seemed to be searching him for something with her eyes.

"Not exactly how I planned to meet the parents," he offered, the joke falling flat to him even as he said it.

She hummed, stared at him a while longer, then took two, slightly hesitant steps and wrapped him in a hug, the bottom of her nose on his shoulder. She was a tall woman.

"Thank you for rescuing my daughter from that horrid place," she sniffed as she drew away, the beginnings of tears welling in her eyes. "I have no idea what I would have done if I had lost her."

Harry rose an eyebrow and leaned against the doors, slightly taken aback at the affection. "You don't blame me at all? You know it was because of me she was taken in the first place."

She shook her head and wiped away a tear with the back of her hand, a slightly exasperated look coming over her face. "Nymphadora has always been wilful. No doubt if I disapproved of you she would have only chased you further, which is exactly what happened in your case."

Harry was beginning to understand how she ended up with Remus.

He hummed in a way that indicated nothing but filled in his answer anyway. "Still, I have to warn you I'm dangerous," he met her eyes. "I kill people. People are going to try and kill me because of that. Your daughter could get caught in the crossfire if she chooses to stay with me. She already has."

"They deserved it," she responded immediately. Another tear was wiped away. "What those brutes were about to do to her... no, they deserved it," she drew herself up. "I may no longer be a Black, and I may despise anything associated with the name, but I was still raised one, and I know what you did was the right thing just," her shoulders slumped back down a bit. "Just keep her safe, ok? I've come to terms with her being in danger, she's an Auror, but this is all new. She told me about the ward you gave her just... do more of that, please?" She was rambling a bit now. Harry saw the shame that he had been able to protect her daughter where her mother hadn't been able to. Harry was sure that Lily Potter would relate if she could.

He gave her a nod. "Of course," he looked to the only curtained bed in the room. "How is she handling this."

Andromeda cast a mournful look over her shoulder. "I think it would be best for you to find out for yourself, she refused to talk about you when we brought it up."

Harry felt his stomach twist.

"Alright," he said in a tone that sounded suspiciously like a croak.

Andromeda gave him a look he couldn't decipher and disappeared through the curtain, soon emerging with a tall messy haired wizard with a slight rise to his stomach and lines on his face that spoke of many beers and deep laughs. He was wearing ribbed denim jeans and a biker jacket. Evidently, this is where Tonks had gotten her style from. This was Ted Tonks, a man Harry had only met once when they had been on the run, by some miracle running into each other in one of the many old Order safe houses. They had heard the news of his death on Potterwatch three days later.

Ted shook his hand firmly. "Thank you for retrieving my daughter," he said, his face far too serious for the laughing lines. "I am of course in your debt but," he leant forward. "If you ever go anywhere near my daughter ever again-"

"Edward," Andromeda snapped, pulling away the man by the arm.

"I don't think that's really your choice, mate," Harry replied coolly, his gaze already falling back onto Andromeda. He bowed his head. "It was good to meet you Mrs Tonks, Mr Tonks," he gave the glaring man a short nod and moved away to the curtains, the sound of the door closing behind him and the soft hush of the two conversing the only noise behind him.

He opened the curtains and stood, still, watching. Tonks lay in a bed in the centre of the area, the Prophet spread out on her lap and several cards by her bedside table. It was late in the day, Harrison was probably the last to come and see her. Her parents had been with her the whole time.

She looked up at him, her eyes turning from a muddy brown to a grey much like his own before they returned to the same shade of brown. Her hair was also a dull brown with streaks of black in it. Harry couldn't blame her sombre mood, what she had gone through was rough.

They stared at each other for a while longer, the air between them heavy. A pressure on his ribs seemed to be preventing him from breaking the silence. Eventually, though, he brought up the courage to do so, feeling that breaking his ribs was preferable to letting the silence stretch longer.

"How are you holding up, Tonks."

She smiled at him, but Harry could see it was strained. "I suppose I've seen better days."

Harry frowned, stepping forward. "Will there be a scar?"

She shook her head. "Nope, skin still silky smooth as ever."

"You sure you don't want me to examine it?" He asked.

She gave him another smile, but again it was too thin and the words sounded forced. "Maybe another time." She paused. "Thank you, for getting me out of there, things were really beginning to look nasty, I don't know if I would have been able to escape by myself."

Harry waved her off. "I'm sure you would have figured something out. Plus, it was your turn to be the damsel in distress, no?"

For some reason, those words seemed to make her shrink into herself, her abilities making it literal. Her hair darkened further, her face got softer and she seemed to get smaller by a foot, even as she gave him a weak laugh. "Yeah, I s'pose so."

This was wrong, something was different, and it wasn't him. The conversation was too stilted, the silences between his words and her answers slightly too long. Something seemed to have taken residence in those moments of hesitation, and Harry had a sneaking suspicion of what that could be, although he had never imagined it would be a problem.

Her eyes were downcast when he broke the silence again. "Do they have any idea how long you'll be cooped up here?"

She shifted under the sheets, her hair turning as white as the walls. "About three more days, the cruciatus... it was much worse for me, because of the metamorphmagus abilities," she turned a calculating look on him. "But I suspect that you would know something about that, wouldn't you?"

Harry shrugged, ignoring the sensation of his stomach sinking. "I've been hit by it more times than I would like, wasn't exactly a walk in the park," he replied nonchalantly, subconsciously fiddling with the curtain he was standing next to as he watched her body change with rapt attention, filing away each minute change of colour and face shape to try and discern what she was feeling. She seemed too plain, too dull to be *his* Tonks.

"There, you did it again," she announced, a heavy frown marring her face as she finally met his eyes. "You joke about getting hit by an unforgivable like it's some kind of minor inconvenience, and you joked about killing all those people the other day," she shook her head, her voice soft. "Who are you?"

Harry swallowed. "The same guy who you sat next to in the Ministry."

"Are you though?" She asked, sitting up in the bed and jabbing a finger at the flailing flames dancing across the face of the newspaper. "Because the man I met then wouldn't have done this, wouldn't have killed all of those people."

'Ah, so this is what this is about.'

Harry scowled, his arms crossing when he realised he had been fiddling. "You had no idea what I was then, you—"

"Twenty-two," she cut in, her voice hard, mousy brown hair suddenly streaked with thin strands of red. "Twenty-two, does that number mean anything to you?"

Harry mulled the number over then shook his head, slightly confused.

"That's the number of people you killed that day, Harrison. Moody came by with a pensive and we counted. twenty-two people, and you didn't even seem fazed by it!"

Harry was very thankful for the silencing ward now.

"And that's twenty-two people that won't rise again and try the same shit again, Tonks," he replied hotly. "All of those people deserved what they got, they—"

"Who are you to decide something like that?" She cut in again, her fists clenching into the bedsheets as she pushed herself up higher. "You can't just go around killing people when you like!"

"Oh I'm sorry, I suppose I should have just waltzed into the Manor and what, stunned and bound each one? Just so they could be revived by their friends and curse me in the back? Sorry Tonks, but I wasn't prepared to start using Jelly-legs jinxes on them when they were firing killing curses back," he retorted, sarcasm lacing his tone like venom.

"Just because they use curses like that doesn't mean you have to lower yourself to their level," she said, sounding disgusted. "You were throwing around dark magic like it was nothing, what makes you better than them when you do shit like that?"

Harry stared at her.

"Are you kidding me?" He asked incredulously, stalking towards her bed with purpose, a finger jabbed in her direction. "What makes me better than them? Alright, let's see. What about the fact that I did it for *you*, I killed those people to save *your* sorry arse, and now you want to have some sort of argument about morality?"

"I'm not fucking ungrateful," Tonks spat, moving out of her bed to stand in front of him, her hair a flaming inferno of red and orange to match the pyre that was Travers Manor, her height adjusting to equal his own. "I'm grateful, of *course* I am, but that DOES NOT mean that I'm just going to ignore the fact that you massacred dozens of people!"

Harry stepped closer, hard grey staring into deep black, repeating. "I did what I did for *you*-"

"And do you have *any* idea how terrifying that is!?" She cried, her face flushing red and tears brimming. "Do you have *any* idea how terrifying it is, *knowing* that someone that I—that *anyone* would do something like that just for... just for *me*?"

Harry stared at her. Her face was flushed, her chest heaving in anger. Various thoughts entered his mind, including how far down that blush went down before he fought such images down and stepped away.

"And I would do it all again," he rasped, his voice hoarse. "I would kill them all again without hesitation. Twice their number if necessary. But you're deluding yourself if you think this somehow makes me someone else. I would have done the same before I entered Azkaban." He stared at her, mirrors hardened from reflection to hard silver, flecks of deep gold entering them. He spread his arms. "I was always like this, Tonks, this is who I am."

She shook her head. "No, no I refuse to believe that you're a murder, that's not the man I sat with."

"Oh get off your fucking moral high ground, we underlings are getting real fucking sick of it," Harry spat, his eyes getting more and more gold as his anger built. "For someone who was trained by Alastor Moody, you're being a right coward about this. You know the man held Evan Rosier under the cruciatus for a full minute before he killed him? That man was a vegetable before he put him out of his misery."

"That's not relevant-"

"No, it really is relevant," Harry interrupted. "Have you never thought it? Thought that maybe, just maybe if you had used something more permanent than a fucking *stunner*," he spat. "Maybe your friend wouldn't have been killed later on? Maybe that child wouldn't have lost their parents?"

"That still isn't your decision to make. I'm an Auror, if I don't believe in the law what is there to believe in?" She demanded. "You can't just go around killing people, it's anarchy, it's against everything I stand for-"

"You wouldn't be standing for anything if I hadn't!" He roared, his temper finally flaring, his arms thrown up in the air. "What's it going to take to get it through your thick fucking skull, if I hadn't done what I did you would be dead or worse! Do you have *any* idea what they did in those dungeons?" Harry saw the tightening of her jaw as affirmation. He laughed in disbelief. "You do! And yet you still cling to the belief that scum like that should be left alive?"

"It's not just that Harrison, it's your nonchalance about the whole thing!" She shouted back. "It's like you're some kind of god among us mortals, killing people and subverting the law

like it's nothing! Do you *ever* think about what kind of damage you could deal with your apathy? Don't think I didn't recognise that bloody jacket, Kingsley showed me the memory! You've been hopping around the country, killing people on your own judgment like you're judge, jury and executioner, like you're some divine being that decides who gets to live or die! Wake up call, dickhead, THAT'S NOT YOUR JOB!"

"Oh, so you think it should be left to the Aurors? What about the fact that it was an Auror that sold you out in the first place! When I arrived they were wiping your blood off the fucking floor Tonks, your *job*," he said acidly. "Was the reason that you were... you were almost..." Harry closed his eyes and breathed out slowly, unable to say the words. He opened them again, his face hard. "I do what needs to be done. If that means that some people call me a murderer, so be it. This is fucking war, Tonks, people die. Either they died, or you did, I made my choice about that before I even gave you the ward."

She was crying now, but she still looked furious. "Stop speaking to me like I'm a child!"

"This isn't Auror training anymore Tonks, we aren't playing games, the fight doesn't end when the enemy is stunned, this isn't a duel, this is action and reaction in an endless back and forth where the victor is the one with the most blood coating their sword. And do you know what I see? I see that *I won*."

She shook her head, backing away from him. "You're a psycho Harri, stop talking like you're some kind of Merlin be damned philosopher!"

Those words hurt. He was perfectly aware that he wasn't entirely stable, hearing voices did not a restful mind make. But having it pointed out to him by someone he had come to care for... that hurt.

"Fine," he said, his jaw tight. "I'm a murderer, I'm a psychopath, I should be locked in the deepest, darkest cell of Azkaban," he drew a bundle of roses from an enlarged pocket on the inside of his suit and tossed them onto the bed, the red petals looking like trickling blood as they fell off the flowers at the rough fall. He stepped closer to her one final time. "But you know what?"

"What," she bit out.

He leaned in, inches from her. She didn't back down in the slightest. "I can bear being all of those things and more if it means that you and others don't end up dead or broken. If preventing that from happening makes me a... 'psycho,'" his lips twisted sourly around the word. "Then so be it."

He stared into her eyes, willing her to see his sincerity. Apparently, it burnt her, because she looked away and to the side at the roses, hair shifting from red to a deep maroon.

"Those were for you, by the way," he said.

She didn't respond, and Harry sighed, suddenly feeling all of his many, far too many years.

"This is who I am, Tonks," he said as he backed away, her dark blue eyes following his passage through her heavy fringe, as if she was trying to hide from him. "I didn't change. I am who I am, take it or leave it, because I know I still want you."

He was well aware of the irony of those words.

And with that, Harry left. The last thing he saw was Tonks holding his roses with the smiley face 'get well soon' tag hanging off the front, tears streaming down her face. And then the door closed behind him, and Harry moved on.

-oOo-

Tonks stood, thorns digging into her palms as she clutched the roses and watched the sway of the curtains that signalled the departure of a man that was the cause of a huge mess of emotions.

Tonks was, as she had stated earlier, an Auror. She had built her life around the job and she loved it despite its flaws, even if the most recent development and the people in it had tainted it. All she had learnt was built upon the belief that the law must be trusted above all else, that the life of the common man couldn't be decided by a single person.

And then Harrison had entered her life and kicked apart those beliefs like a child destroying a sandcastle. A homicidal child kicking apart castle foundations that she had valued for her whole adult life.

She didn't know how, but she had always had an air around him that indicated that he was... bigger, somehow. She didn't understand it, but it was there. It was the slight buzz against her magical senses whenever he was near her, the way he acted like he was just stopping by on this world purely to cause chaos, the talking to dementors, the magical cuffs, the wards that she had never heard of, his eyes, which looked so much older than they should.

She had known this, but she never would have guessed that this was what that indicated. He had opposed everything she had been taught, he had gone into a situation by himself with no backup, killed without hesitation or mercy then avoided any consequences purely because nobody was sure that they could hold him.

And yet again, half of her was fascinated, was drawn into him like a contrary moth to a particularly dangerous flame. She had always gone against what others wanted for her, done what others had advised her not to. Her brain was telling her to run away from Harrison Slate as fast as she could, and so her heart was begging her to get closer.

Yes, the other half of her was scared. Scared that he could disrupt the foundations that she had built her life upon with such ease. The words he had said had shaken her more than she would like to admit. Could being close to him tear down everything she knew? Could she resist the pull of her heart, as she always had, even if where it would lead her would result in her beliefs being subverted?

Looking down, she saw a trickle of blood running down her wrist where a thorn had gone through the meat of her thumb. Scowling, she ripped the flowers away and threw them into

the bin in the corner and healed the hand with a quick spell from her wand, blinking away the tears furiously.

Suddenly, the curtains opened again, and in walked two people that Tonks recognised. Well, one wasn't a person yet, but she recognised him all the same.

Moody looked at her from the opening, his blue eye rotating around the room furiously even as his real one studied her with apparent indifference. "Lo Tonks, you look like shit."

Tonks snorted at the bluntness, sinking into the side of the bed. "I feel like shit, though you don't look too much better peg leg." She ruffled the head of the huge black dog in front of her. "Hey Sirius." The dog barked in response and nosed her knee.

Moody grunted. "Aye, cruciatus will do that," he jabbed his walking staff at the dog. "The mutt wanted to talk," his eye whizzed, following the top of the ceiling and the curtains of the area. "I would put up a privacy ward, but it looks like Slate already did that," he poked the doorway with his wand, sending a wave of blue around the room. He grunted again, this time in satisfaction. "Bloody good one too." His eye fixed on her again, studying the tears and slumped form. "I don't need to go out there and curse him, do I?"

Tonks shook her head and smiled a tight smile, her head bowed and facing the floor, looking into Sirius' dark eyes as she fondled his ears. "No, I'm all good."

Moody studied her for a moment longer then nodded and fixed Sirius with a look. "Make it quick, if you get caught I'm not saving your mangy behind," and with that Moody exited and closed the curtains behind him to stand guard.

Immediately, the dog spun in a blur and a man appeared. His hair was a long, silky black running in waves down to the bottom of his neck. He had a face that should have looked young but was offset by lines and shadows that were entirely out of place on the face of a 35-year-old man. Still, his grin was mischievous and bright, as was the light in his eyes.

He wrapped her in a hug, one she reciprocated easily. "Tonks," he said warmly.

She sighed and hugged him closer. "Hiya Sirius," she replied. She suddenly became aware of the very thin hospital gown between them. "Sirius, I know what they say about Blacks and their cousins, but I'm not technically a Black, don't you think this is a bit intimate?" She jested weakly.

He jumped back from her like she was on fire and seemed to realise for the first time what she was wearing. He let out a bark of laughter/ "Sorry 'bout that, suppose you can take the man out of the Black, but not the Black out of the man." He sat next to her, his grey eyes flitting from the discarded roses in the bin then back to her. "What's wrong Tonks, boy problems?" He asked with a mischievous smile as he sat sideways on the end of the bed.

Tonks sighed and dropped her face into her hands. "Yeah. It's like I never even knew him, Sirius."

Sirius frowned. "Slate? What makes you say that?"

"He killed all of those people Sirius... 22 people, and those are only the ones I saw."

Sirius' frown didn't move. "And why does this mean you didn't know him?"

She turned to look at him. "Are you kidding? He was so sweet Sirius, he seemed so perfect," her words turned bitter in her mouth. "I suppose it was too good to be true."

There was a moment of silence as he regarded her carefully. "You know he did it—"

"For me, yes, I know, he only said it about ten times," she ground out. "That doesn't make it any better. What happens when the next asshole picks a fight? Is he just going to murder them in cold blood?" The simmering anger that had been stewing since he had left was finally extinguished then in an exhausted breath, and she slumped against the headboard of the bed.

Sirius remained quiet for almost a full minute, an uncharacteristically long time for the former marauder, long enough that Tonks peeked through her fingers at him again curiously. His face was drawn and pensive and he seemed to be pondering something. Eventually, he seemed to decide, and his face relaxed. His eyes seemed to dim, and the lines on his face deepened further under the weight of his decision.

"I'm going to tell you something that I have not told anyone else for a long... long time," Sirius said, taking a deep breath.

"Sirius," Tonks said worriedly, seeing how withdrawn the man had become. "You don't have to—"

"No, no I think I do, this will help me just as much as you," Sirius explained with a raised hand as he shuffled back onto the bed and sat cross-legged on the end. Tonks nodded hesitantly and got under the covers to lean more comfortably against her pillows.

Sirius took another fortifying breath and seemed to gather himself. "Okay," he said, shuffling in place. "You know that I had a... reputation, back in school," he looked her in the eye and gave her a tight-lipped smile.

Tonks smiled in return. "You mean you were a man whore, yes I know."

He huffed a breath through his nostrils. "That's one way of putting it," he admitted. "What I don't tell most people is that, eventually, I fell in love with a woman towards the end of my Hogwarts days, much like James did, but unlike James, we didn't fully settle before the end of Hogwarts. We continued to make contact after school. She was a healer, I was an Auror, and with how I worked I saw her often enough," he chuckled ruefully. "Eventually, she fell in love with me in return, and we were happy together. I couldn't believe it."

Tonks watched as a single tear fell down Sirius' face before he wiped it away, picking at the sheets of the bed agitatedly with his other hand.

"Her name was Marlene McKinnon."

"Oh, Sirius," she leant forward and grabbed his hand, stopping its movement. "You don't have to tell me this." She had heard what had happened to the McKinnons. The entire family

had been slaughtered by Death Eaters, it had been a huge loss to the Order as the entire family had been incredibly talented. Marlene had been as good of a fighter as a healer from what little she had heard.

"No, don't stop me or I'll wuss out before I can continue," Sirius said firmly. "You need to hear this."

Tonks nodded hesitantly. "Okay."

He took another deep breath. "One time, me and James interrupted a raid on a small town called North Sunderland, one of the first we went to for the Order. The Death Eaters were slaughtering all the Muggles in sight, doing awful things to them," he shuddered at the memory. "In the fight, I managed to stun one of them and bind him before I continued, but I got drawn away, and the man was revived so he could apparate away. But not before I recognised him."

Sirius' eyes closed, and tears fell freely now. "A year or so later, Marlene and her family were all killed by Death Eaters. In that same year, you may remember that Igor Karkaroff had his trial, in which the man that I stunned, Cohan Travers, was revealed to be one of the number that killed them. He lead them."

He looked up at her, his eyes red-rimmed. "And afterwards, even now, I wonder, if I had used a piercer instead of a stunner, would she have still died? Maybe someone else would have just taken his place," he shrugged. "There's no way to know, but there isn't a day that goes by that I don't regret killing Cohan Travers on that day. Afterwards, in the few months between Marlene's death and my capture, I was far more lethal, far more deadly, always going for the killing blow. There's a reason why they thought I could have done what they said I did in the end."

"Travers is dead now," Tonks said softly. "Harrison killed him, too. At least we think so."

"And for that, I am in his debt," he ran his calloused thumb over Tonks' still hand. "What I'm trying to say, Tonks, is that perhaps he did what he did to prevent the same from happening to you."

Tonks sighed and sank back into the pillows again. "I know, but it's just so scary, to know that he would do such awful things just for me."

"Did he seem to take pleasure in it? Did he prolong their pain before they died?"

Tonks grimaced and shook her head, remembering his display in the dungeons. "No, that was part of what made it so scary. He seemed entirely indifferent to it, like it didn't matter to him at all. The way he killed them, Sirius, it was one of the most brutally efficient things I've ever seen," she swallowed. "Moody would often try and get me to do similar things, but..." She trailed off. If pushed, she knew she could use some of the more lethal curses that Moody had taught her. But Moody was restricted by the Ministry program, even if his personal tutorage was more advanced the man still couldn't teach them dark magic no matter how much he wanted to, not that he didn't slip them a few choice books from the evidence room every now and again. But under the advice of her father, who had always been a pacifist, and her mother,

who had always had an aversion to anything dark, she had ignored it. Even if she did want to use the curses, if someone had to be put down, that was the job of the Aurors. Not a single man.

"Moody has done that and worse, believe me," Sirius said. "He was the decapitate first ask questions later type in the war, I think he probably would have done the same as Slate did in that situation."

Tonks nodded grudgingly. "Am I being ungrateful, do you think? I mean, he did save my arse."

Sirius smiled and shook his head. "No. You're reacting as anyone would when faced with such a thing, you have found that you didn't know someone you thought you did. Trust me when I say I know all about how hot emotions run after a high-stress situation."

Tonks nodded again. She knew as well as he did which specific Halloween night he was speaking of.

"I'm not saying you have to run and apologise to him right away, but you have to see this whole mess doesn't necessarily mean that he is evil. There's a difference between what he did and what Death Eaters do. Slate did this to protect children, and more than likely saved many lives doing so, and of course to save you. Death Eaters and the Dark Lord kill for power or terror, they are two different things. I killed when I was an Auror, does that make me as bad as Voldemort? Moody has killed countless people, does that make him as bad as Dolohov?"

"Of course not," Tonks denied vehemently.

"And there you are," Sirius leant forward and placed a steady hand on her upper arm. "I suppose what I'm trying to say is don't let small things like morality get in the way of the things you love like it did for me." He patted her arm. "Just think about it."

"I'm not in love with him," she said, immediately on the offensive and not sure exactly why.

Sirius smiled a wry smile. "Of course not. Slip of the tongue."

After that, the two of them talked for another half hour before he left, and afterwards, Tonks felt much better. Talking with Sirius always took her mind off of things, and by the end, her hair and eyes had gained much more colour, even if it was pastel instead of the usual brighter colours.

In the silence, the Auror thought. In her mind, grey eyes and sharp corners swam amongst harsh words and ill-thought statements. She concluded, in the end, that they needed to talk. Neither was without blame, both had thrown words she knew they would regret.

Soon, she decided, already thinking about what she would say. She sent one more mournful smile at the flowers he had left before putting them in a vase to the side of the room and settling in to try and get some more sleep.

Aphrodite

Chapter 10: Aphrodite

Harry stood, hands clasped behind him and back straight as he watched the second years slowly filter into the room. As with many of the classes now—apart from some of the upper year ones, who knew him better—students took seats starting at the back and filled in forwards from there, the last to come in approaching the seats nearest to him like skittish animals, as if he was about to draw his wand and curse them at any moment.

It was safe to say that many found it jarring to read the fantastical stories being written about him in the Prophet and then have to sit in the same room with him these days.

"I'll call your name, you will raise your hand," Harry said after everyone had sat and the room was silent, making many start in surprise. When he was finished with the register and was sure that everyone was listening, he began the lesson.

"Close the books for now, today I need you to listen," he said brusquely, waiting for the last book to thump shut before he continued. "I'm going to be talking to you about power, and how it works in the magical world. I'm telling you this now because you are still young enough to not let your pride blind you, and after a year of education here you may have already begun to see some of what I'm about to explain to you."

He paused, looking over all of them, eyes a dark, steely grey. "This is *important*. So again, I need to all to *listen*."

You could have heard a pin drop in the room, it was so quiet. But they were paying attention, and that was all that Harry needed.

He nodded in satisfaction. "Good. Now, the first thing I'm going to tell you is that magic, at its core, is *unfair*." There were some perplexed faces in the room, but most looked unsurprised at this, which comforted Harry a little. "Some of you—those who have been raised in magical households perhaps—will have already been taught this, told to accept it." He swept his eyes across the room. "But for those of you who have not been told, it will come as more of a shock. In the muggle world, everyone is far more equal in the power they can put out on average. This is not the same for mages.

"There will come a day when you will notice that another is capable of producing a spell that you cannot, or is able to cast it more effectively. You will question why, and get frustrated by it, wondering at the disparity between someone you see as an equal or even lesser person than you. You might become envious of him or her, and begin to become hostile, jealous or both. What I want to do now is nip that way of thinking in the bud, so that in the future when your hormones kick in and you're a hot-headed teenager you don't do something stupid because you haven't been taught about how things are and hurt those around you and yourself.

"The bare, unbiased truth is that not everyone is born the same. I am—more than likely—more powerful than anyone in the room will ever be. This isn't a boast, this isn't me trying to

scare you, it's just how it is. It's the same for Albus Dumbledore and yes, the Dark Lord as well."

He waited for the gasps to die down then leant forward, hands planted on his desk as his voice dropped. "Many wouldn't want me to tell you this, they think that it gives children the wrong idea, delusions of grandeur. But in my opinion, those people are merely exacerbating the problem by sending you out there ignorant of reality. Eventually, some of you will realise that—magically—you are more powerful than others. It is inevitable, but what I want to tell you now is, above all else, *do not let it get to your head*."

"Power is but one aspect of magic. Yes, being more powerful will give you an advantage, but only against those who don't know how to counter it. Power often corrupts, making those who wield it in abundance arrogant and dismissive of those they see below them. It's easy to feel intimidated by someone who has more magical power than you, as has been the case in previous wars. But I'm telling you now, *power isn't everything*. You can be smarter, faster. Use their belief that they are better to lure them into complacency. Even a man such as Albus Dumbledore can be defeated by a clever wizard who waited for the opportune moment and snuck an *expelliarmus* to his off-hand. Mages like him often win fights purely through intimidation, the victim's knowledge of the disparity between the power of two mages making them throw their wand to the ground at the first sight before they even attempt to defend themselves."

"So what I am saying is that, yes, some of you may be more powerful than others, some may have a natural talent for something that gives them a perceived advantage, but you must *not* allow yourself to be defeated before the fight has even been fought because of arrogance. In this class, I will find your strengths, your weaknesses, and then we will play to them and introduce new ones, so that when you battle something or someone with greater power than yourself you will not falter, and will instead *fight*."

He stood straight again, arms swept wide. "Magic is unfair, magic picks and chooses who it gives its power to more. But that is just the magic, and you are not solely your magic. It is your choices that will define whether you allow that unfairness to dictate the course of your life."

He stood before all the young faces and let the silence stretch, let his warning sink into their brains. Their hesitance seemed to have been forgotten, and many even looked eager.

When he had judged the silence to be long enough Harry dragged a sharp grin onto his face and twisted his wand into his hand.

"Now, BEGIN!"

-oOo-

As soon as the last student left and the sound of excitedly chattering voices faded Harry waved his hand to the door, causing it to slam shut. He sank into the comfortable leather chair behind his desk heavily, the strained smile on his face disappearing like a mask falling.

He really hoped that they took it to heart. The imbalance of power between one mage to the next was what allowed Voldemort to walk uncontested through a busy street without anyone raising their wand. He prayed to all the magical beings that maybe—just maybe—he could start to change that perception from the classroom. The wizarding world didn't need more sheep.

Reaching down into a lower drawer to the side of his desk, Harry withdrew a bottle of muggle scotch from inside with a tumbler and poured a healthy amount in, downing it with practised ease afterwards. The shadows of sunset crept across the room like Death lowering the drapes on his little spot in the world as he filled his crystal glass with more amber liquid and poured it down his throat, a scowl marring his sharp features, angular black brows knit together.

Tonks, his mind was on Tonks. It concerned him how much her words had affected him. He hadn't had anyone get too close to anyone for many years, hadn't allowed his emotions to go beyond his own control since he was thirty and had lost his partner to his own stupid mistake. And now, Tonks had done just that.

Harry knew he was different, how could he not be with the life he had lived? Tonks' words about him being above everyone else held more truth than he would like to admit, but he preferred to think he was instead below everyone else, the hidden scalpel carving out the benign tumours that wracked the wizarding world so that sweet souls like Tonks didn't have to. Which was ironic, considering what her job was. He knew that what he did was distasteful to most, but he did what he thought was necessary. Killing was what he did, and he was good at it. Had been since he was a teen. He would never feel guilt for any that he had killed, his words to Tonks had been true, he would have done it all again for her.

For her. It struck him that he was beginning to think of doing things more and more for the sake of her. He supposed that it was as good a motivation as any. And what a motivation it was, so strong was it that he had carved a river of blood just to get to *her*. He'd set the world aflame to keep her with him.

And yet again, that caused a twinge of unease to flash through him. In his line of work emotional attachment hadn't been an option. Emotions could be too easily manipulated and used against him, and with who he had been that had always been a distinct responsibility. This woman that he had known for such a short amount of time had managed to get so close to his heart, that which he thought had shrivelled and died long ago, and he couldn't imagine losing her. And now, she had apparently decided that she wanted nothing to do with him. He didn't like how much that hurt.

Harry downed one last glass, the warmth of the scotch burning down his throat as he tipped it back more violently than usual and threw the empty glass at the wall. He stood and ran his hand through his hair in agitation. "Fucking hell Potter, get your shit together. You're not a sodding hormonal schoolboy anymore." His voice was rough from the alcohol and it carried easily around the empty classroom, which only made him feel more alone. The room was dark now, and he belatedly realised that he had been sitting there for hours, the sun had already set. And here he was, brooding like some angsty teen. He was almost a century old for Merlin's sake, he was too old for this shit.

With an irritated growl, Harry decided that he needed to get thoroughly pissed and do something dangerous and stupid to take his mind off things. Throwing a long dark brown leather overcoat over himself, Harry stepped into his floo and emerged into the smoke-laden room of the Hogshead. He took one look at the space, decided it was far too busy for his current mood and exited after waving at Abe, ignoring the dark, fearful or (by far the worst) reverent looks he was getting from the occupants of the dingy old bar. The papers seemed to have come to the conclusion that he was some kind of Dark Lord, which amused him greatly. He found it funny that he had managed to get accused of the same thing that his younger self had, in the same year no less. Fate was a funny little thing.

He twisted away from the Hogsmead apparition point and landed in the Diagon Alley one with only the smallest of *pops*, his ponderings and alcohol distracting him from silence. He looked up the length of the Alley to the Leaky Cauldron and came to the same conclusion that he had at the Hogshead. After a moment's indecision, he walked the other way, further into the Alley.

Again, people parted before him as if he was maintaining a banishing spell five paces in front of himself, giving him wary looks and shepherding children under protective arms. It was funny, when a mage got to a certain calibre and then got in trouble with the law there was often an awkward sort of stand-off. One average mage could cause a lot of damage on his own, and when mages of himself, Dumbledore and Voldemort's strength were involved it was magnified tenfold. He had seen it before, multiple times. Dumbledore had flamed out of Hogwarts wards and evaded the entire country's Auror force with ease before returning with a happy smile only months later, and nobody had dared lift a finger to him even if he had technically been breaking multiple laws and resisting arrest. He had been called to take care of mages like Dumbledore himself numerous times when Ministries were in over their heads. The only way to match that kind of power was to bring in another of equal or more strength.

The end result was the Wizengamot being too scared to call for his arrest. Probably because they (along with everyone else) suspected that he was the one that had single-handedly broken into one of their precious ancient mansions and burnt it down to ash and bone. If he had done it to one, who was to say that the mysterious Harrison Slate wouldn't break into all of their homes and murder them in their sleep?

Sometimes, Harry wondered how the wizarding world hadn't fallen into ruin yet. He sent another prayer (to all the muggle deities this time) that his message to the children would sink in and change things.

He came to a stop outside a bar down a side alley not far from the looming marble of Gringotts. It was formed from large, ungainly blocks of old grey stone and mottled timber and looked like it had been there before Diagon had. It was called Garnuk's Hand, the image of a goblin's wrinkled hand pushing forward a stack of galleons adorning the ancient headboard. It was the place most frequented by weary Gringotts employees and goblins themselves.

It had an interesting history, including a story about a group of goblins saving the wizarding king at the time, but all that mattered to Harry at that moment was that it was quiet. The

people who frequented the place were far too worn down by the slave drivers that were the goblins for any kind of rowdy atmosphere.

Harry pushed open a heavy stone door that reminded him of a vault door, the rough-hewn granite swinging inwards far more weightlessly than what should have been possible, revealing a room that could have been best described as... heavy. Heavy timber rafters crisscrossed the ceiling, the thickness more than his entire torso. The bar and stools were both made from huge, solid blocks of marble much like Gringotts. Soft music ran underneath the buzz of conversation and clinks of glasses, all of which stopped when people began to notice who had entered. Harry observed the pub, and the pub observed him back. He was amused by the wary glances being thrown his way for all of about three seconds, then got tired of it. Eyeing the bar, Harry saw a few stools free around a singular woman in the middle. Shrugging, Harry strode through the room, ignoring everyone backing away from him, and took a stool next to the woman, quickly ordering a drink afterwards. As with most things goblin, the Crackling Ale he ordered was almost double the price as it would be anywhere else. But again, at least it was quiet.

As he waited for his drink to arrive he looked around the bar once more, noticing that everyone was still quiet and staring at him.

He did a double-take. Actually, no they weren't.

'Huh.'

Harry followed their gazes and his own eyes landed on the woman next to him, who was still resolutely staring forwards as she spun the spine of a wineglass idly between long, delicate fingers. Her hair was a platinum blonde, the sheen unnaturally bright and flowing. Her features were delicate and defined, her nose sharp and cheekbones prominent. Harry immediately recognised her, and knew if she turned towards him slights, he would be affixed with bright, azure blue eyes. She was wearing loose, flowing robes, deep blue with a silver trimming that matched her hair.

'Ah, well that explains it.' He had managed to find a seat next to Fleur Delacour of all people. Not really much of a surprise, now he thought about it, he was fairly certain that at this point she was working at Gringotts as a... something. Honestly, Harry didn't think he had ever bothered to find out.

"Bloody hell lads, I know I'm a looker but there's no need to stare," he said, louder than strictly necessary. The words seemed to snap all of the men out of their collective trance, shaking their heads bemusedly as the few goblins arrayed around the room looked on in disgust. The little blighters weren't as affected by her charms as wizards were.

Harry turned back to see his drink had been placed with a sound *thunk* before him, the goblin behind the bar giving him a trademark sneer which he returned before the little guy waddled off to annoy someone else.

"Little shits," Harry muttered as he lifted the ale to his mouth and took a sip, delighting in the sensation of his entire body becoming suddenly fizzy.

"You are not affected by my allure," a soft voice said from next to him. It would have probably been difficult to know who had spoken to him over the renewed chatter in the bar if the French accent hadn't been so distinctive.

Harry glanced to the side to see that she was studying him, looking remarkably like a hawk who had just pinned down something to play with. He shrugged. "No, I don't suppose I am."

She seemed to be expecting him to say more to her, probably used to men telling her their biography after she looked at them for more than a second. She blinked a few times, off balance, before she continued. "You do not understand, zees is a very rare thing," she gestured around the room in general in a distinctly dismissive manner. "Zese brutes in zis country, zey have no control," she sniffed.

Harry turned to her fully on the cushioning charmed block of stone, gulping down another mouthful of his ale before he flashed her a grin. *"You must forgive my fellow countrymen for their lack of manners. But I must ask, if you hate this place so much, why are you here?"* He asked in French. Of course, he didn't actually know French. No matter how much he hadn't come back to the UK once he started working for the ICW he was still British at heart. Disliking the French was in his blood. No, what he had actually done was apply a translation charm under the table.

The only sign that she was surprised was a raised eyebrow. *"I aspire to be a cursebreaker, however there were no open places at the French branch of Gringotts,"* she shrugged, tipping the wine glass forward to allow a goblin to fill it up again as she pushed a galleon forwards. *"So, I settled for the next best thing,"* she looked around at the various men ogling her with what they probably thought was stealth. She sniffed again. *"No matter how barbaric the people here are, the Gringotts branch in England is a famously competent one,"* she eyed him with a small smirk. *"And do not think I didn't see that charm you cast under the table."*

Right, veela. Like most magical creatures, she was more sensitive to magic than most. Probably would mean she would be a damn good cursebreaker, actually. After all, that's why goblins were good at warding, and she had the advantage of a wand.

Harry laughed. *"Guilty as charged,"* he thrust his hand forward, *"Harrison Slate."*

She eyed him with distinct amusement as she carefully took his hand and shook it lightly. Her skin was warm, almost uncomfortably so. A creature of fire. *"I already know who you are, Meester Slate, your face has been spread across the paper for days."*

"All lies, I assure you," he replied, his smile a bit strained. He had forgotten exactly how much he despised Rita Skeeter. He lightened his own mood by imagining a beetle in Umbridge's old place of residence back in Cornwall.

"I'm sure they are," she said, her eyes twinkling. The pupils were a little too large to be natural, giving her an almost alien appearance.

"And you, of course, are Fleur Delacour, the famous Triwizard Champion, you suffered the same fate as I over the previous year from what I saw," he said with a mocking smile, moving on from the unpleasant topic.

She frowned as she took a careful sip from her wine, wetting her lips afterwards. She probably had no idea how attractive that looked. Actually, scrap that, she knew exactly what she was doing. *"Not exactly what I would like to be renowned for, that entire contest was a disaster."*

Harry nodded sagely. *"Understandable, I heard your solution to the first task was so boring that even the dragon fell asleep."*

She glared at him for a full second before she tipped her head back and laughed, the musical sound drawing the eye of pretty much everyone in the room, even some of the goblins. Harry smirked at the jealous looks being thrown his way and took a smug sip of his drink, waiting for Fleur to compose herself.

"Oh, I am zorry," she said, not sounding it. *"Eet 'as been a while since someone 'as teased me so, not since I left ma sœur in France, it... 'ow do you English say, took me off guard,"* she nodded in satisfaction. *"Oui, it took me off guard."*

Harry shook himself from his observation of the way her hair was moving and grinned at her like a loon. *"Happy to be of assistance,"* he turned to the barman (bargoblin?) and ordered a fire and ice cocktail. The result was a tall concave glass, half swirling orange and half crawling ice-blue. *"No matter how much of a disaster the tournament was, I assume it helped with getting the job?"* He asked.

She nodded, switching back to French. *"Like many of the ancient artefacts that we've claimed for ourselves, the Goblet of Fire is a goblin-made object, they know how it functions. It chose the most worthy from all who put their names into it,"* she was trying to appear modest with the slight shrug she performed, but the proud smile was shining through despite her best efforts, *"my entire year put their name in the Goblet, and out of all of them, it chose me, and so the goblins followed suit."*

Harry gave her an appraising look. He hadn't actually known that. *"That's respectable. So you are, I assume, a preacher of the 'more than just a pretty face' argument?"* he asked, a smirk tugging the corner of his lips as he drank from the cocktail, the feeling of warmth and ice slithering down his neck.

She let out an amused huff through her nose. *"I do not respond in such a cliché manner any longer, I am more likely to inflict harm upon their own face if they say something that would encourage me to reply in such a way. Make sure they are never even a pretty face."*

Harry smiled. *"I'm sure, you do look like quite the formidable witch, probably even more so when you're in form."*

"I think it would be best for you if you never found out."

Harry laughed again, feeling his worries ebb away due to the spirit of the conversation he was in. *"If I ever make a veela angry enough for her to want to peck my eyes out, I will probably deserve it,"* he said, making the corner of her own mouth tug up a bit. *"Still, cursebreaking, that is a very dangerous profession, no?"*

She gave him a hard look, looking suddenly hostile. *"I do not need your approval, I am perfectly competent in the magic required to do the job,"* she said icily.

Harry looked at her sideways, amused, as he took another drink. *"I don't know why you think I would disapprove or not, we only just met,"* he said, grey eyes twinkling, *"if you want to go blow that pretty head off your shoulders poking runes in a jungle somewhere, go ahead princess. I'm not about to stop you. Girl power."*

A hot blush rose up her neck and infused her cheeks as she looked away from him, pulling up the collar of her robes in a vain attempt to hide it. *"Apologies, I am far too used to people just seeing my..."* her lips quirked up, *"pretty face, and objecting me to do such a dangerous job,"* she lifted a shoulder in effortless elegance. *"I don't know if it is because of the allure or because of the stigma about blondes."*

Harry huffed a laugh and drank. *"And you are about as blonde as it gets, no?"*

"I suppose so."

They fell into a comfortable silence for a few minutes, neither really caring to put effort into the conversation for a while as they drank. Magic was an incredible thing, but Harry thought that along with occlumency the things it could do to alcohol were among the best attributes of the miracle.

"So why cursebreaking?" she gave him a look and he rose a shoulder in a pale imitation of the artistry that was her own movement, *"you never actually answered my question."*

She seemed satisfied with that and seemed to consider her answer for a while before she replied. *"Perhaps it is because I simply want to prove those who disparage my heritage wrong, when a cursebreaker uncovers a good relic or tomb they often get printed in the Breakers newspaper, and when those who say my kind are only good for intercourse see the name 'Fleur Delacour,'"* she spread her hands apart before her as if unfurling the title, *"under an accomplishment that they know is beyond their own abilities, I will smile my brightest smile."* She had an incredibly vindictive look on her face and her pupils had got unnaturally big, and unnaturally black. *"I also got the best marks in ancient runes in thirty years, seventeen years for defence against the dark arts, my qualifications uniquely suit the job."*

Frankly, Harry found the scene genuinely frightening. Facing down a Basilisk was one thing, an irate veela within fireball-throwing distance was another.

"And how close are you to achieving that goal?" Harry asked, hoping to act as the fire extinguisher in this instance.

She seemed to sag slightly, which didn't suit her proper and proud posture at all. *"It is slower than I had hoped, it is part of the reason why I am here,"* she gestured around her with her off-hand, not really needing to clarify why this place in particular was the chosen location to mope. *"People seem to think that because veela are not human, goblins will like us more than they like mages,"* Fleur snorted, taking a spiteful sip from her drink, *"they are mistaken. Goblins hate everyone equally, even other goblins. I have been stuck working in cursed*

object detection for my entire time there, and they show no indication of giving me any kind of opportunity to rise in the ranks."

In Harry's mind, an idea was beginning to form. A wide grin was spreading across his face as it took shape and life, Fleur caught it from the corner of her eye and gave him a wary look. Apparently, even if she had only known him for a total of about ten or twenty minutes she could tell when he was about to do a classic Harry Potter and do something potentially lethal to all involved.

"What are you 'zinking?" Fleur asked warily.

Harry's grin didn't abate in the slightest. *"Say, Fleur, would you say that you are the adventurous type?"* he asked innocently.

Fleur's eyes narrowed. *"Would you?"*

Harry shrugged. *"Of course. You entered your name into the Goblet of Fire, probably knowing you would be the one to be chosen, you moved to a different country to chase a job that is considered one of, if not the most dangerous and lethal job in the world, a mage doesn't do these things without a little of ingrained thrill-seeking."*

She scrutinised him for a while. *"Okay... I suppose you are correct, but I know that look. My sister had it once, it resulted in the house elves relocating the pond from the garden into my parent's en suite, you are planning something, 'arrison."*

Harry wasn't sure which was hotter, 'arry or 'arrison. He decided they were equally sexy and moved on.

He rose an eyebrow at her. *"You will have to tell me that story sometime, but not right now. Right now,"* Harry leant forward eagerly, lowering his voice, *"how would you like to come with me and break into an ancient hidden tomb and call it work experience?"*

Fleur's eyes widened, her almost empty glass hitting the bar with an audible *thunk*. *"You are being serious?"* she whispered.

Harry nodded, his smile blinding. *"Oh, it's serious alright. I was planning on breaking it myself, but I suppose I could take an apprentice along."*

She looked hesitant. *"Are you... qualified, for such a thing?"*

Another risen eyebrow later Harry replied. *"Is me not being the youngest Defence teacher in almost one-hundred years not enough for you?"*

She shook her head. *"No. Dumbledore's choice of teachers is renowned for being... lacklustre."*

Harry thought for a second. Now that he had come up with his plan, he was quite attached to the idea of bringing Fleur along with him, for reasons he didn't fully understand.

"How about," he said slowly, *"I prove to you that I am competent."*

She still looked sceptical. *"And how exactly would you do that?"*

Harry withheld the urge to say something biting. She had no way to know that he had been breaking into magical strongholds for longer than her parents had been alive and had forgotten more things than she knew. Since he had only mastered occlumency when he was 21, that was actually probably true. But it would be pointless to be angry at the girl.

"I'll take you back to my house, and make a runic array that you don't think is possible," Harry said, his eyes distracted as he considered what he was going to make.

Fleur leaned away from him a little. *"Your house?"*

Harry snapped back into reality and realised how weird that sounded coming from a guy she had only just met. *"Yes, my house. You want a vow?"*

Fleur stayed silent for a minute or so. Harry took the opportunity to finish off his cocktail, the last flickering flame flowing down his throat with an audible *thwump* of snuffed fire.

"I must admit, I am intrigued," Fleur said, her head tilted to the side. *"There have been many stories about you 'arrison, I'm interested in being the witch to find out if the rumours of you fending off twenty dark wizards has any veracity,"* she said cheekily, *"although, I am less interested in the rumours of you yourself being a dark wizard."*

Harry tipped his flat hand from side to side in a 50/50 gesture. *"I wouldn't call myself dark, maybe the better classification would be... dim."*

"Dim," Fleur repeated, looking like she was trying hard not to laugh.

Harry nodded seriously. *"Of course, I'm not dark, but I'm not light either. Grey doesn't work, dark and light aren't colours, so the in-between is dim, not grey."*

"You know, if your trying to convince me of your competence, calling yourself dim is perhaps not the best way to go about it," Fleur said, finally letting out a little giggle that she stopped with a hand, looking horrified that she had done something so dumb-blonde-ish.

"Hmph," Harry said with faked disgruntlement. *"So, are you in or are you out?"*

Again she considered him with all her attention, and again Harry got the impression of being pinned under the talons of a bird of prey as it pondered whether to eat him now or later.

"Against my better judgement, I think I will accompany you, if only to see what sort of adventure you have concocted," she was trying to sound reluctant, but the anticipatory sparkle in those bright blue eyes gave her away. *"But I will, of course, require a vow,"* she smiled weakly, *"I have already, unfortunately, learnt my lesson on needing such things when invited to any man's home."*

Harry rose his eyebrow.

The smile became thinner. *"You heard about the house fire on Ackerley Lane?"*

"Ah," Harry nodded, "*well, seeing as I have no intention of my house becoming ashes, I will, of course, do the vow,*" Harry looked away and snapped his fingers at a nearby goblin, at the same time cancelling the translation charm under the table so there was no interference with the vow. "Oi, you! I need someone to bind an oath, you up for it?"

They had to put the goblin on one of the high stools while he and Fleur stood so the little guy could reach their intertwined hands. Harry didn't swear on either his life or his magic, you had to either be exceptionally stupid or confident to swear on such things. Instead, he swore a more complex vow in which if he made any unwanted moves, perceived or not, he would experience steadily increasing pain until he stopped, similar to the cruciatus but without lasting effects. It was the standard vow for any situation where you wanted to go somewhere with someone you didn't fully trust. With magic making it so much easier to control someone, women learnt from a very young age to make sure something like that would never happen. The vow was made specifically for their safety. The ingrained lesson was probably the only thing stopping cases of abuse of any kind from being astronomical.

When they were done, they both began to gather up their things. The cloak that she fastened over her shoulders was a lighter blue than the darkness of her robes, lined with what looked like actual bronze magically woven into a thin strip around the edges. She flipped the cowl of her cloak up over her head and looked at him expectantly.

Harry proffered his arm, a wide grin on his face. "Let us go on a merry adventure, *Madame.*"

Fleur smiled too and took his arm as they left the bar, looking far less weary than she had when Harry had entered. "Yes, let us."

-oOo-

They arrived next to a grass bank, not directly into the house. On one side was another house and on the other side a lively bar, from which music and rowdy voices tumbled. Next to him, Fleur looked around curiously. "Are we already inside 'ze wards?"

Harry looked over his shoulder just before he entered the wards. "No, we entered into a small notice-me-not ward that I erected if I ever needed to bring someone new into the main wards, just so if someone apparated in they wouldn't be noticed by the local muggles."

Fleur nodded. "That is smart, I suppose," she admitted.

"You ain't seen nothing yet. Before I bring you in, let's have our first lesson," Harry said, grinning as he gestured at where his ward line was. "Open your senses. What do feel from the wards?"

Fleur gained a look of intense concentration as she drew her wand and pointed it in the general direction of the ward, closing her eyes after a while.

"'Ze wards... they are..." she searched for the word, "*tremblotant*, they waver in and out."

"Wards? Plural?" Harry prompted.

Fleur nodded. "Zere are two different sets?"

"Is that a question or a statement?"

She gave him an irritated look. "Statement."

Harry hummed in agreement. "Indeed there are. What you are feeling is one set deactivating and one activating. Of course, the timings overlap so there is no time for someone to slip in between, making it much harder for someone to break through them. It is harder to pin one set down. Whoever's trying to break in either have to break one fast enough before it disappears, or break both sets at the same time, which would be much harder with their shifting nature."

Fleur looked grudgingly impressed. "'Ow much did zis cost you? I 'ave never 'eard of such a thing."

He held up one hand, fingers curled in a zero. "I made these myself," Harry said, not bothering to hide the smugness in his tone.

She blinked once, twice before she replied. "Is 'zis what you wanted to show me as proof?" She asked.

Harry shook his head as he proffered her his forearm for her to take, channelling his magic into it so he could account for the shifting wards. "Princess, what I'm going to make is going to be much cooler than these old things. As I said, you ain't seen nothing yet," he said.

Fleur rolled her eyes but took his arm anyway and let herself be pulled in. "I wish you would not call me princess," she muttered with a pout.

Harry stayed silent as they walked up the path, right up until they were almost at the door, where he nudged her gently with his elbow. "You should know that seeing as I didn't feel a single twinge from the vow, I can tell you don't actually dislike it."

-oOo-

Two sobering potions and half an hour of painstaking etching later, Harry stood before Fleur with a proud smile on his face, his hands holding a pendant on a leather cord coiled in his palm. The pendant was made from smooth marble and had been transfigured by Harry into the shape of a raven with its wings spread wide, its head twisted to the side to eye him beadily.

"I'm finished!" Harry singsonged from above her, startling her from her deep focus on a book Harry had chucked on her lap about Manchu wardcrafters to keep her occupied while he worked. She had been working her way around the house before that, muttering depreciating things about his spartan interior design and how it reflected on the county as a whole.

"*Merde* 'arrison," she breathed, her hand clutching her heart before she saw the pendant. She came closer, curious. "What is it?" she asked, her hand already extending towards it.

"Ah ah," Harry teased, dangling it out of her reach. "You'll find out as soon as I put it on you."

She scowled but turned and brought her hair up anyway to allow him access, her curiosity overpowering her aversion to anything too intimate. Harry brought the pendant around her neck and clasped it behind her without lingering, however tempting it was to do so.

She stood there for a few seconds before she realised what had happened and gasped, her hand flying to her mouth.

"Zhe allure," she turned wide eyes to his amused face, *"what have you done to it?"*

Harry rose both hands and wiggled his fingers as if to say 'ta daa!'. "I blocked it."

Fleur looked down at the Raven, a curious expression on her face as if she was conflicted as to whether to be happy or not, "'Ow did you do it?" She asked.

Harry sank into a leather armchair. "I managed to get my grubby mitts on one of the Guardian rings, you know, the ones the rich purebloods get when they have the money to do so?" He clarified when he saw her momentarily puzzled face. She nodded and continued to finger the Raven idly as she listened with rapt attention. "A part of their runic scheme is a block against compulsions and love potions. What I did is reversed the runes so that instead of blocking the emotions from coming in, they block them from coming out, and I also changed them so it became a ward instead of only a personal protection. Flip the pendant over," Fleur obediently flipped the bird over to reveal the underneath, where around ten small runes were drawn, glowing with a pink hue, "you see silo there?" She nodded. "That used to be Karugan, I switched them because of the different type of attraction compulsion you exude. Around the whole array, Erbetois has been etched instead of Dubravnov to change it to a ward and Ekko has been flipped to link with Gab to prevent the compulsion from getting out instead of in," Harry gestured to the runes in question, master explaining to student. At that moment, their age gap seemed much wider than it actually was.

"*Ingénieuse*," Fleur muttered, "people 'ave been trying to do zis for an age, to think the solution rested in 'zomething as obscure as Guardian rings..." she trailed off.

Harry smiled as he spun his wand around his fingers, trying to get the stiffness out of them. "So, do you think I am *qualified* now?" He asked, unable to prevent the sarcasm.

Another shade of red crawled up her slender neck before she looked away, pretending to study the Raven again. "I suppose this is an adequate display of your competence," she murmured before her head rose up again, the spark back in her eyes, "so, where are we going?" She asked, anticipation heavy in her tone.

Harry smiled, his arm proffered palm up and open for her to take so they could apparate away. "*Nous allons à l'horizon, princesse.*"

Harry leant back leisurely in the cracked leather seat of the rib he had... unofficially commandeered to get to where they needed to go. Right now they were quickly leaving the island he had 'borrowed' the boat from and bouncing across dark, moonlit waves as they made their way towards the general direction of where Harry was pretty sure their tomb was. Despite it being almost midnight it was over twenty-five degrees with a Saharan wind from the southwest blowing in their faces. Harry was wearing a plain white shirt with the top buttons undone and a pair of cargo shorts. He would have completed the look with a pair of aviators, but wearing sunglasses at night was one of those things that was considered generally moronic.

In front of him, Fleur was wearing an all-white plain summer dress, thankfully charmed so the wind wouldn't give Harry a free show.

Like him, Fleur didn't need extravagant design to look good.

She was kneeling at the bow of the boat, her platinum hair flowing freely behind her as she watched the rib rise and fall into the waves, uncaring of the sprays from the contact. It was, Harry thought, most definitely picture-worthy. He imagined he could make a fortune selling it. Harry was pretending he was James Bond on a mission with his beautiful sidekick when Fleur spoke, turning around to sit down so her hair flowed past her face with her arms resting on the inflated sides of the rib.

"So, why Greece?" She called over the sound of the wind and the engine, "It *eez* not the most popular country, *non*?"

Indeed it was not. It was only in the last hundred years or so that the Greek mainland had begun to build its mage population back up at all. The mages that had once lived there had called themselves Athenians, the country having included magical Constantinople at the time even if Athens had been the capital and more populated, at least for mages. It had all changed when the Ottomans attacked towards the end of the life of the Eastern Roman Empire. Unlike the Byzantines on the muggle side, Athens hadn't fought the Anatolian mages and had instead all been steadily fleeing northwards to Bulgaria for years previous, which was the main reason why Bulgaria was one of the leading countries in the wizarding world in the current day with all the experienced mages they had received from the exodus. Recently mages had begun to immigrate back to the now unimaginatively renamed Magical Greece, a relief as the muggleborns born in the country had been stuck in a bit of a grey area for a long time where they both did and didn't belong to a magical country. Harry had always found how mage and muggle culture overlapped fascinating, most of all the fall of the Roman Empire, which had formed or otherwise affected many of the current wizarding countries.

Harry slipped his wand into his hand and set up a shield to partially separate the wind around them so he could speak normally. "We're here because this is where whatever we are looking for is... at least that's what I think."

Her head tilted, and Harry tried not to get too distracted before he ran them aground. "You *theenk*?" She asked, a hint of danger frosting her tone.

"Uh huh," Harry said, his wand now displaying coordinates. Without looking, he angled the boat starboard and slipped the wand back up his holster with a nod. "It's under a fidelius."

She stared at him. "A fidelius," she repeated in a deadpan, "if *eet* is under a fidelius, then 'ow do you know where or what *eet* is?"

'A good question,' Harry had to admit.

"Well, I'm actually not sure *what* it is exactly," Harry said, scratching the back of his head and ignoring the first part, "but from the nature of what's within it I'm assuming that it's some kind of vault or tomb. One weakness of the fidelius is that even if it can hide the location, it can't hide the knowledge of specific objects within it if the objects were once outside of it, or people would be regularly forgotten and then remembered again as they walk in and out. I know that the object I'm looking for was in this general area, and due to the... nature, of the said object I can follow the magical trail to where it ended up before it was put in the fidelius."

"But you were just looking at coordinates," Fleur pointed out, "that *eez* not what *eet* looked like you were doing."

It certainly wasn't what he had done the first time around. It had taken them almost a year to follow the very, *very* scarce trace of Hufflepuff's cup and find it, half of that year having been spent scouring the Aegean Sea with the desperate hope that they would pick up the much-faded magical residue of the Horcrux. Harry and Hermione's sensory skills had been nowhere near as developed as his own were now, so predictably it had taken them a while. If Ron had stayed with them it probably would have taken half that time, if the git could have been bothered to actually put in the time to be a sensor. Magical ability had never been Ron's strong suit, he had been the more 'moral support' type. Not that he didn't try, the poor sod.

Harry nodded, "I'll do it once I pick up the magical residue, but right now I'm using a different method," Harry had to jerk the wheel to avoid a floating log he only just spotted in time. After two strings of cursing from both him and Fleur he continued, "I knew where this place was before someone put up the fidelius, and now I can tell—from where things are missing in my head—the general area it's in now."

"And 'ow 'ave you done zat?" Fleur asked, sounding intrigued.

Harry looked at her and grinned, a flash of white in the ink-black night. "Ever heard of occlumency?"

Fleur seemed to stare at him for a while longer than necessary before she answered. "Of course, I 'ave mastered its basics already, although my status as Veela gives me certain natural advantages," she said, aiming for arrogance. It was ruined by the fact she had to force herself to look away from him. Harry tried not to smile at being ogled at by Fleur Delacour, it was certainly quite the ego boost, although he did wonder if he would have got that in his old body.

"Ok, so basically I can think of the object I'm looking for, but then when I try and think of where it is, my mind runs into a wall of sorts. This is just one more thing about occlumency that makes it probably the most useful thing to ever learn," he lectured. "I can tell the general amount of memory space that has been removed from the magical residue left over from the fidelius invading my mind and nicking it, from there I prod that blank space a bit, and

from *that* my mind makes links and associations with what was once there, the area around it, the fidelius has to stop removing memories *somewhere*." Harry smiled at her disbelieving face. "Let me tell you, it takes *a lot* of practice to get that technique down."

Fleur stayed silent for a while, probably thinking on his words before she remarked. "If you knew of zis place before it got put under ze fidelius, why 'ave you not already broken it?"

Harry smiled disarmingly. "Why, I didn't have good enough company of course."

She looked away again, the darkness hiding what Harry knew was there anyway. He was really starting to enjoy doing that to her, she was far too sophisticated and poised for her own good.

-oOo-

"Alright," Harry said as he sniffed the air around them. Burnt ozone flooded his senses, the smell of dark magic. Of course, he couldn't actually smell it. Muggles call it synaesthesia, the brain associating tastes and smells with information in the brain. Certain types of magic had certain smells, and dark magic smelt like ozone. "I think we're in the right area now." He slowed the boat down to a halt, the dual outboard engines' idle rumble the only sound in the silent night.

"And 'ow can you tell zat?" Fleur asked as she looked around. The only thing to be seen was black waves and the carved reflection of the moon on the water.

"Fill the air around you with your magic Fleur, the only way to get better and sensing is constant practice, even if it's easier for you than others. Tell me what you feel."

She closed her eyes again and splayed her hands outwards, as if trying to hold the magic physically. It was a while before her face scrunched up, a thoroughly disgruntled opinion overlaying her elegant features. "I can barely feel *eet*, but what is there is..." she shook her head, "zere is an echo of something... *Mal, anormal*."

"Abnormal," Harry mused, "I suppose that's a good enough description."

"What *eez* it?" Fleur asked, her nose scrunching in a way that Harry found quite cute.

Harry's face became grim. "Let's just call it soul magic and leave it at that."

Fleur's eyes snapped open, the fierce blue easily visible in the dim moonlight. "*Magie de l'âme? Merde* 'arrison, what are you dragging me into?"

"Don't tell me you aren't intrigued," Harry grinned as he cut out the engine and moved to the front of the boat next to her.

She sighed struggled for a bit then sighed defeatedly. "*Oui*, I zuppose I am, my mozzer always said I 'ad the tendency to jump into the nearest patch of Devil's snare and jump in *eet*," she admitted. She looked over the side of the boat and hummed thoughtfully. "Do you zink it *eez* still warm?" She asked.

She really shouldn't have said that.

"Why don't we find out?" Harry said gleefully. Fleur only caught onto his meaning when he scooped her up under the knees and behind her back.

"Arrison! Don't you dare!" She shrieked, trying to escape.

Harry just laughed and threw her bodily into the water, screaming the whole way. Harry took his wand out, set up a ward around them to calm the waves in the area as well as a muggle aversion charm just in case, then slipped the wand back into its holster.

Fleur surfaced, spluttering, just in time to see Harry throw his shirt to the side, take a runup and throw himself into the water without any grace. He landed half on his side in a canon-ball position and once more drenched Fleur, who had to turn away at the last second.

What followed was a diatribe of very inventive and lengthy French cussing, in which Harry was fairly certain she insinuated that he was the result of an illicit and illegal act between a troll and a mandrake. After that a duel was instigated as they trod the water, resulting in Harry becoming half-merman and Fleur riding the water Hippogriff he had conjured, raining fireballs down on him as she tried to simultaneously fight off the army of flying jellyfish he had brought up.

He let her win, of course.

Harry was still chuckling as he pulled her back onto the boat, where she collapsed onto the cushions on the front. She looked like she was glowing with how bright her smile was, no matter how irritated she had been at first. Right then she looked like something from myth, a water nymph in the flesh.

Harry sympathised with Apollo.

"Might want to apply some drying charms to that dress," Harry commented as he scooped his shirt back up, refusing to look in her direction.

Fleur looked down at the clearly visible bra through the white material and yelped, applying probably the most efficient drying charm known to man. Emotion's a good motivator.

"You could 'ave neglected to tell me and got... what did you say? A free show?"

"I could have," Harry agreed as he did up the last few buttons, "but I'm not that type of guy. I want to earn things like that."

"And what type of *guy* are you, 'arrison Slate?"

The image of Tonks in the hospital flashed in his mind. *"Did I ever know who you were at all?"*

Harry's eyes visibly darkened, Fleur noticed it easily, as it was like someone dimming a torch in the night. "I don't think that even I know that yet," he said darkly before he shook himself

and walked forward again. "Anyway, enough philosophy, we've got a fidelius to break into, ancient tombs to desecrate. Do you know the Galilee Charm?"

She flipped her damp hair over her shoulder. "Of course, I am not *un imbécile*."

"Right then," Harry said as he twirled his wand at his feet and stepped off the boat to step onto the water as if it was solid, his arm extended, "follow me then *madame*," he teased. Fleur chose to go along with it and delicately took his hand, stepping off the rib and onto the water like a celebrity exiting a limo.

"The fidelius is two parts, half of it removes knowledge from people's minds, the other half blinks it out of existence on the physical plane," Harry began to explain as he walked towards the centre of the warded area, Fleur following dutifully beside him. The ripples of their footsteps shone in concentric, moonlit waves around them. "We find it by using a handy little charm called *reperio complicatum spatium*. It's mainly used for detecting space extension charms so you don't misjudge how much something has been expanded and crush yourself when you cancel them, but it works when you're looking for a fidelius as well. The fidelius is the opposite of extension charms, as it is shrinking space away instead of expanding it, but the charm is made solely to detect magically manipulated space in general, so you'll still feel something from the magic. Any fidelius can be located like this, but most of its reliability comes from obscurity, as the bloody things are almost impossible to find in the first place," Harry lectured as he began casting the spell as he walked around the warded area, the orange waves rippling across the warm sea. The sensation of walking on it was odd, he could still feel the water on the bottoms of his feet but he didn't fall through it.

Next to him, Harry saw Fleur watch his wand movements a few times and then mimic it herself, getting it right on the second try. Harry was impressed, he had no doubt that she would grow up to be an accomplished mage. Well, actually he knew she did. In battle, the woman had been a force from the stories he had been told.

"I 'zink I found *eet*!" Fleur called excitedly from across the warded area roughly half an hour later. Harry skipped over and stood next to her.

"Where?"

She gestured to an area roughly three paces in front of her as Harry looked over her shoulder.

"Good fucking job Fleur," he said excitedly, patting her on the shoulder as he moved past her and cast his own charm. "You're right, it's right here," he said, his wand pointed at a small space.

"What now?" she asked excitedly, curiosity evident.

"Now," he said as he began tracing runes around it, "now we poke it to reveal what secrets it's keeping."

Fleur came up from behind him and was now the one looking over his shoulder. The feeling of her hair cascading off his neck and over his shoulder made him pause halfway through a rune that looked like an eight turned sideways and stuffed inside a cube before he continued.

'Focus, you old cretin.'

"What runes are these? Many of them are unfamiliar to me," Fleur said, sounding confused. "Oh, apart from 'zat one," she pointed at the squashed and entombed eight he had just finished, "is that not one of the runes for illusions?"

Harry nodded as he added a runic link to add another cluster to the array. "Right you are feathers, the rest of them you don't know because you most likely didn't do a divination mastery and don't know the more advanced mind-altering runes yet."

'And some of them haven't been invented yet,' he added silently.

Fleur stiffened beside him. "I will ignore zat you called me zat 'orrid nickname only because zis is so intriguing, but if you do so again I will immolate you, *compris?*"

Harry hid his mischievous grin by facing away from her and finished up his last rune. "Crystal clear *ma petite ailes*, now before I activate this do you want to copy this array down? You could hunt down the individual runes in your spare time or figure out what they do afterwards."

Ten minutes and one burnt-off eyebrow later Fleur was done with her notes, and was still glaring at him. Harry raised his hands in mock surrender as he slowly regrew his eyebrow. "Hey, I think the nickname is cute, not my fault if you choose to take offence."

The blush didn't make the scowl any less fierce. "Ow are you regrowing zat?" She asked irritably, as if it was a personal offence that he was undoing her handiwork.

"Oh," Harry pondered it for a minute, then decided he trusted her enough. He morphed himself to have bright blue eyes and bright, platinum blonde hair falling in waves to the top of his neck. His nose got longer, but apart from that, his bone structure didn't shift much, his normal one being close enough. The end result was someone who looked eerily like Fleur's older, veela brother. "I'm a metamorphmagus," he revealed with a bright smile.

Fleur blinked, "*Merde* zat is weird," she commented, then smiled. "So you are not fully 'uman, like me *non?* I zuppose zis is 'ow you did some of the things attributed to you?"

Harry shrugged, his features subtly shifting to resemble her more and more until he just looked like her with a male hairdo. "Yeah, I guess we can bond over our appeal to the black market sex trade now or something."

She hit his arm. "Zat is not funny," she scolded lightly, then side-eyed his form, "and stop zat, go back to 'ow you were, or at least something different."

"You're just mad that I'm worth more than you. And what, you don't like it?" he grinned, returning to how he usually looked. It was odd, it was almost easier now to shift into this form than it was to shift into how he had looked as Harry James Potter.

"*Non*," she replied, turning her head to study the runes, looking slightly embarrassed, "I am too attracted to it, I never considered myself to be a narcissist."

Harry nodded sagely. "Well if it's any consolation, I think that if anyone could be beautiful enough to fall in love with themselves it would be you."

She rolled her eyes, the expression looking comical on her face. "Flattery will get you nowhere, Meester 'arrison Slate, now activate the scheme."

"You know when you say my name like that it only encourages me," Harry teased. Fleur turned to scowl at him, one hand suddenly wreathed in flame. "Ok! Ok! Distraction time!" And with that, Harry shoved the tip of his wand into the central activation cluster and channelled his magic into it.

Immediately, a green glow emanated from the spot and spread away from them, rising and falling to reveal a huge shape rising from the sea. Harry strained to hold his magic to it, the runes glowing brighter and brighter under his wand as more magic was fed into them. It highlighted Fleur's face and his own in unholy neon green as they gazed at the shape it formed.

Fleur gasped. "It eez an island!"

Before them, made all from different shades of bright green, was in fact an island. It looked entirely bare and unnaturally uniform, a perfect circle with cut grass covering it apart from a thin strip of smooth light green sand surrounding its edge.

"Not done yet," Harry said through gritted teeth as he jabbed his finger at the circular cluster his wand was pressed in the centre of, "this cluster is giving me a third eye on where the island is, in the land of the Not and Black. This one," he indicated the one below it, "is a clusterfuck of a ward using more divination runes, occlumency runes on top of some soul and blood magic to trick it into giving me it's secret when I drag it from non-existence. I need you to rotate the top one right as I rotate the bottom one left, understood? We have to do it at similar speeds to pull this baby out of hiding."

Fleur scrambled forward and hovered her hand over the cluster, nodding along over the sizzling sound of active runic magic permeating the empty black ocean, jabbering, "*Oui, oui je comprends. Dis-moi quand.*"

Harry decided that meant she was ready, braced himself and placed his own hand over the bottom cluster. "Okay. Three, two, one, now!"

Harry withdrew his wand from the top cluster to allow Fleur to take his place then placed all five fingers on the cluster below and began to turn it, feeling the blood flow from the tips of his fingers as he did so. Above him, he could feel Fleur doing the same.

Fleur was helping, but he—as the activator for the second phase—was bearing the brunt of the magical drain. This wardbreaking set was one of the few that could actually make a good dent in his magic, there was a reason that the people who had broken fideliuses in his time had been teams of specialists. He felt like he was trying to spin Hagrid as he turned the cluster around. Fleur did the same in the opposite direction, noticeably smoother than him but still keeping pace. However, the results were evident. As one set moved up and one moved down the island began to rise from the ocean at the same pace, shedding seawater like a

second skin. Great cascades of black water roared in foamy avalanches down the grass and off the beach to end in ripples near himself and Fleur. He felt the knowledge of what the island was flowing back into his brain as the scheme began to trick the ward that he was in on the secret.

With one last monumental effort, Harry moved his cluster the rest of the way around the circle to come to rest at where Fleur's rune had been previously, her own doing the same. Blood was now leaking from the lines of the runes in his own clusters as the scheme literally bled away the rest of the blood that it didn't need. Before them, the island finally shuddered to a halt with a series of bone-shaking cracks and rumbles.

Harry withdrew his hand from the ward and hissed in pain. "Son of a *bitch* that hurts!" he swore as he sucked on the tips of his fingers and then plunged them into the ocean, his intent letting them past the Galilee charm. The sound of more hissing sounded as steam rose, like hot metal being quenched in a bucket of water.

"Arrison! Are you ok?" Fleur gasped as she moved to kneel by him, taking his fingers in her own. The tips were raw and burnt, the huge amount of magical energy channelled through them having been partially wasted in heat.

"Yeah, all good," Harry mumbled, using his off hand to fumble around in the waterproofed, expanded pocket of his shorts to pull out a tupperware tub of magical burn cream, which he applied and helped along with his own magic. Soon enough, the skin healed and knitted together.

Seeing he was fine, Fleur looked around in confusion. "Did *eet* work? I do not see anyzing, apart from the 'ologram."

Harry snapped his newly healed fingers. "Ah, right. The island of Herpo is..." he brought up his wand, "at 36.061728, 24.418658 in the Aegean Sea, 58 kilometres north of Crete and 180km south of Milos."

Fleur's eyes widened as the island rose from the sea like a whale breaching, the secret now flowing into her own brain.

"It eez *incroyable*," Fleur whispered. Then, "Island of 'erpo?" she questioned, "I 'ave never 'eard of such a place."

Harry eyed her curiously. "Surely, anyone who has studied curse-breaking has heard of Herpo the Foul, he created some of the most revolutionary wards to date." He said nothing of her moronic statement about not hearing about it. From her flushed ears, she had also realised how dumb that was.

"Truly? And this is his island?"

"His burial site," Harry corrected as he began to walk the short distance to the island and up the sandy beach to the lush grass. Behind him, he could hear Fleur doing the same. When they reached the peak of the island Harry conjured a sun lounger and lay back in it, pulling

out a pepper-up from his pocket that he had purchased from the Athenian magical district along with his and Fleur's garb.

Speaking of, Fleur was standing before him, beautiful and puzzled as she watched him down the crimson red potion.

Harry vanished the empty potion vial with a negligent wave of his hand and raised an eyebrow at her, waving a hand vaguely around the island. "Well? What are you waiting for? Find the entrance!"

"Excuse moi?"

Harry glared at her, "I said get on your hands and knees and scrub, princess. Want to cursebreak? Half of it is scrabbling around in the dirt looking for entrances that haven't been found in centuries, so far I've done most of the scrabbling, now it's your turn. Call it a lesson."

Fleur seemed to wrestle with hexing him for a moment before she turned herself away with great effort to carry out what he had ordered, her want to learn more than her want to hurt him apparently.

It took her only twenty minutes to find the entrance, the island not being that large and with nothing on it. She called to him then, causing Harry to grudgingly release himself from the sweet hold of the lounge and walk over to her. She was standing next to a circular area of grass that was rippling and flashing yellow and black like some kind of safety hazard. It was pretty obnoxious.

Harry proffered her a potion that was a clear silver with bubbles rising from it. At her doubtful look, he explained, "It's a wakefulness potion, sweetheart, if I wanted to drug you I would have done it before now. I just don't want to get myself killed because you fell asleep and fell through a ward trigger-line."

She took it then.

Harry had her try and figure out the right runic combination to deconstruct the illusion while he added his own commentary and comments on her work, drawing better runes for her and correcting others. Eventually, she got it, and the illusion fell away, the perfectly even grass caving in like a mini-sinkhole. She looked very proud.

"Follow me," Harry said as he walked through the entrance and emerged onto a rough stone staircase that descended in a straight line down into the darkness. With a flick of his wand, multitudes of fling balls of light positioned themselves in a line down the staircase, illuminating their path. Behind him, Fleur stepped inside also. He turned his sensory abilities up to full tilt. The corridor lit up like a Christmas tree.

"Don't step anywhere that I don't step, and don't touch the walls. If I die, don't panic and don't try to save me, run back and try to remember what parts are safe to touch. The man who set this up likes his traps."

"And what man is *zis*?" Fleur asked as they began to trek down, her voice betraying no fear.

"His name is Tom Riddle, but I wouldn't recommend looking into him. People who search for his name often end up only finding an early grave," Harry explained as he gingerly stepped over a trick step that would have done something nasty. "Don't step on that one."

"Why 'as *zis*... Tom *Reedle* set up traps for a tomb that is not his own?"

Harry chuckled at her pronunciation. "The short answer is arrogance, the long one is something that I'm not going to tell you at the moment for your own safety, speaking of safety..." Harry paused and undid a thin magical trigger line that stretched across the path at shin level.

"Oh? And why is *zat*?" Fleur asked as she watched his handiwork in interest.

"Why is it because of arrogance or why am I not telling you for your own safety right now?"

"Ze latter."

"You know what they say about knowledge being power? Yeah, in this case, the power would be of the corrupting, dangerous sort that people would kill you for. I would rather that the least amount of people know of it as possible."

He turned around then to make her see how serious this was. "This isn't just dark magic, Fleur, this shit is *black*, the type of magic that twists and influences everything it comes into contact with. So if I tell you to back away and don't go near something, you listen, ok?"

After a moment's hesitation, she nodded. "*Oui*, I will listen."

Satisfied, Harry nodded once before turning and continuing onwards.

After many more traps and illusions had been destroyed and dispelled by the both of them they emerged into a large chamber with heavy vines clinging to every surface protectively. The corners and distant reaches of the chamber were obscured with heavy shadows. The sound of water dripping somewhere far away was prevalent as it echoed around the huge space.

"Stay behind me and don't do anything stupid," Harry said shortly as he stepped in. Immediately, the entire area was illuminated by a murky green light with no visible source, similar to that which flowed into the Slytherin common room from The Black Lake.

The light revealed a huge pile of staggering amounts of wealth in the centre. Piles of gold were stuffed into finely crafted armoured helms and swords jutted out from open trunks filled to bursting with perfectly cut gems and jewellery. Necklaces and pendants hung from proffered limbs of solid gold statuary that were so lifelike they seemed as if a human had been touched by King Midas and sold onwards. Laying haphazardly atop it all, as if it was merely thrown on top as an afterthought, was a long tomb of solid white marble with black spidery lines crisscrossing it.

"*Putain*, you could buy 'alf of France wiz zis," Fleur breathed from his side, awed at the sight.

"Do not touch any of the valuables," Harry warned as Fleur reached down for a silver cherub that had rolled off the pile and bounced to where they stood at the edge. "If you touch the first thing that catches your eye when you are cursebreaking you will die before you hit twenty. Don't be a fool, Fleur, check that it isn't cursed before you touch it."

Abashed, Fleur pulled her hand away and cast detection charms on the cherub. On the third charm, it glowed with an inner light for a moment before it faded again. Fleur narrowed down the detection charms until it glowed red and produced a slip of parchment. After she read it she sighed. "It *eez* under the gemino charm. If I 'ad to guess I would say zat every object in ze room in under the same charm."

"And how would you dispel the charm?" Harry asked.

Fleur paused. "A counter-ward over the entire pile, seven stones arrayed around *eet* with the gemino charm's counter on each."

Harry smiled. "Good, I would do the same." As he finished that sentence the sound of stone grinding on stone filled the chamber, and he and Fleur turned to see the lid of the tomb slowly slide off and fall to the side. There was silence for a time as he and Fleur watched. Then from the tomb, a pulsating red light began to glow.

"Arrison, what is zat?" Fleur asked softly from beside him, her pale skin and bright flowing platinum blonde a stark antithesis to the dark stone and darkness of the chamber, as if someone had guided the sun itself inside.

Harry braced himself and rose his wand to the tomb, fighting a grin. "Something wicked this way comes, Fleur. Try not to die."

Before she could respond rasping breath was drawn from before them, the sound like nails dragging on parchment. A body sat up then, and Harry heard Fleur gasp in horror.

The thing before them was similar to photos Harry had seen of ancient Egyptian mummies once removed from their sarcophagi and wrapping. Its skin was dry, brown and dead, hanging off exposed bone like someone had thrown wet paper at a skeleton. It had no eyes, its sockets a black hole. Grey hair was in patches on its skull and chin, remnants of what had been a long, flowing beard. Scraps of cloth where perhaps clothes had once been lay in tatters at its feet and on its shoulders.

Inside the ribcage was a spinning ruby, the second Horcrux in the room that Harry could feel. But this one didn't belong to Voldemort.

"Herpo," Harry acknowledged grimly.

What had once been a legendary wizard responded with a loud, keening shriek as it leapt from the tomb, gnarled staff in hand, the tool of the ancient mages. Harry wasn't surprised

that Herpo couldn't talk. Being trapped as a Horcrux down here for so long had probably driven the man past insanity.

Herpo let loose with a roaring inferno of purple and black fire as soon as his bony feet touched the ground, the clear crystal nestled in the top of the staff glowing the same colour. Snarling snakes and malformed creatures tore throughout the flame in a raging stampede as the curse bore down on himself and Fleur.

Harry's own wand was already moving before the fire was even halfway. From his own a bear of clear crystal emerged, twisting around once before landing on the stone floor with a heavy *thud* and thundering forwards. When it met the fire it opened its mouth impossibly wide and swallowed it whole, then continued its charge with a roiling fire visible in its gut and flaming violet eyes.

Herpo twisted out of the way of the killing curse that Harry had followed up with and continued the move to slice downwards with his staff, cutting the bear in two with a sharp *CRACK!* of broken glass. The fire washed over him, but when it had faded Herpo was unharmed, the only visible effect being the melted skin sleuthing off his bones.

A *reducto* then hit Herpo from Fleur, who had been frozen up to then but had taken advantage of the reduced sight. The small blast took out the skeleton's breastbone and the surrounding ribs, leaving a hole about the size of a dinner plate in its wake and causing Herpo to stagger backwards, screaming in pain.

"Good fucking hit, Fleur!" Harry roared in approval, keeping up a steady stream of highly explosive spells to keep Herpo occupied in an endless chain that was rocking the whole room. The shell of a man was forced to spin his staff like a propeller once to fall behind a strong blue shield, bright orange and white explosions detonating against it in a disastrous orchestra of detonations.

"Zanks, but 'ow do we kill 'eet?!" Fleur shouted back, twisting away from a twisted iron spike on a chain that had come around the side of Herpo's shield narrowly.

Harry weaved an animation into his chain against Herpo to keep the ancient being behind his shields, the dim blue beam of light hitting a solid gold statue of a Spartan soldier resting haphazardly sideways on the pile of wealth.

"Don't try to kill it, restrain it! I'll do the rest!" Harry replied.

He brought his wand sideways across himself and summoned a dark red shield to block an angry yellow blade of light from Herpo that would have cleaved him in two. The spell slowed when it hit the shield, slowly fizzling out and dying as it went through, emerging from the other side as quickly fading yellow sand.

There was no follow-up, as Herpo was suddenly otherwise occupied. The statue had managed to stand and had wrapped its pike under Herpo's neck, pulling the writhing creature into its solid gold chest and lifting Herpo off his feet. The thing stood at around eight feet tall and was completely rigid, not even moving with Herpo's spasmodic jerking.

"Keep him down!" He yelled, sending chains to wrap around Herpo and keep him still. Fleur followed up soon enough, side by side with him now as they sent spell after spell to keep Herpo strapped to the giant Ancient Greek soldier. The gleaming metal muscles were straining to keep the thing in place, the sound of metal groaning and threatening to tear filling the chamber with an awful, reverberating howl.

Harry began to sense the incoming problem when a hum started to sound, and he began to feel magic being drawn in from around the room and building up in front of him. The crystal in the staff began to glow a deep red where it was pinned to Herpo's chest bone under all the chains, illuminating the sunken cheekbones of the monster in an unholy light. Its shrieks became whispered words which carried unnaturally around the chamber in a sibilant chant as if the walls themselves were murmuring the words in rhythm, making Harry's chest cavity vibrate with its odd strength.

Harry realised at the last second what was coming when he caught the last word. It brought forward the memory of a word he had read in an ancient text he had found buried in a shaman's tomb in Guatemala.

"Get the fuck down!" Harry yelled, dashing towards her.

She turned halfway through an overpowered sticking charm, just in time for Herpo's chant to reach a crescendo and for Harry to tackle her bodily to the floor like a rugby player.

A titanic *thrum* of electric magic exploded from Herpo's gnarled staff. A rapid ring of red death with a white-hot edge to it crackled as it burst from the crystal, bisecting his soldier in two and expanding at chest level around the whole of the chamber. Behind Herpo the top half of the thick, marble tomb slowly slid off of the bottom half with a steady rasp to fall onto the pile of valuables.

Even if by then they were flat on the floor, both of them could feel the malevolent magic pass over them in a blistering wave of hate. The acrid smell of burnt hair filled his nostrils alongside roiling ozone as the hairs on his arms and the back of his neck curled and crisped.

Harry had turned as he tackled her so his back was to Herpo, old instincts kicking in as he put himself in between the monster and Fleur. As soon the wave passed over them he spun around, getting to one knee to cast a shield on pure instinct.

It was just in time as well, as as soon as he did so a constant scream of bright white lighting impacted it, sending a jolt up his arm. Harry groaned as he maintained the shield, slowly struggling to his feet with trembling legs as the lighting magic hissed and cracked against the pale silver of his shield.

"Fleur!" Harry barked, sweat beginning to drip down his face. "I need you to distract him, I can't risk dropping this!"

A constant stream of swearing sounded from behind him, but finally, the spell against his shield was dropped. A constant stream of fire was enveloping the area where the lighting had been coming from.

"Thanks luv!" Harry yelled cheerfully.

'Time to end this, I think. Don't want to explain to the French Nobleman how exactly his eldest daughter got burnt to a crisp in a place which technically doesn't exist.'

As soon as Herpo emerged from the smoke Harry let loose with a barrage of rippling cutting curses, all of which were borderline illegal in some countries. In the rest, they were just plain illegal.

Herpo managed to deflect two but the third sliced through the top of his right arm, neatly bisecting it from the rest of his body. If Harry had been anyone else he would have stopped and blinked, not having expected to be able to actually damage it. Fortunately for his continued existence, Harry was far from being anyone else. He quickly animated the now vegetable soldier, the upper half of the gleaming giant reaching out to catch the staff out of mid-air, which had already begun to arc back into Herpo's outstretched off-hand. Fleur followed up by summoning both away and burying them half into the stone to stop Herpo from getting his staff back.

He sought to take advantage, as did Fleur from behind him and to the right. Herpo—in a display of acrobatics that should have been impossible for someone a millennium old and missing an arm—ducked under two more cutting curses and twisted around a flailing cross of writhing rope before stomping on a shining gold sword leaning against a shield on the floor, causing it to bounce up with a *ping!* and land firmly in Herpo's outstretched hand. The creature opened its toothless mouth open and let out a warbling cry as it charged.

Harry grinned. "Oh, is that how it is?" He whispered under his breath.

He tossed his wand in the air, the slither of wood spinning slowly. From one end a liquid stream of dark metal emerged to form a long, sharp edge. The wood thickened and grew a leather shroud around it, a simple, straight guard growing from the top.

-oOo-

Fleur watched in amazement as Harrison caught his wand—now in the form of a sword that was taller than her little sister—and expertly swung it around himself, a slightly manic gleam in his eyes, before charging to meet the monster they had been fighting, laughing uproariously.

Even with an arm missing it still seemed to be able to use the sword like an expert. As soon as it was within range of Harrison the sword blurred in a devilish vertical arc, aimed to slash Harrison from chest to stomach.

"Arrison!" She shouted in both fright and warning, her wand raised to distract the skeletal figure should Harrison fall. But her warning was for nought, for Harrison's own sword was already in motion, much faster than what should have been possible. It swung from underneath and to his right and batted the golden sword to the left, allowing Harrison to get a firm kick into his enemy's midsection, sending him stumbling back a few steps. Herpo was still fast enough to block the following sideways slash however, and from there the fight continued.

What followed was one of the most incredible things Fleur had ever seen, second only to the dragons of the Triwizard Tournament. Against the creature, pulled straight from one of the scary books her *mamam* would read her about shambling bone-men, Harrison seemed ridiculous. He was dressed in an open-fronted white shirt and beige cargo shorts with trainers, exposing lean muscles and an odd scar on one side. It was a harsh contrast to the dark steel sword he swung like he had been doing it for his whole life. He moved like a dancer, twirling and parrying and then responding in fluid movements. Halfway through, he began laughing again, and Fleur found that she didn't even think it was out of place.

Harrison Slate was, without a doubt, the most dangerous man she had ever met. Other than maybe Dumbledore, but only because of the political power that man wielded. Harrison knew how to do things she had never even imagined. Breaking into a fidelius? It shouldn't have been possible, it was the stuff of myth and legend.

She considered him from her place at the side as she watched them. His grin was wide as slapped the flat of the sword as it was thrust towards him with his bare hand, which was glowing a pale white. The sword that he had just slapped away swung around again with an audible *whoosh* to cleave at Harrison's midsection, which he barely dodged by jumping and twisting to lie horizontally mid-air before landing, the only cut received being to the lower half of his open shirt, where a slither of material had been neatly sliced off. Was that who she was with? A legend?

She was broken out of her hopeless observation by Harrison finally getting his move in. Herpo had slashed his sword across his chest once more, the swing starting from his armless side. Harrison leant back, his spine bending at an angle that shouldn't have been possible. The crackling sound of bones shifting was audible, and Fleur realised he had morphed to allow him to dodge it. The result meant that Herpo was completely open in the small gap in time between the dodge and Herpo's correction. Fleur watched, entranced by the beauty of the steel dance, as Harrison thrust his sword directly into the undead creature's chest where Fleur had blasted a hole with a joyful shout.

-oOo-

"Surprise bitch!" Harry yelled gleefully as he channelled magic through the wand and subsequently through the blade, causing a huge blast of magical energy to flow through it and hurl Herpo away from him and into the wall to the right, screaming the whole way.

"Keep him bound Fleur!" Harry shouted as the blade of his sword was detached from his wand and banished away to pin the struggling creature to the wall, the blade sinking into the cold stone like it was butter. He followed it up with several steel javelins that also pinned his remaining hand and feet to the wall, his wand moving with the rapidity and fluidness of a master. After a moment's hesitation, Fleur's conjured chains also wrapped around them and Herpo to keep the old wizard still.

Harry looked into Herpo's eyes as he approached cautiously, the newly restored wand spinning between long fingers. There was nothing in the dark pits of his eyes, but Harry could practically *feel* the glare on him as the ragged man struggled to break free.

Once he was near enough he stopped and stared at the ruby glow before saying: "You may want to look away for this bit." Not waiting to see if she did so or not, Harry cast a spell on his left hand, covering it with a layer of golden light, making it seem as if he had a magical glove on. After inspecting it for any imperfections Harry thrust his hand through the ribcage and grasped the ruby. Violent red sparks flew from the glove as he pulled, the horcrux resisting his efforts to remove it from its host. If he had done this with his bare hands his own hand would have been burnt away, leaving only a blackened stump that would have refused all attempts to regrow or heal. He knew that because it had happened to Hermione. Eventually she had been able to craft a new, metal hand that had actually reached artefact status for its ingenuity, but for the remaining few years of the war she had had to put up with a Moody-style wooden hand that used a clever holster to put the wand in it. It hadn't affected how brilliant she was, only made people underestimate her. But she had been in constant pain for a number of hard months.

With a monumental pull, the Horcrux was torn asunder from its ivory cage, and in Harry's hand he held the soul of a monster. The skeleton fell to the floor then, humerus, thigh bone and tibia rolling away as it lost the source of its power that had been keeping it together.

"Is *eet* dead?" Fleur's voice penetrated into his mind, shaking him from his study of the depths of the jewel.

"Julian Herpo has been a dead man for a long time, princess, this was just the last cry of a man long lost to insanity," Harry said grimly.

"Ow did he life for so long?" Fleur asked, obviously shaken, "*eet* should not be possible."

Harry turned full body to her then, rolling the vile magic in his magically protected fingers. "Are you sure you want to know, Fleur? You can feel what I hold here, do you really want to know what it is?"

Her jaw set and she got a stubborn glint in her eye that Harry had seen in many a woman, normally before an argument ensued. "If *eet* is *dangereux* then *eet* is best if I know about *eet*, *non*? *Eet* would be better to know than to die because I never learn."

Harry nodded in appreciation. That was an argument he could agree with.

"Very well," he said easily. She stared at him, surprised that he had capitulated so easily. He smiled. "What, you thought I would keep knowledge from you? You're an adult, Fleur, I'm not about to baby you."

"This," he held the stone up, interrupting whatever comment she had been about to make, "is what's called a Horcrux. It's created by killing someone with the killing curse then, using a ritual, splitting your soul and storing it within an object." He tilted his head. "It is preferable for the object to be magical in nature, the more powerful the better, for it grants the soul fragment with additional protection on top of what the ritual already gives it."

"Zat is 'orrific," Fleur whispered, looking at the red ruby in horror.

"Yes, it is," Harry agreed, "human sacrifice is the most powerful sacrifice when doing rituals, as you probably know," he grimaced, recalling his own personal experience of just how dangerous it could be in the Algerian desert. "It imbues the Horcruxes with immensely powerful protection, so much so that it can be destroyed by very few things, the most powerful of magic." He rose an expectant eyebrow at her. "Can you guess what those are?"

"You are doing a lesson now?" She asked incredulously.

"Yes. Now answer."

She huffed and thought on it. "If *eet* is a part of a soul, would the killing curse kill work? Zat curse severs the connection to the soul, *non*?"

"Good, another."

She puffed her cheeks out in thought. "Per'aps using a form of alchemy you could dissolve *eet*?"

"Nope, the only other way is Fiendfyre and Basilisk venom, I have some theories about dementors and the Veil... but that's not important."

"And which one will you use?" Fleur asked, nervous.

"Fiendfyre, but first we need to find the other one," he said, placing the ruby on the ground.

"*Ozzer* one?" Fleur asked, her voice ever so slightly higher pitched.

"Mhm, but the fucker placed it under all the gold, so we need to cancel out the *gemino* first," he turned to the veela, who was looking around the room warily, as if another corpse was about to jump out at her. He snorted. "Don't worry about it, this one doesn't have anything to control, you make the three ward stones for the right side and I'll make the four on the left, okay?"

She nodded a bit numbly and moved to comply.

Harry used the marble that had been used for flooring as the ward stones. It wasn't pure enough for more long-lasting ward stones but it was good enough, the wards didn't need to last long. Harry finished his four quickly and moved to help Fleur, finding that her own were actually perfect and far neater than his own. She was more of a perfectionist than he was, always finishing her runes with the proper flourishes and spikes. The only downside was that she took twice the time as he did with his hasty scratchings.

Once the ward had run its course Harry began to dig through the valuables until he found the polished wooden box that was practically leaking dark magic. Wrinkling his nose at the smell of ozone, Harry opened it and removed the cup with another gauntleted hand, this one having been enchanted with a curse that would drain all the water in someone's body through the bottom of their feet.

"By Godric, I hate these ruddy things," Harry muttered as he lay it next to the ruby. "Stand back a bit please Miss Delacour, can't be too safe with fiendfyre."

She did so, and Harry walked back and cast the chaos magic. From the tip a spiralling pillar of flame emerged, spilling to the floor to form into the form of a familiar skeletal horse. It flapped its wings proudly and tossed its head. Harry glared and wrestled control of it, sending the creature stamping towards the Horcruxes, wings spread as it half glided along.

With his off-hand Harry cast a silencing charm on himself as he watched two twirling figures of black disintegrate in the unnaturally wide maw of the thestral, indistinct mouths agape in wordless agony. Eventually, though, the remains of the Horcruxes were gone, leaving only a dark smear on the floor.

The thestral trotted back to him then, looking very pleased with itself, bowed its head.

"Yeah yeah, you're very impressive," Harry drawled. The thestral let out a proud snort of flame before it was dispersed with a flick of Harry's wand.

"Zat was... terrifying," Fleur said, staring at the place where the Horcruxes had been.

"Yeah, not the most pleasant things," Harry agreed, then turned back to Fleur, grinning. "But now at least we can do this." He sprinted away from her then, jumping and turning in mid-air to land on the pile of gold with an almighty crash, sending stacks of coins and assorted bits of jewellery tumbling down to the floor.

"Scrooge McDuck style," he said blissfully, casting a few cushioning charms behind him and laying his head back in contentment.

"One moment you are battling a demon in a sword fight then you dive onto money like some sort of child. You really are an enigma, 'arrison."

Harry jerked his head up to look at her, smiling. "C'mon, don't pretend like you don't want to."

She kept looking at him sternly, then a wide smile broke out onto her face and she followed suit, squealing and landing next to him with a slight "*oomph!*" when she did so. Harry turned his head, watching her as she cast the same charms that he did and then observed the ceiling with a frown. "Zis ees not nearly a good enough view."

Fleur then shot four different spells in a square, each one forming lines between each other on the high stone ceiling of the cave. She then began murmuring in Latin and waving her wand in intricate patterns, midnight black and starlight pouring forth from the rosewood tip. When she was done it was like a window into the night sky, complete with the moon shining at them at an angle, not quite full. It was yellow, likely from some sandstorm miles away.

"Looks familiar," Harry observed.

Fleur nodded and let her wand fall to her side. "When I was at 'ogwarts, the top of 'ze Great 'all was one of 'ze few things I liked, I used to remain in 'zat room for hours. Afterwards, I dedicated myself to learning 'ze charm for my own use."

"Nice," Harry observed, then remembered something. "Hey Fleur, how would you feel about trying something new?"

She shrugged. "Zis day 'as been so crazy already, why not?"

Harry grinned and fished a sealed plastic tube from his cargo shorts. Delicately, he popped the cap off and withdrew the rolled piece of paper from within.

"What is 'zat?" Fleur asked curiously, "*eez* it a *cigarette*?"

"Nah, this is much better," Harry said gleefully, "you know how to smoke?"

"*Non*, I 'ave never tried," she said, still eyeing the thing with curiosity.

Harry brandished his wand and lit the end of it with a flickering flame. "Well, I think it's about time you learnt."

The next few minutes were thoroughly enjoyable to Harry. On her first try she coughed so much she thought she was about to cough up a lung, causing Harry to roar with laughter. Through his laughter, he somehow managed to educate her on how to inhale and exhale properly, and soon enough she was doing it perfectly. There was something about teaching a high-up French nobleman's daughter how to smoke weed that was just priceless to him, she was so delicate with how she held it and regarded the whole thing with a mite of curious suspicion. They finished the first one quickly, and on the second one they both just sat back and relaxed again, a happy light-headedness spreading through them.

Harry blew a puff of smoke out and rose his own wand, drawing links in the constellations in the sky, trying his best to remember old lessons from Professor Sinistra. "Why were you there? At the pub."

"What do you mean?" She asked softly.

"That pub is quiet, not a place that people go to have fun, at least not younger people." She smiled at that. "People go there for a bit of peace and quiet, to think on their issues. That's why I was there, so why were you? Apart from escaping the goblins."

She was silent for a while, then she let out a long sigh. "You are correct of course." She paused. "I was 'zere because of a man."

"Oh? Please do tell." She snapped her head to meet his eyes and he shrugged, "what? I could help," he said, passing the smoking spliff over.

She considered it then nodded, "alright." She took a deep breath. "'Is name is William, 'e works at Gringotts."

"William Weasley?" Harry asked, already knowing the answer. "He's a well-known cursebreaker in the field." He explained at her raised eyebrow.

She nodded, smiling, "'E is very good at what he does."

"He's also an Englishman," Harry pointed out teasingly. "So what, you like the men but not the country?"

She flushed prettily and took a deep drag to stall her answer. Her embarrassment couldn't hold out under the influence, however, and soon enough an easy smile spread across her face and she lifted her shoulder in that effortless way she did. "I zuppose so," she turned to him, resting the side of her head on one hand, and winked lazily. "I will be the first to admit you are quite 'andsome as well."

Harry snorted, taking the spliff back from her. "I don't count, I'm a metamorph."

"Zis ees not 'ow you usually look zen?"

"Eh," Harry tilted his hand back and forth. "Kinda. How I look right now is the image I have of myself in my head." *Although it used to be a different one.* "How I look is my own projection of who I am, and who doesn't want to think of themselves as attractive? How I look is fluid, I can become attached to a face and keep it around, but I'm all of them and none of them." He smiled ruefully. "There's not really a good way to explain it, it's a completely alien concept to anyone but us."

"*Eet* must be nice, being able to change 'ow you look and fade into 'ze background whenever you like," Fleur said wistfully, rolling a thick gold coin of unknown origin in-between her slender fingers, "most of 'ze time I can ignore 'ze stares, I 'ave been subject to zhem since I was a leetle girl, but zometimes 'zey still get to me."

Harry didn't try and reassure her that standing out was fine, that it was good to be different. He had experienced it, and it wasn't fine. It was a huge pressure to feel like you were always being watched. It followed you into empty rooms sometimes, it could haunt your life if you let it. Thankfully Harry had been too busy trying to survive to worry about his fame most of the time. He had been horribly unprepared and under-supported to experience the horror that was being a child celebrity. If he hadn't been preoccupied then he had no doubt he would have gone insane. Afterwards, he'd buried himself in his work, choosing the Hit-Wizards over the Aurors so he wouldn't have to patrol in public areas and could focus on the fighting aspect.

"You're a strong witch, I can tell." Harry exalted, twisting his fingers until the smoke resembled a hung banner. "Maybe when you get that page in the newspaper and cast down your doubters you'll find the stares far more palatable."

She smiled, tracing her name through the smoke, a gleam in her eye. "*Oui*, I *theenk* I will."

"But we got off topic," Harry cut in, "you mentioned a certain handsome redhead, and were about to tell me what the problem is."

"Oh, yes," the smile faltered, "we met a month ago, in Gringotts, and we started going out a week ago. 'Ze date was *incroyable*, but 'zere were a few problems."

Harry had a good idea of what those problems could be. Or who.

"Alfway through 'ze dinner 'is mother made 'erself known," she sounded as if she very much wished that weren't the case. "She made increasingly rude comments about me, indirectly of course, and William just stood 'zere and didn't even try to defend me! 'E waited until she 'ad run out of 'zings to say, 'zen asked 'er to leave! 'Eet was absolutely 'umiliating." She was genuinely upset by the end, her chest heaving. Harry passed her the weed to wean off some of the angst. She took it and a long drag with relish.

She sighed, slumping back to lie limply on the pile of wealth. "And 'zen afterwards I cannot 'elp but wonder, what if she is right? What if I am too young? 'E is twenty-four and I am only eighteen. What if 'e *is* only wiz' me because I am a veela?" She said, sounding defeated.

Harry thought about that while he worked on finishing off the spliff.

"Did you say anything back?" He asked eventually.

She let out an amused huff and rolled her head to look at him. "What do you *theenk*?"

The corner of Harry's lip twitched. "I was past the thinking stage, I already knew. That was just confirmation." He thought some more. "Do you like him?"

"*Oui*," she replied without hesitation. "'E is not affected by 'ze allure at all, and 'e 'as been a complete gentleman wizzout fail."

"So why do you think anyone else is entitled to an opinion?" Harry asked in confusion. "You like him, he likes you, as far as I'm concerned everyone else can fuck off. Why should anyone but you and him care about you and him?"

She giggled. "Such a way with words you 'ave. It will be 'ard being with 'im, if the 'ole family 'ates me."

"Weasleys... the mum called Molly?" He asked.

"Yes, why?"

"She used to be Molly Prewett, old family, so her head's probably still in the fucking Victorian age," he took a deep drag, delighting in the feeling of the dying embers burning in the back of his throat. It made him feel *alive*. "Not surprised she's got a stick up her arse, probably thinks your some kind of street whore that enticed him with your allure. You know how much worse people were about veela back in the day, especially in the old families."

She breathed deeply. "Even if 'zat was per'aps 'ze most crass thing I 'ave ever 'eard," she released the breath in a sigh, "now 'zat you say 'zat, what she said makes far more sense."

"Hey," he reached over and tilted her chin up, "fuck. Them."

He withdrew his hand and she smiled again. "'Zat is your advice? *Fuck 'zem*?" She laughed, "I *theenk* I could 'ave come up with that by myself."

Harry grinned at her, loving the way she said 'fuck.' It sounded funny hearing the barbarian English swearwords being spoken by someone as elegant and French as Fleur. It also

sounded sexier, but that was beside the point.

"I promised help, princess, I never said it would be good help."

"Zank you anyway." They remained in silence for a while longer, happy to bask in the feeling of a task accomplished and the haze of good marijuana. Fleur broke it eventually, though. "And why were you in 'ze bar?"

Harry shrugged. "Was looking for pretty French birds to chat up, what else?"

She laughed heartily. "Well you found one, but I doubt that 'zat was your original intention."

"Would you believe me if I said that I was there for similar reasons to you?"

She rose a teasing eyebrow. "A man?"

"When she wants to be."

"Ah, so 'zat gossip rag you English call a newspaper were right about one *theeng*."

"Broken clocks, Fleur, broken clocks," he said to the ceiling, lighting another. Fleur refused it so he kept it all to himself.

"And what is 'ze problem with you and 'er?" She asked, "per'aps I can be more 'elpful than you were." She sounded far too amused for his liking.

"Yeah yeah, laugh it up feathers," Harry drawled.

"Don't *call* me 'zat."

"Uh huh," Harry replied uncaringly, breathing out a puff of smoke, "what do you know about what happened on the 28th?"

"Not much," she admitted, "theories vary from you being 'ze next dark lord to being an 'ero who saved thirty-eight people in a heroic fight to the death against 'ze entire muggle army. All 'zat is known for certain is 'zat, somehow, Nymphadora Tonks was taken, you arrived at the scene, and Dumbledore 'imself brought 'er into 'ze 'ospital hours later."

"Some good examples. Although my personal favourite is the one about me rooting out the primary conspirators of the Rotfang Conspiracy."

She giggled confusedly. "*Excusez-moi*?"

"Never mind," he waved a hand dismissively. He had to pause to compose the answer in his head. "Would you like to know what really happened?"

"*Oui*."

Harry took a long, long pull. He needed it to not remember her face as he told it.

"The truth is that they took her." He looked to Fleur. "Death Eaters took her, a way to get to me for surviving a raid and putting one of their buddies in prison."

"Zat is awful," Fleur gasped.

Harry shrugged. "That is war, and we're in one. Action and reaction. Fortunately, I took action before they did and forced her to take a ward so I could know if she was attacked, not that the fucking thing helped much." He grinned ruefully. "Had to use divination, always was pants at the art but fuck me if it isn't handy."

"And 'zen?" Fleur asked, enraptured.

"Tracked her down to an old pureblood mansion where they were keeping her in a cellar, torturing her," his face fell into a stony mask. "She said I killed twenty-two men and women that day," Harry said without emotion. "The thing is, the memory she counted the bodies in didn't include the fight in Hogsmead."

He looked to the side to find her staring at him. "What do you think of that, princess? Still so keen to be on this adventure?"

"Zey deserved eet," she said, uncertain but with an undercurrent of fire. "Veela are creatures of love, 'arrison. We, more than any other being, know 'zat we will do anything for 'ze people we love, no matter 'ow bad." By the end she was more certain, her chin lifted as if daring him to think she was lying. "I don't fear you, I admire you."

Harry scoffed. "I don't love her, I don't love anyone."

"I did not say 'zat you love 'er, love comes in time," Fleur said patiently, "but you have love *for* 'er, enough to kill to get to 'er and raze the place of 'er 'ardship to 'ze ground." Fleur sighed and shifted closer to him so she could rest her head on his shoulder. It was a purely platonic sort of contact, both of them both knew they had other people on their minds and in their hearts. It was a comfort of sorts, for both of them. "Merlin knows I would do zhe same."

"Maybe," Harry laughed, placing an arm around her shoulders. "I wish she took it as well as you are."

"Ow bad?"

"Red face, tears and shouting," Harry admitted.

Fleur winced against his chest.

"Yeah, said some stuff about not knowing me, about me being apathetic and acting like a god amongst men or some such rubbish." He scowled, gesturing unthinkingly at the starry ceiling as he tried to get his point across. "It's not like I just go around cursing random people. The people I killed were trash that were harming children and planning to rape a woman they had never even met before. I would do it all again in a *heartbeat*. I'd kill them in the hundreds if it meant she didn't get hurt."

"You talk like someone who 'as seen war," Fleur said quietly. "You talk like my *Grand-père*."

Harry wondered how much information he could trust her with, but didn't wonder for long. His brain was filled with smoke and his words flowed from it like water from a tap.

"I have seen war, sometimes it feels like I never left the first one," he laughed, the laugh turning into a cough halfway through. He soothed his stinging throat with more smoke. "And now I'm in another one! Isn't that just *grand*?"

"Maybe 'zat is the problem."

Harry rolled his eyes to look at her. She was looking very thoughtful. "Oh *really*."

"Yes, 'arrison, really," she said in exasperation, lifting her head so her sharp chin rested on the muscle of his chest as she stared up at him. "'As *she* ever been in a war?"

Harry opened his mouth to say yes, she had died in one, but some sense of self-preservation emerged and he strangled the words before they came out. "No," he croaked.

"And it *eez* said 'zat she is an Auror, 'ow long 'as she been doing 'zat?" Fleur persisted.

Harry did a bit of math in his head. "A year," he admitted.

"Only a year of being an Auror, a year which was entirely peaceful and she probably never 'ad to kill anyone or see many dead."

He mulled over that for a few seconds. It was true, he had been doing that same thing for over seventy years, to him it seemed like just another day. His head had been scrambled, associating the Tonks from his time, who had died a battle-hardened Auror, to the practically green Tonks who had probably never even seen a killing curse. Abruptly he realised he had been expecting far too much from her, and he didn't like how that made him feel about himself.

"Still though," he scowled, "she didn't have to be such a bitch about it, she must know I did it for her." He threw a large golden coin away from himself petulantly.

Fleur attempted to hide a smile which he saw anyway. "'Ow soon after 'ze incident did you speak to 'er?"

"Three days," Harry replied, "there were some things that had to be cleaned up."

"Oh? *Anytheeng* to do with those three Aurors zhat are missing their thumbs on their wand arm?" Fleur asked coyly. "William got called in for it, but even 'e couldn't break the curse stopping them from growing back."

"No idea what you're talking about. I'm sure those thumbs will grow back in roughly the same amount of time it takes for an Auror to be discharged from the corps for being on medical leave for too long. Purely by coincidence, of course."

She snorted. "I'm sure, but we are... how you English say, off the rails?"

"Off track," Harry corrected with a smile, "off the rails is something completely different, although I suppose we are both that as well right now."

She hummed and shifted for more comfort against his chest, accepting a small puff from the spliff still in his fingers. "Off track, yes, a curious phrase of speech..." she wandered off, gazing at his face blankly.

"You were saying?" He asked, amused.

She blinked and blushed again. "Yes, I asked 'ow soon you spoke to 'er after what 'appened, and you said..."

"Three days," Harry repeated, mouth widening into a grin.

"Shut up," she said, slapping his chest. "All I was trying to say is 'zat she would 'ave still been emotional and... *en conflit*."

"Conflicted?"

"Conflicted," she nodded, sending platinum blonde down his body. "We are slaves to our emotions, we say stupid things when 'zey run high." Fleur frowned, "Although I don't like 'zat she attacked you when you saved 'er life, I can see 'ow that reaction may 'ave come about."

Harry thought about that and came to the decision that she was probably right. It didn't make some of the things he or Tonks had said any more justified, but he could see how the argument had 'come about', as Fleur said. He was too used to just being able to do things like that and walk away without any moral qualms and had been alone for so long that he hadn't really bothered to think about the consequences of someone close seeing what he was capable of. Half of him wished he had just stunned Tonks as soon as he had seen her, and the other half was actually glad that she knew who he was now.

Well, at least that part of who he was.

He sighed explosively. "You're right, I'll have to speak to her soon," he looked down at her, eyes narrowed. "How are you so good at this?"

She smirked. "Veela, 'arrison, are sensitive to love," she said with immense self-satisfaction, "I could sense your inner turmoil the moment you stepped into the bar."

Harry grunted. "Fucking veela." He sat up, letting her take her head off his chest. "I think it's about time we got out of here."

Fleur brandished her wand and produced the time from the tip. She swore. "*Merde*, I 'ave work in three hours." She sat up and seemed to remember that she had been lying on a massive pile of gold. She glanced from the gold to him then back to the gold, a hesitantly wistful look in her eyes and posture.

"Take as much as you want," he gestured around him. "It's certainly better than the person who owns it having it. Anything you don't take, I'll be taking later." He swiped a brown bottle

nearby and held it aloft, whistling. He popped open the cork and took a sniff. "Fucking score! This whiskey must have been ageing in here for almost a thousand years," he took a deep swig and smiled widely at the taste, "damn, that's good."

Behind him, Fleur was stuffing her expanded pockets with gold and jewellery until she resembled a walking jewellery store. "Should I feel bad about stealing *zees theengs*?" She questioned, holding a huge solid gold chain aloft and eyeing it doubtfully before pocketing it.

"Nah, the guy who owns this is a right bastard, he deserves everything coming to him," Harry said, taking another swig and then beginning to make his slightly staggered descent. Suddenly though, his foot fell through a hole disguised by a silky sheet of velvet and he stumbled.

"Oh, fuck!" Harry yelped. He only had a split second to make his decision before it would be too late, the floor was already rushing towards him. It was a critical moment, his vision narrowed and tunnelled as he focused on protecting the only thing that mattered.

Quickly, instead of casting a cushioning charm on himself, Harry curled his arms around the precious whiskey and clutched it to his chest as he tumbled painfully down the pile, knocking helmets and coins down with him in a thunderous avalanche of chaos. He fell to a stop at the base where he finally stopped swearing and lay, groaning and moaning.

"Arrison! Are you ok?" Fleur asked, all the heavy cloaks and jewellery adorning her making the run down far more ungainly than she would ever let herself be if she was fully sober.

Harry stuck up the unbroken bottle of whiskey in triumph from his place on his back on the floor. "Nothing important was lost in the accident, Fleur, no worries!"

Fleur laughed freely but was interrupted by the sound of whirring and the sound of metal clinking from the direction of the top of the pile. Harry (for the second time) sat up. He looked around in confusion before realising he was facing the wrong way and shuffled around again. Fleur turned around as well. Both of them watched the hole with dazed curiousness, Fleur remaining frozen to the spot and Harry sat still on the floor, only moving to take a sideways sip of the bottle, keeping one eye on the hole. Finally, the whirring stopped, and for a few solemn seconds, there was silence.

Then, suddenly, from the hole that Harry had punctured a distinctly canine head emerged like a meerkat emerging from its hideout, formed from what looked like burnished bronze. The head turned to them, revealing glowing eyes the colour of teal, like the shallows of a tropical sea. With an athletic leap, it jumped out of the hole, revealing a heavily muscled frame. It was about 2 feet tall at the shoulder, the muscles also formed from the same polished bronze and rippling like they were the real thing as it began to approach them low on its haunches, making sniffing noises as if deciding if it was safe to approach.

"Arrison? Should I be concerned?" Fleur asked warily, eyeing the dog as it got closer, the sound of its heavy metal paws striking the stone floor ringing around the room.

Harry—still sitting on the floor straight-legged—waved her off, taking another deep drink from the bottle. "Nah, don't think so," he slurred.

The dog stopped in front of Harry and sat, its tongue lolling out goofily.

"Who's a good boy?" Harry cooed, scratching it under its chin, "Is it you? Are you a good boy?"

"You are unbelievable," Harry heard Fleur mutter as she sagged in apparent relief that she wouldn't be fighting another monster today.

The dog let out a crackling bark and began to itch itself with its hind legs where Harry was petting it, as an actual dog would.

"This is pretty impressive," Harry observed as he tapped his wand against the dog with his off-hand, runes and diagnostics appearing above it. "I think some of these are Atlantean runes."

"Atlantean?" Fleur asked in wonder. "I was not aware 'zat anything from that place remained."

"Because the High Wizard Council at the time ordered anything remaining destroyed. They were understandably paranoid, seeing that some of the artefacts from the place could have razed cities. Did wipe cities, actually," he said distractedly as he swiped his wand sideways, the runes spinning with the motion to reveal a new set that he examined. "This dog is called a Molossian, a traditional Ancient Greek dog. Old Herpo there probably had it commissioned at the time and managed to hide it away in here," he gestured in the vague direction of the skeleton still pinned to the wall. "Most likely the last of its kind in existence."

"*Incroyable*," she whispered, hesitantly stroking its head and snatching her hand away when it growled at her threateningly.

Harry chuckled. "I think I somehow activated it when I stepped on it like an idiot, it's sort of... bound to me, now. Dunno, from the little I've seen of Atlantean magic it seems to have even more of a life of its own than the magic we use now," he swiped the set of runes away with a flick of his wand and frowned at the new ones while the dog pressed itself into his palm. "Fleur, go and stand on the other side of the room for me?"

He felt the heat of her glare on the side of his head. "A please would not be out of place 'arrison."

"*Please* don't be a pain in the arse?" He asked, not looking away from a certain rune depicting seven semicircles arranged in a circle to resemble a flower.

Huffing and muttering under her breath about rude Englishmen, Fleur began to walk to the other side of the room.

Harry conjured a parchment, ink and quill and wrote down Fleur's name on the front, a rough estimation of her location and a brief message before folding it and proffering it to the dog.

"Hey boy, you mind taking this to Fleur?"

To his delight, the dog barked in affirmation, delicately took the scroll behind its large canines, turned towards Fleur then leapt into the air. In front of it, a bright teal light erupted into existence and the dog fell into it. A moment later the light emerged in front of Fleur, and the dog jumped out to land on the stone with a heavy *thud*, making Fleur let out a shocked gasp. It trotted up to her, the scroll floating from its mouth on a beam of ocean green light to float in front of Fleur, who took it delicately and read it.

"Gold doesn't suit you," she snorted, looking down at the heavy jewellery adorning her then to him with a raised eyebrow. "Everything suits me, 'arrison."

"True, can't let you get big-headed though," Harry said. "This is pretty bloody cool. Vaelin!" He whistled, "Come back here you great lump!"

Without hesitation the dog turned and jumped back through the glowing portal to him, butting against his legs affectionately. Harry grinned and scratched it behind the ears. "Who's a good boy, is it you Vaelin? *Yes it issss*." Vaelin let out a warbling sound of contentment at Harry's ministrations.

"Arrison, you can play with your magical dog later, I 'ave to get 'ome and sleep for the few hours that I 'ave left," Fleur said, moving over to him.

"Oh, right, sorry," Harry said. He looked around. He could move the rest of it into his vault at a later date he supposed. "Come on then Vaelin, we're off," he clicked his fingers at his side and moved off to the stairs, Vaelin walking obediently next to him. On his way out he picked up the staff to add to his collection.

"Vaelin?" Fleur asked in amusement, glancing down at the dog.

"A tribute to a hero lost too soon," Harry said solemnly. "I suppose I could have named him after the Latin name for bronze, but I didn't want to call my new dog *aeneus*."

Vaelin barked his agreement and Fleur laughed melodiously. Harry smiled, this had certainly been a much better way to spend his time than moping in his classroom.

-oOo-

Once they had recovered their original clothes and Fleur had stashed her hoard in a bag she had expanded they stood atop the Hill of the Acropolis, looking over the blinking lights of muggle Athens. The potions had begun to wear off now, and Harry could tell that Fleur was struggling not to fall asleep as she leaned against him, one of his arms once more wrapped around her. On his other side, his companion sat vigil, the glowing eyes the sole evidence that it wasn't a statue.

"Zank you, for today," Fleur finally said. "Eet was... informative, and 'ze most fun I have 'ad in a veery long time, 'eet was exactly what I needed, I *theenk*, even if eet was *terrifiant* at times."

"You're welcome. Not what you expected to happen when you went out for a drink, ay?"

"*Non*," she laughed softly, then took a deep, satisfied breath. "I 'ave no idea 'ow I will return to sitting be'ind a desk now I know what *eet* is like to cursebreak."

He gave her a soft squeeze. "You'll make it. You picked up the things I showed you quicker than almost anyone else I've seen." He looked down at her pleased flush and bright blue eyes and grinned. "Plus, if you ever need an escape again you can always let me know and I'll swoop by and rescue you from your tower of despair."

She rolled her eyes, but they were bright. "I am not a princess, 'arrison, I do wish you would stop insinuating otherwise."

"Vow breaks in a half-hour, Fleur."

She pushed away from him and pouted. "I never should 'ave sworn that vow."

"No no, it was a good idea," he shrugged, "I'm dangerous."

"Zat much I know, but you are a good man 'arrison," she looked up at him seriously, "Nymphadora will see *eet*. I know these things."

"Don't be so sure, Fleur," he warned, "trust is an awful thing, and trusting too easily will get you bit."

"Don't you trust me?"

Harry smiled. "I don't trust anybody, Fleur, nobody but myself—not for a very long time. It has always worked out the best for me." He offered her his arm. "C'mon, enough of the therapy. Let's apparate back."

Her eyes were sad for a moment before she nodded and took his arm, and they spun away back to England. A moment later, a lone teal flash sparked on the top of the sheer hill of the Acropolis then blinked out.

Eleos

Chapter Summary

Sorry for the long wait folks, in recompense, I give you the next TWO chapters at the same time so you're all caught up with fanfiction.com :)

Enjoy!

Chapter 11: Eleos

8 th October 1995, 03:55pm

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Dumbledore sat with three fingers on each temple, eyes closed firmly in concentration. He had been sat in the same exact position for almost three entire minutes, so still that his phoenix, Fawkes, let out a concerned cry. His master was getting old, and frankly, he was expecting the old human to keel over any minute.

It was this that brought him from his thoughts, along with the firm mental poke sent along with the bird's warbled exclamation.

"You're sure of this?" he finally asked, eyes flashing open to regard the man sitting at his desk.

The two people sitting before him looked around forty. The man on the right, whom Albus had been speaking to, was a distinguished-looking gentleman in a pitch-black suit with a severe goatee and wavy brown hair that reached to his broad shoulders in a shiny river. His face was hard, with age lines accentuated by the golden rectangular glasses perched on his long nose. His legs were crossed, and his hands were rested atop an artfully engraved cane in front of him. He had the look of a man that knew of things before they even happened.

"Absolutely certain," he responded easily. "I doubt that anybody else on earth felt it but us, but feel it we did. A magical disturbance of massive proportions, and we are sure that it emanated from Avalon." There was a trace of a Romance accent in his rich tones, barely audible, but Albus could still hear it even after all these years.

"And you think it was..."

"Your new Defence teacher, Mr Harrison Slate," the woman confirmed, rose lips stretching into a smile. She was elegant in her age, seated properly in a simple purple dress as she sipped her tea.

Albus steepled his fingers, his mind racing to try and uncover their reasoning. "Please explain your reasoning, Nicholas."

His old friend smiled, pleased to relay information to his old student. "The day we felt it," he turned to his wife, a small frown on his brows, "it was around the start of the month of August, was it not *mon ange*?"

"The fifth, to be exact," the woman confirmed, tucking a curl of barley hair behind an ear. She didn't seem to be completely invested in her husband's machinations, and Albus knew she wasn't. She simply followed him and supported him with whatever he did, slyly offering small comments that often ended up changing events to how she desired them and preventing her eccentric husband from inadvertently becoming a dark lord.

Nicholas leant forward eagerly. "Yes, and hear this, I did a little investigation at St Mungo's—"

"He means that he walked in and legilimised everyone in the building," Perenelle supplied. She had begun knitting something in baby blue, the clicking of her needles adding another layer to his office's low cacophony of noise.

"Well—yes, but that's irrelevant," Nicholas waved her away, unbothered. "The point is, I got curious about this hectic new addition to the game, so I went digging."

"And you found something?" Dumbledore asked, intrigued. He had less time than he would have liked to investigate Harrison Slate, too caught up with his duty to the ICW, the Order of the Phoenix, Hogwarts and research into his suspicions on Tom's artificially extended life. It was simply too low on his list of priorities.

"Gold, so to speak," Nicholas chuckled, his eyes shining. "Something unprecedented, something I've never seen in all my long years of livi—"

"He understands Nicholas, do get to the point of the matter please dearest," Perenelle said, not looking up from her knitting. Albus smiled; he had always admired the dynamic between the two ancient mages.

"Yes yes, well it's all rather fascinating. Slate was hit by a curse—*avada rictus* I believe, a rather nasty curse derived from the more famous one that slowly severs the soul of the victim but doesn't kill them, essentially replicating the effects of a dementor but without the loathsome presence of the creatures themselves."

Dumbledore grimaced. He remembered that curse being a favourite of Varus Selwyn's during the first war. The twisted man loved the demoralising effects the curse had on the victims' friends and family.

People didn't survive *avada rictus*.

"I see you understand why this is remarkable now," Nicholas said, intelligent brown eyes shining with that almost manic curiousness he got before he dove headfirst into a new impossibility that had driven him to inventions such as the Philosophers Stone. "Slate shouldn't have survived—he should have become a shell of a man with only a ladle and drip

feed to sustain him, and yet he *lived*. He was resurrected—have no doubt about it—and I am *sure* that the disturbance we felt coincides exactly with his revival. I have managed to get close to him during the few times he had left the castle, and it has only made me more sure. He is an anomaly, a discordant note, Albus, a square key in a triangular keyhole, a—"

"He doesn't belong," Perenelle summarised. "And we have felt other disturbances since that time, the timings of which are more than what can be attributed to coincidence. Just several days prior both Nicholas and I felt a calamitous event occur in the Aegean Sea. We were otherwise occupied at the time, however when we arrived we found that a blood-locked fidelius charm, one that had belonged to an... acquaintance of ours, once, had been broken into. It was most curious."

Albus blinked, horribly surprised by the news. "The secret was betrayed?" He asked for clarification, although he suspected he wouldn't like the answer.

Nicholas chuckled. "Oh no, immortals no, there are—or were, I suppose—none alive other than us that knew of Herpo's island, we were given the secret in the funeral invitation. It really wasn't worth the visit, in the end. Julian and his clan never had the same sense of flourish as, say, Marquis or Ganymede did, now there were some wizards who understood the importance of proper stagecraft—"

"You're rambling again, dear."

"Yes I am, thank you *mon ange*. Anyway, some upstart tore down the first fidelius and replaced it, attempting to make us forget it, which of course I refused to do—"

Albus took in the news about a legendary historical figure's secret island and the fact that, apparently, the Flamels could just refuse to let a fidelius make them forget something with a straight face and calm demeanour.

"—We ignored it, of course, there was nothing interesting left on that island but old gold and a rotting corpse, but recently, someone has taken down the fidelius and made away with all the loot that was there. We, of course, investigated, and found that there had been some dark, *dark* magic in the chamber where Julius buried himself. The signatures matched with those barbaric things that he created... I forget the name..."

"Horcuxes," Perenelle supplied, frowning as she knit with an angry *jab*. "Such a crude method to prolong one's life. What is the point in preserving your life if you lose your sanity?"

"Indeed," Albus said distantly, "the trappings of immortality are far too tempting for those who yearn for it, I fear." He sat back in his old chair, bones creaking as they always did these days. "And you think Harrison is responsible for this?" his eyes widened, "you think it's possible that..."

"Yes," Nicholas said triumphantly with a thump of his cane, "I believe that the upstart in question was your Tom Riddle, and I believe he left a Horcrux in there. Would it not fit with his personality?"

"To break into the one who created the Horcrux's tomb and place his own within would elevate himself beyond such a legendary figure's level of prestige, in his eyes," Albus acknowledged. "So you believe he knows of Tom's Horcruxes?"

"I do."

"I find myself unsurprised, somehow," Albus said after a pause. "He located another of the Horcruxes recently, in young Harry Potter. He has offered to remove it, using a *ritual*."

Perenelle's lip twitched. "I take it you were not welcoming of the offer. You always were rather biased towards the practice after what happened to your dear sister. But as I have always said, that was only due to interference in the ritual, not the ritual itself. I would urge you to consider it, if only to help the boy. Who *knows* what could happen after prolonged exposure to such *foul* magic."

"I think he can be trusted," Nicholas advised, as he had for so long. "He may not be on your side, but judging by his actions against your little Dark Lord problem, he isn't on the other side either."

Albus took his glasses off, thumbed his eyes then replaced them. "I will think about it," he said heavily, though judging by Perenelle's amused smile, she knew she had convinced him to follow her path again.

"He is very, *very* interesting Al. Contradictions follow him like nifflers follow gold. He is experienced beyond his years, has been causing all sorts of havoc and rings oddly against our magic," Nicholas explained. "I would keep a close eye on him, I suspect he would make either a valuable ally or a terrifying enemy."

Albus was prevented by a bright flash of pale green in the already well-lit room, from which a dog of bronze emerged, large and imposing. It landed on Albus' desk mid-run from one side, dropped something from its jaws, and then ran the rest of the length of his desk to jump off the other side, where it disappeared in another flash of light.

Two wands (and one knitting needle) were pointed at where the creature had just been, all three of the owners of which were blinking in confusion at what had just occurred.

Nicholas broke the silence. "Was that..."

"Atlantean technology. Yes, it was," Perenelle said in rare awe, her knitting momentarily forgotten. "What did it deliver, Al?"

"A letter," Albus said dazedly. "But I thought that the remains of Atlantis were all in the ICW archives in Rome?"

"Obviously, there was more than just gold and souls in that tomb," Nicholas observed wryly. "What does the letter say?"

Right, of course. He should have guessed it would be Harrison again.

Albus picked up the letter with strange resignation, unfolding the obnoxiously bright pink paper to reveal the scribbled note within. He read:

"Fine, I'll come.

P.S., care to explain the two gods sitting in your throne room?"

"I like him," Perenelle declared.

"That is because you are vain, *mon ange*, and he called you a god," Nicholas said automatically. Perenelle didn't even bat an eye, apparently agreeing with the assessment. "What is he accepting an invite to, Albus?"

Albus put down the letter slowly. "I came to much the same conclusion as you did, my friends. Not about the curious events you mentioned, but on your suggestion to watch him carefully. Either he is a friend, in which case I want him close—"

"—Or an enemy, in which case you want him closer," Nicholas finished, nodding in agreement.

"Indeed. So to facilitate this, I invited him to a meeting of the Order of the Phoenix."

"When?"

"Tonight."

Perenelle tutted, now back to her knitting. "I still say you would be better suited using your political skills rather than leading that ragtag group of misfits and incompetents, you're far too good at manipulation to suit being a vigilante."

"Blunt as always, Perry," Albus chuckled. "Thank you for the compliment, alas I think the politics is better left to the youngsters, these days. Unlike the two of you, I'm not getting any younger."

"Bah!" Nicholas thumped his cane in disgruntlement. "You would lead this miserable heap of rocks better than that moron Fudge deaf, blind and missing half a brain. That imbecile couldn't manoeuvre himself out of a paper bag. But I won't force you to do what's in your best interests, as I always haven't."

Dumbledore smiled at the passive-aggressive suggestion. "Thank you."

"It's rather incredible that he could sense us up here," Perenelle noted. "Nicholas and I keep our magic subdued greatly."

Nicholas hummed in agreement, thumbing the top of his cane. "I want to meet him."

Albus closed his eyes while he took a deep breath. It seemed Nicholas had a new fixation, and this one was a person. And considering the person in question...

He could think of very few ways in which this would go well.

8 th October 1995, 06:34pm

The Burrow

Molly looked up from the dough she had been kneading when she heard a knock at the door. She clapped her hands together as she walked towards the door to knock off the flour and glanced at the grandfather clock. Seeing that her own hand was nowhere near 'mortal peril', she glanced out of the small window to the right of the entrance and saw the profile of a tall man with flowing, azure blue robes.

Those robes could only belong to one person.

"Albus!" She greeted enthusiastically when she flung the door open. "I had no idea you were dropping by, or I would have prepared something!"

Albus chuckled, ducking as he stepped into the house. "No need, no need. Apologies for imposing on you, I'm sure you have more important things to be doing..."

"Oh! Nonsense," she waved him off, stepping with him back into the kitchen. "I was just making some bread, as you can see. It's really no trouble at all."

Albus watched the dough kneading itself with a smile. "Contrarily, I think that what you were doing was of the utmost importance. Is Arthur in?"

Molly glanced at the clock. Arthur's hand was still on 'work'. "No, not for another few hours yet. The Ministry have been running him ragged recently, with the recent upsurge of misused muggle artefacts being discovered, awful stuff."

Albus nodded gravely as he swished his wand, directing a kettle under a tap to be filled. "It's in moments like these where I am grateful for the flexibility that my titles entitle me. Tea?"

"Yes please. Milk, one sugar," Molly smiled, taking control of the dough again. Albus often came to the Burrow and made whoever was in it a cup of tea and sat with them for a talk. He had mentioned how the kitchen reminded him of a home he had once had. Molly also liked to think that the venerable headmaster considered herself and Arthur good conversationalists.

"Are the children enjoying their time at school?" Albus asked as he picked two teabags from their old tin container.

"Oh yes, they're loving it. Apart from that awful affair with the last Hogsmead trip," her breath hitched a little at the memory of when she heard the news. Still, she continued, "it's been the best year for them yet, especially for Ronald. After what happened between him and Harry last year, he was worried that Harry might not want to be his friend anymore. I told him he was being ridiculous, of course, but boys will be boys."

"There is more than enough room for forgiveness in a heart as large as Harry's," Albus said as he waited for the kettle to boil. "And the twins? How do they fare?"

"They thrive," she said simply, her nose wrinkled but still unable to hide the small smile under it. "The two trouble-makers just announced their plan to start a *prank shop*, of all things! Some and some of the things they've invented... nothing short of genius," she frowned. "I think that Slate character has been giving them ideas."

"I know that's true for a fact," Albus said mildly. "I think they see a kindred soul in him. And Ginevra?"

Molly shrugged. "She doesn't send as many letters as the others. She's going through *that* phase. But I think she's having a good time in Care of Magical Creatures. I do like Hagrid, but the man really is distressingly irresponsible. Wilhelmina is a far better teacher, I must say."

"True, true. But I fear that if I allow her to continue her beloved teachings, soon there won't be enough of her left to teach," Albus chuckled with Molly. A *ding* sounded then, indicating the kettle had finished boiling. "Ah, that jogs my memory. Would you mind writing out an invite to the Order Headquarters while I pour this tea? I find that your own letters are far easier to read than my scrawl."

Molly hesitated. "Are you sure Albus?"

He waved her off. "I trust you with all my heart my dear, it really is nothing to worry about."

Still hesitant but, heartened by his words, Molly clapped her hands again, adding a touch of magic to completely vanish all the flour and dough from her hands. She then fetched a quill and parchment as the sound of water pouring into the china mugs came from behind her. She penned the invite in a steady, blocky script contained within many a recipe book.

The headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix may be found at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, London.

"Thank you, Molly dear," Albus said, swiping the slip of paper away and replacing it with a steaming mug of tea, the colour exactly as she liked it. He read it briefly, then tucked it into an inside pocket.

"Who's the invite for?" She asked placidly, blowing softly on the boiling surface of her tea.

"Harrison Slate. I'll be giving him the invite as soon as I return to the school."

She froze. "Slate? Are you certain that he's a good fit for the Order?"

Her old headmaster shook his head. "No, but it's better that he's there than not."

She pursed her lips the next time she blew, disappointed but unwilling to voice it. "Whatever you say, Albus."

He hummed and sipped his tea, an odd smile on his lips for a moment before he turned and looked out the window, tea steaming at his side. In another hour, he left, telling her he would see her at the Order meeting later in the day. It was what she had been making the bread for. It was rising in the oven as she stared fixedly at the family clock for another half hour, worry

holding her in a choke hold before she shook her head with a heavy sigh and bustled off to get on with some more chores.

-oOo-

8 th October 1995, 08:21pm

Number 12 Grimmauld Place, London

"Who's *she*?"

Tonks stared at the newest guest of Grimmauld place. The girl was standing on the opposite side of the room to her next to Bill Weasley, newly back from his most recent expedition to Egypt. Dumbledore had him doing some sort of research out there on the side. She was, undoubtedly, the most beautiful woman Tonks had ever seen.

"Fleur Delacour," Remus whispered back. "She's working at Gringotts. She was in the Triwizard Tournament last year."

"Well, that explains the magazine model impression she has going on then. She's a veela, right?"

"Yup."

"Bill has a good eye," Tonks complimented. The girl certainly was beautiful. "Was he the one to bring her in?" She had only just arrived in the kitchen of number 12 Grimmauld Place to be greeted by cheers as she walked awkwardly in, her movements still slightly jerky due to the after-effects of the cruciatus.

"Yes. I'm not sure what good she can do us though. Her family is powerful, but only in France. And she's a powerful witch I'm sure, but still so young," he shrugged. "We'll have to see, just like with the other person coming today."

"Other person?" Tonks asked, still discreetly watching Delacour. The blonde beauty was pretending not to be nervous, which she succeeded with almost perfectly. Bill leant down to whisper in her ear, and she smiled weakly at him. Still, she did relax. The two were close; Tonks could tell.

"Harrison Slate. Not sure what Dumbledore was thinking inviting him, but there's no denying he would be a valuable fighter in a tight spot."

"Harrison's coming?" Tonks asked, more high-pitched and squeaky than she would have liked.

"Should be here already," Remus confirmed, looking around him as if the guy would pop out of the biscuit tin on the kitchen table, not noticing her reaction. "As should Dumbledore, as a matter of fact. Odd, he's rarely late."

But Tonks wasn't listening to the rest. *Harrison's coming*. She hadn't talked to him since that day in the hospital. She had only seen his face in the series of articles in the newspapers and

once, briefly, on clean-up duty in Hogsmead. He had caught her eye for a single moment. She had been transfixed, but he had looked away. Words they had and hadn't spoken had been heavy before them.

And guilt. Definitely guilt. What a shitty emotion.

"You alright Tonks?" Sirius asked as he settled in on her other side. He had always been able to discern her mood better than the others. "You look like you've seen a demon."

"Did you know that Harrison's been invited?" She hissed back.

"What? No, I didn't. Who invited him?"

"Dumbledore, I think. I bumped into him up in Portree and he told me Slate was coming," Remus explained, then frowned when he finally realised her state. "Worried?"

"Our last meeting wasn't exactly a warm send-off," she murmured. Sirius gave her a brief one-armed hug, then stayed by her side.

"Greetings all," the unmistakable voice of Dumbledore came from the door. She turned to see the headmaster smiling upon them all. He was dressed in a bright orange robe trimmed in black with a large yellow pointed hat. It made him look like a lick of flame. "Is everyone here?"

"Mundungus isn't, neither is Sturgis, but that's pretty normal," Emmeline said.

"So Mr Slate isn't here yet?"

"No, he isn't," Remus spoke over the people who didn't know about the new invitee.

"No matter, no matter. I think I'll take a quick trip to the lavatory then while we wait; I don't believe I've had the pleasure of visiting the one in this lovely place. Sirius?"

"First door on the left at the top of the stairs," Sirius said bemusedly.

"Thank you," Dumbledore bowed, a gleam in his eye that reminded Tonks of something else for a moment before he left. "Do feel free to speak amongst yourselves until I return, I might be a while. Wizengamot meetings do drag on so..."

He left then, a certain awkward gait to his steps that Tonks didn't like to think about. The door closed behind him, the room soon descending into low chatter as old friends greeted each other and talked about nothing.

"Did something seem... off about him to you?" Tonks asked Remus as she frowned at the door.

He looked askance at her, distracted from his chat with McGonagall. "No, why?"

"Nothing," she shook her head. It was Dumbledore; he was always odd. "Don't worry about it."

He nodded once and turned away, taking her word at face value.

"You are Nymphadora Tonks?"

Tonks stiffened as she swung her gaze to greet ice-blue eyes and beauty. Around her, she could already see the effect the girl was having on the men. Sirius had to blink a few times before his eyes cleared, and Remus shook himself like he was trying to dislodge a flea from his brain. Poor Dedalus Diggle looked like he was about to start praying to her.

"Yes," she said in a strained voice. "But I don't like to be called by my first name."

Fleur cocked her head. "Why not?"

"Not all of us have names as pretty as yours princess."

Despite the attitude behind her words, Fleur only smiled. "He called me the same. 'Zhe two of you are very similar."

"Who?"

"Who do you *theenk*?"

"Harrison? You met him?" Tonks asked, not liking the swell of jealousy rising in her breast.

"*Oui*, I *deed*. He took me to a tomb, and togezzer we defeated a monster," those eyes were burning in their intensity. "He 'ad quite 'ze story to tell."

"*Really*."

She nodded. "About a woman too blinded by what she sees before her eyes to see anything else."

Tonks stiffened.

"He did not show it, but I could tell 'e was 'urt."

"He hurt me way more than I hurt him."

"I would not be so sure. I *theenk* 'e 'as been alone for a long time, I could tell. 'aving you say 'ze thing you did pained him more than 'e would like to admit."

"Yeah, well, at least he has you to keep him company, he shouldn't be 'urt for too long."

Fleur gave Tonks a look that made her feel like she was the teenager in the conversation.

"Talk to 'im when he gets 'ere. 'arrison is my *friend*. Either you forgive each other or I convince 'im that it *eez* better to move on, you choose which way *Mademoiselle* Tonks."

She gave a smile completely devoid of warmth. She stalked away to stand next to Bill again, her eyes sliding across Tonks to land back on her ginger companion like she hadn't just been speaking to the metamorph, whose hair had gone a vivid shade of red.

Sirius whistled, pretending he hadn't just been eyeing the girl's rear as she walked away.

"Shut up, Sirius."

"You just got *told*," he snickered.

"I said shut—"

"Greetings all," the headmaster's voice broke in, closing the door behind him, then turned to grace them with a smile. "Apologies for the hold-up. I was delayed by a ward some clever students contrived to place around my office. Is everyone here?"

Tonks looked at him askance, as did many others in the room. He had already said... most of that. And...

"Did you get changed in the bathroom Albus?" Sirius asked in amused confusion, one eyebrow raised.

"The bathroom?" Dumbledore questioned, equally confused. "Certainly not. I have never used the facilities here, and if I *were* to get changed it wouldn't be there."

"But you just said you were going to the bathroom..." Emmeline said.

"I am old my dear, but I don't think my memory has failed me yet. When did I say such a thing?"

"Not five minutes ago, when you came in here!" Elphias Doge exploded.

"I assure you old friend, I have only just arrived, I have not been in here."

There was a drawn-out silence.

Of course, it was Moody who immediately figured out what was going on, drawing the most dangerous possibility from the spaghetti of schemes floating around in his head.

"IMPOSTER!" He roared, thumping his staff hard. A flood of red sparks rushed out as everyone began to talk at once. Seven plans of action were drawn up and four methods of running away were constructed simultaneously.

"QUIET!" Dumbledore called out over the throng, who all went quiet again. "Where did the imposter go?" He asked in an implacable, commanding tone.

"To the toilet," Sirius responded in a similar voice. "Up the stairs, first on the left."

All of them rushed from the kitchen, following Dumbledore's lead. They thundered up the stairs and arrayed themselves around the bathroom in a circle, all wands pointing towards the inconspicuous chipped wooden door.

"On my count, stun anything that moves within the room," Dumbledore whispered.

"3...2...1..."

The door swung outwards under the headmaster's magic, and the air was soon filled with red. Tonks herself cast a single stunner before she realised that nobody was in the bathroom, but most of the others seemed content to keep raining stunners through the hallway, tossing chips of broken tile around, the air filled with the sound of shattered masonry.

"Stop! Stop!" Dumbledore called, but nobody heard.

"STOP CASTING YOU FECKIN' DULLARDS!"

"Thank you Alastor," Dumbledore said in the newborn silence. "There's nobody there. Sirius, put the house on lockdown. Everyone else, we must search the house. They could be anywhere, so go around in pairs."

They all agreed, some sheepishly, and moved off to perform the task, white-knuckled grips on their wands. But Tonks was barely down the hallway before the shout came up.

"Here!" It was Emmeline; Tonks could tell. She sounded... confused? Tonks could sympathise.

They all ran, Tonks behind Dumbledore with her wand raised and ready to cast. The man moved with surprising agility for someone five times her age. They all clattered down the stairs to the kitchen they had just left, where the voice had come from. Emmeline was standing inside the room, her wand pointed across the kitchen at something she couldn't see. She was too high up on the stairs to see so far in, but that soon changed.

"Evening Dumbledore." Harrison Slate said, his boots propped up on the table as he grinned, cigarette smoke curling from his fingers. "I have to say, the security around this heap could really do with an upgrade."

'Oh for Merlin's sake...'

-oOo-

"Slate?" One of them questioned. Harry tried to think about what his name was and came up blank. Obviously, this dude was irrelevant.

Harry wiggled his fingers in greeting. "Howdy."

"Harrison, please do me the pleasure of explaining why you were impersonating my good self, before my comrades here curse you," Dumbledore said calmly, his wand still drawn.

"What? You invited me to join your fancy little club, I wanted to see what kind of protections you had."

"I don't see how you contrived to enter this house in the first place, seeing as I never managed to locate you in order to give you an invite."

Mrs Weasley frowned at Albus. "But... you said you would give the invite I wrote for you to him as soon as you got back to the school, not even two hours ago!"

Dumbledore blinked once. Twice. Then turned to Harry with a disapproving frown.
"Harrison..."

Harry maintained his innocent smile.

Mrs Weasley finally seemed to catch on. "You!" She burst out.

"You should probably get some better wards for your minions Al," Harry intoned gravely.
"And maybe some precautions against people polyjuicing as you. I even got a free breakfast from it."

"Could you please do one thing without causing chaos?" Dumbledore asked, rubbing his eyes while the people behind him looked like they were about to burst from outrage.

"I'm going to pretend you didn't just say something so ridiculous. Now, would you mind introducing me? I wanna see who you have in your anti-evil club."

Harry's old headmaster took in a deep breath, then waved his hand over his shoulder. "Very well, everyone do come in. Try not to irritate Harrison too much, he bites."

"Ha-ha, old man," Harry drawled, looking at Sirius like he was a long-lost lover. Turning his face to Albus but not taking his eyes off Sirius, he continued: "You're aware you have a mass murderer in your vigilante group, right? Doesn't exactly give off a very good public image."

"Hey! I'm innocent!" Sirius protested, finally breaking the tense silence that had been enveloping the room beforehand.

"Was that ever proved in a trial?" Harry shot back instantly. At Sirius' stumped astonishment, he smiled smugly. "Didn't think so."

"Why is he here, Albus?" Hestia Jones demanded, never being one to mince words.

"Harrison has recently shown himself to be a resourceful fighter and capable wizard. I think he potentially has many skills that could be of great use in the fight against Voldemort, especially in our more... physical pursuits," Dumbledore explained smoothly.

"And he wants to learn all of my secrets," Harry added.

"That too," Dumbledore admitted, his smile unfaltering.

Harry was momentarily distracted when he noticed a pair of eyes that were the only ones not looking at him. Tonks was standing in the corner of the kitchen, looking like she was trying to blend into it. Unfortunately for her, she would never be able to blend in anywhere. At least never for him, even with her morphing skills.

He didn't like the twist in his heart that the sight of her conjured within him. It was obvious from the sight of her that she was just as unhappy as he was. Her hair was a distressingly normal brown, her features unobtrusive and average. The strong desire to run his hands through that hair and tease pinks and blues from the long locks was almost irresistible.

But then he remembered what she had said, and the emotions fell away like a house of cards.

"*You're a psycho Harri...*" Was that what he was? Was he broken? After all these years, could it be that the thing to finally defeat Harry Potter would be Harry Potter himself?

"*Harry Potter? A dead man, Slate is all that's left. Can you be him and Harry at the same time?*"

"I'm not sure I approve, Albus," Molly said warily. "I read the papers, and we all heard what Mad-Eye had to say. I don't think his methods would be welcome here."

"Molly, I assure you that—"

"I will vouch for 'im," Fleur declared, stepping forward. "Despite the 'orrid *theengs* zhat ze Daily Prophet say, I know 'im to be an honourable man, any who say ozzewise will 'ave to deal with losing me with him." She looked around the room, daring them to answer back. They didn't.

"That's reciprocated by the way, in case any of you get any ideas," Harry said, grinning like a wolf.

Again, Albus attempted to smooth the ruffled feathers. "Perhaps instead of speaking of what the media says, and vouching for one another, you could introduce yourselves?" He gestured around the room, "All new members have in the past, and I'm sure we're all interested to hear more about you."

"Bagsy not going first," Harry said immediately.

Fleur gave him a dirty look but began anyway. The rules of bagsy were never to be violated. "My name is Fleur Delacour, and as many of you may 'ave already guessed, I am from France. I came over for a job at Gringotts, but I am fighting here because I do not *theenk* ze Dark Lord would stop at 'ze borders of *Bretagne* if 'e won 'zhis war." She looked stoic, her eyes deep. "I 'ave a sister in France; I will do anything to keep 'er safe."

"A noble reason to fight," Dumbledore said. "And a sensible one. I believe you to be correct about Voldemort's ambitions beyond the borders of this country. Harrison, it's your turn."

Harry stood up. "Hey guys, my name's Harrison, Harrison Slate. I'm a part-time teacher at Hogwarts and a full-time genius, playboy and all-around swell guy. I accepted Albus' invite because I was bored, and there's someone here I want to talk to," his eyes flicked to Tonks, who again didn't meet them. "I know that some of you may disagree with my... methods, and to that I say, try and stop me. Thank you," Harry beamed at them, then took a seat.

"Thank you Harrison," Albus said above the discontent murmurs, "I believe now is a good time to begin our reports. Remus?"

After a minute shake of his head, Remus stepped forward and began his report. "For once, I don't actually have much to report," he said, sounding bemused. "My contact has recently

gone underground and it was only by lucky chance that I managed to get a chance to talk to him before he was beyond communication."

"Did your contact tell you why?" Dumbledore asked.

Remus nodded. "He did. From what I gathered, Fenrir Greyback's pack has gone missing somewhere in Germany. An acquaintance of his managed to track them to where they vanished. From what he found, he estimated that they had all been killed, probably by a team of wizards."

"So his pack died along with him then," Dumbledore mused. He had wondered about that after Remus had told him about being sent Greyback's head. Despite efforts, they had never been able to locate the evil man's pack, so he hadn't known if they had followed him into the beyond.

"Did your contact tell you who did such a thing?"

"No, but he thought that Germany must have found them and dispatched a hit-squad. It was why he was going underground, the German's laws aren't very lenient when it comes to Werewolves."

"Perhaps," Dumbledore allowed, frowning. "But it doesn't strike me as something they would do. Despite their dislike of your race, Remus, they normally prefer to capture the culprits alive so they can be tried publicly, it warns the others that way."

There was a small cough, as if someone was trying to catch their attention. All heads yet again turned to Harry, who had his hand raised as if he had something to tell the class.

"Yes Harrison?" Dumbledore asked, wondering absently at the feeling of numb foreboding he was feeling in his gut.

"Yeah, well, now that I'm part of the Junior Dark Force Defence League here I should mention that I was actually the one to do that."

("Dark Force Defence League?" Sirius whispered to Remus.

"I think that's that made-up organisation that Gilderoy Lockhart always went on about."

"Oh.")

"What do you mean you had something to do with it?" Arthur asked.

"I..." Harry frowned, wondering how to phrase this delicately. "...Relocated them."

"Relocated?" Sirius asked with a raised eyebrow. "Where exactly did you relocate them to?" He had doubts; Bellatrix had used that same tone when they asked where the family dog had gone. They found it three weeks later. Well, Regulus had found it. It had been in *his* desk drawer, after all. At least the head had; they never found the rest.

"Somewhere where they won't be bothering anyone else?"

"Could we see them?" Dumbledore pressed, "If we went through the right channels, I think we could prosecute them to the full extent of the law."

Harry opened and closed his mouth a few times.

'Oh, fuck it.'

"You probably could," he answered, scratching his chin. "I mean, you would have to dig a good twelve feet into the earth, and I doubt they would be able to make a very responsive defence on the stand on account of all of them being... you know, dead. But you would definitely be able to see them."

There was a horrified silence.

"So it was *you* who sent me his head!" Remus exclaimed, pointing at him.

"You're welcome," Harry grinned.

"How did you know it was him who...?"

'Bollocks, didn't think of that.'

'Thinking's overrated,' Ron dismissed. Typical Ron, always trusting instincts over his brain.

'Shut up moron. Now think Potter, and think fast,' Bill said firmly.

"I... heard him bragging about it and recognised your name."

'Good one,' Moody praised.

'Thanks.'

"Oh," Remus responded eloquently. "Well, thanks anyway. He was a real piece of shit."

"Anytime."

"You killed all of them?" A total milf who Harry thought might have been Emmeline Vance said. "But there must have been—"

"Fifteen," Harry finished. "Enough for a full Quidditch game, plus a spectator."

"Quite the pitch invasion," Sirius said, sounding impressed.

"I thought so too, but they didn't seem to enjoy it as much as I did."

"Probably because they're all dead," Sirius deadpanned.

"Maybe, but I haven't ruled out the possibility that they just couldn't appreciate a good joke."

"Probably because they were dead before the punchline."

"There was no punchline," Harry grinned, the banter making him feel oddly nostalgic. "They were all one-liners."

He whistled. "That's cold."

"I thought so too."

"I'm sorry, are we just going to ignore that he just admitted to killing fifteen people?" A short, bald man said shakily, looking like he was about to either bolt or shit himself at any moment.

Harry gained a thoughtful look. "Fifteen and a half."

"W-w-what?" The man stammered.

"They were about halfway through eating that body, so technically it was fifteen and a half."

"I think it's about time we move on," Dumbledore cut in, watching in mild concern as Sturgis turned a sickly shade of green. "Thank you, Harrison, for your... contribution."

"It was nothing," Harry waved off, ignoring everyone staring at him in awe, fear, bafflement or all three. Sirius was grinning again. So was Bill. Harry guessed that these two were some of the few that had seen the worst of humans. A glance at Remus confirmed his theory; he hardly looked surprised.

"Next on the agenda," Dumbledore said, ignoring him. "Kingsley, anything to report from inside the auror office?"

"We've had reports of people going missing all over the country," Kingsley rumbled. "I compiled them onto a map and tried to make some sense out of it. It looks like they're keeping it random, and there could be some interference from regular missing person cases throwing off the results, but I noticed a concentration of missing persons around Hampshire. I brought it to Scrimgeour's attention, but as always he turned me down to curry favour with the Minister."

Dumbledore bowed his head at the unasked permission. "You may begin your search. Anything else?"

Kingsley's eyes flicked between Harry and Tonks for a second. "Of course there is what happened last week. None of the bodies could be identified apart from the ones in Hogsmead. Their names should be released soon enough in the paper," again, his eyes flick to just Harry this time, "also, after the event, three aurors got put on leave for... medical reasons."

"That's awful," Harry said in a completely deadpan voice. Fleur and Bill snorted.

"What was the reason given?" Dumbledore asked, valiantly trying his best to pretend he didn't exist.

"Griffiths, Savage and Dawlish all woke up without their thumbs on their wand arm missing. So far, it looks like they're going to have to start learning to use their left hand before they rejoin."

Sirius whistled. "Nice."

"I don't know why you're all looking at me," Harry said defensively.

"Harrison," Dumbledore said sternly.

"Fine. But they deserved it. When I got to the Hinkeypunk they were mopping her blood off the floor," Harry pointed at Tonks, who stared at him, "they were all dirty, probably been selling off information from the inside for years now."

"Can we expect any of them to unexpectedly go missing in the near future?" Dumbledore asked.

The muscled in his jaw visibly clenched as he worked them. He and Tonks were suddenly locking eyes, mirror grey meeting perfect black. "That... isn't my choice to make."

"We could get into contact with them, perhaps tell them that Slate will remove the curse if they pass on information to our side instead," Snape said, seemingly the only one socially inept enough not to notice the air of tension between Harry and Tonks that nobody else seemed willing to break.

"Perhaps," Dumbledore said. "Speaking of, I'm glad to see you healthy, Nymphadora, and thank you to you, Harrison, for retrieving her and defending the students."

Harry merely nodded. The fact that Tonks didn't correct the headmaster was telling.

"Now, Severus, what news is there from within the Dark Lord's ranks?"

Snape stepped forward from the shadows, making that small movement look overdramatic. "The Dark Lord seems to finally have found someone he despises more than you and Potter, headmaster," Snape began, and Harry had to fight not to snort at the irony. "Slate's attack on Travers Manor cost him a sizeable chunk of manpower. The ruthlessness of the attack seems to have caught him by surprise, and we all know how the Dark Lord reacts to surprises."

"Must have been a nightmare to plan parties for," Harry joked.

"Undoubtedly," Snape drawled. "He has stayed inside recently and cursed anyone who has interrupted him. I have no doubt he is planning a new attempt on your life, Slate."

"Yeah? Well next time you see him, tell him I said that he's a wanker."

"I'm sure he'll take your opinion into careful consideration," Dumbledore said calmly. "Does anyone else have anything to report?"

"Oh yeah," Hestia Jones rose her hand like she was in a classroom.

"Yes, Hestia?" Dumbledore asked, amused.

"For the last couple days, every time Rita Skeeter has tried to write an article she writes 'I must not tell lies' instead. It's been brilliant, me and a few other reporters have had the chance

to write articles now she isn't hogging all the limelight."

"You work in the Daily Prophet?" Harry asked interestedly. He remembered her, a pretty witch with black hair that had been kind to him once upon a time.

"Yeah," she gave him a slightly apprehensive look. "Mainly Quidditch reports and duelling tournament coverage, but I've written outside of those two things a few times."

"Quite an odd curse, hard to accomplish too," Dumbledore mused.

"Hmm," Harry hummed.

"I can't think of many people who had both the motivation and ability to do such a thing," Dumbledore continued.

"Hmm."

"Harrison."

"Maybe she should take the advice," Harry offered sagely.

"To do that, Harrison, the curse would have to be lifted."

"Hmm."

"You're ruining her career, Harrison."

"I'm sure I'll persevere somehow."

"Oh come on Albus," Sirius protested. "We all know you hate the woman almost as much as you hate Fudge, even if you try and hide it."

"I do recall seeing the remains of a few of the woman's articles in your fireplace, Albus," McGonagall said.

"If you want to get rid of her legally I can tell you that she's an illegal beetle animagus," Harry offered cheerfully. "I know the mental image of her getting kissed makes me happy, at least."

"Sirius, Minerva, I believe myself above ruining people's lives over personal grudges." He paused, then frowned, "And Harrison, no."

Harry harrumphed and sulked into his chair, crossing his arms. "You're no fun."

"Anything else?"

Harry put his hand up, "I'm going after Pettigrew."

Dumbledore blinked. "Any reason why him, specifically?"

Harry grinned. "It's a personal grudge."

Harry had just flushed and washed his hands when he was confronted by his old godfather right outside the loo door.

"Sirius Black," he introduced himself without preamble, sticking out his hand.

"Harrison Slate," Harry said in slight bemusement, shaking the proffered hand. He winced when he felt the twinge of darkness lingering underneath the man's skin, but made sure to give him a firm shake anyway. "You look better than you did in the mugshots."

"Bad lighting," Sirius dismissed. "Should we move somewhere more comfortable?"

"Sure," Harry stood to the side and welcomed Sirius into the tiny toilet under the stairs like a hotel assistant. "Please, come in."

Sirius nodded solemnly, not showing any surprise at the offer. "Thank you," he walked into the bathroom calmly and perched on the toilet cistern, his feet on the closed seat. Harry closed the door and sat in the sink, his legs dangling awkwardly as he faced Sirius.

"Sorry about the smell," Harry said as he adjusted himself so the tap wasn't digging into his back, "what did you want to talk about, Mr Black?"

"Please just call me Sirius."

"Alright Sirius, you may call me Harrison, or something shorter if you like."

"Will do. Now, I've been thinking about what you were saying back in the meeting about Pettigrew, were you serious about that?"

Harry feigned puzzlement. "I don't I've ever been you at any point, especially not then."

Sirius grinned.

"But jokes aside, yeah, I was."

"I want him dead, too," Sirius said unashamedly, "I'll give you my reason if you give me yours?"

Harry shrugged. "Sure. It's not that complicated. I did some investigating around the area the ward first went off when I was talking to Tonks. Forensic charms showed rat's paw prints, and seeing as the building has rat eversion wards, that only leaves the bloke all the Death Eaters call Wormtail and Pettigrew interchangeably, who I'm guessing is a rat animagus."

Harry was lucky he had thought to put some effort in and conjure up a believable lie. The truth was he had just ripped the information from Travers' mind, and even if he hadn't, he already knew Pettigrew was a rat.

Sirius nodded along. "That's decently well thought out. And yes, he is."

"All I need is a slice of cheddar and a spring-loaded trap then, sweet. Anyway, I think I already know why *you* want him dead, seeing as he's supposed to be the tragic hero that was killed by the betrayer Sirius Black, not exactly a good look that he's faked his death and hid instead. I'm guessing *he's* the one that betrayed the Potters and, to top it all off, from the looks of things you got the shaft."

"Tell me about it. Yesterday I almost gave Podmore a heart attack when I jumped out from behind the sofa on him, I think he thought I was an inferius."

"Sweet," Harry grinned back, then frowned. "You know, I think I could fix that."

Sirius looked puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"You were bathing in dementor juice for twelve years, it's soaked into your bones, if you want I can try and get it out."

Sirius grimaced. "Ew. That sound's even worse than bin juice. Give it a go, if you think it'll work."

Harry could tell that Sirius was trying to put up a stoic front, but he could sense the hopefulness beneath the shrug.

"Alright, just stay still and try to relax," Harry said, clambering out of the sink and letting his wand fall into his palm. He span it once, then gently pressed the tip of his wand into Sirius' chest, around where his heart was. Harry took in a deep breath.

"Expecto Patronum," he whispered, focusing his magic on conforming to his will. Sirius' eyes widened as he felt the foreign magic invade his own. His body was glowing from the inside, getting brighter and brighter as Harry fed more magic into it. Wisps of black magic resembling smoke began to rise from the man's pores as if he was on fire, the black magic of the dementors being forcibly removed.

Sirius giggled. "That tickles," he complained.

Harry snorted and pushed a particularly strong pulse of magic into Sirius' body, causing a body-wide plume of black magic to rise and Sirius to yelp helplessly.

"There we are, I think that's the last of it," Harry said, his wand disappearing up his sleeve again.

"Wow, thanks mate," Sirius said, looking at himself in the mirror. He looked about twenty years younger, a lot more like the mid-thirties he was supposed to be.

Harry blinked at being called 'mate' by his godfather but continued on as he settled himself back into the sink. "You're welcome. Why did you want to know about Pettigrew?"

He seemed unable to stop playing with his hair, which was smooth again. "What? Oh right, that. Do you have any leads on him?"

Harry tilted his hand from side to side in a 50/50 gesture. "Maybe, just a rumour of a rumour with some dubious evidence backing it, but it's what I've got. Why, you want in?"

"Yes," Sirius said immediately, "one hundred per cent yes."

Harry rose an eyebrow. "I didn't think you were allowed to leave this place."

Sirius raised an eyebrow right back. "I didn't think you cared."

"True," Harry agreed cheerfully. "Alright then, you can come along. But we should probably try to capture him to clear your name, then kill him after."

Sirius thought on it for a moment, then smiled. "Sounds like a plan. When are you going to start looking for him?"

"Don't know, I'll come over when it's time and pick you up."

"Brilliant, thanks," Sirius sighed, relaxing back against the toilet wall. "I was going crazy cooped up in this bloody house; it'll be nice to finally get out."

"I can't blame you," Harry admitted, "this place is like one of those haunted houses at the fair, I'd go mental too."

Sirius grunted in agreement. "Did I see you smoking earlier? You mind if I have one? I haven't smoked in 12 years, I've missed it."

Harry wordlessly passed him a cigarette and perched one of his own on his lips before pocketing the small box again.

"You ever learn this little trick?" Harry asked, then lit a flame on his finger and lit the cigarette.

Sirius nodded. "Yeah, but we did it a little differently in my day," he pinched the end of the cigarette. No flame came from his fingers, but the end steadily heated until it was a merry red glow.

"Nice," Harry complimented, setting up a spell made to dispel potion fumes so they didn't stink out the toilet. "When did you go to Hogwarts?"

"Class of '78," Sirius said proudly. "They called us the golden year, some of the best witches and wizards to come out of Hogwarts were in that year. I think only Harry's year could match it. 'Course, all of them are dead now."

"*All* of them?" Harry asked.

Sirius hummed, "Most of the people I knew, anyway. I think Mary's still knocking around, a healer in Mungo's or something. And of course there's me and Remus," he grimaced, "and Snape, but I don't include him in any list unless it's the same one Pettigrew's on."

"Snape was in the same year as you?" Harry asked, feigning surprise, "but he looks about fifty, and not even a good fifty."

"He's always been ugly on the inside and outside," Sirius said, "always figured it was the potion fumes, but I'm not discounting the possibility that he's the spawn of a dementor and a house elf."

"It would explain the nose," Harry mused, deep in thought. "And the robes."

"I'm pretty sure Dumbledore won't let him treat with the vampires because he doesn't trust Snivelly not to ask them to bite him."

"I heard he's a unicorn animagus."

The both of them broke into snickers.

"There was a small period of time where I felt bad for giving the coward hell in school, but after meeting him again and hearing what Harry has to say about him I regret not going further."

Harry didn't disagree. He was against bullying in general, but some people just deserved it. "Harry's a good kid," he said, not even feeling like he was patting himself on the back for some reason.

"I forgot you teach him, how's he doing?" Sirius asked, leaning forwards.

"Thriving," Harry grinned. "I brought back the duelling club and he's been stomping all the kids in his year and the year above, even some two years above. I gave him a bit of a nudge and he started up a club of his own geared more towards teaching than competition."

"It's good to see him having fun, that kid doesn't get nearly enough breaks," Sirius said, then eyed him curiously. "You like him, huh?"

"He reminds me of me," Harry shrugged.

"Sirius! Where are you, you bloody dog!" An unmistakable carrying voice rang out clearly.

"In here!" Sirius called back, the noise extraordinarily loud in the cramped spot. "I'm on the throne!" He faced Harry, lowering his voice, "I have a feeling I know what she wants to talk about."

Harry sighed, slumping against the wall as the cigarette hung lazily from his lips. "Yeah."

"Where?" Tonks' voice called again, sounding much closer this time.

"Here! You can come in if you like!"

Footsteps echoed, coming close. "Merlin, you've been in there for ages! I've been looking for you, I wanted to ask if you've seen—" The door was wrenched open to reveal Tonks, her hair

a short brown like her eyes, which locked onto his immediately. "—Harrison," she finished faintly, then seemed to notice the setting. "Why are you sitting in the sink?"

"Well, I was hardly going to sit on the towel rack was I."

A small smile blossomed on her pale face, then disappeared under a frown. "Stop that."

"Sorry."

"I'm just going to..." Sirius coughed, then stood. Neither of them even looked at him. "Yeah." He slipped out the door and vanished down the corridor.

The two of them stared at each other.

"We need to talk," Tonks said finally, absently picking at a splinter in the door frame.

"By all means, talk," Harry said, rolling his hand in a 'go on' motion.

"Not in here, Harrison," she snapped.

"Fine," Harry said, awkwardly clambering out of the sink. He flicked the stub of the cigarette into the toilet and flushed it. "Lead the way, my lady."

She didn't respond, just spun on her heel and walked briskly in the opposite direction that Sirius had. Harry followed dutifully behind, wondering at the pros and cons of making a run for it. Confrontation in a fight? Harry was all for it. Confronting all those icky *feelings*? Nope, not his thing.

"Here," Tonks barged straight into a room Harry had never been in before or even noticed. Harry looked around as he entered.

'Hello, welcome to MTV cribs, my name is Harrison Slate, and this is my crib! Over here we have the head of a Hydra, and this is my great-great-great grandfather Perseus Black, who invented the Spanish Flu.'

"Nice place," Harry complimented. "Very... Gothic."

"Shut up," Tonks said, sinking into a grand leather sofa, "we're going to have a grown-up talk."

"I think you're going a bit far to call yourself a grown-up, Tonks; you have to have a bit of rationality to qualify for that," Harry said, slumping into a seat opposite her.

Tonks glared. "You're one to talk about rationality, you—" she closed her eyes and seemed to physically force her anger down. She opened her eyes, and they had gone from a dull brown to an icy blue. "You're not making this easy."

"I tend to hold a grudge against anyone who calls me a psychotic mass murderer."

"I wasn't the only one throwing out names, Harri," she said.

"I know," Harry ran his hand through his hair. "I'm... sorry," he forced out. "The things I said... they were harsh and I probably went too far. But you *were* being stupid, and it isn't like you didn't reciprocate."

Her eyes became a stormy grey, and she seemed to sag. "I know," she whispered, sounding like it pained her to admit it, "I talked to Sirius after, and Mad-Eye. They showed me what you meant. But I was just... I don't know. Overwhelmed, I guess. I thought I was ready for a war, ready for a fight. I was trained by Mad-Eye Moody himself, a bona fide prodigy. I got cocky, and suddenly I was tied up surrounded by Death Eaters and I couldn't do a *single thing*," any other girl might have been crying, but Tonks just looked angry. "Then you come along, taking them all out and making it look so *easy*. I hated that you didn't have any difficulty doing what it took to save someone when I couldn't even save *myself*. It's like you're the better version of me, and I needed to hate you for it."

Harry looked at her, horrified. What on earth was he supposed to say to that? This is what he had meant when he said he wasn't ready for all the emotional shit.

"Fucking hell, Tonks, if you wanted to make me feel like shit..." Harry breathed, then noticed her glare and scrambled for something more meaningful. He drew his wand and spun it around his fingers in an endless dance, the habit relaxing him. "Look, Tonks... I've been through a lot of shit. I've been fighting for pretty much all of my life. You've only been an Auror for what, a year? There's no way you could be as good as me in a fight. Even then, you still took out a few of the Death Eaters that attacked you from what I heard."

She gave him an unreadable look but lifted a shoulder in a shrug that reminded Harry of Fleur, though he imagined voicing that thought wouldn't be wise at that moment. "I tried my best. It wasn't enough." She was quiet for a while, then, so quiet Harry almost didn't hear it. "I don't think you're a monster, by the way."

Harry was tempted to reply with sarcasm but resisted bravely. "I know. I don't think your skull is that thick, either."

There was another stretch of silence; the only sound was the tic of a massive grandfather clock in the corner and the subtle movements of the house.

"Did you mean that? What you said earlier?" She suddenly asked, as if she had been trying to work up the courage to do so.

Harry raised his bowed head, regarding her from under heavily-lidded eyes. "I said a lot of things, Tonks. You're going to have to be a bit more specific."

"You said in the hospital that you did all of that for me," she murmured, her hair becoming a long length of pitch black. "Did you mean that?"

"Of course I meant it, Tonks," he said. "I don't mean everything I say, but that... I meant that."

"Really?"

"What did you think the roses were for?"

Slowly she stood, her eyes a swirling vortex of dark, dark blue. "I saw you and the Delacour witch... you haven't moved on already have you, Harrison?"

Harry watched her approach him as he sat in a lazy sprawl. "Far too busy being yours to fall for somebody new, I'm afraid," he croaked.

She crawled over him on all fours, the leather creaking as she made her way up his torso until she was level with his eyes, her hands pinning his to the back of the sofa. Harry didn't make any move to protest.

"You're bad," she whispered. "My dad hates you, everyone else is scared of you. Even *I'm* scared of you. You're the antithesis to everything I believe... And yet, I couldn't stop thinking about you for a single moment."

Nobody ever seemed to remember how fascinated Little Red Riding Hood had been by the Big Bad Wolf's teeth.

"Maybe you should stay away then," Harry murmured, his eyes drawn to the swoop of her neck as he felt her brush against him.

"Yes, I should," Tonks said, then pressed her lips against his.

The kiss was languid, and their hearts seemed to beat in rhythm for the duration. Slowly, Tonks shifted her weight until she was sitting in his lap, her arm leaving his wrists to cup his face. Harry moved his own to snake around her waist, pulling her further into himself. Already he could feel her shifting as he did the same, the two of them slotting together like two pieces of a puzzle.

"Fuck," she breathed as they broke apart, "Harrison—"

"I know," he said huskily into her neck as he sucked on it. Her back arched, and she began to grind herself against him as he grasped her arse with both hands, holding her against him firmly. Something frantic was charging the air between them, electricity linking their thumping hearts. His skin felt warm.

"Harrison, I need you," she panted, fumbling with his chin to raise his head and crash her lips into his again. Harry groaned low in his throat as he felt his cock strain against the fabric of his trousers against her. He could feel her heat infusing him, and he immediately got lost in it. He could tell she did, too; their movements were desperate and hasty, as if the world was about to end and this was all the time they had left.

Harry stood, a single hand on the small of her back keeping her against him as she wrapped her legs around his waist. He pulled off her t-shirt with the other revealing a simple black bra and a wand holster on her wrist. She pulled her wand from the holster, fired a locking charm at the door, and then tossed the wand onto the sofa as Harry lowered her delicately like she was a precious thing. The arch of her back and the smooth, unblemished skin of her stomach were things of beauty.

He knelt between her legs, towering over her. He didn't think he had ever seen something as beautiful as she looked then. Her hair was splayed around her in a pure black pool, her face constructed in a diamond shape with wide, wild violet eyes and swollen, abused-looking lips. To him, right then, she looked like something fallen from one of Michaelangelo's ceiling frescoes, an artist's ideal of beauty pulled from paint. Her confident vibrancy and stubborn assuredness were the stuff of dreams, different in a way that made her admirers keep their distance. She was the gift at the end of a rainbow, desirable above all else in concept but, to most, not worth the chase. In contrast Harry was the thunderclouds and lightning that swept it all away, dark, shadowed and destructive but just as magnetically attractive in his own way. Together, they should have torn each other apart, but they didn't. They entwined, similar in so many ways but different in others. It felt inevitable.

Because that's what both of them were. Truthfully, no painter could truly capture them and do them justice. Nobody could but themselves, for they had somehow contrived to capture each other's hearts.

"You're... beyond belief," Harry said throatily, gazing at her like she was the holy grail.

Amazingly, she became even more beautiful when two spots of rosy colour rose on her cheeks. "Shut up, Harri, stop making moon eyes at me and touch me already," she said, impatiently undoing the buttons of the simple dark green shirt he was wearing. Harry took her hand when she failed three times on one and kissed it while he undid the rest with one hand and lowered himself to be horizontal with her as she squirmed beneath him.

She threaded her fingers through his hair as he peppered kisses down her neck, grazing his cheek against the fabric covering her breasts before continuing down to her stomach. Her chest was heaving as she moaned, and the sight was made all the more alluring by the fact that her breasts had grown larger in her arousal, the bra straining.

Soon his shirt was off, and their bodies felt electric against each other. Harry felt like he was on fire.

"Shit, shit, shit," Tonks gasped as he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her fully into him. She was so tiny he practically pulled her off the sofa. "Please, don't stop."

Harry's hand was just snaking down and teasing the band of her underwear when a knock came at the door.

Tonks and Harry stared into each other's eyes, frozen, wondering if some cruel god was making them hear things to stop them from carrying on. But then the knock came again.

Harry closed his eyes, *very* unwilling to let her go. "If that isn't the herald of *fucking Ragnarok*, I'm going to behead them," he growled.

"Go," Tonks laughed, "just come back, and quickly."

Harry gave her one more heated kiss as the knocking came again before standing and striding to the door and yanking it open.

Once more, Sirius was standing outside the door, but this time he was greeted by a slightly different Harrison. Harry was still bare-chested, his figure lean, tall and well-defined. His hair was even more mussed than usual, his eyes wild, his lips swollen, and he had suspicious red marks all over his neck and chest. A glance past him revealed Tonks, who had wrapped Harry's shirt around her and was approaching to stand by Harrison.

Sirius would have cracked a joke if the situation wasn't so dire.

"Harry's broken into the Department of Mysteries, his friend somehow got captured and taken there, I don't know how, but it's definitely a trap, we need to go and help him."

All thoughts of defenestrating Sirius on the spot for blocking him from some ridiculously good make-up sex fled from his mind immediately.

Voldemort had made his move early.

"Fuck!"

Ares

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chapter 12: Ares

8th October 1995, 10:18 pm

Number 12 Grimmauld Place, London

Sirius watched as his new friend swore viciously, then turned to him, pale fire in his mercury eyes. He looked about ready to kill someone, the temperature noticeably dropping. Sirius was suddenly reminded that the man before him had single-handedly wiped out an entire pack of werewolves, and looked ready to do it again.

"Do you know who else has gone with the boy?" Slate asked, and Sirius didn't even think about withholding the information for a moment under that kind of scrutiny.

He shrugged helplessly. "Some of his friends, we had a letter sent to us by the Lovegood girl, apparently she's gone with him along with the rest of his defence club you started up for him."

"Fuck," Slate grunted. "Any idea who's been taken?"

"Hermione Granger," Sirius said flatly.

"Hermione?" Tonks piped up worriedly. Sirius knew the two of them had become fast friends over the summer, he liked the girl himself. "How—?"

"—We don't know," Sirius said grimly, "but Harry needs our help, and he needs it fast. You two coming along?"

"Of course," Slate and Tonks said at the same time. "You're coming?" Tonks continued in surprise.

"You got a problem with that?" Sirius challenged.

Tonks shook her head. "No, but—"

James ' boy, trapped alone at the Ministry against that monster...

"—We don't have time for this!" Sirius said impatiently. "My godson is in trouble, we need to go. *Now.*" He held his hand out to both of them, ready to apparate away to join the others at the Ministry.

Slate, who had been in deep contemplation up until that moment, snapped out of it and held his cousin's jaw delicately with a long-fingered hand as he gave her a quick but forceful kiss.

Sirius watched them impatiently.

"Go with Sirius. I'll investigate what happened at Hogwarts. I'll join you lot later."

His cousin nodded, and Sirius was glad that Slate wasn't trying to protect Tonks from a fight. He knew her, knew she would never accept such a thing.

"I'll be back soon, and then we can continue where we left off, yeah?" Slate said with a flash of white teeth, teasing the open front of the shirt Tonks had borrowed with a single finger before vanishing from the house with nary a whisper.

He shouldn't have been able to do that, but Sirius didn't have the time to consider such things.

"Here," he tossed a whiplashed Tonks her enchanted jacket. "Get yourself buttoned up and grab your wand, we're leaving."

-oOo-

Harry arrived right outside the gate that marked the edge of the Hogwarts wards, placing his hand against the shield adorning the front. The Hogwarts crest glowed, and the gates opened with a creak, recognising him as staff. Harry stepped inside and immediately apparated again.

Apparating inside the boundaries of a ward was considerably easier than breaking through them. Technically still not supposed to be possible, but that had never stopped him before.

He arrived in his room and immediately got changed into battle dress. Mages in the current age didn't think much of it, but he considered going into battle without proper armour needlessly stupid. It had saved his life before. When he had tightened the last strap and taken a deep, calming breath to centre himself, he pushed out of his room into the castle proper.

The school was asleep, the only sound the snoring of the portraits and the squeal of metal as the occasional suit of armour saluted him as he walked quickly through the corridors. It came alive, though, when he crossed the threshold into the Gryffindor common room. Although it was late at night, most of the students appeared to have some idea that something was happening and had congregated to gossip about it.

"SILENCE!" Harry snapped, still standing in the open portrait-hole. The room did as it was told, pale faces all turning to him at once. "Where are the room-mates of Hermione Granger?"

Two girls, whom Harry recognised as Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown, timidly raised their hands from where they sat in the centre of the maelstrom of gossip.

"Do either of you know what happened to her?"

They both shook their head rapidly.

"N-no professor," Lavender Brown said, who Harry remembered as being the more extroverted of the two. "She disappeared right after class, she—she didn't come back to the common room."

There was an undercurrent of murmurs around the room at that. No doubt the rumours had been spinning at a record pace for a while now.

"Does anyone else know anything?" Harry demanded.

Silence.

"Is she in trouble, sir?" Lavender asked fearfully.

He ignored her question. "Where's your room?" Harry asked the girls, who pointed at a door on the walkway on the second floor.

Harry turned and stalked towards it, feeling like Moses as the sea of red split before him. Just before the edge of the first walkway he rose in the air and floated unassisted to said balcony, stepping lightly over the railing to step gracefully onto the floor and ignoring the gasps behind him.

The door swung open and he ignored the wards designed to keep men out as he stepped in and closed the door behind him. For a moment he wondered how he would tell Hermione's bed apart from the rest, but that problem was solved as soon as he saw the pile of books covering every surface of the one closest to the toilet.

Striding over to it, Harry searched the bed for what he was looking for. He found it soon enough, a long strand of brunette hair that must have come loose during her sleep. Evidently, he needed to slot in the lesson about the dangers of leaving bits of yourself lying about and how to get rid of them. But for now, the laxness might just save her life.

Happy with the find, Harry placed it into a glass jar and left the room.

"Professor, what's going on?" A bold voice called from the silence as he walked through the group of children again.

Harry turned to see that it was Fay Dunbar who had spoken. Harry recalled that she was one of Hermione's very few close female friends.

He had never believed in mincing words when it came to those who were close to the endangered. Having been on the receiving end of such a tactic, he knew it was better to rip off the figurative band-aid now than to let worry fester later.

"Hermione has been kidnapped. Harry Potter and others, who I am sure you have noticed are also absent, have gone to retrieve her. Now, I'm on my way to get all of them back. Stay here, and don't endanger yourself."

He nodded at Dunbar, who looked as if she might faint, then left the common room, apparating back to his own room as soon as the portrait closed behind him.

Rifling through his drawers, he eventually found the sealed tube of Hyacinths under a stasis spell, the purple in the dense knot of flower petals just as vibrant as the day he had bought them from the apothecary.

Carefully, Harry wound the hair around the short stem of the plant and knotted it at the top, then smeared some of his blood over the entire thing to bind the tracker to himself.

Harry closed his eyes and clenched the crude creation in his fist, the petals turning the drops of blood dripping from between his fingers maroon. He began to whisper an incantation in Ancient Greek.

"Hyacinth, guide me to my lost love. I am no God but a mortal without you near, and without me there, I fear I may lose myself to madness. Zephyrus, Boreas, command the winds to find our heart."

All mythology tended to hold a grain of truth, where magic was concerned.

The Hyacinth crumbled to ashes in his palms, and from it a golden mist rose, twisting and swirling to flow out of his classroom door on an unseen wind.

The thickness of the tendril confirmed what he had suspected. Hermione was close. Within the castle or at least on the grounds.

He had half feared that Voldemort had gone through with taking one of Harry Jr's close acquaintances this time instead of faking it as he had with Sirius, but from the looks of things, his worst-case scenario had been proven wrong. A rare thing—normally the facts exceeded his estimation of how bad his luck would be. But Hogwarts wards would have detected a kidnapping, despite its Swiss-cheese level of security.

'Another thing I should have fixed instead of lazying about and romancing Tonks. But Goddammit if my timetable isn't full right now, and Goddammit if romancing Tonks isn't far more interesting.'

A patronus was cast with a flick of his hand as he followed the tendril, the tall thestral awaiting proudly for his command.

"Go to Sirius. Tell him I'll have the Granger girl and join him in the fight within the hour. Do be quick about it old chap." He would send it to Dumbledore, but the fuckers had timed it so he was in an ICW conference in Rome when they took her. He wasn't the only one with a loaded timetable. Dumbledore would probably end up arriving late, just like last time. It was funny, the things that stayed the same.

The thestral tossed its skeletal head arrogantly and disappeared through the wall to his left to find the headmaster.

For the next few minutes, the magical trail led him deeper and deeper into the bowels of the castle, into the dungeons. That all but confirmed that it was a Slytherin who had captured his old friend.

'Always a Slytherin. They complain all the time about how people assume they're the bad guys—then go do some bad guy stuff. You'd never see a Puff do this shit.'

He didn't slow his pace as he rounded the corner and found a seventh-year standing outside a door. The boy looked like he was about to piss his perfectly pressed trousers at the sight of him, but still stepped in front of the door as he approached.

"Sir, you can't go in this—"

"Out of the way, stupid boy," Harry snapped, stunning the kid before he could even react and shoving him out of the way with a push.

The door was flung open with a magic-assisted kick, revealing a room containing three more scared-shitless boys sitting in wooden chairs against each wall, one of which being Draco Malfoy.

Harry was disappointed. He didn't know why, but he had expected better from the little snot.

"Out," he said. "Now."

They stood, but none left. Instead, they held their wands in a shaky grip, looking frightened but determined.

Harry sighed. "Fighting it is, then."

The first to cast a spell was another seventh year. Harry pinched it out of existence with a thumb and a finger and stunned him, spun to dodge two more spells then snapped out a rope to grab a kid he recognised as a sixth-year Ravenclaw. The rope pulled on his wrist, sending him flying across the room to catch Malfoy's second stunner, who was then stunned also.

It was all done in less than three seconds.

"Waste of fucking sperm," Harry grumbled as he bound the four of them together. "And, even worse, a waste of my time."

Hermione was in the corner. She had been put to sleep and had her ankles bound along with her wrists behind her back. Harry woke her with an *ennervate*. Her eyes opened wide and she gasped into the gag secured around her mouth.

"You're safe," he said firmly. "The others are gone, but you're coming with me to the hospital wing, understood?"

Being kept docile by force of magic for prolonged periods could have negative effects upon a mage's brain if the caster wasn't careful or, like the schoolchildren he had just tied up, experienced enough. He had seen men turned brain-dead by an intentionally botched sleeping spell held too long.

She nodded.

"Good, now lets get rid of these," Harry tapped the gag and ropes with his wand, all of which fell away easily.

"Professor," she burst out as soon as the gag was released, "Harry! He doesn't know I'm here! He—"

"I know," Harry assured.

"We have to go and stop him!" Hermione cried.

"Yes, I do," Harry replied. "But not you. *You* will stay here, out of trouble."

She looked outraged. "But professor—"

"No," Harry said stoutly. "Children should not be fighting adult's battles, they should be learning. Your place is here. Where I'm going, you would only get in the way. Now come." He slapped a hand on her shoulder and apparated them both away.

Harry landed standing, Hermione landing on the bed in the same seated position she had been in on the floor just a moment before.

"Mr Slate, what on earth is the meaning of this?" Madam Pomfree exploded from her office in a flurry of perfectly pressed pale blue robes, her piercing blue eyes flicking between himself and Hermione.

"She's been held in a magical sleep for one, maybe two hours," Harry replied, making Pomfree's eyes immediately narrow as she entered healer mode. "The casters were children, I didn't trust they'd done it properly," he straightened his spine. Unconsciously, he filled his armour out and made himself taller, his features hardening into those of a warrior.

"I have to go," Harry said. "Take care of her. If I have my way, nobody else will be sent here tonight."

'At least, nobody innocent.'

And with that, he was gone from the room, leaving Madam Pomfree to tend to his friend, once upon a time.

-oOo-

Harry glared balefully at Bellatrix as Neville's cries echoed around the chamber they had run into.

They had done well until then. There had been a few very close calls, and Ginny had her ankle broken by a faceless Death eater, but they had managed to stay as a group as they had been taught in Defence Against the Dark Arts, with Ron, Neville and Luna playing to their strengths in defence and Ginny, the twins and himself going on the attack.

Professor Slate had shown him his strength privately, which he was glad for. He was significantly more powerful and in touch with his magic than his classmates, which allowed him to go for bigger and more powerful spells designed to overpower his opponent's defences. He had demonstrated this against a Death Eater when he, using a technique

Professor Slate himself taught him, overpowered a shieldbreaker and followed up fluidly with a petrification hex. The spells had punched through the shield like it was paper.

Ginny had a different style. She cast rapidly, using many low-powered spells instead of his fewer higher-powered ones. The flurry of spells forced her opponents to either shield or try and dodge. The first would rapidly drain their strength and hamper their ability to move, the second would result in them being gradually taken down as they had their eyelashes lengthened, their speech garbled and were forced to tap-dance.

Fred and George were a terrifying pair to fight against, which Harry could attest to from personal experience. They worked—predictably—as a duo, seeming to share a brain as they fought. Harry saw Fred shield while George formed a spell that had coated an entire side of a room filled with planets in luminous pink paint that stuck to anyone that touched it and didn't let go. George hadn't even flinched when the spell had splashed against his brother's shield, having had complete confidence that Fred would protect him.

Predictably, many of their spells were their creations and fell on the humorous side of things even if they were effective. Dolohov was still having to tug his arms away from his luscious blonde curls, which had snaked down and attempted to restrain them. But the two of them had also shown a surprising repertoire of spells that were on the darker side of things. Harry had recognised one of them cast a spell that caused a silky black liquid to slither across the floor and attempt to suffocate one of the Death Eaters unsuccessfully, and another had cast a bone-breaker.

Hermione and Ron normally fought as a pair. Ron wasn't as diverse with his spells but the ones he did have down were solid. He defended Hermione's back and threw a jinx when he had the opportunity while Hermione's wand moved in a blur, vomiting a rainbow of hexes, jinxes and curses at their opponents. But Hermione wasn't there, so instead Ron was fighting with Luna, who fought similarly to Hermione with her quick Ravenclaw mind, her wand flicking elegantly through endless spells that Harry was half sure she was making up on the spot.

He was proud of all of them.

Now, though, it seemed all of their improvement under Professor Slate's tuition had been for nothing. Bellatrix was holding Neville under the cruciatus, just as she had done to his parents before him. Harry wanted to tear at his hair and scream as he stood there, helpless. He had been so stupid, getting them all into this situation to chase a lie. Of *course* Hermione wasn't actually taken, Hogwarts was the safest place in the had led his friends and over half of what he considered to be his family here for *nothing*.

'Stupid stupid stupid,' a mean voice in his head mocked, 'you'll get them all killed for your mistakes. How long can you keep this up before one of them dies for you?'

"That was just a taster!" snarled Bellatrix, raising her wand so that Neville's screams stopped and he lay sobbing at her feet. She turned and gazed up at Harry. "Give us the prophecy NOW, Potter, or watch your little friend die the hard way!"

Neville was still writhing in pain that Harry could remember viscerally, but he still managed to twist his head to meet Harry's eyes. The message was clear.

'Don't.'

Harry wondered how anyone could ever have called Neville Longbottom a coward.

"Fine then, catch!" He yelled, tossing the orb at Bellatrix with a quick overarm throw.

Bellatrix, not able to torture and play catch at the same time, released her spell on Neville and held her hand out greedily for the prophecy orb.

Before she could, a spinning white spell slammed into her and she was sent spinning into the steps. Harry hoped it hurt, even as he spun to see where the unexpected help had come from. Maybe the Ministry had finally got off its arse and realised a war was being fought below its very floor?

Of course, that was too much to ask of the Ministry. From a doorway people were spilling into the chamber he and his friends had been entrapped within, people he recognised. At the forefront was Sirius, the one who had cast the spell judging by the way he was holding his wand. On his face was a bright smile.

"Sirius!" He cried in joy.

The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches... Born to those who have thrice defied him... The rasping voice of... was that fucking Trelawney? Of all the people he'd expected to hear down here...

"Behind you!" His Godfather replied, the smile falling off his face in a flash and his wand shifting aim.

Harry ducked on instinct as he spun, could hear a low crackle as a spell missed his neck close enough to make the hairs crisp.

"Protego!" A white shield caught a splash of violent red that came from the wand of Lucius Malfoy, only recognisable by the blonde hair spilling from behind the mask.

...Born as the seventh month dies... and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not... Harry's useless Divination professor continued to ramble in the background, the dramatic words bouncing off the walls of the cavernous chamber.

Harry dropped the shield and cast a silent *expelliarmus* which Malfoy dodged with a flutter of dark robes. Harry could almost see the patented Malfoy sneer under the mask as Harry followed up with a low, but forceful, "*stupefy*," that Malfoy deflected with a dueller's shield before dropping the small green shield with a flick and blasting the stone in front of him, the debris flying towards Harry's head.

Malfoy had been taunting him all night, but now that there were even odds it looked like the ponce had taken a slice of humble pie to the face.

...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 seventh month dies... Well, shit. That didn't sound too good. But Harry was far too busy trying to survive in the moment to think about how he would die in the future.

"Flatus!" Harry cried, inwardly wincing at the thought of the berating and no doubt oddly creative punishment Professor Slate would have given him for the exclamation. A strong burst of wind deflected the stone away, barely. A few stray bits hit, one cutting his cheek and one bouncing off his nose painfully.

He emerged from the small cloud of dust created to see a large snake writhing towards him from where Malfoy stood, already rearing to strike. Harry knew he wouldn't be able to react in time, but in his panic still raised his wand, not even having a spell in mind.

The snake sprung towards him, jaws wide, but just before it could clamp down on his arm a spell detonated against it, shattering it into harmless pieces, some of which hit the odd veil thing and didn't emerge from the other side.

All of a sudden Sirius was at his side, and now instead of Harry being the one retreating Malfoy was. He and his Godfather worked side by side, Malfoy having to go almost entirely on the defensive as he was confronted by a barrage of hexes.

"Sirius! Hermione—"

"I know kiddo! Slate's taking care of it! For now, we just need to get you out of here—*duck!*"

For the second time Harry ducked, the flame whip sent their way by a distinctly panicked Lucius Malfoy passing over him, the scent of burning hair filling his nose as he rose to a fighter's crouch and started casting in earnest, the wakeup call making himself and his Godfather more aggressive in their attack.

It gave Harry enough breathing room to see the fight around him and check if any of his friends needed help. Fred and George were fighting alongside their father against Dolohov and a Death Eater he didn't recognise. Mr Weasley's spells were much more devious than he'd expected, and as he watched Dolohov was taken down by one that seemed to remove the bones in the fingers, causing the pale man to drop his wand and be hit by the twins' spells.

Tonks, Kingsley and another Weasley who must have been Charlie by sheer process of elimination were facing off against Bellatrix Lestrange at the base of the steps to Harry's left. The evil woman was still holding off against all three and even managing to get in a few offensive spells. Harry had to admit he was intimidated by her skill.

Behind Lucius, Harry could barely see a flash of platinum blonde and red as... *was that Fleur Delacour?* And Bill Weasley faced off against two more Death Eaters. More were on the other side of the stone archway he and Sirius were duelling next to, but he couldn't make out exactly who they were.

And Moody... well, Harry couldn't see Moody.

"Are you sure this is the right way?" Justin Vickers—a low-level Death Eater—asked nervously, looking around the pitch-black room, so dark that closing his eyes made not a shade of difference. His voice echoed oddly in the space, bouncing off surfaces he couldn't see. Justin had only been in the Death Eaters for a month. Back then it had seemed like fun. Now, locked in the darkness with only the thundering beat of his heart in his ears and men he knew would abandon him to die at the first sign of danger accompanying him, he was beginning to regret his choices.

"Shut up, coward," Boris Avery growled in front of him. "Just keep moving, the others will need our help to catch the little shits."

They had been walking blindly through this room for Merlin knew how long, Justin was beginning to think they were walking in circles, confounded by one of the many unexplainable things in the Department of Mysteries.

"But don't you think it would be better for us to turn around?" he whispered, suddenly feeling watched and jumpy. "What if—"

"*Shh!*" Avery whispered, "did you hear that?"

"What? No, I—" But then Justin did hear it, a low noise in the distance. His ears strained almost painfully to hear it better through the dark.

It sounded... it sounded like wood. Wood hitting the floor in a steady rhythm.

Clunk ...clunk...clunk...clunk...

"Oh Merlin," He heard Avery's confidence drop in a moment, "oh Merlin save me, oh bloody bugging shit."

Clunk...clunk...clunk...clunk ...

"What? What is it?" Justin asked, clutching his wand so hard he thought it might snap as he heard Avery stumble away from the noise. His panic rose with Avery's panic.

Clunk...clunk...clunk...clunk... the wooden rhythm got louder, closer.

"It's... *him*."

Before Justin could question that, a low, gravelly chuckle echoed around the room. Justin, eyes wide as saucers, began to back away as well. The chuckle got louder and morphed into a full laugh, almost as mad as his Lord's, harsh and grating against his ears.

Clunk...clunk...clunk...clunk ...

In the darkness, a red light grew and grew, and the light revealed their foe. A scarred, craggy face with a spinning blue eye, pinned on him and Avery. Thin lips were parted in a grinning sneer, twisting knotted scars.

Mad-Eye Moody.

Then the red light was cocked back and thrown, and the fight, while fierce, was short.

Nobody ever saw Justin Vickers again.

-oOo-

No matter. Harry was sure he would show up at some point, he couldn't imagine the old man missing out on a fight.

Finally, they broke through Malfoy's desperate defence, both he and Sirius chaining spells at the same time to bring down the shield. Malfoy was sent flying back, his head crunching nastily against a bench before he slumped bonelessly to the ground.

"Nice one Harry!" Sirius shouted in apparent joy, advancing forward to cast another spell on Malfoy, probably to tie him up.

"Sirius!" Harry heard Kingsley shout in warning. He turned to see that Bellatrix had somehow managed to knock all three of her opponents to the floor, and now her wand was raised and pointed at Sirius.

"—*Kedavra!*" He heard her scream, the violent green curse at the end of her wand lighting up her face in an unholy glow.

He froze, completely undone by the sight of the green light. An image in one-thousand fragments flashed through his mind, the scream of a dying woman echoing around his skull like Hades himself had emptied the Styx into it, the souls of the damned singing their tragic melody. Mum. Dad. Cedric. He watched, helpless and trapped, as the killing curse crackled towards Sirius' back, a sick sort of elegance to the way it spiralled...

Only for a pillar of stone to erupt from the ground and catch it, barely a meter from where Sirius stood.

"*What?*" Bellatrix shrieked then, quicker than Harry thought possible spun and cast a shield, blocking a blasting curse that shook the room. He looked to where he saw the spell came from, and relief swelled in his heart.

They were saved.

-oOo-

Harry descended from the balcony in graceful flight. His eyes had darkened from their usual quicksilver to a dark grey like the epicentre of a storm cloud. He was the image of a vengeful angel, fallen from heaven in his matte black armour, the breastplate and greaves peppered with faintly glowing blue runes. All around the raised central dais, the fights had momentarily paused, each side holding each at wand point. Harry's arrival seemed to have made everyone take a step back and rethink. He couldn't imagine why.

"Slate!" Bellatrix cackled delightedly, "you arrived just in time to see me kill my baby cousin!"

Harry's eyes flicked to Sirius and young Harry. Sirius had placed himself in front of his younger self, a steadying hand on his chest keeping him back. "Go," he told them as his feet met the ground, his wand spiralling through his fingers as he stalked. "Help the others, this one's *mine*."

Sirius gave him a short nod and pulled young Harry off to the side, where they joined Arthur Weasley in defending his wounded daughter.

Bellatrix cast a look their way, licking her lips like a lizard before focusing her full attention on him. "Playing the big bad hero are we, Slate?" She asked as he came before her. She was at the top of the dais, confidence exuding from her advantageous position. Her voice dropped to a deadly croon. "You know your *wittle* girlfriend, my niece, is here. Would you like to watch her die?"

"Don't sound so confident, bitch!" Tonks cried from where she was squaring off against three more Death Eaters with Kingsley and Charlie Weasley.

"You lot tried to kill her before, and I levelled one of your fancy manors for it," Harry said, smiling cruelly as he crested the set of stairs. "You shouldn't make threats you can't keep, Bella."

She gnashed her teeth at him as they began to circle, grinning like a loon. "Trust me, I *never do*, little darkling," she tilted her head, amusement vanishing as if it'd never been there. "You should know, the Dark Lord is quite fascinated with you."

"Is he now? Well, tell him I'm not interested. I've already got a job and, well," he glanced at her forearm, sneering. "The whole thing's a bit too... *culty* for my tastes."

She giggled, twirling a lock of her lank hair in a way that would have been coquettish had she not been so haglike. "Oh he isn't interested in *recruiting* you, silly billy, he wants you quite, *quite* dead. Almost as much as Potter, but he *is* interested in where you came from."

"Thought he'd be a bit old to need the whole spiel on where little witches and wizards come from," Harry snarked. "Then again, I doubt he's ever touched a woman in his life."

"We should retreat," one of the Death Eaters growled. "We heard the prophecy, but we don't have the numbers."

"*SHUT UP!*" Bellatrix shrieked, spinning and casting a curse. There was a *whoosh!* of displaced air and all of a sudden the Death Eater's head snapped around with a nauseating series of cracks and he fell to the ground, dead. Then Bellatrix turned back to Harry, her wand trained on him again. "*WE'RE TALKING!*" The whole thing couldn't have taken more than half a second. "As I was saying," she said, puffing a stray curl of black hair from her eyes. "Selwyn says he cursed you with *avada rictus*, but you *lived*. How did you do it, Slate?"

"The power of friendship, how else?" Harry snarled, his usual lightness of demeanour failing him.

Bellatrix had survived the final battle at Hogwarts. Afterwards, she'd gathered the remains of Voldemort's army and become the leader. The tactics had changed. She went after Harry himself, targeting all the people he loved. He'd lost Neville, Luna and most of the rest of the Weasley family before she'd been cornered by Aurors and killed. By the end of everything, he'd hated her even more than he'd ever hated Voldemort.

They stopped circling and stared at each other, the Veil silhouetting them off to the side. Harry's mental defences were ironclad, not a single whisper of his intentions slipping through. Bellatrix's were the opposite, a confused jumble of thoughts constantly changing, making it impossible to determine what she was thinking.

"*Avada Kedavra!*" She suddenly screeched, and suddenly the stalemate was broken. Voices filled the air, everyone around him and Bellatrix resuming their fight simultaneously.

A conjured disk of metal blocked the curse and was immediately sent back at her like a Frisbee as Harry sidestepped the heart-render that had followed it up. A twirl of his wand threw a chain net at her before he had to blast his own Frisbee up into the ceiling, where it sank into the rock like it was butter and stuck. He frowned. He was being forced to block or shield, as she was angling all her spells in a way that would hurt those around him if he didn't stop them. Unlike him, she didn't care about catching her people with her spells.

"*Avarium sphaera custodio,*" he whispered at the ground, vibrant red light bursting from the tip of his wand. Around him and Bellatrix a spherical red shield sizzled into existence, the lower third sunk into the ground.

'*Now, let's fight properly,*' a bloodthirsty (his) voice crooned in his head.

He ducked the organ-expeller she'd cast at him midway through putting up the shield and watched as it rebounded off the shield and came right back at her. She had to scramble to raise a shield and block it. Harry went immediately on the advantage, spinning curses at her at a dazzling speed. She laughed as she rose shield after shield blocking them, the explosions lighting her eyes up with all the colours of madness. In a move far too quick for someone who'd been locked up in Azkaban for so long she dodged one of his javelins like a snake and cast a powerful *reducto*, the force of the spell kicking her wand back. The hard rock floor exploded, sending a wave of rubble at him. Instead of blocking or dodging Harry drew a circle in the air, closing it to reveal a glimpse of another place. The rock flew through and appeared in an identical circle behind Bellatrix, who was blasted off her feet.

Harry began to cast a spell that would have solidified her within the rock when he was thrown off balance. It took him a few moments to understand what was happening. The *reducto* Bellatrix had cast had unearthed the rest of the sphere, the shield tilting under the force. Grinning in realisation, Harry stepped backwards.

The shield tilted the rest of the way and then began to roll down the steps. Bellatrix, freshly escaped from her rocky confines, was forced to walk forwards and Harry was forced to walk backwards, like two hamsters on a running wheel.

Fights were scattered and forced apart as he and Bellatrix traded spells within their cage, rolling through groups like a runaway boulder. She looked worse for wear, clothes covered in rock dust and torn. Harry stopped another killing curse with a block of marble and then shot it at the ground, the marble sliding along the rounded surface towards her legs. With a growl, she leapt over it and cast three grasping, thorn-covered arms that reached out for him with sharp fingers.

Harry cast a charm at his feet and suddenly was rotated upside down as his boots clung to the surface of the ward, the arms slamming ineffectually where he had just been. Cackling, Bellatrix did the same and followed, the two of them constantly turned in different directions as the ball continued to roll. A gout of flame followed by a strong jet of water was sent her way. Both were shielded, but the water instantly became a hissing steam that surrounded her. A twist of his wand transfigured it into hydrochloric acid, causing the witch to shriek in pain before she blasted all away with a gust of wind. The left side of her face was red raw and weeping blood, but still she cast with the same unnatural speed, this time a blood-freezing curse. She only had time for that, though, before Harry's javelin tore through the skin of her right leg, inches away from halving her leg at the knee.

Outside, Harry saw Kingsley banish one of the Death Eaters into the path of the rolling shield. The Death Eater only had time to get up before the shield was upon him. Harry ran to where he was and cast an overpowered banisher at the floor, the ground under his feet becoming an ugly red paste as the shield was forced down onto the Death Eater. He twisted away just in time to miss a *crucio* at his back.

Bellatrix was directly above him now, or below him depending on what part of the roll they were in. Harry backhanded another blood-freezer and retaliated with lightning speed, his bone-breaker catching her in the shoulder with enough power to throw her to the side, the gecko charm on her feet failing as she was distracted by the pain. Even with all of this she still managed to twist in the air, much like a cat would, and land on her feet.

Just in time to catch the *reducto* he cast fully in the chest. She rag-dolled backwards and slammed into the wall again, then promptly began to tumble like a log as the ball kept rolling. Before she could get her bearings Harry disarmed her, caught the wand then bound her with ropes and lifted her in the air so she wouldn't keep rolling. She let out an animalistic roar of sheer fury, her eyes rolling in their sockets like a rabies-infected dog's.

Harry cancelled the shield with a few murmured words and dropped her to the ground unceremoniously, where she writhed like a mad snake. Harry considered her twisted wand with contempt, thinking of his collection, then hardened his face and crushed it with one hand, letting the splinters fall to the floor.

The room had suddenly become very hushed. The Order had restrained any Death Eaters that hadn't escaped with the force of numbers and experience, and now all were staring at him. Harry ignored all but two, one a blonde with startling blue eyes and another a blue-haired witch with pink irises. Fleur looked on with cool fury, the image of a Valkyrie with her blood and soot-stained face. Tonks stared with grim satisfaction, giving him a hard nod.

Bending down, Harry grabbed her by the hair and began to drag, ignoring her screaming. She'd go from manic anger to crooning, poison-dripped mockery in milliseconds, mood

changing like the wind. She became more frantic as Harry pulled her up the steps to the Veil, not bothering to be gentle. Finally, he dumped her in front of the Veil and forced her to kneel.

"The Dark Lord," she panted, "the Dark Lord will kill you, Slate, you and—and everyone you love," she coughed, blood sliding from her mouth in clumps. "I am nothing compared to his power, he will crush you."

Harry didn't even register her words. "You've already taken some people I've loved," he said quietly, low enough that nobody else would hear. "Back then, I promised I'd kill you in this life or the next," he grinned like a Cheshire Cat. "Guess it'll be the next."

Her madness fell away, her gaze intensely curious with a hint of underlying fear, the type a hunter gets when it realises it's the *hunted*. "You aren't Harrison Slate," she whispered.

"Damn right I'm not," Harry snarled, "my name is Harry James Potter, twice dead, twice revived, and soon to be twice vanquisher of the Dark Lord Voldemort. Look in my eyes, and know it was *I* that sent you to the afterlife before you're undone," he unbent, standing over her. Bellatrix's eyes were wide with horrified surprise, lips parted to speak. He didn't give her the chance. "Say hi to Death for me. Tell him I said, *not yet*." And with that, Harry kicked Bellatrix Lestrange into the Veil. Her body froze in entry, then floated away with jarring elegance to the violence that beget her end.

He searched for some sense of satisfaction within him, some closure from the death of the woman that had caused so much pain.

He found it.

"Goddamn that feels good," he breathed, smiling widely, "whoever said manslaughter isn't good therapy was talking out of their—"

"*Harrison Adrastus Slate!*"

'*Uh oh,*' Ron chuckled merrily in his head, '*First, middle and second name. Looks like you're in trouble, old bean.*'

'*Shut it, Roonil, before I convince Malfoy to buy the Chudley Cannons.*'

"Tonks," Harry smiled at the irate witch. "You look radiant this evening, did you know?"

She faltered, thunderous expression momentarily abating, then glared. "Don't try that with me, what the *hell* were you thinking?"

Harry looked around for a form of escape. All he got in return was a sympathetic look from Sirius and an evil smile from Fleur. Traitors of the highest order. "Umm, I wasn't?" He hazarded.

"Damn fuckin' *right* you weren't!" She hissed, jabbing him in the chest, which Harry accepted solidly. "Fighting her like that—"

Harry smiled when he realised what she was mad about. "Tonks—"

"—Could've been *killed*—"

"*Tonks*."

"—Would've *murdered* you if you died like that—"

Harry laughed, which finally made her sputter to an outraged stop. "Tonks," he emphasised, smiling as he held the side of her head with a palm. "I'm fine. She wasn't a challenge."

She lost some of her wind. "But—"

He thumbed her cheek. "I'm *fine*, love. I know my limits, and she was far from being within them." He didn't add that he didn't think he *had* any limits.

She stopped and started a few times. "I'm going to have to get used to this, aren't I."

"Afraid so," he said ruefully. "If you feel like backing out..."

She rose to the tips of her toes and stopped his words with a kiss. "I've never backed out of anything," she whispered against his lips when they parted, fierce eyes the colour of honey holding him in a vice. "I'm not about to start with you."

"This is touching and all," Moody interrupted loudly. "But we've got injured here, we need to get going."

Harry closed his eyes in resignation. He hadn't been reluctant to fight for a long time, but right then he was tempted to back off, to stay by her side and become a conscientious objector. For her.

But rare was it when a man could choose a life like that.

"Let's go," Tonks urged him thickly. "Come on. Not far to go now, then we can get right back to where we left off."

"These moments never last long enough, do they?"

"We'll just have to make the next one worth it then."

Harry smiled faintly at that, running the back of his finger down her cheek. Then he let his hand drop to his side and turned to the Order. All of them were looking at him, and it took him a moment to figure out why. They were waiting for instruction. Even Moody.

"People follow strength, Harrison," Tonks said from next to him, her hand curling around his. "Give them something to follow."

Harry looked around at the upturned faces. His younger self looked back, weary but determined. Sirius, Ron, Luna, Neville, the Twins, Ginny, Arthur, Molly, Kingsley, Remus, Charlie, Bill, Fleur, Moody. All of them, waiting for his word. He'd seen many of them die when he could have prevented it. He hadn't been strong enough then, but he'd had the drive and motivation to see it through in the end. Did he have enough motivation now?

He looked to his side and found his answer. His hand tightened around Tonks'. Not even two hours ago they'd been tearing each other's clothes off, but somehow this moment felt infinitely more intimate.

This is my Rubicon. His path to creating a new life from the ashes of his mistakes, the dust of time itself. He could only hope he was worthy.

He hardened his battered resolve and crossed the bridge.

"Moody, are the Death Eaters all secure?"

A satisfied smile twisted the old Auror's lips before it disappeared. "Aye, they won't be getting away 'till the Aurors pick 'em up," he kicked a trussed-up Death Eater next to him, one of a pile that he'd arranged neatly to the side. "Amelia'll make sure they get their dues."

Harry nodded sharply. "Good." He switched his attention to Harry Jr. "The Prophecy?"

"Smashed on the steps, sir," he said regretfully. "I'm sorry."

Harry waved away the apology. "No worries. So they all heard it?"

Harry Jr paused then nodded. "I think so."

"Anyone who can cast *obliviate*, make sure that the Prophecy is forgotten," Harry directed. "Injuries?"

"Zis boy is suffering from *cruciatus* expozure, and the girl 'ad a broken ankle," Fleur said, crouching by Neville, who was slumped on a bench alongside Ginny. "I ave done all I can, but I am not an 'ealer..."

"Can they move?"

"With 'elp."

Harry scanned the people who weren't obliterating. "Molly, Arthur, could you give them some help?" The two accepted, already moving to do just that.

"Can't we just apparate them out?" Asked Sirius, his head poking above Lucius Malfoy's limp form. Mysteriously, the blonde man had found himself on top of the pile and bereft of a mask. Even stranger, someone had cut all his precious hair off. It pooled around Sirius' feet. A coincidence, Harry was sure.

"No dice I'm afraid. Anti-transport wards over the whole place. Only way we're leaving is through the Floos in the Atrium."

"Anti-transport? But we broke those to get in in the first place, who replaced them?" Bill asked.

Harry looked to the ceiling. His face was grim, but none missed the hungry gleam in his unholy grey eyes. "We, my friends, just kicked the proverbial nest. Now the mumma-bee is

comin' a-knocking."

They paled. Tonks gripped his hand harder. "The Dark Lord? Here?" Charlie Weasley whispered, horrified.

"My guess is he wants whatever was in that Prophecy Orb, and what he wants, he usually gets. He's not used to losing." Harry smiled, and it promised nothing good. "I intend to educate him. While I do that, you lot try get the kiddies to safety using the fireplaces in the Atrium. Anyone who heard the Prophecy, make sure *not* to look in his eyes. He'll be looking for an opportunity to steal it from your mind."

The kids nodded, acting like they weren't scared out of their wits. Harry wished he could say it got easier as you got older, but he'd be lying. You just got better at pretending.

"We're done over here!" Moody called, rising stiffly to his feet. "We've been dawdling too long, Slate, we have to move."

It seemed that even if Moody was fine with him taking the lead, he was still going to be a loud voice. Harry didn't mind.

"You're going to fight him?"

Harry looked down to Tonks again, ran a thumb along the ridges of her knuckles. "Yes, I am," he admitted.

She took his honesty with a small nod. "And...you can beat him? You're certain?"

"Nothing is certain, sweetness, you know that. But I have a better chance than anyone else here."

'Lots of you tried to kill him, before. Tried and died. Over and over. I walked your gravestones and thought about being better.'

"Just...don't underestimate him, Harrison. You don't know what he's capable of."

He wanted to say the words, wanted to tell her that he knew exactly what Tom Riddle was capable of, but the they got stuck in his throat. Fearless warrior he may be, but he was too cowardly to tell her the truth. Not then, at least. Even he was smart enough to understand that if he continued this lie he'd ruin whatever they had beyond repair. Sometime soon, the truth would have to be revealed.

"I'll be careful," he promised.

'You? Careful? I'd sooner believe that dementors are good bed warmers,' a voice said snidely in his head. Harry ignored it. Out loud, he said, "Come on now, Moody's right, we do have to go."

She gave him a long, judging look then nodded, giving him one last kiss before they descended from the podium together. As they left the chamber and began the walk back through the many rooms towards the elevator the Order of the Phoenix unconsciously arrayed

themselves in formation behind them, shielding the injured amongst themselves. As they crowded into the elevator a head of platinum blonde appeared by his side. Harry smiled as he stared straight ahead.

"Hello there, Fleur, having a good evening?"

"Az good as can be expected."

He snorted, glancing down at her. "You've got a little bit of..." he gestured above his eyebrow, "just here."

"Oh?" she took out her wand, flicking a spell at her face that disappeared the blood. "Zhank you."

"Have you two met?" Harry asked, looking between Tonks and Fleur.

"We spoke," Tonks said, an edge of terseness in her voice.

Harry looked between the two stone-faced women. "Oooo-kay," he said, shaking his head bemusedly. Women. He refocused on Fleur. "So, how did things go with Bill?"

"We 'ave decided to stay as friends. I like 'im, but the same does not go for 'is family. I cannot respect people who do not respect me, I 'ave far too much self-respect to put myself through *zhat*."

She hadn't bothered to lower her voice. For it, she received some hostile looks from the front of the lift. Bill looked delightfully embarrassed. Harry's lips curled in amusement. Fleur was a laugh to have around. He'd have to make sure to keep her about.

"Good on you, princess. If you're looking for someone new, I can vouch for a certain Harry Potter."

"Hmm." Fleur eyed up a certain Boy-Who-Lived, who was trying his hardest to act as if he hadn't noticed. "A bit young, no? A bit short."

"Trust me, he'll get taller," Harrison said magnanimously. If he managed this, he *so* owed himself a pint.

"We're almost there," Moody interrupted, his eye looking through the roof of the lift as they ascended. "Slate, you're sure he'll be there?"

"Cross my heart and hope to die," Harry said cheerfully.

"I bloody well hope not, or we're all fucked," mumbled Moody.

"Language, Alastor," said McGonagall.

The lift clanged to a halt. "Here we go," someone said. Harry didn't see who.

"Buckle up and batten down the hatches, folks," said Harry. "It's going to be a bumpy ride."

The lift doors opened, and the Atrium was revealed in all its glory. The floor gleamed, black and white chequered marble cleaned to a fine polish. The ceiling was tall, fading into black with only the vague impression of huge stone arches in the shadows. In the centre, the Fountain of Magical Brethren rose in a glory of shining bronze, a testament to Wizarding Britain's greatness.

'A testament to Wizarding Britain's lies, more like.' The only expression that was correct on that fountain was the House Elf's. Harry was surprised there hadn't been another Goblin Rebellion launched around it.

The Atrium was also conspicuously empty.

Nobody talked, the anticipation making it seem as if a single word would shatter the sky. As they encroached into the hall they all held their breaths. All apart from Harry, who closed his eyes, tilted his head up, took a deep breath and let it out in a rush.

'Air's ready for the killing.'

"I spy with my little eye, something beginning with *V*," he said with a mad gleam in his eyes, stepping away from the group to walk further into the Atrium, turning in a circle as his voice echoed around him. "Oh *Vooooldemoooort!* Come out come out wherever you are!"

"He's mad," breathed Ron from behind him.

"The world is full of madmen with a cause, Ronald. I'm looking for one right now. Oh *Vooooldemoooort!* Why won't you show your face? Don't tell me you're *scared*."

When the Dark Lord appeared, it was as if it were between one moment and the next. He stood at the opposite end of the Atrium, clad in a black cloak that seemed to pull the very shadows he'd stepped from up around his shoulders. As was his custom he was barefoot, feet as pale as his bald head, eyes a livid red. The snake-like slits of his pupils regarded Harry with a calm, constant hate. Harry finished his last turn and faced him, two small figures in the middle of the giant hall.

"Harrison Slate. I regret that we have not been acquainted until now." The Dark Lord spoke as if he were mere paces away, but his voice carried with ease, filling all the empty corners of the room.

"Can't say I share the sentiment, pal," said Harry, spinning his wand between his fingers. He could feel the blood pumping through his heart, beating a song of violence, chomping at the bit to be unleashed. He wondered how nobody heard it. "How about you let my friends here pass, and I'll let you leave here alive?"

Voldemort looked over his shoulder at the group of men, women and children, then back to him, a mockery of a smile on his thin lips. "I think not. If I thought you capable of killing me, and if I thought you'd hold to your word, I might just accept, Harrison Slate."

He wasn't wrong. The moment the others were gone, Harry would have killed him anyway.

"How about a new agreement," Voldemort whispered, stroking the length of his pale wand. "You allow me to retrieve my loyal followers, and I will only kill you... and not everyone you love."

Harry clicked his tongue, failing to stop the too-wide devil's grin from spreading across his cheeks. "No deal I'm afraid my noseless friend. You seen, I don't plan on dying anytime soon." *Not again.*

"Ah," said the Dark Lord. "A sentiment I can agree with. We are at an impasse, then."

"So it would seem," Harry mourned, "I regret that we cou—*Avada Kedavra!*"

The look of surprise that briefly lit Voldemort's face was patronus-fuel. But soon it was engulfed by a towering rage as he tore up the ground with a jagged upward drag of his wand, marble cracking and crashing like a rock slide, rending the quiet asunder.

But instead of the Killing Curse exploding in a burst of green fire as anticipated, the spell was absorbed into the rock. A corrupted smoke curled from the entry point, and there was a faint hissing, like the stone was filled with a thousand hungry snakes.

Harry smiled.

He'd always found that the best sort of surprise was the kind that hit someone twice.

What he'd done was something only a master occlumens could accomplish. He'd split his mind into two different thought streams. With one, he'd uttered the Killing Curse, but with no intent or power. With the other, he'd cast something else entirely, knowing that a solid shield would be raised.

Voldemort's eyes widened. "No!" he cried in a guttural roar, his wand whipping around to cast a shield.

He almost raised it in time. The stone exploded towards him in a shower of livid green acid the same colour as the Death Curse, the reason he'd chosen it. The half-formed shield blocked some, but the rest splattered against the Dark Lord's face, arms and legs. He hissed in agony.

Harry didn't allow him time to recuperate. "It smells like burnt snake in here!" he cackled, and began to cast. An arc of white with a pure black edge lashed through the air towards his opponent, followed by a rocket-fast metal javelin and an explosive curse to top it off. Harry grinned and grinned, the thrill of the fight an ecstasy to his brain.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so *alive*.

Voldemort was forced onto the backfoot, lips pulled back in a feral snarl. He stepped to the right and split the white cutting curse in two with a flick of his wand, the javelin sailing past him harmlessly. The last explosion he shielded, the spell exploding with enough force to make Harry's ears ring. Then, behind the shield, Voldemort flickered, and appeared ten foot to the right, midway through casting a curse.

'When did he cast an illusion?'

Harry cursed and switched his aim at the last moment, his next follow-up spell colliding with Voldemort's shadow-wreathed scythe blade in mid-air. The blade shattered into cutting shards of ice, and all of a sudden neither of them was on the back foot.

A flame whip was doused with a sheet of water, the same water then turned to a sheet of metal and thrown at Voldemort like a frisbee. A *crucio* was blocked by a conjured block of granite close enough to him for a jolt of primal fear to shock him. Where had his metal frisbee gone? Behind him. Voldemort had banished it. He twirled sideways, and it came flying by him with a ringing hum. Someone was laughing. Through the haze, he realised it was him.

Lightning crackled up his arms, and through his wand, he channelled the ancient magic. *'You hear that, Thor? It's me, Harry!'* An electric blue bolt of pure power emanated from his wand, lighting up the dim hall in a pale blue. The noise was deafening, the sound cracking and crashing of mountains colliding making his ears ring.

Cleverly, Voldemort threw his wand upwards in a whirlwind and pulled the metal beams crisscrossing under the floor out, baring them like the metal ribs of a great beast. The lightning struck and dissipated into the floor under them like a great lightning rod.

A mix of excitement and fear coursed through him. He bared his teeth and twisted his wand. The huge steel girders arched upwards in jagged spikes, closing in on Voldemort, who in response roared and swept his arms outwards. A dark wave burst from his very body, turning the metal into black dust and ash as it swept through. It continued forward in a tidal wave. Ozone and rot sweetened the air, the smell of dark magic.

Harry spread his arms wide in a mimicry of Voldemort, and from his own body, a river of incandescent blue magic poured forth in response. It spread across the hall and formed a wall separating he and Voldemort, and when the shadowed wave hit it it erupted and died against it with a long eruption of fiery red sparks. Then Harry clapped his hands together, and the shield closed to cocoon the Dark Lord. For the first time Voldemort faltered, taken aback. Harry revelled in it but understood. After all, this magic hadn't been invented yet. Nevertheless, Voldemort fought back, releasing yet more darkness. Harry pushed his hands together, as if trying to squish an invisible football, his arms trembling with the effort of keeping his opponent contained.

He saw something out of the corner of his eye, a shimmering white. Thinking fast, he dropped the containment magic, threw a twisting burst of swirling green magic at the furious Dark Lord, raised a strong shield, and looked back.

The Order of the Phoenix was edging around the fight towards the nearest fireplace, keeping the wounded and young behind their backs. The strongest were maintaining a mobile shield, a battle-defence spell that required mobile users. Tonks—brave, beautiful Tonks—watched him with worried eyes half a step behind Moody, who was holding her arm in a vice.

But that was all he allowed himself to see. He'd felt a spell impact on his shield, and it was only a matter of time before—

"*Avada Kedavra!*" And there it was. Harry spun as if to apparate, but instead of vanishing his body transformed into a shadow formed of a thousand shades of black and flew to the right. Then, his body reformed, and all of a sudden he was between the Order of the Phoenix and the most feared wizard in the the United Kingdom.

They stared each other down, taking a breather by some unspoken agreement. Voldemort's red eyes were blazing, but his voice was measured. "Impressive," he said, tone mocking.

Harry bared his teeth in a wolf's smile. "Believe me, sonny, you ain't seen nothin' yet."

Voldemort's eyes flicked over to the right, where the Order of the Phoenix was edging along the wall still. Not for the first time, Harry wished the Atrium wasn't so damn long. "You make bold claims, Slate."

"I do bold deeds, Riddle," said Harry, and launched into his next spell. It zigged and zagged, paused, then shot down towards Voldemort with a shrill whistle.

Eyes filled with a new rage at the name, Voldemort backhanded the spell with his bare hand, roaring in rage. Harry shifted his stance, readying himself.

'*Good, good, just keep that on me baldy.*' He needed to keep the attention away from the Order, keep it on himself.

From the pale yew wand erupted waves of magic. The type that, if Harry didn't block entirely, would continue past his shields and threaten the Order. Harry was effectively forced on the defensive as he had to put more effort into countering every spell. But even so pressed, he wasn't without a weapon.

"So what do I call ya, ay?" Harry gritted out as he deflected a twisting shadow into the ceiling. "Are you more of a Tommy, or just Tom?" He grinned as he *felt* Voldemort's anger swell. "Oh, don't tell me you're a *Junior*."

Voldemort screamed and slammed the tip of his wand into the floor, chanting in an undulating, oddly song-like rhythm. Around him, dark forces began to swirl and coalesce. Harry understood, realised he was laughing again, and did the same, golden light twisting around him. It was that, or be crushed by what Voldemort was creating.

Their voices reverberated around the Atrium, and from the ground up monsters were created.

Voldemort's creation was a towering thing made of yet more writhing, inky black shadow. Its arms were long, and in its face, two bright red flames roared in place of eyes.

An Avatar, the physical embodiment of everything that made a man, enhanced and grown until it was easily six stories tall. Some of the most advanced magic at mankind's fingertips.

In opposition, Harry's own Avatar formed, moats of golden magic coalescing into an armoured knight. Unlike Voldemort the Knight was solid, the pitch-black armour plates ringing with strength. The helm was formed of two great ravens wings, a slit in the front revealing two glowing white eyes. More raven wings decorated the arms, chest plate and

legs, and Harry heard the mocking cawing of Death's favourite creatures ring in the back of his skull.

Voldemort's hellish creation stepped forward with deceptive speed and struck down at the Order with a massive fist, blocked by the forearm of Harry's Black Knight. An armoured fist swooped in from the side and smashed the shadowed creature in the face. It didn't show a visible reaction, red eyes a constant, malevolent glow, and it stepped back and blocked another blow before attempting to go on the offence. In their shadow he and the Dark Lord continued to fight, dancing around the feet of their monsters as the harsh flashes of their spells light up the Atrium and the blows that gauntleted fists and clawed hands land shook the chamber.

He and Voldemort kept pushing and pushing, attempting to see how far the other's knowledge went. Magic that hadn't been seen in centuries was unleashed and then countered, spells powerful and complex enough to be the sole domain of myth and legend rolling off their mortal tongues to die at each other's feet with a contemptuous flick of the wand.

Harry was beginning to realise that he hasn't been on a playing field this dangerously level in a very long time. And that, contrarily, the thrill that the challenge gave him was making his cheeks hurt with the width of his grin.

He dropped to a crouch, the whip of thin silvery magic that would've separated his head from his shoulders grazing his hair. He was casting as he did so, and when he rose to his feet he cast a spell that caused another knight to appear mid-charge in the air, another spell giving him a shield of magic to guard himself. Voldemort snarled the Killing Curse at it and the Knight exploded. Harry danced to the side so he wasn't crushed by his Avatar as it was forced on a backfoot under the power of a kick, and began to between its legs as he unfurled from his twist and took aim. Halfway through he caught Voldemort's fragmentation curse with his off-hand and held it in his palm, then pushed the tip of his wand into that hand as he finished the incantation. When he finished the spell, both he and Voldemort's spell twisted towards the Dark Lord at the same time.

Startled by Harry's abrupt skill at wandless magic, Voldemort threw up a shield on reflex. A mistake, as the spell he'd wrapped the fragmentation curse in was a shieldbreaker.

And everyone watched in disbelief as, for the second time, Harrison Slate scored a hit on Voldemort.

The shield shattered, and Harry felt a primal sort of blood-lusted satisfaction at the sight of the whites of Voldemort's eyes through the pieces of broken magic. Then it impacted, and the Dark Lord screamed as his long, loose sleeve was ripped apart on his entire left arm and shoulder. The fragmentation curse was nasty, and didn't just fragment bone. Chunks of pale flesh fell in clumps, the arm torn apart like a madman had imprinted a jigsaw puzzle over him and cut through the lines with a scalpel.

Harry pushed the advantage. He let out two shrill whistles, and from behind the Dark Lord Vaelin leapt from a teal slash in the air and locked his bronzed jaws onto Voldemort's other arm.

'Good boy.'

Voldemort yelled in surprise, trying to get his wand arm free of the very heavy metal dog hanging off of it, but was blasted to the floor by another of Harry's spells. Then he was disarmed before he could recover, and Harry caught the wand.

Harry didn't waste time on "*any last words?*" or any such nonsense. As fast as possible, he took aim and said calmly, "*Avada Kedavra.*"

The smell of ozone swelled, making his stomach turn, and the sickly green spell erupted from his wand and twisted towards the Dark Lord. A real one, this time.

It got halfway there before a massive, shadowed body fell across it and blocked it, taking the curse full in the chest. Voldemort's towering Avatar screamed as its chest smoked and crackled, cut off abruptly when Harry's Knight stomped on its head and it dissolved into smoke.

"~Leave!~" He heard Voldemort scream in parseltongue, and just as the smoke dissipated, Voldemort vanished with a sharp *crack!* Vaelin rolled free, shook his head, looked to Harry then flashed away.

'Portkey,' he thought dully as he watched the space where Voldemort had been, something like shock rooting him to the ground.

It had been a very long time since someone had escaped him. Almost seventy years.

He suddenly realised that it was very quiet. He looked to where he remembered the Order being. They stood in a protective circle around the third fireplace along, the ones adjacent having been destroyed by the Avatar in an attempt to stall their exit. Harry noticed that all of the injured and under-aged were gone, then realised that the rest were looking at him with a mixture of awe and fear.

Tonks especially looked like she didn't know what to do with herself, a mix of confusion, awe and relief in her eyes. At that moment, the two of them looking at each other, it suddenly felt like they didn't know each other at all. Planted in the centre of the Atrium, a monster clad in a man's skin, eyes dark and body *radiating* with pure, unfiltered power. A man who had just bested a nightmare. It felt as though Lucifer had once more plummeted from Heaven, with no intention of ascent.

Then she took a step forward, and he was Harry, and she was Tonks, and he felt like they could conquer the world together if they just reached out and took it. Her arms were tight around him as she hugged him hard enough to make him wheeze. He didn't complain, just hugged her back, breathed in the scent of her—raspberries and rain—that smell that drove him crazy, and reminded himself that he was *alive*.

"That might have been the coolest, most badass, fucking *terrifying* thing I've ever seen," she said, voice muffled against his chest.

Harry smiled, then it twisted into a frown. He looked at the pool of blood that Voldemort had vanished from. "Didn't get him, though."

She leaned away and thumped him on the chest. It probably hurt her hand more than him. "Hey," she said, to get his attention back on her. "You came closer to doing it than anyone else has in yonks. Plus," she said, jerking her head pointedly to the side, "it wasn't a complete loss."

Harry looked to where she indicated, and for the first time realised he had an audience. Arrayed along the edge of a high balcony stood the majority of the upper echelon of the Ministry. Fudge was prominent at the front and centre, easily identified by his bulk and the sheen of sweat that Harry could see even from so far away. He was ringing that ridiculous top hat in his hands and, standing beside him, beaming as if all was well, was Albus Dumbledore.

His eyes slid from the headmaster to the idiot that had almost doomed them all, and his hands fell reluctantly from Tonks' waist. Keeping his eyes on Fudge, he began to walk towards them. His Avatar lumbered in front of him and knelt and, without breaking step, Harry stepped onto its hand and was brought up all five levels until he was level with the party, whereupon he stepped onto the railing then off onto the floor.

He chucked the wand in his left hand and, almost dropping it, Fudge caught it, staring at the pale length of wood with wide eyes. "I trust," Harry said in a deceptively light tone, "that this is sufficient proof, dear Minister."

"You—" he looked to the wand, down at the scorched marble floor of the Atrium, "—he—that was really him?"

Harry's eye twitched, and he opened his mouth to tell him that no, it was *obviously* another man with red eyes with Voldemort's voice and Voldemort's wand and Voldemort's fighting ability, and that Fudge was clearly not as unfailingly imbecilic as everyone seemed to think he was, but Dumbledore beat him to it, tone serious as if he wasn't thinking exactly the same thing.

"Indeed, Cornelius," he said gravely, "it would seem that the Dark Lord Voldemort has returned. As I told you several months ago."

"Yes yes. But—how—my Gods," Fudge wipes the sweat from his brow, glancing around at the murmuring audience surrounding him. Harry wonders when he'll realise that reelection is about as likely as a Chudley Canons top 20 finish. "How? How can he have come back from the dead? It should be impossible."

"How he returned is of little matter now, Cornelius," said Dumbledore placidly, "what matters now," he continued, raising his voice to carry over the crowd, who all bent to listen, "is that we do not panic. As we have just seen, Voldemort is not infallible," he gestured at Harry, who scowled and tried to ignore the camera flashes of the reporters that had managed to push to the front. "He can be hurt, and if we do not give in to the dark forces that plague our front doors, we can drive him back as we did before!"

Dumbledore had already effectively taken full control of the crowd, Fudge falling to the side, clutching the wand like a child lost in a supermarket with a toy. From the dawning look of dread on his face as he, too, was lit up by the bulbs of the reporter's cameras, Harry thought that he was beginning to understand his position. Harry had never seen Dumbledore like this, commanding and grand and larger than life. He began to understand why the old man had been able to unite the squabbling countries of Magical Europe behind his back against Grindelwald.

Harry remained behind Dumbledore's back and to the side, trying not to get involved.

"Voldemort's tactics will only work if he manages to quench our hope, to cower us into inactivity," Dumbledore was saying, ignoring the flinches. "But now I say, take hope! Put your faith in us, and we promise that we will lead you safely through these dark times, to a new era of prosperity!"

The crowd erupted in cheers and the piercing cracks of camera flashes. There were more people on the floor than Harry had thought, and the noise was almost deafening. More had started to step from the Floors, crowding the Atrium itself and maintaining a healthy separation from his Avatar. He met Tonks' eyes, the bright violet they had changed to visible even from so high up, then turned back to where Dumbledore was finishing his speech.

Dumbledore waited for the clamour to subside, then said, "You have seen, now, the potential," he gestured behind him, where Voldemort had run away, with his great hanging sleeves. Harry felt dread pool in his stomach, and he glared at the back of Dumbledore's head. *Don't you fucking dare.* But, as if in slow motion, Dumbledore kept his arm where it was and said, "And now, you may meet it."

It was masterful, the way he stepped aside in a way that made it obvious that he was giving the floor, passing on the torch. The press and the crowd didn't bat an eye, the cameras seamlessly refocusing on him, and Harry was suddenly the centre of attention, a circle cleared around him as people looked on expectantly.

For hope. For guidance. For leadership. For a fucking *speech*.

He glared at Dumbledore, who smiled at him with smug serenity. *Planned planned planned. Bastard bastard bastard.*

Slowly, reluctantly, he moved from his undignified lazy slouch against the balcony railing and stood at his full height. He looked around at the people gathered around him, felt the eyes on his back from the people in the Atrium.

There was something in the air, something charged, something with potential. It felt like that final breath before lightning strikes. It was terrible and heady, and Harry knew that the canny Headmaster had just placed the future in his palms.

Isn't this what he wanted? When he preached to his students about fighting back no matter the odds, was his goal not to incite the public against Voldemort? Was this not the perfect opportunity to do so?

'This is my Rubicon.'

He looked up at the crowd. "If you're expecting some flowery speech, you can forget about it," he said, and the crowd tittered nervously and side-eyed each other. "What I have to say is very simple, and I'll start with this: Personally, I couldn't give less of a shit about Magical Britain."

There were many over-dramatic gasps, a cacophony of camera flashes and scratching of quills. But nobody interrupted him. "I don't fight because of the *Ministry*," he sneered at Fudge, "or for money, I sure as shit don't fight for *good and evil*, and I definitely don't fight for Magical Britain. No. I fight for the people in it." He met their eyes, these people that not months ago had called him a Dark Lord, and now lapped up his words like a man dying of thirst. He pointed down towards the Atrium, where the Order of the Phoenix watched. His voice was impassioned but not risen, and his pale grey eyes burnt with conviction. "Down there, there's people I want to protect—" *Tonks, Sirius, Fleur*—"People who could die if Tom Riddle is allowed to live. I'd ask you all to think of the people you love, too, then picture them dead. That is what they will be if you do not fight back. Voldemort doesn't *care* about your blood, or who your daddy is, or how much money you've got, all he wants is to destroy, and he will stop at *nothing* to see everything burnt just so that he can rule over the ashes."

He could feel it. Feel his words stoking the passion Dumbledore had inspired in the people, transforming it from unfocused anger to pointed, directed fury.

"Fight or do not fight. Live, or die. I cannot make you choose. But all of us were born with the ability to work wonders at our fingertips, and I *refuse* to believe that such a people will lay on their backs and meekly accept their fate as if it were predetermined."

There was silence for a time, then Harry nodded decisively, summoned Voldemort's wand back from Fudge's limp hands, and leapt off the balcony.

Shouts erupted, the crowd and reporters braying questions like a pack of hounds. The words chased him as he slowed his fall before he hit the ground and began to shoulder his way towards where he last saw the Order. Eventually, a path was cleared before him, and he stalked through them all, a man carving his name into the annals of history. *Unstoppable*.

The Order must have been saying something to him, as he could see their mouths moving, but the crowd was so loud that he couldn't hear them. He shook his head, shouted "*Headquarters!*" and walked into the Floo. His world was suddenly gone in a swirl of black and green, then he stepped out of the Hearth in Grimmauld Place, ears ringing with the sudden change in volume.

And stood there, face still irritatingly placid, was Albus Dumbledore, who of course had managed to slip out while he was mobbed.

He could hear the *whoosh!* of the hearth as more people Flood in as he stormed towards the Headmaster, magic humming in his blood. "What the *fuck* was that!" he demanded, coming to stand before the old man and jabbing a finger at his chest. They were of a height, and he looked the man dead in his blue eyes. "You waltz in late, not even helping with the fight—we

could have *killed* the fucker—then you feed me to the press and fuck off back here? What the *fuck*?!"

"That," Dumbledore said calmly, "is what I believe is called a revolution."

Harry's face twisted. "*Bullshit!* I almost *had* him! If you had just *been* there—"

"—Then Tom would have activated his portkey earlier, and none would have seen that he has returned," Dumbledore interrupted smoothly. "Didn't you wonder how all they all arrived in time to see?"

Harry clenched his jaw mutinously, his pause allowing him to realise that the Order was gathered around them, watching the face-off with nervous eyes. For good reason. If he and Dumbledore fought, the neighbourhood would be levelled.

"I received Kingsley's Patronus midway through the meeting, then Alastor's one by the time I finally managed to leave. He mentioned that you had everything in hand, so instead I gathered as many as I could and urged them to come with me to the Ministry," Dumbledore said straightforwardly, perhaps sensing that Harry wasn't in the mood for his usual long-worded explanations. "I thought that we would arrive as you fought and strike an early blow against him. I expected you would be able to hold Tom off for a while, I did not, however, expect you to best him. For that I apologise."

Harry searched the Headmaster's eyes, then huffed in annoyance. "Fine," he bit out, running his hand through his hair agitatedly. "Just—don't underestimate me again. And by Hecate, if you *ever* trick me like that again, I swear on everything I love I'll start letting off blasting curses into the crowd. See how you get your revolution off the ground then."

Dumbledore nodded solemnly. "I shall keep it in mind."

Harry snorted, suddenly very, very done with everything and everyone to do with politics. "Yeah, I bet you will," he said. He sighed. "I'm leaving. I need a piss, I'm hungry, and I probably smell. *Almost* killing Dark Lords is hard work, you know," he shot a glare at Dumbledore.

"I do, actually."

Harry sucked on his lip, clenched his eyes shut. "Okay, I need to leave before I kill someone." He let his lip go, looked around for Tonks, then grabbed her and apparated away.

They landed in his bungalow, amidst stacks of boxes with all of his things in. He had been midway through moving out and taking down the wards between lessons when everything had gone to shit.

"The fucking *nerve* of that man," he burst out as soon as they hit the floor, pacing the floor like a caged animal. "Showing up right in time to be useless, then make some pissy speech and force me to play along? The bloody, *fucking* nerve!"

"Harri."

"If he thinks for *one* second that I'm going along with this, he's got another thing coming—"

"—*Harri*—"

"—What can I do, what can I do... I'll move the Headmaster's Office to the Owlery, I'll turn all his robes beige, I'll replace his Sherbert Lemons with cough drops, I'll enchant the toilet so he can never find it, I'll swap Fawkes with a rotisserie chicken, I'll—"

"Harrison!"

He finally spun to look at her, and words failed him at the look on her face. Her eyes were dark, looking at him with an intensity he hadn't seen in her before.

"That was, by far, the hottest thing I've ever seen."

He smiled, but it soured when he thought about it. "It would have been way hotter if I'd actually managed to—"

"Harrison," she interrupted, her voice straining, like she was struggling not to shout. "If you don't fuck me right now, I'll burn this house down with us inside it."

That finally drew him out of his rage. All of a sudden, his skin was prickling like he was being baked in an oven, and his layers of armour felt unbearably restrictive. His eyebrows rose, his mouth tilting up in a sly smile as he stepped closer, lowering his voice. "Well, we wouldn't want that. I'm not actually insured for house fires, so..."

She made a noise in the back of her throat, like she almost laughed but stopped it before it could get out. "You're an idiot," she said, then kissed him.

It started slow, then quickly got more heated. He felt her hands card through his hair as his slid around the curve of her arse and pulled her into him. She made a little whining noise into his mouth at the contact that made his brain short-circuit.

Finally, they came up for air, and Harry sunk his head below her jaw and peppered kisses along her neck. He heard her say something and he said against her skin, "Hm?"

"You...should get...comprehensive coverage," she said, grinning down at him.

He snorted loudly into the place where her neck slanted into her shoulder, and above him she let out a delighted cackle. Until he pushed her against some boxes by the wall and got his leg between her thighs, and she gasped and writhed against him, hands moving frantically over his shoulders. "Fucking clasps," she said breathily, "these things don't work for shit."

"Hey, don't diss the armour, I worked hard on that," he said against her lips.

"Well you did a shitty—fucking—job!" she yanked on the straps.

"Oi, oi, *oi*," he pulled back and slapped her hand away, laughing, "what the fuck are you doing?"

Her face was red, and she was breathing heavily. With how close she was to him, it was very distracting. "You made crappy armour that isn't letting me take you clothes off, that's what's happening!"

"Here," he chuckled, tugging on the rear of the straps, and the armour fell off easily. "See?"

She pouted at him, feigning annoyance with her eyes dancing. "Stop looking so smug. Smugness isn't sexy."

He hummed, too aroused for words, and then they were kissing again, clothing falling around them.

It wasn't delicate or slow like it had been at Grimmauld Place, it was hot and clumsy and frantic. When they finally coupled their entire bodies rippled outwards like they were liquid, muscle and skin shifting so they might better pleasure each other. It became a game, their abilities giving them control over endurance, and when they finally finished their naked bodies were both slick with sweat, lips swollen and hair mussed. Tonks was the most thoroughly fucked woman he'd seen in his life, and he wasn't far behind. They were lying in the bed, the only piece of furniture left in what had been his bedroom. The two of them were coiled together like serpents, their bodies moulded to fit.

"That...was...the best sex...I've *ever* had," Tonks panted, then looked down at herself, "I think my vagina's gonna fall off."

"Guh," said Harry, his head tilted back on the pillow.

They were silent for a time, then she shifted so her chin rested on his chest, her bare breasts sliding against his skin in a way that would have excited him had he not felt empty as a deflated balloon. "You know what's going to happen now, right?" she whispered up at him. Her eyes were a shimmering gold in the dim light, her hair an inky pool falling around her round, pale face.

He looked down at her, and wondered if he was in love.

"What?" he asked, realising he had completely lost himself in her eyes.

Her lips curved, as if she knew exactly what he was thinking. "Taking control of the Order, what you said to the press. You realise what this means, right?"

He closed his eyes and slumped back again, not wanting to think on it when he was so content.

"People are going to start looking to you, Harrison, for leadership, for guidance." She reached up and cupped his cheek, brought his head up to look down at her. "You're becoming more, Harrison. More than a man."

He brought his free hand up, held her hand against his face. "I know."

She held his eyes, her head tilting. "You do, don't you?"

His heart thudded and he forced himself to keep looking back, nodding jerkily. "Yeah."

"What aren't you telling me, Harrison Slate?"

"I'll tell you, I promise. Just...not now." He thumbed her knuckles. "Do you think you can stay with me until then? Through all of this?"

She raised her eyebrows and smirked. "After *that*? I'd have to be insane not to."

"I'm serious, Tonks. Like you said, I have secrets. And I know I'm not exactly the most sane bloke, your dad hates me, and—"

She silenced him with a kiss, her face becoming serious to match his. "I don't care," she said. "I—well, I don't think it's love just yet, but I'd rather be with you than anyone else, I know that."

"Yeah," he said softly, "me too."

"Isn't that enough, then?"

He swallowed. "I guess it'll have to be."

She smiled. "Then I'll wait for you."

He nodded, lay back and stared at the ceiling as Tonks sighed happily and shifted to lie more comfortably by his side, his arm wrapped around her.

His storm-grey eyes looked into the past, and he thought about rows of gravestones with his friends' names on them.

Chapter End Notes

As a reward for reading all of this mess and being so patient and being so nice in the reviews and such, I give you this: AI generated portraits of your favourite characters in this fic. I hope you enjoy!

<https://imgur.com/a/JZMmAlc>

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!