

Turn Me Loose: A Harry Potter Adventure I was Born to Run

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Chapter 1 – I was Born to Run

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You already know what you would do with five minutes to live – you've answered that question. You'd fight, because you won't go down that easily. You'd survive, because you don't have any other options. You'd claw your way to victory, making something out of nothing, because that's what you do – it's who you are. There aren't that many people you can count on to fight the battle beside you and most of them have their own agendas.

Every year since Hagrid told you that you were a wizard, you've been fighting other people's battles. One would think a six hundred year old coot would have figured out how to protect his own damn stone! Surely, this wasn't the first time someone tried to 'Nick' it? Slay a thousand year old monster? Sure why not! It's not like anyone else was going to bloody well do it. Dementors make great truancy officers – stay in school or lose your soul! Hey Harry, we've decided to host a dangerous tournament, hope you don't mind that someone entered you. No, nothing suspicious about that, is there? Students of Hogwarts, presenting Delores Umbridge! The less said about that, the better.

You don't even want to discuss the betrayals that started this summer. Returning to England brings it all back to the front. The powers that be decided that being forced into a relationship with one girl wasn't working, so they tried the other one. Like a bad episode of that cartoon with the talking dog, they would have gotten away with it too, if it wasn't for their ability to completely fuck up! That will not happen again. Blood will be shed first and by 'Blood' you mean their blood.

That doesn't sound very heroic, but 'Hero' is a funny word. People think you're 'The Hero'. Kwan's right – people are idiots. They only see the brave and noble Harry Potter defying a Dark Lord at age one. They didn't see the kid hunched in a tiny cupboard on urine stained sheets praying for someone to save him.

Then again, maybe good old Petunia dropped you on your head one too many times as a baby and that might be difference between bravery and stupidity. You could make an argument that the 'Power the Dark Lord knows not' is brain damage. Dumbledore should have listened to the great Tina Turner – What's Love got to do with it? Probably not a damn thing!

Escaping to South America with your new best mate Bill, you avoided the people who wanted to either kill you or use you for their own ends. Somewhere along the way, you became one curse breaking, Daemon slaying, hidden city discovering, Goblin hating, Inferi destroying, Unforgivable using, don't want to run into you in a dark alley, Animagus. You went into that jungle a boy and returned a man with a few notches on your wand and a few more scores to settle.

The battles are still waiting for you, but now you get to fight them your way. When you figure out what that is, you'll be the first to know, but something's better that what you had before isn't it? At least, you've made a few changes in your life and they should limit other people's hold on good old Harry James Potter. There are a couple of people you can trust with your life. Come to think of it, that number should always be a low one – shouldn't it? Statistically, there's less of a chance of someone screwing you over.

Kwan Chang-Ho, Bill Weasley, the ex-Boy-Who-Lived, and Hack the daemonically-enhanced troll – now, that's one motley crew. You landed in England and avoided the 'friendly' welcoming committees. 'Unfriendly', well that's what brings you back to the here and now . . .

Somewhere over the Atlantic, you felt an odd sensation like a building pressure in your skull. Tom Riddle's checking in and he knows that you're on your way back. It's bad enough you have to kill him once and for all, but do you really have to feel him in your head? Exactly what did you do in a previous life to get that shitty deal?

Of the three Death Eaters that 'found' you, one is a big, burly Nordic guy. You don't know him and you don't really care. Bill and Hack will handle him. The second one you'd never forget. Her name is Bellatrix Lestrange. No doubt she'd be giving you the little baby voice taunts, but she's got her hands full at the moment. There's a reason people pay Kwan handsomely for his services. Even with a fake leg, he's one of the best and unlike all these so called Dark Wizard catchers in England, the Korean Hit-wizard isn't the least bit intimidated by her. That leaves the last one facing you. His name is Antonin Dolohov. The Death Eater is at least three times your age, skilled, and a killer. He's probably still pissed about you stunning him in the Department of Mysteries. Sorry, Dumbledore, it doesn't look like they stayed caught very long this time, unless Azkaban has instituted a catch and release program.

The long-term parking lot at Heathrow isn't exactly the most private place to conduct a magical duel, but you didn't exactly plan for it. There's a nice little spot for magical people to arrange transportation back in the terminal, complete with Ministry official and probably more than a few bounty hunters. That didn't seem like such a good idea. Three of you could Apparate to safety, but you've grown fond of the Troll. Besides, this is what the Obliviators get paid for. You dive roll under the same purple curse that he injured Granger with and banish a sewer cover at him. He dodges, but

you roll with him and summon that metal cover right back towards you. Jake Collins taught you that trick. You'd thank him, but unfortunately, he's dead.

Dolohov gets clipped by the cover on his left side. It caught the shoulder and not his head. Just a flesh wound – damn! You'll have to work on your aim. With a swish and flick you mutter the spell that halts it a few meters in front of you. A gesture causes it to swerve into the path of the killing curse the Ukrainian tries to land. He closes the gash on his shoulder and Apparates out of the way of your cutting curse. You don't want to advertise that you can Apparate just yet, so you spin towards the sound of the crack and see him on the roof of someone's BMW. You recognize the blasting curse he's casting. It's rather obscure and it's not aimed at you. The target is the pavement around you. Screw it! Apparate!

Squeezing back into existence, you reappear one row directly behind him in next to a Volvo. Spinning, you hurl a blaster at the BMW. Car go boom! If they could afford a 'Beamer', they could afford the insurance. Hearing sirens mixed with screams in the distance, you wonder if the IRA is going to get blamed for this. Where's Dolohov? Did you get him? Don't count on it! Instinctively, you raise a shield that buckles under the bludgeoner that slams into it driving you into the ground. That'll leave a bruise! Apparate!

Good thing you did – the bastard Apparated on top of a light pole and tried to give you 'Death From Above'. The area you just vacated is washed in a crimson fireball taking the Volvo with it. Here you thought they had a reputation for safety. Cagey bastard, but he underestimates you. You know more than he suspects and not just how to Apparate.

So much for hiding your power, but then again, counting on Riddle to toy with you again isn't necessarily a great plan. Right now, killing Antonin Dolohov is a much better plan! Apparition takes a good deal of energy – it leaves most people weak and prevents casting the really powerful spells. That's why you're bruised from the bludgeoner he led with and not scorch mark on the asphalt. He's not powerful enough to have led with the fireball.

On the other hand, you're not like 'most people'. Kwan's pushed you past Apparater's cramps. The Korean can't manage a very strong spell after Apparition. He typically uses piercing curses allowing his superior aim to take a weak spell and make someone bleed. You on the other hand can still bring it. At least fate gave you the raw power to play in Riddle's league. You'll hurt, but not nearly as much as he will. Dropping to one knee, you bring the holly wand down on the pavement and scream, "*Invito Fulgurex!*"

The surge of energy makes you gasp and quiver. Keep it together Potter and don't black out! You managed it once on the Lakota reservation, but you didn't have massive amounts of adrenaline flooding through your body back then. Raw heavenly electrical power slams into the large metal pole causing it and the cars around it to explode. Dolohov's Apparition comes a second too late. He reappears with a crack and collapses to the ground.

The old Harry Potter, well, if he'd been here, he'd probably have followed it up with a stunner and maybe a binding spell – just to make sure. Stunners are for people you don't mind seeing again. Ropes, they'd look mighty nice wrapped around Lauren or even Fleur, but you've learned to play for keeps. You never want to see Dolohov again. A reductor blows a chunk of flesh out of his chest the size of your fist and the laceration curse a dead Texas Hit-wizard used to butcher cattle with for 'fun' digs a trench starting about a meter in front of Dolohov and ending roughly two meters behind him. Now you're sure he won't get back up.

Turning back, you catch the shocked look on Bellatrix's face. The crazy bitch just might be scared! Even the insane are allowed moments of clarity. Try and run, little rabbit! You start an Anti-Apparition chant, but she goes the other way and triggers a Portkey, while shielding against Kwan's onslaught. You didn't have enough time for a combination chant, and guessed the wrong escape method to block. Well, better luck next time.

Surveying the damage, the Obliviators are going to have their work cut out for them. The whole fight took maybe two minutes and left one hell of a mess. Okay blowing up half a row of cars and that electrical transformer burning in the distance says the lighting bolt might have been tad excessive. Kwan looks more annoyed than injured. You pop over to Bill who is trying to close an ugly wound on his leg while Hack looks at the blood stains about ten meters away with a disgusted look on his face.

Hack grunted with disappointment. "Wizard duck Hack's club. Hack only hit arm," he said, pointing at the arm in question. Well, you assume it's the arm in question. Identifying a limb dismembered by a spiked daemon club would be sort of like trying to figure out what Riddle had for breakfast by looking at the shit on Malfoy's lips. "Hack aim better next time," the big guy finishes.

Helping Bill close his wound and giving him a hand to his feet, you smirk at him. He looks apologetic as you snatch a blood replenisher out of your pockets and hand it to him. "I know. You're a lover not a fighter, for which, I'm sure Fleur is extremely grateful."

"Sorry, Harry. The guy was better than me, but he thought Hack was just another wizard under the glamours. Hack ran right through his bonecrusher and gave him a love tap."

"Talk, talk, talk! Do all you English stand around and talk this much? Keep standing here and we can talk to the Normals. Do you see all of them running towards us? Maybe Dark Witch come back with a dozen friends and we can all talk! Move now! Talk later!"

Kwan's cheerful as ever, but he has a point as the sounds of sirens and people are running out of the terminal – time to go. You vanish the junk-filled suitcases. The 'real' luggage is shrunk and in the backpacks all of you are wearing. Picking up a scrap of nearby metal with the BMW emblem still emblazoned and hand it to Kwan. You look at the three. "Shall we go pay our respects to the Minister now? Let's stick to the plan."

You sigh starting to feel the effects of summoning lightning as Kwan creates the Portkey. Fortunately, England is a relatively small island and you can Portkey nearly anywhere from London. For the moment, he's the only one actually licensed to create one in these parts and if the DMLE were being a pain they could point out that his credentials are in need of renewal. That would actually be funny to watch some rookie Auror trying to tell

Kwan that his credentials need to be reregistered here in England. You could probably get away with it too with your ‘status’, but no need to give the Ministry any ammunition to try and use against you.

“Fun, fun, fun ...” is all you manage to get out before the Portkey rips you away.

Reappearing several miles away in Diagon Alley, the four of you are immediately joined by a fifth man. His name is Sean and he’s a hired wand. You bought the services of his crew of bounty hunters. Negotiations were done at wand point – yet another of those things that most sixteen year olds don’t get to and probably shouldn’t have to experience. Hack easily supports Bill’s weight as Weasley leans up against the Troll.

“Didn’t get to mount the head on a pike as you requested, but help arrived much quicker than expected. Octavius Nott is dead and his mansion is burning as we speak.”

“Any collateral damage?” It’s a more pleasant way than asking, ‘how many other people did you have to kill?’

“His wife was away. There was one other man present. He’s dead now too. Both had the Dark Mark. Per our agreement, that’s another thousand galleons for an ‘extra’ Death Eater. My diversion team deliberately tripped the wards at two other locations to get their forces moving.”

Ironic that you’re sitting here listening to a man tell you about two people with about the same emotional detachment of making an expensive purchase and in a way, that’s what you just did. Twelve – now thirteen thousand galleons just bought the death of two men and burnt an ‘Ancient and Noble House’ to the ground.

“No losses on your side?” Kwan asks, not really out of concern for the hit squad, but for the sake of knowing for follow-on work. He looks critically at Bill, “Go get healed! You no use to us like that. Looking wounded attracts attention.”

Bill leaned close to Kwan and whispers to him. The Korean actually sighs and shakes his head before waving his wand across Bill’s forehead and then his injured leg. Bill straightens up and stands. You recognize it as a rather dubious healing spell. It isn’t used typically except in combat, because it comes with a heavy price. It speeds healing, but mostly, it allows the person to ignore their injury. Next time Bill goes to sleep; it will be for three days at the minimum.

“No. The ward scheme was accurate, but they have some additional layer of alarms. Ivan’s best guess is that they are linked to the Dark Mark and set by the owner. The alarms were too late to save them, but it was a close call getting out of there when the reinforcements arrived.”

Bill answers for you, “The money will be transferred as agreed upon with the additional one thousand added in. We will be in touch when we have more work for you.”

“My folks are in the Alley and have you covered to the Ministry building.”

“Thank you. We look forward to working with you in the future.”

The dark haired man nods and Apparates away. The whole conversation had a ‘sterilized’ feeling to it. Would Granger be proud of you that you can use the word ‘euphemism’ in a sentence? The raid was timed to coincide with your return to England, in hopes that the Death Eater forces would be spread thin and increase both mission’s chances of success. Hopefully, Bellatrix is still looking for help. You wonder if the other Death Eater would make it if the only person around to heal him was that psychotic bitch.

The Ministry is just like you remembered it. When the man asks you to turn in your wand, you show him the first document in your satchel. He stares at it and you long and hard.

“Is this some kind of a joke?”

You drop your glammers. “I don’t make jokes. These four are with me and we are late for a meeting with the Minister of Magic. I assume word was left here to expect me.”

“Yes, but ...”

“Then allow us to pass.” Nikolai Colastos taught you quite a few things about dealing with low level bureaucrats. It’s amazing how easy it is with a tiny bit of confidence.

“I’ll allow it, but you will have an Auror escort.”

An all too familiar voice answers, “I’ll take them up.”

The man at the wand check station pales noticeably. “Yes, Auror Moody.” Chiding yourself for not spotting him, you watch the old man limp up. He had ‘lost’ himself in the crowd, but it looks like Kwan spotted him.

With Moody’s escort, you pass beyond the checkpoint and head to the lifts. His eye swivels regarding each of you. “Two whole squads of Obliviators are on their way to Heathrow. You boys were just at the airport, how were things? I’m surprised you’re walking on that leg Weasley – better get that thing looked at soon.”

Bill gives him the briefest of details on the way up and drops his glamour. Opening the door to Minister Scrimgeour’s office, you push through the outer waiting room and into the administrative office and ‘inner’ waiting room – where the people who are actually going to get to meet with the

Minister are sitting. Two assistants are holding court determining who gets to see the Minister and when. This should be fun as several immediately notice Mad Eye and, of course, you. Flanked by Bill and Mad Eye you head straight to Percy Weasley.

"Long time no see Percy." Bill says with a neutral tone.

Percy's answer is equally devoid of warmth, "William. What is the meaning of this? Is this another of Dumbledore's imposters?" You wonder if anyone actually believes it's you at Hogwarts right now. England – the land of the poorly kept secrets...

"I'm the real thing, Percy. We're here to see Minister Scrimgeour."

"I'm afraid the Minister is in a very important meeting at ..."

"Yes, I am well aware that he is meeting with Ambassador Alesandro Dimperio, the head of the South American Peacekeeping force that now patrols Diagon Alley to allow England's Aurors more time to focus on the threat of the Death Eaters. I am also aware that Senior Ambassador Alesandro left word that the Junior Ambassador from the Brazilian Ministry would be attending the meeting."

Percy fixes you with a calculating stare. You're enjoying this far too much as you produce your paperwork from your diplomatic satchel and thrust them into his hand. "I am here to formally present myself to Minister Scrimgeour on behalf of my government."

As Percy stares open mouthed at the paperwork in his hand, Bill mutters, "I knew I should have brought a camera. At least we can go into the Pensieve later and laugh about it."

It's Moody's reaction that you're really interested in, since he wasn't privy to this 'minor' detail. The grizzled Auror cracks a smile and looks impressed. "Ambassador Potter, from Brazil – that's inventive."

"I'm still trying to decide whether to keep dual citizenship or renounce the English one. I suppose this meeting will go a ways towards making that decision, assuming Weatherby here stops trying to catch flies and announces our presence to Minister Scrimgeour." You couldn't resist the 'Weatherby' dig at Percy. He's clearly flustered.

After allowing Percy a minute to regain his composure, you are admitted into the office. The rest remain in the 'outer' waiting room.

Minister Scrimgeour looks up from his desk as you enter. Alesandro is a tall thin man with short black hair and a wispy mustache. He stands to introduce you. "Minister Scrimgeour, my junior Ambassador, Harry Potter. The six peacekeepers that will patrol your town of Hogsmeade will report to him."

"What is the meaning of this?" Scrimgeour gapes obviously shocked.

"As a token of our thanks for Mr. Potter's recent actions, our Minister has seen fit to award him not only the Medallion of Tiradentes, but he been granted full citizenship, recognition as a Journeyman Cursebreaker and has graciously accepted an Ambassadorship to return to the land of his birth."

Scrimgeour is red-faced, but being quick on one's feet is a necessity for a politician. "Well congratulations are in order then, Ambassador Potter. How is it that you completed your education?"

"He was evaluated by our Educational Minister and the Headmistress of our Academie de Magia and deemed to be a wizard of considerable talent and promise. As your country is also a signatory to the ICW Accords of 1732, I believe that means you also recognize his status as an adult wizard."

You decide to take the initiative, "Excuse me Alesandro, I don't have time to play games, Minister. Voldemort wants me dead. So, I got away from all the people trying to use me for their own ends and made some allies. I want Voldemort dead and if bringing three dozen of my new countrymen here to assist the Aurors, by taking over the patrols of the Alley and Hogsmeade helps catch Death Eaters and weakens Voldemort then that's what I'll do."

Scrimgeour nods obviously analyzing how this can be shown in a positive light for his administration, "Might I inquire exactly what service did you perform for the people of Brazil?"

"I'm afraid that Mr. Potter's deeds are classified at the moment, but I am told that when the details are released that the honors bestowed upon him are much less than he deserves."

"So you do not know either."

"I know to trust my Uncle's judgment."

The Minister gets a calculating look on his face. "And this is when you're going to tell me what this is all about?"

"I want him dead – for good this time! From what I was told by Dumbledore," you make a point of grimacing when you say his name, "you want to make me some kind of poster boy out there telling everyone what a fabulous job you're doing. Considering, I killed Dolohov at Heathrow a few minutes ago and he was in jail when I left, you haven't made a good impression. Why don't we get Dumbledore here and I can do this all at once? We'll work together. In public, we're gonna be one big happy family."

"I guess that really means you're not Dumbledore's man. Actually, let us continue our discussion and drag the Chief Warlock out here later."

"There was probably a time when that might have been true, but I've banished those foolish notions."

Ambassador Dimperio stood. "I believe my portion of this meeting is done. Harry, I will come to see you in a few days, after you have settled in. We are hosting a dinner for Minister Scrimgeour next weekend and their will be members of the press there. We need to discuss your relationship with the British press."

You acknowledge Alesandro knowing that your stormy past with the media and how you will need to behave will be a *long* conversation. Its part of the life you signed up for when you made this deal with the Brazilian Minister. You can tell Scrimgeour is practically bursting at the seams to ask you questions.

"Ambassador Potter, we seem to have gotten off on the wrong foot, so to speak. Let us cast aside our preconceived notions of each other and start anew. I am here because Fudge was cast out and the others were either too frightened to take up the fight or like my dear friend Amelia, were murdered. You have returned to our shores with much needed fighters. I can understand why you would want them here, but I have yet to understand why they would agree to come here?"

"I was able to convince Minister Dimperio of the danger that the Death Eaters present. Much like the American Normals sent Expeditionary forces to Europe in their World Wars; my superiors decided that by having our people here, that they would receive reliable reports of the severity of the situation." You smile, knowing it is only part of the truth. The real reason is that South America is less than a year from a 'staged' Goblin Revolt and Minister Dimperio wants his troops 'bloodied' before then. Most of the Peacekeepers are not very seasoned with only a few veterans here to bring them up to speed. Juan Dimperio fully expects his peacekeepers to see combat.

Part of the ugliness of politics is evident. Scrimgeour knows you are holding back, but to directly say so would be a diplomatic faux pas. Instead, there will be subtle interrogation, where he will try to get you to misspeak. You stick to the prepared answers, because the words Harry Potter and subtle do not get used in the same sentence very often. The chaos at Heathrow was your attempt at subtly entering the country. This afternoon, you will try to subtly return to Hogwarts.

"Do you intend to remain a British Citizen? I would urge you to. I doubt the people would understand if you were to renounce us. They would see it as a betrayal." Translated for the neophyte diplomat, that meant, 'I'll have the sheep run you out of here with a broom shoved up your arse if you do.'

"That is not my intention. Dual citizenship is working for me now. I and the forces I have brought are committed to helping Britain through this perilous time," which was your way of saying, 'So long as you don't try and screw me over, in which case, I and my three dozen peacekeepers will pack up and leave and take bets on how long before the people or Voldemort run your arse out of here as well.'

"Indeed, for which I cannot be grateful enough. Your Senior Ambassador indicated that you would operate out of Hogsmeade, I gather that means you will in fact be returning to Hogwarts?"

"It is as heavily warded a place as there is in this land. Since I am a Curse Breaker, the school is especially interesting. My main interest is seeing the Dark Lord defeated. If Riddle was powerful enough to challenge the Old Man in his lair, he would have already done so." Yes, you are willingly putting yourself in Dumbledore's reach, but you don't have to like it. "Minister, these are troubled times the ugliness at Heathrow is likely to be repeated. Those who openly support Riddle also should not be allowed to become too comfortable."

"Shortly before my meeting began, I received a report that the estate of Octavius Nott had been attacked. It sounds like someone is already trying to send such a message. Rest assured that any attacks on private citizens will be given the appropriate level of consideration with regards to the work load of our law enforcement officials – though I would publicly have to discourage any such vigilante acts."

That's about as much of an endorsement as you are going to receive. You wonder how much it would cost to see Malfoy Manor burnt to the ground.

"So Ambassador, tell me, I have never been to Brazil. What did you like about it?" You didn't expect that one, but decide it must mean, 'If we both get run out of here, I might need a place for a government in exile.'

"The land is warm year around. The people are good to me and I've enjoyed my time there." There was actually much more than that – Scrimgeour would be hard pressed to pull, 'The Jungle was harsh. I almost died on several occasions and I'm lucky that I'm on the good side of the crooked bastards that run that Ministry,' out of that statement.

When you think about it, 'diplomatic speak' is actually kind of fun.

Eventually, *'Innuendo 101'* winds down, with the promise of another lesson at the state dinner. The flash of a photographer's camera captures the Minister personally escorting you to the Chief Warlock's office at the Ministry. He offers to stay, which of course meant that he wanted to see the show. You politely decline his company and wait while the Minister has someone firecall Dumbledore. Ironically, or maybe because he is in a generous mood, Scrimgeour has Percy bring in refreshments. Rufus must have a sense of humor! Watching him being reduced to serving boy, well that just adds to the enjoyment. Bill is enjoying it probably even more than you, but after his morning, he deserves it.

Much too soon for your liking, Albus Dumbledore arrives grasping the leg of his Phoenix. You want to catch the look in his eye, but Fawkes hovers right in front of you hissing angrily. It trills which sounds like a beautiful song played far too loudly forcing you to shy away from it. It turns on the Troll just as quickly and everyone realizes that the office, while quite spacious isn't the best place for a Troll and a Phoenix to get nasty.

Dumbledore commands it to leave, while looking at you curiously. That's not a good sign; you can only imagine that all the exposure to undead, death and swapping blood and spit with a Daemon is bound to leave a mark on you.

"Hello Harry. Fawkes seems to have taken a dislike to you. That is most troubling."

"The phoenix still blindly follows you. You've gotten more loyalty out of me than you deserve. It probably knows what I think of you." Looking down at the diseased thing that he once called a hand you sneer. Sometimes doing the easy thing is better than doing the right thing.

"I'm sorry to see that things have degenerated so badly between us. I promised you an apology in person and I do apologize for my role in the events of this summer. In a more private setting, I will do my best to give you an accounting and explanation of my actions. Fortunately, you have returned and we can start anew."

"We can start when I have your oath not to turn me into a love addled fool or have me Obliviated. Just like I told the Minister, in public we'll all be one big happy family. You can be sure that I won't set foot in that castle until I have it." You pretty much ignore the first of many meaningless apologies you'll be receiving in the near future.

"I will accede to your request to ensure that you return to the safety of Hogwarts to complete your education. I applaud your sudden interest in the Art of Curse Breaking."

You wonder how wolfish your smile looks as you hand him your credentials. "As one adult wizard to another, I appreciate your concern Headmaster Dumbledore. I wouldn't mind the opportunity to sharpen my Curse Breaking skills at your fine institution with Mr. Weasley here as my personal instructor. I've been given the Journeyman title, but I don't feel that I've really earned it just yet."

"What exactly have you done, Harry?" Dumbledore jerks an old style pocket watch from his robes and stares at it intently before relaxing and putting it away. You responded to his sudden movement by drawing your wand. His expression narrows as you return your wand to its holster. There is no twinkle in his eyes. You recall him openly mocking Dawlish before outdrawing him and stunning everyone he wanted in the room. You're much faster than Dawlish.

"That's a rather broad question, Headmaster. I'm legally an adult now and a wizard. Technically, my education is over."

"I see, but you are coming back anyway."

"I don't see why not. There is still the matter of Voldemort and the pieces of ..."

The old man waves you silent. "That is not a discussion for here. We can address that later. Onto a more pleasant subject, I would hope that you plan on continuing your classes; it is only when one's schooling ends that their true education begins. Unfortunately, if you are not a student, I may not be able to allow you to participate on the Quidditch squad. I will see what I can do."

He offers a carrot – you toss it back at him, "There'll be time for Quidditch later. I'll attend some classes as my busy schedule allows. I would like to be quartered in the visitor's quarters along with Bill, Kwan and Hack."

"I will see what I can do, but the Troll may be a problem. The Board of Governors has become wary of Dark Creatures on school grounds."

You're tempted to make a comment about Snape, but instead you give him some of his own doublespeak, "Headmaster, problems are only challenges for which a solution is required. Besides, you're underestimating yourself. You've managed to get several *remarkable* personnel on the staff of your school in the last few years."

It takes a few minutes to agree on the wording of the oath, but with Bill, Moody and Kwan all looking for ways that the Headmaster could possibly wiggle out of it, you feel all the bases are covered. Bill agrees to be the oath binder and within five minutes you don't have to worry about Dumbledore ordering you doused with potions or Obliviating you, or having you Obliviated. You agree to attend classes to the best of your ability, defend the castle and the students to the best of your ability, and reside at the Castle for the next two years unless you are for some reason forced out.

With the group of you ready to return to Hogwarts, Fawkes refuses to transport you. Under Scrimgeour's instructions the Ministry has erected Anti-Portkey wards, which means you'll be flooing to Hogsmeade. Dumbledore recommends his brother's tavern and to allow Moody to go first.

Kwan finishes 'dressing' Hack, who shrinks himself down to a respectable size to receive the Korean's glammers. One of the weird things about Hack ever since the encounter with the Daemon and the creature's blood that coated his wounds is that he can change his size. There was a magical growth potion in him at the time and it's the only thing that makes sense. At his smallest, he's about a meter tall and he can actually hover using those tiny bat wings; the only part of his body that doesn't change size. Out of habit, he sticks to his three meter size, but he can reach the same five meter size that he was against the Daemon. Naturally, the first time he did it, the troll dropped his pants to make sure that all the equipment grows. You didn't need to see that. Not only was it gross, but it made you feel oddly inadequate.

The changes appear permanent and while that's good for him, but it scares you. You swallowed a good deal of that same thick ichor during the battle. Every headache you've had since then has you checking yourself naked in the mirror for horns, scales or a tail. So far, the only thing you have discovered is that you always know where your troll is. Riddle has his snake. The old liar has his firebird. Fate has handed you a size changing demi-human with hygiene problems, gutter humor, and a willingness to put the wood to every female troll who wanders into his line of sight. Ironically, you wouldn't trade him for a dragon – he's just that cool.

The streets of Hogsmeade are packed with your former classmates running around filled to the brim with blissful ignorance. A good notice-me-not charm and no one gives the four of you a second glance.

One of the nice things about your summer is that you don't need your glasses anymore. You still have a pair, but the only thing about your vision they improve is your ability to see magic – top of the line curse breaking glasses with a price tag to match, but money isn't a problem for you – Dark Wizards and even a few Light Wizards, they are your main problem. Living long enough to enjoy spending a tiny chunk of your ridiculous wealth is a worthy goal, isn't it?

A tap from your wand activates them and the castle in the distance lights up in a multi-colored hue that bedazzles you. The only other time you experienced something like this was when Thundercloud was pouring that Peyote laced Animagus potion down your throat and you were seeing some serious shit! Right now you're stone cold sober and the sight in front of you is like something out of a kaleidoscope.

It's easy to see why a Breaker would come here and take one look at the wards and chortle with glee. What Bill's childhood home is to magical architecture, this is to ward schemes. Located where two particularly strong ley lines intersect, you now see what Bill meant when he said that a person could spend years just trying to map out the protections – some possibly dating back to Rowena herself.

Mesmerized you stare at the flow of colors, but your attention is drawn to a tiny swirl of darkness on the path towards the castle. Whatever it is, it is localized and fairly intense.

"Bill, there's something going on. Let's move!"

Sprinting up the path, it's tempting to shift into your jaguar form, and cover the distance in less than a minute, but charging into unknown situations ahead of your backup gets you injured more often than not. So, the whole headlong blindly into peril thing makes far less sense than it used to.

There's a girl floating in the air with a swirling mass of energy around her. Now that's something you don't see every day. You recognize Leanne Patterson staring in horror at the scene in front of her. That means the person in the middle of that maelstrom is Katie Bell. She's not on the list of people that have screwed you over. Move it Harry!

"Hack, get her down! Now! Gently! Bill, what the hell is that thing on the ground? Watch it! Whatever it is looks dark as all hell. Leanne, tell me what happened. Kwan, help me check her out."

Funny thing is just over a month ago; you'd have been the one waiting for Kwan or Bill to tell you what to do, but you're part of the team now and they respect you every bit as much as you respect them. The girl starts babbling. It means absolutely squat. She doesn't know anything and it isn't helping. Glancing at Kwan, you silence her.

Bill slides in next to you. "It's a seriously Dark object Harry. Let me in there, Kwan. Your diagnostics aren't going to help. We already know what's killing her. Use the glasses and we'll find out where it is and see if we can stop it. Kwan, can you keep her down? Watch it, she's starting to thrash. Good, hold her still. Hack, keep the kiddies back. Harry work with me look for black lines – they'll be the same dark color as the object. It'll be spreading."

The glasses barely perceive her aura, at first you think it's going to be like looking for a needle in a barn full of haystacks, but then, you sense the wrongness. It draws your attention to the vile presence spreading up her right arm.

"Right arm! It's moving!"

"I'm on it!" Bill's wand moves and Katie's arm sleeve vanishes. An ugly smear of runes dances across her flesh on the inside of her forearm with a growing purple welt surrounding them. The tendrils of magic flow up her arm and are almost to the shoulder.

"It's in pretty deep! Harry, use your wand. Stick it at the leading edge of the infection. Use your basic Norse anti-ward chant and keep the tip of your wand on top of it. That should keep it from moving further. I'm going to latch on at the base of the infestation and try to pull it back."

You follow Bill's instructions as he puts his wand in the center of the swirling runic mess on her arm. A noise reminding you of fingernails on a chalkboard assaults your senses as Bill's chants join your voice. The tip of your wand glows, and the thin line of darkness moving up her arm slows to a crawl – slows, but doesn't stop! Bill's working feverishly on her. He's straining from the effort and it's beginning to show.

You hear Kwan summon a Patronus. It distracts you momentarily, as you instinctively look for the dark shapes of Dementors and lose your hold on the tip of the curse. The Thestral Patronus swirls around you. No Dementors; Kwan's just using the same trick all of you picked up in the lost city. The Patronus is guardian spirit energy and it's bathing all of you in its power. It can lessen the effects of a dark curse. He's a bloody genius! You get control back of the slowly moving curse. You don't want to be forced to vanish any more of her clothes. The scene probably looks bizarre enough as it is. Three guys holding a thrashing girl down on the ground with a troll standing guard while another girl is screaming at the top of her silenced lungs. Kwan's right, every time you try and blend in; you just end up drawing more attention to yourself. You recall thinking something about subtlety getting to the castle.

Sparing a glance at Bill you watch as some of the runes begin to follow his wand back into the air. He's latched on to the curse and is pulling it out of her. Both his hands are on the wand and it's like he's struggling with it. It reminds you of those idiotic fishing shows you'd see Vernon watching occasionally. You focus on the runes themselves as you continue to chant words belonging to Viking tribal shamans centuries ago. You see the shapes of Old Norse runes. Bill's attention to detail still impresses you; no wonder he told you to go with the Norse chant. You don't have time to translate what it means, but the last symbol is heart. That's where this curse is headed.

Naturally, Katie's magic is not only fighting the curse, but your efforts to stop the curse. Her moans of agony join with the chants. Bill's been fighting with this thing for a minute when he sags forward and the three symbols floating in the air plunge like fangs back down to the Chaser's arm. She arches her back almost beyond what is humanly possible – not good!

He's hyperventilating. In between gasps, he manages, "Too strong. I can't pull it. It's headed for her heart. We're going to have to take the arm."

Katie's right handed and no one is ever going to draft a one armed chaser. "No! Let me try pulling it. You keep it from spreading."

Kwan refreshes his Patronus as you and Bill switch places. You've had exactly one minute to learn the chant he's been using, but you think you have the words. You begin chanting and stab your wand down on the five runes dancing on her forearm. Bill corrects your pronunciation on the fly. The sensation is like grabbing on to the root of a plant and yanking on it, except the roots is moving. *Coming this fall to a school curriculum near you – Wrestling with Dark Magic 101 – Don't wait, register today!* Already weakened from conjuring elemental lighting earlier today, the effort is draining. The runes continue to defy your efforts to latch on to them.

"Come on Harry! If it gets to her shoulder, we can't stop it by taking her arm. She dies. So if you're going to pull it, now is the time!"

It's not your five minutes to live this time – it's Katie's.

A small crowd is growing, but the troll with the big nasty club is keeping them back. You can't afford distractions right now. There, got the nasty bugger – like trying to hold water in your bare hands. Hang on! Just dig in and hang on! Now pull the fucker – Pull!

You've burned a man to death with your bare hands. Death is more your thing. Your expertise falls more along the lines of saving people before the bad guy hits them with the lethal curse. This whole fixing the problem after the fact is new. Don't worry about that right now. First rune is off – only four more to go. Gnashing your teeth at the effort, you keep pulling. Two down, Bill is urging you on. Three up now as many as Bill managed. Katie's counting on you.

You're not sure when you started screaming the chant out loud or when both of your arms started shaking as badly as your wand. The words sound raw coming out of your throat. You've hit the wall and if you can't push through it, a sweet girl dies. It's just like the graveyard and locking wands with Riddle. You did it then; you can do it now! The fourth one is coming up off her skin – one more to go. Nothing matters but pulling and chanting. Pain doesn't matter as your world shrinks down to nothing. It's just you, your wand and the energy in front of you. Katie's screaming now, or is that you screaming like a girl? Who cares? Just don't stop pulling!

The last one's fighting hard, but you don't quit. It's a character flaw. It's probably why everyone does think you're 'The Hero.' One day you should consider therapy, it might help. Still, it's difficult to work someone into your already crowded schedule.

The fifth one comes out with a snap, like those tug of war battles you always lost with Dudders. He'd suddenly let go and you'd fall backwards on your arse. The swirling dark magic attached to your wand fades away as you stare at clouds above you, completely exhausted. At least no one's going to immediately punch you in the stomach like dear old Dudley used to. Of course these people here, they might do something worse. Hack helps you to your feet. Okay he's mostly carrying you.

Semi-consciousness is a state you're not that familiar with. Usually after pulling this kind of stupid crap, you pass out only to wake up hours later and have someone explain what happened while you were 'indisposed'. Maybe that's really the way to go, so you can fast forward through all the mundane crap, but you can't afford to be napping right now. There's too much uncertainty. Even as delirious as you are right now, you feel the sensation of crossing through the wards surrounding Hogwarts. How did you never feel that before? Something's different it's almost like the wards sense you. You feel weaker and collapse into your troll's arms.

Welcome back to Hogwarts, Harry Potter!

Turn Me Loose: A Harry Potter Adventure I was Born to Dream

Chapter 2 – I was born to dream

Sunday, October 13, 1996

You are ready to make a grand entrance. After a refreshing nap, that just happened to last eighteen hours, you're standing in front of the entrance to the Great Hall of Hogwarts School of Wizardry and Witchcraft. The school used to mean so much to you, but recent events have caused it to lose some of its luster. In your mind, it's simply "the old man's lair" now, Dumbledore's seat of power. Both Kwan and Hack are at your side with Bill resting comfortably in a private suite under the tender loving care of a certain French witch. He will be out of action for least two more days. Probably more when Fleur gets him where she wants him...

"Well come on guys, let's get this over with before the nurse realizes that I'm not in the infirmary." You laugh as you adjust your robes. They are gaudier than you would prefer, but an ambassador from Brazil needs to look the part. On the other side of that door are various people who you used to call your friends. For the most part, that's just not the case any more. Right now, Dumbledore is on the other side reassuring everyone that everything is under control. After all, there's no reason for alarm unless you happen to be Katie Bell. She's resting and recovering from her injuries. It's probably the one thing you are truly glad about at the moment.

The best part of all this is that Dumbledore isn't expecting you to walk through that door for another day or so. One of the nifty things about the Jaguar totem hanging around your neck is that meditation allows you to store magical energy inside of it. Lone Thundercloud taught you how to withdraw the power contained inside of it to help rejuvenate you. It's the reason you're on your feet right now.

Only during school assemblies do the doors get shut. As a result, they make a good deal of noise when you push them open. This naturally draws everyone's attention to the back of the room. For a brief moment you consider repeating Professor Quirrell's warning from your first year about a troll being loose in the castle and then pointing at Hack.

"Oh I'm sorry. Am I interrupting something?" You cross your arms looking at the ancient wizard standing at the podium. "Have you got to the part where you are going to tell them that I haven't been here all year? My apologies to you all for the subterfuge, but my training took longer than expected."

"No, I'm afraid I had not quite gotten that far, Harry, but I see some explanations are in order to the majority of our student body. The man you see before you is indeed your former classmate and now the junior ambassador from the wizarding nation of Brazil. Harry left us this summer to train in seclusion in South America and we are ever so grateful to welcome him back." There were several surprised looks, reminding you that the students are mostly idiots and even a few "I knew its" with the loudest one coming from Draco Malfoy. Congratulations! Someone give him an effing biscuit! Your eyes lock with his and you shake your head at your one time nemesis. How in the world did you ever take that little twit seriously? Next time he crosses you, you're going to give it to him so badly that even Kwan will be impressed.

While Dumbledore shovels out another load of fertilizer for the room full of mushrooms gobbling it up, you scan for faces in the crowd. You spy your old best mate Ron Weasley. The idiot actually looks happy to see you. It's probably because he knows you have to fight Voldemort. He looks a bit taller and his hair is a bit longer.

Seated a few people down from him is none other than your sort of ex-girlfriend Ginny Weasley. Your eyes bore into her and she refuses to meet your stare. The main reason you're looking at her is to make sure that there's no lasting effects from the love potions that you were doused with. No, there are no urges to leap over the table and take her in your arms. Well that isn't exactly true, you would mind taking her in your arms and wringing her scrawny little neck! Neville Longbottom is sitting awfully close to her and you notice that his hand is covering hers. Luna had written that Ginny was dating Dean. Looks like that didn't last, don't worry Thomas, you're probably better off.

It makes you wonder if Ginny couldn't have you, then she went for "the next best thing." He's a decent enough bloke and he fought by your side and it's doubtful that he was part of the plot. Unlike others he hasn't screwed you over, yet. A bit further down the table, sporting the head girl badge is Hermione Granger. The reports you heard were correct; she looks more like a third or fourth year than a sixth year. Never really a very large girl, she'd lost quite a bit of weight and her face is much thinner than you recall. She meets your gaze and appears to be trying to figure out what to say. It would be rather amusing to listen in on her and her thoughts right now. That would be a positively fascinating bit of dialogue to hear!

Over at the Ravenclaw's table, you first see Cho Chang. She is every bit as pretty as you remember and oddly, if rumors are to be believed, you, or more importantly someone who looks like you is dating her – Charlie, you dirty little dog, following in your older brother's "barely legal is still legal" ways. Of course, there is a great difference between being intelligent and being able to use that intelligence for something. The poor girl is still doing double takes. Whatever the two of you had and you're not all that sure it was even that good, it was in another lifetime for you and it's over.

Finally, you spot someone you've really been looking forward to seeing. Oddly, Luna looks a bit younger than the images your mind created of the girl on the other end of your written correspondence. Then again, you are probably unconsciously comparing her to Karina, Amy, and Lauren. Only Amy was barely still in her teens and quite arguably she was the naughtiest of the three girls – no make that women – that you shared a bed with

during your adventures. Where you gave Neville a nod, you give the petite little Ravenclaw with the large blue eyes a slight smile. For her part, she gives you a blush and quickly averts her eyes. You can't wait to finally get her alone, so the two of you can "really talk."

"Mr. Potter, pardon me, Ambassador Potter, if you and your associates would please be seated we can continue." Dumbledore says. You listen, but you can't detect any annoyance in his voice. You'll have to try harder next time. Making his life a living hell wouldn't bother you in the slightest.

"No, thank you. We were just stopping by. When you're done with the students, I will be in your office waiting for you and your explanation." You turn and start back towards the door.

Dumbledore's voice calls after you, "You'll need the password..."

You don't bother turning around, "Either that or you'll need a new guardian. It makes no difference to me."

You wonder what spell he uses to whisper "candy canes" in your ear as you walk through the doorway. It's a nifty trick. Out in the hallway, you start off in the direction of the headmaster's office.

Kwan looks at you and shakes his head, "You waste too much time posturing. Trying to impress children is stupid."

"Kwan my friend, we've left the real world behind. We're back in the schoolyard. The rules are different here. I have no doubt that he would've tried to slip me back in with as little disruption as possible. My little stunt back there forced him to acknowledge me in front of the entire student body. It'll make it harder for the scheming bastard to treat me like a kid in public."

Kwan's only comment is, "Good thing you did not attend my school..."

Wondering what kind of educational system would produce Kwan, you make your way through the castle towards Dumbledore's office.

Fawkes damn near has another hissy fit as you enter the room. Hack takes steps towards it and it shrieks in anger raising a cloud of hazy fire behind it.

"Hack! No!"

"Firebird wants to fight. Hack doesn't mind."

Forcing your voice to be calm and steady you say, "No. Fawkes is marking his territory and he doesn't seem to care for us in particular. Let's just keep to our side for now."

Hack relaxes his grip on his Daemonbone club. It's far superior to his Dragonbone spear. You and Bill collaborated on it as your first real project working on the recently acquired material. It's nothing to be laughed at as some Death Eater missing a limb could probably attest.

His office looks much the same as when the last time you stood here. You notice that several of the instruments you damaged in your temper tantrum are in various states of repair. One actually has spell-o-tape holding it together. The wait is made more enjoyable by imagining what your rampage could do to this place right now.

The door opens and it is not the Headmaster and entourage that enter, but Remus J. Lupin – super-genius. It is tempting to ask if the "J" is really for Judas. The financial guardian of your estate has been very liberal in funding Dumbledore's secret club and other endeavors.

"Hello Harry."

"Lupin. I trust the Goblins cut off your access to my vaults." You wonder how soon you can get your entire trove out of that bank. Relations between Brazil and the Goblin nation are going to be strained and you'd rather not have the little bugger driving the cart take you to visit the dragons instead of your vaults.

"Yes. I've come to apologize. I asked Dumbledore as a favor to allow me to approach you in private. May I speak to you alone?"

"Kwan's my personal bodyguard and Hack is a true friend. If there's a one Dark Creature limit for the room, then I'd suggest you leave. Whatever you have to say to me can be said in front of them." Hack makes a point of laughing at your statement. Kwan merely continues looking around the room and trying to get a feel for the person that is Albus Dumbledore. You wish him luck, because after all this time, you still don't have much of an idea about the ancient wizard.

Lupin looks fairly ashen, getting caught screwing over your friend's kid probably ensures a nice negative karma debt. "Harry, I've made several mistakes. The Headmaster confessed that he did not have your explicit approval for all the expenditures. That said; I take full responsibility. Even had I known, I still would have approved them. I believe that it was for the best."

"So you believe that a good cause like the Order justifies stealing someone's inheritance? Nice. You'd steal for a good cause. What wouldn't you do for a good cause - Imperius someone? Read their mind? Kill them? Make them a werewolf? How do you know which crime Dumbledore asks of you is okay and which isn't?"

"Harry! We're trying to wage a war."

"And you're doing a smashing job at it! How many have you turned over to the Ministry so far? Regardless, the Law disagrees with you about stealing. All I need to do is utter one word to our new Minister and you'd be headed off to a nice long stay in Azkaban, but I want you to live a long

life and one day you'll have to explain yourself to Sirius and my parents."

Lupin doesn't say a word. You'd been prepared to crush him and were doing a rather good job. Borrowing from Scrimgeour, you press on, "You know something? You're nothing but Dumbledore's man, through and through. Come back when you have something to say that involves an original thought."

"Harry, be reasonable..."

"I am being reasonable. If I wasn't, you'd have already been arrested. How about I load you up with love potions and Oblivate you every now and then? Would that be reasonable?"

"I didn't know anything about that! You have to believe me!"

You ignore his pleas, "I'll tell you what I believe. You are either a liar or an idiot and I don't have any use for either. Get out of here! Send in your master." Your senses tell you, he isn't Alpha. He wears a master's yoke.

Lupin shakes his head sadly and leaves the room. He was just the warm up. The main event is just about to start.

The werewolf leaves and only Dumbledore and Granger enter. You were expecting an entourage, but they will do.

"I would ask that you send your followers out at this time. You already have my oath and can rest assured that Miss Granger will take no actions against you. Let us sit down."

Waffling for a moment, you eventually ask Hack and Kwan to step outside as you look at a former member of the "Golden Trio". She starts towards you like she wants to give you a hug and you hold your hand up stopping her. You seem to recall her having a very active role in this hare-brained scheme. "So what have you got to say for yourself?"

Her voice sounds thick with emotion and she's doing a good job at looking miserable. "I agreed to all this to help you and it's gone so terribly wrong."

"How would this help me?"

"You were so angry and withdrawn over Sirius..."

"Don't forget not being allowed to go to his service. I'm sure I was pretty angry over that, but it's not like I would know anything that happened that day. Would I? You were pretty quick to pass me off on Ginny from what I can recall."

"Harry, I felt guilty! You weren't the same around me with the potions. You told me the prophecy and I knew that I could help you better prepare if I wasn't your girlfriend. It's not that I didn't want to be your girlfriend..."

You finish for her, "but Ginny really did. Don't worry, I get it! That was so much easier wasn't it? If you cared so much about me, why did you put up with the Obliviations? I was wearing my cloak watching you and Ginny convince yourselves how this was for the best and that stopping Voldemort was the most important thing. After all your speeches about morals and all his flowery words about right vs. easy, you're nothing but a sellout. You'll get a kick out of this! I wrote a will while I was in the jungle. Do you want to know what I left you? Thirty pieces of silver!"

Granger turns on some waterworks and buries her face in her hands. You don't feel bad about this at all! You look forward to your conversations with Ron and Ginny almost as much.

"That's right! Go ahead and cry, I could expect something like this from Ron and we all know what Ginny's price was. You on the other hand, you're nothing but a traitorous little ..."

Dumbledore interrupts trying to smooth things over, "Harry, it was I who approached Miss Granger. I asked that she consider becoming your female interest to give you a greater sense of stability in this year. She did in fact express some reservations about it, but I'm told I can be rather convincing."

"Which is when you offered her the extra tutoring and the Head Girl position..."

"No, that came later in our conversation. I'm certain that if you ask, she will retrieve the memory for your review..."

"Memories can be altered..." you add.

"... or even allow you to question her under truth serum, but we're getting ahead of ourselves. This was my plan and as I mentioned it was partly my intention for her to provide a stabilizing influence, much like your mother provided James after he had lost his parents."

You home right in on the phrase "partly my intention." He just admitted there was something more going on. There's a good chance the shit in his arse doesn't know what his sphincter is up to until it's too late. This is interesting. "Okay, I see your twisted logic. It worked for the dad I didn't know, it should work for me as well. What was the rest of your intent?"

"I was busy with, as you say, the rest of my intent when the unfortunate circumstances leading to your clever escape from Arthur and Molly's house. I would not have condoned a switch from Miss Granger to Miss Weasley under any circumstances for reasons that will become apparent momentarily. Nor, would I have consented to any memory charms."

"How's Marietta Edgecombe's memory by the way?" You toss a live one back at him to see how he reacts.

It doesn't get under his skin like you hoped it would have, "Ah yes, that was done by Kingsley and only to prevent a mass expulsion of students by Madame Umbridge. Your example should also serve to remind you that I covered for your Dueling Association to give them the target they truly wanted."

"Would you like a biscuit or something? You enjoy playing with other people's lives. We could spend hours discussing this and it won't get us anywhere. What were the rest of your intentions?"

"To free you from having to return to the Dursley's, and to strengthen the wards of the school against the Dark Lord and his minions, now that they're walking free again."

You take a moment to see how he would have achieved this. Searching your mind for what you know of blood wards, you begin talking. "Wait a second. The wards at Number Four work based off of blood. How would you move them here? You'd need some kind of anchor and a blood based one at that." It clicks in your mind and you stare right at Hermione.

A long moment of silence ensues before you round on him. "What have you done?"

"Part of Miss Granger's potion regimen included a rather unique one to fool the wards into believing that she is a close blood relation – my own work, quite clever if I do say so myself. She was not aware of this at the time. Only after you had escaped did I reveal this information to her. I was able to integrate the wards that surrounded Petunia's house into the structure of Hogwarts. At the beginning of the year three seventh years and one sixth year students were all forcibly denied access to the school by the wards. All were found to have the Dark Mark on their body."

"Malfoy?"

"No, Mr. Nott."

"So that's why you were adamant about me returning here. You need me to keep the wards functioning."

"Had you not returned by Halloween, I would have been forced to send the students on an early vacation and allow the wards to fail and replace them with a new set. You can see that it has been taking its toll on Miss Granger."

Without you being around the blood wards were looking to Hermione for charge. It's why you felt so suddenly weak crossing the perimeter of the wards. Katie is lucky she didn't have her accident ten meters further up the path. She'd be dead or missing an arm right now.

"Aside from the whole 'helping Harry cope with his grief' angle, why is it important that she be my girlfriend?"

Hermione turned away unwillingly to look at you. "For the potion that allows her to be the focus of this, it requires the sense of familial love. A close relationship between you and Miss Granger would suffice. The more time you spend together more the wards will charge."

"Are the wards charging now?"

"They are still weakening, but now that you are here and aware of the situation, this will change."

"How so? I'm not just going to start dating Hermione. I don't even want her in the same room right now."

Hermione stops being a wallflower, "Harry, we should do this for the safety of the castle. If you must know, I was quite upset when Professor Dumbledore told me the rest of this, but I've come to accept his reasoning."

You can't resist looking her in her puffy eyes, "Amazing how when it's not just me getting used that you have to rationalize it and accept his reasoning. Why do you think I'd go along with this?"

"You've already agreed, Harry." Dumbledore says smiling.

He knows something. You never agreed to anything of the sort! Did you? You agreed to an oath to protect Hogwarts – that's all. "No. I'm afraid not. You can't use any spells or potions on me and you can't allow anyone to do it to me with your knowledge."

"And what of your portion of the oath, Harry? I believe it was 'to protect the castle and its students to the best of your ability.' Certainly, maintaining the wards around this castle is well within your ability."

Oh no! "The wording of the oath! You son of a bitch! If I don't do what is within my power to protect the students of Hogwarts, it releases you from your oath and causes me excruciating pain for being the oathbreaker."

"My apologies, Harry, but it was the only way." Excruciating pain – that's not something you'd really like, now is it?

You've been had. You know it. He knows it. Hell, Hermione probably just put it all together. That dirty fucker! When Bill wakes up, the two of you can try and figure out how to get out of this, but so far it doesn't look good. Between your power, Bills experience, and Kwan's downright nastiness, the three of you might be able to come up with something. You've got several liters of Daemon blood. Maybe you could use it to nullify the wards? No, that won't work. You'd be going against your oath! How about ...? Damn! Nothing else seems to be coming to mind! Luna's going to love this! Sorry, we can't try dating just yet. I have to be Hermione's boyfriend!

"Harry! You act like dating me would be a chore or something!" She's a bit indignant.

Come on Potter, you're a politician now, how can you turn this to your advantage? What would Nikolai Colastos do in this situation? Most politicians blow something way out of proportion to its illogical end. That's it!

“If love and affection would substitute for Familial bonding, how about we try plain old intercourse? Wouldn't that charge the wards faster?”

Hermione looks scandalized. “Harry how could you say something like that?”

“I'm sorry. I'm just trying to fulfill my side of the oath. Everything in my power didn't you say to protect this school? She's a witch, I'm a wizard. What do you say Hermione? What's a little shag between old friends like us?”

“Harry! You're talking about our virginity! That's not something to speak so callously about.”

You manage a slightly mocking laugh at good old “Hermy Funbags” – though it looks like a bit of air might have been let out of them. “Actually, we're just talking about your virginity, Hermione. Literally, mine's somewhere back in Brazil. Figuratively, I lost it the day all of you started this idiotic idea. Just how far are you willing to go to protect everyone in this castle Hermione? I'm guessing if you're uncomfortable with it, he could whip up a potion for you. Wouldn't you say it's for the greater good?”

She looks for help from Dumbledore, “Headmaster!”

Dumbledore initially appears horrified as well, “Actually, Ambassador Potter makes a credible point that I hadn't considered. Physical intimacy would require the two of you to be in contact for shorter durations of time. When I offered Miss Granger the Head Girl position, I had intended that the two of you do your utmost to keep your relationship a secret and a private suite would allow such a thing. Your idea would work though I would never require such behavior from Miss Granger. Perhaps it is your anger at the situation speaking, but I had hoped for better from you, Harry.”

If life gives you lemons, slice them open shove the pulp in your enemies' eyes and squeeze. “Well ‘hope’ is a four letter word. Look, you've basically made Hermione the focal point for the warding structure at Hogwarts. What happens if she is killed? Are the wards going to collapse or is it going to cascade and blow us all up?”

“I cannot say for certain. That is why Miss Granger is not leaving the castle this year and will often be accompanied by Nymphadora Tonks. Her safety is of the utmost importance, second only to yours. This is a most important secret and Miss Granger is already rigorously applying herself to her Occlumency studies. I must ask that you resume your lessons as well.”

“I don't need them.”

“May I ascertain that for myself?”

“Not right now, but some other time, I don't see why not. For now, you can accept my word that I have taken appropriate precautions. I seem to be accepting your word on a number of things.”

“I see we have a long ways to go to overcome your hostility, Harry. I will leave the details of your relationship with Miss Granger for the two of you to decide. Your Ambassadorial suite is situated next door to the Head Girl suite. The password is ‘Obligations.’ Although, you may change it to whatever suits you.” Dumbledore neatly washes his hands of the matter tossing it all back on Hermione's shoulders. It's nice to see that when push comes to shove, he can simply walk away. He gets an oddly detached look on his face, “Come to think of it, I suppose that solution would have worked for you and Petunia as well.”

You so did not need that image running around in your head! Too bad you can't ask him to Obliviate you! Hermione looks mortified, but the two of you grew up in a world where inbreeding wasn't so widely accepted.

You can ignore the details for now, Bill has a saying about “grudge sex” being really good sex. You may get a chance to find that out. Changing the topic, you find something bothering you. “So, if these wards work against Death Eaters, how come Snape is still here?”

“At my request Fawkes transports him in and out of the castle.”

“No wonder your familiar is in such a smashing mood.”

“No, it hasn't changed its indifference to Professor Snape. I am most concerned with its reaction to you. Will you permit me to view your adventures in my Pensieve?”

Gazing around the room, you shake your head. “After the way you just screwed me, well technically, us, you have some nerve asking that! I trust you even less than before I walked in this room. All you need to know is that I went there, found the Horcrux and destroyed it.”

Hermione is drawn back into the conversation, “What is a Horcrux?”

“Holy shit! You've pulled her this far into it and she doesn't even know what we're up against! You really are a piece of work old man! It makes me wonder if Bill hadn't told me, how long you would have kept me in the dark as well.”

“That knowledge was not important to Miss Granger's role in the war effort. Do you understand the concept of ‘need to know,’ Harry? Under other circumstances, I would remove that knowledge from her mind...”

“Always wrapped up in your secrets and half-truths, aren't you? I'll just tell her again the moment we're alone. One thing that I'm telling you right now, when this is over, there will be an accounting for your actions. I will make you pay.”

Dumbledore allows his aura to flare and radiate with power almost causing Hermione to fall from her seat. It's a neat trick, you can do it too. You'll have to do some practicing in front of a mirror to get it looking so impressive. “Should you win this war, Harry, you are welcome to try.”

Just remember that you said that. If your little display couldn't stop Riddle, what makes you think it will work on his equal? Maybe instead of doing this, we should talk about the Horcrux that's in the school at this very moment?"

That really grabs his attention. "There is one here? Where is it?"

"The trophy room, Riddle's school service award, do we go get it now, or do we wait for Bill to wake up?"

Both you and Bill had been shocked to see the award shown by Ravenclaw's seer glass as one of the three remaining Horcruxes. The sheer audacity required to have it displayed in a case in the middle of your sworn enemy's sanctuary... really after all that you have learned about Riddle, it doesn't surprise you, but even still...

Dumbledore actually looks frightened. "I will go and retrieve it this very instant."

You smack the table, "Don't be a fool. Look at your hand. Seal the trophy room, and then you and I and Bill can take it out together."

A new voice from over by the wall interrupts, "The boy is so very right, Albus. You are a fool! Lord Voldemort placed it right under your very eyes and now you are doomed!"

The three of you turn to see the portrait of Headmaster Dippet, looking his usual doddering old self, except for one small detail. His eyes are red.

Laughing like a maniac, Dippet flees from the portrait frame a second before your spell and Dumbledore's impact against the frame leaving a massive scorch mark on the wall.

"It would seem that our choice has been made for us. I will sound the emergency alarm to tell all the students to stand fast. Miss Granger, find Professor McGonagall and assist her. My predecessor has only one other portrait frame in existence."

You know where this is heading. "Let me guess, the trophy room!"

"Precisely, I will go and investigate."

"You'll need my help."

He looks at you seriously as he activates the general alarm. "I would prefer to do this alone."

Your reply is cut off by a large detonation that sends a tremor through the castle. "On second thought, I have reconsidered my opinion, Harry. This could be very serious. Fawkes will transport me directly. Harry, bring your troll and Mr. Kwan down the closest stairwell. Miss Granger, obey my last instruction. You are to keep any students that are on the upper floors from descending to the third floor. Under no circumstances are you to venture below the fourth floor."

Half-running and half-leaping down the steps, from his office, you motion for Kwan and Hack to follow you. You made a mistake assuming that this Horcrux had no defenses, because you had polished it with your own hands. That won't happen again. If you thought you were going to get a breather and a chance to settle in, you were wrong...

Turn Me Loose: A Harry Potter Adventure The Craziest Boy You've Ever Seen

Chapter 3 – The Craziest Boy You've Ever Seen
Sunday October 13th, 1996

Needless to say, the hallway outside of Dumbledore's office is crowded with people who were curious to see you. You spot half of Gryffindor, a dozen or so Puffs and Claws, and Draco stinking Malfoy himself. Now, everyone's looking around scared at whatever just happened. They're not important. The only ones that matter are Kwan and Hack and they are right behind you. Granger's voice screams for everyone to stay where they are.

You feel a secondary explosion shake the castle as you reach the moving staircases. They're stuck in mid-motion – typical. Why is it that even getting to the battle might kill you? Sometimes, you wonder why you bother. Your dress robes, don't happen to have a shrunken broom in it do they? Nope. They also don't happen to have your Vipertooth Dragon armor underneath them. You'll take that under consideration for later.

"Hack! Can you make that leap?" He's still not very good with his little Daemon wings. It's gotta be at least five meters, and there's not enough space for him to get up a run. He could shrink and you could banish him. A few other possibilities cross your mind as Kwan hobbles up on his fake leg. Screw it! Peter Parker, eat your heart out. "Funis Applico!" A length of rope shoots out of your wand and ties itself off neatly on the frozen staircase. You summon the end of it back to your hand. Hack shrinks down to his smallest size and clambers onto your back. You do your best Spiderman impression and swing to the fifth floor landing. Kwan floats down using some kind of personal levitation spell – damn show off. You repeat and finish with a cushioning charm as you land on the third floor.

If you're the wise-cracking wallcrawler, then Hack is your "Hulk." He leaps off your back and goes to his full battle size, missing his clothes. Mental note – speak to Flitwick about charming your naked troll's clothes. There's a joke about a naked troll with his arms wrapped around you that Bill must never learn. Several enchanted suits of armor are headed toward you. They have sharp swords and spears. Hack brawls with them as you summon his club to give the Troll an "unfair" advantage. Kwan lands with a bit of a stumble, but is already snapping off a Banisher.

"Hack! It's clobberin' time!" You Banish the club into one of the suits near the troll. Okay, wrong superhero, but that's not the point – yelling "Avengers Assemble" also would have just been stupid. Hack scoops up the club and takes point. Gongs of steel caused by the crushing blows of Daemonbone ring through the corridor. You can sense the raw power ahead of you. It's coming from Dumbledore and whatever he's fighting. The feeling is similar to standing at the edge of a cliff in the middle of a violent thunderstorm. It's the magical equivalent of a warning of impending doom; proceed at your own risk. Not that you ever really have a choice to just turn around and go get a sandwich or a spot of tea!

Quick inventory time, what's on the third floor? There are the Charms classroom, the Infirmary, Trophy Room, Armory and a few other rooms. The hallways are full of the suits of armor and the distant sounds of spell fire can be heard. You charge forward, weaving in and out from behind your troll hurling Crushing Curses and Blasters. No kid stuff today! Alright, the armor is just the foot soldiers. Come on Riddle – what else do you have?

A wild-eyed figure stumbles from the Infirmary, through the door that's been knocked off its hinges. Madame Pomfrey's bleeding and clutching her wand uselessly as she flees from the enchanted knights behind her.

You cover her exit with Banishers and Bludgeoners, as you catch her with your left arm. Hack moves in front of you and makes like a championship cricket player. The Daemonbone seems to drain the magic out of the enchanted suits as it strikes them.

The woman struggles in your grasp. She might be good when it's someone else's crisis, but perhaps you'd given the nurse far too much credit.

"Potter! Let me go! We have to get out of here! There's too many of them!"

"Where's Katie?"

She scratches at you until you release her and she runs off without answering your question. Katie's all alone in there! You did not save her from a cursed object just to see her killed by Riddle's Horcrux! Your next Summoning Spell yanks four suits out of there. Hack's club does the heavy work, twisting the metal into freakish parodies of what they once were. Maybe your buddy has a future in modern art? No time to consider that now. The Infirmary is in shambles. The smell is worse than a bad day down in the Potions Lab. Longbottoms of the world unite! Fumes from shattered potions permeate the air and threaten to overwhelm your senses. Fire Spells seem like a bad idea right about now. One of the interior walls has partially collapsed allowing more armored guardians to enter.

The suits of armor inside were milling about, you've given them a fresh target and they turn towards you. Katie is mercifully untouched and you breathe a sigh of relief. They must not sense her as a threat, but you don't want to take any chances. The mindless foot soldiers approach and you

vent your wrath on them. They fall within a minute. Casting a Ventilation Charm to evacuate the dangerous cloud of potion spill out one of the shattered windows, you animate Katie's bed. Mental commands make it follow you out of the ruined ward and head towards the staircase to get your helpless friend away from the fighting. Provided nothing gets behind you, she'll be fine.

No time to rest, back to the fight! Kwan and Hack are fighting – the charms classroom? Something that reminds you eerily of the bone horror that killed Maria Sanchez fills the corridor. This one's made of desks, chairs, and rubble. A flash of orange shoots by as a small tabby cat darts through and easily past the golem. Minerva's knows where the real fight is taking place and leaves the three of you to deal with this "minor problem." It's tempting to follow, but you'd give away your Animagus form and even then, you might not be small enough to get by.

Drawing on your energy, you dig in your mind for the right spells to use when faced with a construct of wood. Fire seems like a good idea, but little mages who play with fire tend to get burned. Kwan's Blasters aren't really doing enough damage. A heavy duty group of spells linked together in a spellchain might be the right choice. No, you're first instinct is right. Fire is the key – just don't play with it! Hopefully, the fumes in the in the Infirmary have dispersed. Whispering a weak Cutting Charm, you open a wound on your left arm and your wand tip is smeared with the sticky red liquid. Like a Catholic priest shaking holy water to bless a house, you shake the blood to the ground. Now comes the good part.

The wand movements are intricate, but your time in the jungle has given you clarity and a certainty that the old Harry Potter never had before. The new and improved version whispers the words of the dead Toltec language, which tumble harshly off your tongue. The droplets of blood rush together and form a single thin line as tall as you are. Surging your magic and bellowing the last words, the column explodes into a pillar of fire, more specifically Bloodfire – an all consuming flame directed by your will. Pushing it with your mind, you send it towards the construct and yell for Hack back off. Kwan finishes off another group of knights and sends a jet of oil at the Golem to add fuel to the flames. He saw you fight with Veras Chilotha and your teammate knows what to do. As living flame meets animated wood, Kwan summons a powerful gust of wind causing your Bloodfire to flare magnificently against it. You pour power into it, resisting the urge to cast other spells. Doing this spell weakened that formidable South American Dark Wizard, and you're still not certain if other traps lay beyond.

Kwan adds a pair of large fireballs roughly the size of footballs and the Golem wobbles unsteadily. You urge the Bloodfire onward and spare a glance over your shoulder. The construct is burning all over and running out of furniture to fuel itself with. Kwan switches to Vanishing the desks, chairs, and now hospital beds that it attempts to fortify itself with.

"Vertixcis!" A gale force wind surges through the hallway nearly lifting you off your feet and the fire spreads to all parts of the golem. "Now Hack! Get it."

The troll smashes his club into it. You feel the Daemonbone sapping at the magic of your Bloodfire and let it dissipate. The furniture golem collapses in a pile of smoldering debris, clogging the hallway. You could Vanish your way through, or go over. Motioning Hack closer, you use his bulk to shield your transformation and quickly leap over the still burning debris. Your senses sharpen. The burning ash and the heat from the flames assault your nostrils.

Coiled power flows through your four legs. You haven't really been able to transform since the Lakota reservation. Like a trained firewalker, it takes mere seconds to move through the pile. You are agile grace personified. Returning to your human form you see more suits of armor pouring out to delay Kwan and Hack. You make the call. They can handle it, so you head towards the trophy room.

Moving faster, you sense the power ahead of you. This part of Riddle isn't going quietly. You round the corner and see another sight that will haunt you for many years to come, should you somehow manage to live that long. Before you is a thing that was Filch's cat, Mrs. Norris, swollen to something slightly larger than your Animagus form, dodging and clawing at the Phoenix above it who is screaming bloody murder. As painful as the bird's war cry is to you, that is not what stops you in your tracks. The sight of the bloody lower half of an orange tabby cat dangling from the monsters mouth shocks you to your core. Rage boils in your veins. The same cutting curse that bisected Antonin Dolohov leaps from your wand. Mrs. Norris senses the wash of magic and gets out of the way before being ripped in half. It retreats back towards the trophy room. Fawkes turns at you for a moment almost trying to decide who the greater threat is before pursuing the transfigured beast.

The entire trophy room is a warzone. The contents of the trophy shelves, as well as the shelves themselves, the contents of broom closets and links of chain form a vortex around a figure in the room. Over the din, you can hear the mocking voice of Tom Riddle coming from the man and the portrait of Dippet.

"Last warning, you miserable fool, let me pass and I won't tear your school apart from the inside!"

A wall of energy shields the Headmaster from the vortex. "You must resist his control. You are stronger than he is!"

You wonder who has been possessed. There's one primary suspect with Mrs. Norris running around here like the poster child for animal experimentation, but how? He's a squib! You release a series of Vanishers into the vortex, but there is too much debris.

The voice sounds a bit less certain, "Potter! So you dare to show your face!" Shards of shelving shoot like oversize darts at you as lengths of chain jangle and crack like giant bullwhips. You dodge the chains and vanish much of the wood. Dumbledore's power joins yours as the chains strike a pedestal where a suit of armor had once stood. The Headmaster has another one of these protecting him. No matter how hard you've trained, he's leaps and bounds ahead of you when it comes to animation and transfiguration. Your methods are much more crude and straightforward.

"Tonare! Lacero! Pello Hostis! Moudre d'Ois! Carnicero Vil! Tonare!" You send a full link of a powerful spellchain at Voldemort's puppet. The Bonesnapper is uttered in French and the vile Butcher Spell in Spanish to shorten the casting time. Words are less important than wand movements. Wand movements are less important than the intent. Willpower and raw power are what really matters! You begin the link again, but are forced to dive for cover as bolts of destructive energy shoot from a statue that hadn't been part of the battle until now - voice activated wards of

the disposable variety. You grunt in pain as one of the beams catches you on the back. Dumbledore leaps to the offensive, but he's only using heavy Stunners and Incapacitation Spells. Sweet Circe naked on a bed! Take off the damn kid gloves and fight!

Sure enough, there's a window as your opponent moves debris to block Dumbledore's array of Stunning Spells. You get your first glance at the man behind the curtain. The Horcrux looks like it's affixed to his chest like some kind of Superman symbol and glowing with energy. You always wondered why he kept his chains oiled. Tremble in fear from the Dark Lord Voldefilch! The Horcrux must be serving as a magical core.

"Argus! You must let us help you!"

You always doubted the bugger was sane. The wild look on his face confirms it. "Help? You think I want your help? Why would I go back to being a squib? Mocked by children, ghosts and elves? I'm fighting the great Dumbledore to a standstill! I have power! Now let me leave or see what I can do to this castle!" More single use wards activate hurling cerulean energy throughout the room. Summoning your strongest shield, it deflects the energy into the wall ripping through stone like wallboard.

"I'm sorry Argus. I truly am." Dumbledore says with an almost audible sigh. His demeanor changes and he strikes out. For you, it's a reminder of the power that hides behind those twinkling eyes. You add your own considerable fury to the attack. Voldefilch's protective cocoon begins to rapidly shrink. The tornado of the Horcrux's power clashes and falters against the hurricane forces the two of you bring forth. The old man sends wave after wave of power crashing against the protective wall forcing Voldefilch backwards. Your spells follow with tight beams of concentrated energy shattering the damaged pieces faster than he can replace them.

Mrs. Norris leaps from the swirling mass, still followed by the angry Phoenix. She emerges from the other side, placing herself in between Filch and the rest of you. All the debris comes to a sudden halt as the creature spits McGonagall's cat body at Dumbledore.

It has the desired effect. Dumbledore falters momentarily. The brief instant where you thought Veras Chilotha had killed Bill crosses your mind. There were always rumors of a relationship between the Headmaster and your former Head of House, but at the very least, they were close friends. You'd feel for him, but Voldefilch uses this to detonate his wall of debris and the castle groans buffeted by another shockwave. You engorge one of those pedestals and leap behind it. It worked for the Daemon when you detonated the sappers. Sometimes the enemies can teach you more than your allies.

The storm of debris rips up the masonry and you see Filch riding past you on his enormous cat. Ahead of him is the statue of the humpbacked witch and the passage to Honeydukes. You rise to your feet and see Fawkes excavating its master. If he's still alive under there, he'll use Fawkes to go to Hogsmeade. You don't have that luxury. As the possessed man disappears beneath the statue, his cat stays to buy him time. You snap off several spells charging towards it, but it dodges most of them, though a Reductor rips a chunk of flesh out of its side, causing it to howl in pain. It leaps towards you and you make your own transformation, meeting it in mid-air. You're foreclaws rip at it and your fanged jowls lock onto the side of its head. There's the wet squishy taste of blood in your mouth.

The two of you roll along the corridor. It's still larger, but it's just an enchanted cat. Even on its best day it would never be you! Want to know how McGonagall felt, bitch? Try this! The enlarged cat thrashes against you and you pick up a few wounds from its hind legs, but it abruptly stiffens and goes slack. You're surprised that the meat didn't have move fight in it, but then you see your claws. The fur ends and scales begin towards the feet. Your teeth feel slightly longer and there's a swelling in your jaws. You sniff the wound at the cat's neck. You know that smell. It's a sharp, distinctive smell, which you've only smelled once before in your life. It's the same odor the basilisk fang had.

You don't have to wonder how the Daemon blood affected you anymore.

The statue is starting to seal itself. You topple it and dive down the stone slide. It's tight, but you can make better speed this way. You'll catch him just after the wards. Faster, you need to be faster through the twisting earthen passage.

He senses your approach but the prey confuses you for his animal. After all, why would he expect different? "My precious, I told you to delay.... No!" The rest of his words are cut off by an inarticulate scream.

In the jungles of South America, you are known as the beast that kills in a single bound. Your mass buries the man in the tight confines of the tunnel. Claws rip at him. Poison from your jaws mixes with the blood and the screams of a petty, angry man. Argus Filch allowed himself to come under the sway of an evil monster, but there are other monsters in this world and you just happen to be one of them, not necessarily evil, but every bit as dangerous.

Within thirty seconds it is over. There is only you, the Horcrux, and the mauled body of Hogwarts former caretaker. You return to your human form and grab the scheming bastard's wand, wondering who he confiscated it from. It's a poor match, but it doesn't need to be that good for what you intend to do.

Cutting Curses remove the Horcrux from the flesh around it. You Vanish the rest of his body leaving only the chest area. The cursed wretch doesn't deserve a funeral. A spell flips the gruesome sight over and you Vanish the rest of the flesh leaving only a blood drenched plaque. Conjuring a sheet and charming it, you watch as the Horcrux is wrapped like a sick present. At the edge of your mind, you hear the distant voice of Voldemort's soul. It's a whisper of seductive power. "Reach out take me. I can make you stronger."

For a moment, you picture the look on Dumbledore's face were you to come back out with it affixed to your chest. "Sorry Tom, I have enough power already. Care to sweeten the pot with a second offer? Knowledge, that's better, but still not enough? I'd consider your tempting offer, but you'd want control in return. Besides, I already have enough older wizards trying to control my life. Maybe some other day, like one that doesn't end in a 'y'."

Considering the Killing Curse right there, you remind yourself that you're in an underground in a tunnel. Just because the diary and Rowena's crystal ball went quietly into the night, doesn't mean this will, remember Dumbledore's hand?

Your holly wand is upstairs where you transformed and you'd rather not use Chlotha's wand just yet, so you'll keep using this one. Even though you've already touched it, before and just now, during the mauling, you are mindful of Bill's training when dealing with dark objects – always float them and never touch them.

Heading back towards Hogwarts, you wonder whether the old man made it. Part of you would rather go it alone at this point, but you need him to help you find Helga's cup. True, you need him, but you don't have to like him. You close the wounds Mrs. Norris opened on your legs and cast a glamour over your tattered clothing. You're a politician, Potter, and as such you must keep up appearances.

Using the Rope Spell and a charm to animate it, you pull yourself back up the slide. How much damage had Dippet's portrait done? Here you were worried about the mystery that is Snape! Shit! Dumbledore might as well invite Riddle into his office. Practice your Occlumency Harry! We wouldn't want Voldemort getting in your head. It might interfere with the reports the portrait was giving him.

The last charmed rope shoots out of the passageway and sticks to the ceiling of the corridor. The charmed rope pulls you back up into the wrecked hallway, and you climb out onto the floor right at the booted feet of Severus Snape. As if the day couldn't get any worse.

His voice oozes with sarcasm. "Welcome back Mr. Potter. So, very nice to see you."

There's a time for politeness, but you're tired, injured and in no mood for this. "Fuck off Snape. Where's your nearest master?"

"Watch your tongue boy," Snape growls. You walk by him, ignoring him following the sound of Fawkes. Kwan looks at you, pulls a Blood Replenisher out and tosses it your way. Shit! Do your glammers fool anyone! You'll have to work on those glammers, but you drink the Replenisher nonetheless. Hack is looking at the dead Mrs. Norris and rubbing his jaw.

Back in the trophy room, Dumbledore, with his arm in a conjured sling and bandages wrapped around his head, is interrogating the portrait of his predecessor. McGonagall's body lies covered by a sheet, returned to her human form. You feel slightly empty. You'll never get to have the "who's the 'real' Animagus" discussion with her. Starting to get that same maudlin feeling that you did after Cedric's death, you cut it off viciously. She was a fully trained witch with a lifetime of experience. She wasn't a kid competing in a tournament that found himself in way over his head.

"I'll never betray my creator." Here you thought that Riddle needed a hobby. Apparently, he paints.

The Headmaster gestures with his wand and the echo inside the portrait screams. "Dippet! There is nowhere else for you to run," You can hear the frustration in the Headmaster's voice. "Even if there is another portrait of you, you need my permission to exit the school grounds. You *will* answer my questions." Wonder if that spell would work on good old Mrs. Black.

"You'll have to destroy me Albus. Do you have it in you?"

You interrupt, "He may not, but I do. Consider your wish granted."

Dumbledore shields your Blasting Curse sending it careening wildly into the wall. "No! It's what he wants. The echo could leave Hogwarts if this frame is destroyed. We will have your secrets Armando."

The old geezer in the painting scoffs at both you and Dumbledore. "What are you going to do? I won't talk and there is nothing short of destroying my frame that can affect me. You always did have a problem admitting that you were beaten, Albus."

"I beg to differ, old friend," The Headmaster is calm now, his studied politeness returned to his voice. "I will take you back to my office, where I have dozens of paintings of our predecessors. You are correct in thinking that 'I' cannot adversely affect you. That said, I do believe Phineas Nigellus and Madame Derwent are more than capable of loosening your tongue." Dippet's eyes seem a bit less haughty and slightly more fearful.

Its reassuring to see 'the greater good' can be applied under other circumstances. Too many times during the summer, you had written him off as a senile old fool. He isn't. Dumbledore gets others to do his dirty work for him – plausible deniability, the politician and crime lord's best friend. He puts the pieces in place and steps away to 'maintain a safe distance'. You understand how he operates now. That should help you from falling further into his web.

Dumbledore removes the damaged painting from the wall, first checking for any remaining traps and shrinks it, placing it in a small bag. You watch him cast a Silencing Charm on it before he turns back to look at you, peering through the illusions and seeing your real appearance.

"Argus did not go without a fight did he? I hope you dispatched him as painlessly as possible."

"How did you know he was dead?"

"The same pocket watch that allows me to monitor the wards also allows me to monitor the well-being of my staff. As soon as Fawkes freed me, I

was able to determine that Argus had met his end. Do you wish to talk about it?"

You hadn't considered that. How do you feel about killing Filch? You do a mental tally in your head. You've become pretty desensitized to all this. "Not really. He made his choice. I don't think he'd be crying to his master about killing us."

"You may come out now, Severus. I have secured the portrait."

Snape walks into the room. He pauses for a moment and looks at the body covered by the sheet. "Tell me what you know of the portrait," demanded Dumbledore in a much harsher tone than you expected.

"I'd rather not discuss this in front of the boy." That raises a few of your hackles, but considering the new light you're seeing the old man in, Dumbledore has reasons for all his actions.

"Indulge me Professor Snape. Harry has assured me that his mind is protected from our enemy. I have verified our privacy. We can speak as freely here as in my office."

Snape actually scowls at Dumbledore. Now there's something worth seeing! "Dippet was the Dark Lord's spy in your sanctum for years. He reported to me every night when I made my patrols. When summoned, I provided enough information to the Dark Lord to spare myself retribution and still give you the hope of defeating him."

"The portrait arrived long before you began teaching here, Severus. Do you know to whom it reported before you?"

"My guess is Kettleburn. I only learned of the portraits existence after the return of the Dark Lord, but I know it was reporting to someone during the first war."

You recall the former Care of Magical Creatures instructor. He was a rather unsavory individual.

"So Kettleburn was a Death Eater?"

"I had my suspicions, Harry. At the very least he was a sympathizer. In retrospect, it makes perfect sense. After retiring, Marcus perished on an expedition in Central Europe."

Snape looks thoughtful, "He was heading for Albania, wasn't he?"

"That would be a logical conclusion. I had heard that the group ran afoul of a pack of Vampires and dire wolves in Transylvania. At the time I mourned his passing, but it may have delayed Voldemort's return by a year. I am most disappointed that you did not tell me of the painting."

"It was regrettable, but my position required it, Headmaster. I filtered the information I was passing to an acceptable level."

No one is stopping you from asking questions, "So what kind of things were you telling him?"

"Your temper tantrum in the Headmaster's chambers after you saw something in the Pensieve. I left out the part about the remainder of the prophecy. He wished to know which Order members were on guard at the Department of Mysteries. I assure you, his attack on Arthur Weasley was intentional."

The idiotic old version of Harry Potter chooses that moment to resurface. "You could have warned him!"

"Fool! Of course, I could not! Do you honestly believe I would expose myself for a Weasley? The Dark Lord specifically wanted to kill him to send a message to you. I also did not know which night he intended to attack, but justifying my actions to a child like you serves no purpose."

Dumbledore interrupts the glaring match the two of you begin. "What have you not told him?"

"Many things. Perhaps first and foremost, that you are searching for his Horcruxes. I assume the item floating next to Potter is one of them and whatever the boy was doing in South America with Bill Weasley involved one as well. You are unlikely to be able to cover something of this magnitude up. He will know what you are up to. I suspect he already knows because of Potter's new status in Brazil."

"Assume what you need to, Severus. We will manufacture a suitable story to tell the Ministry. We shall say that Minerva was bringing the cursed necklace to Filius. She wished to do everything possible to aide in Miss Bell's recovery. Filius was not in his classroom and when she investigated it herself, the object exploded causing the devastation and the unfortunate deaths of Minerva and Argus."

It was a paper thin at best, but it had enough truth in it. Your job is to simply go along with it – a bright and shining lie. Dumbledore eventually asked Snape to assist the other professors in clearing the passageways. He did not wish for them to see her body. Kwan approaches and begins casting diagnostic charms on you.

Dumbledore starts floating the body away. You stop him while Kwan is reopening and closing one of the wounds on your leg to minimize the scars as you add healing spells to the list of things you still need to get better at. Gesturing to the Horcrux still floating in the air, you ask, "Dumbledore, what about this?"

He simply gives you a dismissive wave. "Wait until I leave and do what you need to do, Harry. I defer to your experience in safely destroying these objects. Do be careful. The elves and your troll will ensure that you are not disturbed."

"Aren't you afraid it will detonate?"

"No Harry, if it were a magical bomb, it would have already detonated and killed us. I am certain, Mr. Kwan is perfectly capable of shielding you and to be honest, I'd rather not watch you cast a killing curse. It would be yet another reminder of how I have failed to prevent the desperate times we now live in. I will send for you when the Minister arrives, be certain to cast enough spells to clear the residue of that spell from your wand. I would recommend vanishing debris and using cleaning charms on the floors and walls." Again, he delegates the dirty work and somehow tries to make you feel guilty, damn he's good!

The two of you watch the "champion of the light" walk off. Kwan turns back to you. "Only difference between Light and Dark is the Light one says he doesn't like what he is doing, but does it anyway."

You quip as he finishes closing your wound, "Just says he doesn't like it?"

"Accomplished liars, they save their greatest lies for themselves." Kwan's always good for a pithy saying or two.

Kwan conjures a pedestal to put the Horcrux on and begins working on a solid barrier constructed of rubble and reinforced with his magic. Five minutes pass before he declares the barrier satisfactory. There's a chunk of Tom Riddle's soul that needs to be destroyed.

You search your heart for hatred, loathing, and anger to fuel the spell. Not surprisingly, there's more than enough. "*Avada Kedavra!*" The green ray of light leaves your wand and you crouch behind the shield Kwan prepared for you. Riddle's Special Service Award shatters into thousands of tiny wooden needles, most of them heading for you. They impact on Kwan's barrier and fall uselessly to the ground. Kwan leaps around the corner and begins vanishing them as they start to rise like a swarm of insects in a bad cartoon.

"Your curse was strong enough to destroy it." Kwan observes.

"Yeah, thanks." You almost gave a cheeky answer back but you do feel more than a little sickly after casting it.

"It wasn't a compliment. Don't grow fond of that curse." The Korean says darkly. "Get rest, tomorrow we start training again. Used Pensieve to watch you fight against dark wizard at airport – your footwork is slow, sloppy and you fight unbalanced. People think everything is about arm movements and stupid words. You need more practice dodging."

The sadist walks off leaving you to clean the residue of the Killing Curse from your wand. You know what his dodging exercises are like, you with no wand, while he mercilessly casts spells at you. Tomorrow doesn't promise to be a good day.

A scorched piece of engraved metal with the name Tom Riddle is all that remains of his Horcrux. You inspect it with several diagnostic spells, but it shows no signs of active magic and only trace amounts of dark magic. You wrap it in cloth and carry it away.

You relax in your bed working your way through Veras Chilotha's personal grimoire. It's decidedly darker than most anything your copy of Golinard's Field Cursebreaking Manual has to offer. It's slow going, especially given how he wrote most of his notes in Toltec. Essentially, it is about warding to kill and very light on shields. In fact, some of his schemes employed a false shield designed solely to absorb a spell and become the trigger to a much larger attack. Shields as triggers, it's an intriguing concept; you'd have to ask Bill for his take on it. If Chilotha had been smarter and warded the Gringott's branch after possessing Collins, you probably wouldn't have won. It's nice that people continue to underestimate you. Sadly, you know it can't last.

Dumbledore is obviously trying to impress you with your accommodations. The room is very nice, rivaling the splendor of the rooms at the Colastos estate, with only a slightly less badass bathtub, which took some of the edge off your bruises. It is as much as an upgrade from the Gryffindor dorms, as the dorms were an upgrade from the smallest bedroom on Privet Drive. On the wall is a frame for Phineas Nigellus. You told him in no uncertain terms that unless he is coming to deliver a message from Dumbledore, that you didn't want to ever see him in this room.

Dobby brought you a hot meal as soon as you exited the tub and was overjoyed to see you. Perhaps, just a little bit too overjoyed to see you, but still, it's good to see the little elf. You still need to find your owl and your broom.

Fleur and Bill are across the hall. Kwan's room is next to theirs. In the heavily modified room to your right is Hack, resting from numerous cuts and bruises from his fight with the enchanted suits of armor and the furniture golem. The room to your left with a connecting door leads to the Head Girl's suite. The reason you know this is she just came into your room through that door wearing a pair of oversized flannel pajamas.

She looks like she's been crying and now she wants to talk. It makes you wonder if you can stupefy yourself in the next few seconds before she opens her mouth.

"Harry? Is it true? Is Professor McGonagall really dead?" Too late, now stunning yourself would just be plain rude. You could always stun her...

Yes.” No sense in sugar coating it.

She sobs a bit more and sits uninvited on the edge of your bed. In a decidedly ironic twist, you consider telling her that you’re studying and to leave you alone. Toltec translations are hard enough without some sobbing bint distracting you! Sighing, you set the book aside. She must be really distraught to not even look at the books on your nightstand.

Giving credit where it is due, Hermione tried to comfort you when Sirius first died and she probably just lost her idol. You should be a bit more accommodating, even if her comfort was poor at best. “If it makes any difference, I don’t think she suffered very long.”

Hermione looks up at you, tears running down her cheeks. “How did it happen? Was it the Killing Curse? No, I don’t want to know!” She’s becoming hysterical. You start to move, but keep the covers around you. No sense in showing her that you sleep in the nude – all part of your master plan to keep Riddle out of your dreams. Unless, he also happens to be an extremely rare Jaguar Animagus, he’ll probably be confused and perhaps even assaulted by what he sees should he attempt a mental intrusion. The clothes would change with you, but this somehow feels more comfortable.

Shows a level of maturity on your part, you’re starkers under the covers with an emotionally troubled girl on the bed and you’re not thinking of making a move on her. You could only imagine what Skeeter would do with this scene.

You should probably say something. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“She was the one to come to my house and explain the Wizarding World to me... She even did her transformation for my parents... They were so very impressed.” Hermione lets loose with an undignified snort and you conjure a tissue for her. She starts to use it but then stops and looks at it for a second before blowing her nose.

“That’s was a very nice Conjuraton, Harry.” she says as you Vanish it. Like Transfiguration, the more power, competency, and practice you put into your wandwork, the better your results will be. Nothing like life in the jungle to get you adjusted to a life of conjuring and vanishing paper-based products. Yours even has a nice little HJP monogram on one corner and tiny jaguars on the other three corners.

She prattles on about Professor McGonagall for another fifteen minutes. Here you thought she had a serious Dumbledore fixation! You continue to offer inane platitudes and distract yourself with runic translations in your head. There’s this one set of Mayan runes that no one ever figured out. These three runes are found near several of their sites. It could be something very important or it could be the signature rune of a Breaker that lived a long time ago. Either way, they are rather pretty patterns and do absolutely nothing except glow softly when connected to a charging rune and a controller rune.

Bill has a unique way of learning runes. In his mind he translates first into Norse, then to Celtic and from there he will translate into Egyptian – Breaking is generally a regional thing. You are truly the sum of your experiences. Right now, if one were to assess the Breaking style of one Harry James Potter, they would find you’re pretty much a straightforward Norse rune crafter with a dash of South American influences.

Wait just a damn second, what did Hermione just say? “I’m sorry could you repeat that?”

“I said, ‘That I’ll do it.’ I’ll sleep with you. The castle obviously isn’t safe. We need all the protection we can get and if this will help strengthen the wards then we should do it.” The underweight witch looks up from her limp messy, brown hair, red-faced from crying, and with a snot bubble in one nostril. Who in their right mind wouldn’t want some of that!

Oh hell! You said that to get a rise out of her and Dumbledore. Now here she is agreeing to shag.

“Harry, say something.”

“No.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I meant that I don’t want to sleep with you.”

“But the wards, your oath...”

“Charged just fine at Privet drive and I didn’t particularly care for the Dursleys. We’ll give them a few days of us being in proximity before we do something drastic. Tonight’s attack was internal rather than external. The wards wouldn’t have done a damn thing!”

She looks confused, “Why did you say that to Professor Dumbledore?”

“Because I could! He needs to be reminded who he’s screwing over. You need to wake up, Hermione or he’ll use you again the next time he needs a willing dupe. Hell, by the end of the conversation, he was probably already thinking whether or not you’d need a love potion to get you in the right frame of mind.”

She starts to protest, but then shuts her mouth. “You’re not going to forgive me for my part in this are you?”

“Why should I?”

She appears hurt at first and then slightly angry. “You say the Headmaster manipulated me and I have apologized for going along with it. Maybe I wasn’t worldly enough to prevent getting tricked by the Headmaster, so you’re going to hold that against me. Even with your suspicions, he was able to trick you into that oath. I’m asking for your forgiveness.”

“He got me with the oath because he knows I need him. I need his help finding Helga’s cup. I already know where the other remaining one is. I could also use his help fighting Riddle. Unless he Obliviated you, you know the prophecy, so he needs me to kill his Dark Lord.”

Hermione shrinks slightly at the implication that Dumbledore would Oblivate her. Was she up in the office when he casually said he’d have done it because you mentioned Horcruxes to her? Now you know why Snape is always calling students Dunderheads.

“How can you be certain that he’s never Obliviated you before? He mentioned that he would let you keep the information on Horcruxes. Could that mean he didn’t let you keep other things?”

She’s pretty stunned by your accusations. You’ve no proof of this, but since when does anything in the wizarding world require proof?

“I want to help you, Harry. That’s all I’ve ever wanted. I made a bad choice and listened to the Headmaster. Please forgive me.”

You shake your head at her. “What would have happened if you and the Weasleys recaptured me? Go ahead say it. I’d have been Obliviated again and fed even more love potions. Then, when Dumbledore finally discovered what happened, what would he have done if he found me chasing after the wrong girl and messing with his precious schemes?”

“You’re right. What can I do to regain your trust?”

“Well, don’t hold your breath. It’s not going to happen overnight. We’ll be civil to each other, but let’s not rush into anything.”

“You can’t turn your back on five years of friendship!” she screeches.

“Why not? You did it before me. Don’t! Don’t bother saying you were just trying to help. What’s the old adage, ‘The road to hell’? I’m not saying we won’t ever be friends again. I’m just not in the mood to give out any free passes. Sorry, it doesn’t work that way. You’re going to have to earn my respect and right now you don’t have any.”

She turns away from you and does the crying thing for a minute. You don’t bother with any consolations. What would you say? You’re sorry that she betrayed you and you don’t plan on forgiving her anytime soon. Maybe you should just shag her to shut her up. Bill keeps saying that there is no such thing as bad sex, but you suspect this might be the exception to that rule.

You turn your thoughts to something more useful, “Hermione, you said that you wanted to help me. Instead of worrying about whether we’re friends or not, we’ll start with what you are planning to do to help me in the war. Since, we’re going to be around each other, it might as well be productive.”

She snorts a few times, “I was thinking of ways to help you fight Voldemort.” Fortunately, most Muggleborns find odd with the whole “not-speaking-his-name” thing.

“Go on,” you say. She’s naïve, but she is intelligent. Give her a chance before you dismiss what she has in mind.

“Well, with enough practice and training, I think by the end of the year we can become Animagi. It’ll be harder now that Professor McGonagall is ... gone, but if we apply ourselves it can happen. I already have three books on the subject and I am outlining the major differences between the three approaches. I’ve made notes and a chart with milestones on it. Hopefully, you’ll end up with a form that you can use for a quick escape. You’ll also need to learn how to Apparate as soon as possible.”

Your hopes of something interesting fade. It’s tempting to take off your Jaguar totem and see if she gets any reaction at all from touching it. Somehow, you doubt it. You fake a smile and try to show some enthusiasm for her ideas. No need to burst her little bubble today. She agrees to do her homework quietly in the same room with you for your time together, and then heads off to her suite.

You flex your paws from a good night’s rest. Sleeping in your Jaguar form has some benefits, nice benefits. The body feels much more natural and is easier to get into a comfortable position. Monday morning at Hogwarts, you wonder what class you are supposed to attend or should you wait for the Minister to come.

Transforming, you dress in nice but plain robes. Exiting the visitor’s quarters, you opt to go to breakfast. There’s someone sitting on the floor at the end of the hallway quietly singing to herself. Radishes for earrings are such an environmentally friendly choice.

“Hello Luna,” you say approaching her.

She smiles upon seeing you and stands. “Hello Harry. I’m sorry to hear about Professor McGonagall. Are you okay?”

“I’ve been better. Then again, I’ve been worse.” It’s rather refreshing to see someone with your best interests at heart.

“Would it hurt if I gave you a hug?”

It depends on if you squeeze a bruise, but go ahead and try and we'll see what happens." In a way, it is fresh and innocent. Karina was brash, desperate to save her son, and rather seductive. Amy was just plain naughty and you might add extremely flexible. Lauren was straightforward and intensely emotional.

She wraps her arms around you. Luna's very guarded and seems overly nervous. Your correspondence relationship was turbulent at times, but on the whole it was very rewarding. She's young, secretive, and insecure. You have some doubts whether anything will actually work between the two of you, but it's worth a try. Putting your own arms around her lithe body, you pull her tightly to you. Her size basically allows you to put your face in her hair. She uses a vanilla shampoo, but the scent is overpowered by the vegetation she wears as jewelry and the corks from the butterbeer bottles.

Ten or fifteen seconds later, the two of you separate. Her fair complexion makes her blush all too easy to spot. Whether she knows it or not, she's helping you forget the horrors of last night. You ripped a man to pieces with claws and teeth. It's not the first time and you're fairly certain it won't be the last. Every "true" Animagus must decide one thing for themselves, are you more than human, or less than human? The Daemonic attributes of your jaguar form are troubling, but you play the cards dealt to you, even if Dumbledore is trying to stack the deck.

A clearing throat interrupts the two of you and you turn to see the wanton beauty that is Fleur Delacour. She gives you a hug and a chaste peck on both cheeks. "Welcome back Harry. It does my heart good to see you again."

"How is Bill?" Why is it anytime you're around an interested female and Fleur at the same time that you end up feeling like you just got caught doing something?

She breezes past you and answers. "He still sleeps. I am angered that he chose to have a pain blocking spell rather than immediately see a healer, but I understand his reasons for that choice. I will reprimand him suitably. For now, I am off to fill myself with one of these fattening English breakfasts so that I will have extra energy with which to properly reprimand William."

One thing you've learned about a Veela in love is that damn near everything coming out of her mouth is a euphemism for sex. Too bad Dumbledore can't hire her to teach History of Magic; at least the male population would stay awake in class.

"Don't you want to know what happened last night?"

Fleur smiles, "Yes, but you will tell William when he wakes. I will be there. I can assume that since the castle is not in flames that we are safe for the moment. Besides, you wish to speak with this young lady and not me." You recall Luna's letter where Fleur implied that she would marry Bill and take you for a lover until Gabrielle was ready for you, if Luna did not remove her head from her arse. If Luna was not here, it would be tempting to mention it, but since she is, it would be rather rude.

Two other people are approaching. It looks like alone time might not be coming anytime soon. You recognize Charlie Weasley followed by Cho Chang. He's holding something near and dear to your heart – a Firebolt high performance racing broom. He greets his future sister-in-law with an affable hug and receives a kiss on his cheek.

"Good morning, Harry. I believe this belongs to you. I'd be lying if I said I didn't ride it, but I did my best to keep it in excellent shape." He hands you the broom and you inspect it. It is in excellent shape. You nod and ask Luna to hold it.

She smiles with her faux-dreamy look on her face and begins to sweep with it. The shock on Charlie's and Cho's faces at seeing her do this mirrors your own – a top of the line racing broom being used to chase dust bunnies around the stone floors. You could sooner picture Uncle Vernon being asked to haul a load of manure in the back of his BMW. After a moment, she stops and looks puzzled. "The bristles are too close together. I'm afraid that it's not a very good broom."

Trying your best to not to laugh at Luna and ignore her at the same time, you look at the second oldest and stockiest Weasley. "So, Charlie, what have I been up to? Good to see you again, Cho."

"Not much until the past few days. Rumor has it that it wasn't a very good deception. Now that the cat's out of the bag, I can go back to being me."

The other Ravenclaw in the hallway mutters, "I don't know, it worked on quite a few people."

A momentary look of hurt crosses Charlie's face. "Cho and I are off to have a long overdue talk. When Bill wakes up, I'll have him set me straight about what's really going on. Here's your course schedule. Some elf named Dobby should have brought all your books to your room. I'm just glad you weren't taking Arithmancy! I don't know what you and Professor Dumbledore agreed on, but you normally have Defense and Potions today."

You thank Charlie and nod to Cho as the two of them head off. The age difference is actually less than the one between Bill and Fleur, but it still seems rather odd. If you followed these things, it'd make you curious if they were going to last. Unfortunately, you have other problems and other things to worry about.

Turning to Luna, you extend your hand. She looks impish as she hands you your high performance floor cleaner.

"Wait here," you instruct her.

You walk back into your room, pull the Dragonfly out of its case and bring it back out to her.

"This broom saved my life several times out in the jungle. It's almost as important to me as my Firebolt. I want you to have it. It's only about as fast as the newer Cleansweeps, but it's very maneuverable. I out flew two dragons on this thing."

If possible, her eyes get even wider. “Thank you, Harry. I don’t know what to say.” She’s gobsmacked.

Luna deserve a little cheek for that stunt with you broom. “Just think of me every time you put it between your legs. Now, I need some breakfast. Are you coming?”

It’s nice to see Luna Lovegood speechless.

The Minister had already come and gone. Dumbledore informed you at breakfast that he had dealt with Scrimgeour without dragging you into it. You wonder what repercussions will come out of that meeting. Dumbledore doesn’t look happy, but as always, he fails to offer any further details. A remembrance ceremony for the brave Professor McGonagall and caretaker Filch was announced for this coming Saturday. You wouldn’t be able to attend. That night you would be playing politician at the Brazilian Embassy. Most surprisingly, classes had not been cancelled except for Transfiguration. The explanation that Professor McGonagall would not have wanted classes cancelled under any circumstances was believable to all the sheep here.

You turn more than a few heads eating with Luna at the Ravenclaw table. Additionally, you aren’t wearing Hogwarts robes either, just a simple set of black robes. Ron enters holding hands with Lavender Brown. He drags her over towards you with a big goofy smile on his face.

“Hey Harry. Bloody good to have you back!”

“Ron, Lavender,” you offer in a neutral, but less than friendly voice.

He looks a bit confused. “What’s with the shirty... oh, wait! You probably think I was part of all this, don’t you?”

“Well, I wouldn’t know now would I? That Quidditch Captain badge looks mighty nice on you. I’m trying to figure out which of you is the bigger sell out.”

“Come on Harry, let me explain! You don’t have all the facts.”

“I’m eating breakfast with a real friend.” Noticing more than a few Ravenclaws staring, you respond, “Go away, Weasley. You’re annoying me.”

Luna stops juggling her three rolls, dips one in the dollop of jam she has on her plate and takes a bite. “Good morning, Ronald, does Millicent know about your relationship with Lavender?”

Now he looks even more confused. “What? I don’t know, why?”

She returns to juggling again and answers, “The nargles all over the castle are whispering about your torrid affair with Millicent. I’m surprised that she isn’t the jealous type.”

An eavesdropping Terry Boot spews his milk all over his girlfriend, Mandy Brocklehurst, upon hearing that statement. As Ron sputters a denial, Luna turns to Terry and asks him if he is afflicted with Blofniar’s syndrome. According to her, it causes people to randomly expel white fluid from all parts of his body. Now everyone except Terry and Mandy is howling with laughter. It continues when Luna says that a ceremony involving a live sheep could be used to cure this affliction.

The entertainment ends when the head girl comes over to get you. You detect a bit of tension between Hermione and Ron. Considering he’s dating Lavender, it’s not surprising. As she leads you back to the visitor’s wing, she explains that the house elves have brought a problem to her attention and she seems to believe that you should solve it.

“I think it’s fashionable.” You don’t really, but being around Luna brings out your humorous side and she would definitely get a kick out of this.

“Harry! You can’t let your troll wear Mrs. Norris as a pelt! It’s disgusting!”

“Everyone hated her and you know it.”

“That’s not the point! It’s...it’s bloody sick!”

It’s tempting to say something about her language, but she’s already spun up enough. The smell coming from Hack’s room was your first clue. Well, really it was your second clue. The engorged pelt of that wretched beast strapped across his three meter tall frame was your first clue. He looks rather proud of himself and you’ve got to admit it has a sense of style. You wonder what the local female mountain trolls would think.

“Hack likes.”

Hermione is ready to explode; perhaps you should throw her a bone. “Buddy, don’t you need to let the skin dry and cure a few days before you try and wear it?”

“Hack wondered why it felt all sticky.”

“Oh God! I think I’m going to be sick!” Hermione runs off as Hack eyes Crookshanks appreciatively, no doubt wondering if the furball would make a warmer coat for those less formal occasions where Mrs. Norris’s color would be out of place. The cat hisses at him and runs after his mistress.

In the end, it takes about thirty minutes to get Hack to take off Mrs. Norris, tell him to take a bath, and convince the house elves to dispose of the

carcass and take the pelt to Hagrid for drying and tanning. Magic could probably do it faster, but you've bought yourself a week or so, before Hack will put it on and start terrifying the student body.

All said and done, you're about fifteen minutes late for your first day with Professor Snape.

"You're late, Potter. Five points ..."

"From the sovereign nation of Brazil? I'll be sure to let them know." You finish for him. Technically, you're no longer a Gryffindor.

"I see your time away from us has done nothing to diminish your bloated ego. Sit down."

Looking around the room, you see Hermione and Ron anxiously looking at you from the front of the room. You choose instead to sit next to Parvati in the back row. The Gryffs in general look a bit downtrodden, no doubt still coming to grips with the loss of McGonagall. Honestly, Sanchez and Thundercloud's deaths hit you harder, but your former housemates are just kids. They don't know what it's like.

"Hello, Harry."

Snape pounces, "Five points from Gryffindor Miss Patil. Socialize on your own time and not during my lesson!" Who didn't see that coming?

Parvati frowns and glares at her book. You on the other hand paste a stupid grin on your face and stare back at Snape. Every time he starts to probe you, you break eye contact, wait ten seconds and start staring at him again. This game goes on for a minute before you raise your hand?

"Yes Potter."

"Is the lesson going to start? If not, I have other things I could be doing."

It's Snape's turn to glare at you. One row ahead, Dean experiences a coughing fit that sounds oddly like a chuckle being covered by said coughing fit. Maybe you can lighten the mood for your former housemates?

"Since Mr. Potter is behind in his coursework, a brief review is in order. Perhaps you would be so kind as to tell me the defining characteristics of an Inferius?"

You almost laugh behind that fake grin. Of all the questions he could have asked you! "Well let's see, at close range they have dull, pasty complexions. The flesh lacks any real color. Without the talking and in poor light, they'd look a bit like you."

Seamus seems to have caught Dean's condition. With the infirmary still damaged, this could be a problem if it is some kind of outbreak.

Snape wrangles in his emotions that threaten to boil over and isn't playing anymore. His calm demeanor and patently annoyed sneer return, "How very droll, Mr. Potter. Pity this isn't Potions. I could ask you how to identify various love potions or we could have a charms discussion about the proper usage of glamour spells, but I digress. So now that you have identified an Inferius, do tell us what you plan on doing?"

You let the love potion barb slide, since you're fairly certain who the brewer was and as much as you'd like to dispute it, your glammers suck. "I suppose it would depend on the context that I am encountering this Inferius in. Do I spot it in the middle of Hogsmeade? In a forest? On the Quidditch Pitch? In the ruins of a temple?"

"Don't stall, Mr. Potter. You're supposedly a Journeyman Curse Breaker now. Surely, you know how to deal with such a minor Dark Creature. Prove to me you earned that title and that it wasn't a gift! Answer the question."

"Okay, without a context, I'll try to cover all the bases. If I'm in Hogsmeade, I'll summon the Aurors and use conjured ropes on it. Who knows why there's a zombie roaming around the town? If there's more than one of them and I have my broom, I'll get safely beyond there reach and decide what to do from there. If there was one here in Hogwarts, it means the wards have collapsed and we have much more pressing problems than a single Inferius...."

"I'll speak slowly and use smaller words so you can understand, Potter. How do you combat an Inferius?"

"Oh, I have to fight one, okay. Reductors or cutting curses to the head area."

"Wrong! As always, you miss the obvious. Mr. Malfoy. What would you do?"

"I would use fire to drive them back." The smug little ferret shoots you a condescending look from across the room. You roll your eyes and raise your hand.

"Correct. Five points to Slytherin. Yes Potter? Did the simplest answer confuse you?"

"That really isn't fighting an Inferius. My method disposes of it. His merely drives it off making it either someone else's problem or forcing you to stand there maintaining a wall of flame until you exhaust yourself. Then it comes up and starts gnawing on you. Not to mention if the Inferius is defending something, that stunt is liable to get you killed." You shudder remembering your own version of the Temple of Doom. Bill's still trying to figure out how that serpent ward works.

"Explain, Potter. Tell us how using such a proven method is incorrect." He's actually asking the question and not hurling an insult.

Well there are two types of Inferius, ones created with potions and ones created by wards. The wards are the easiest, but can only be used to defend a specific area. The ones created with potions cost too much per unit to use as defenders. So, if I'm attacking someone's lair and they're using Inferi to protect it, fire is a bad idea. It's the first thing most people would use. Whoever put them there knows that. There could be flame-sensitive traps. The floor could be coated with flammable liquid or you could have deposits of methane to deal with. Again, it's all about the context. Fire against attacking Inferi isn't a bad thing, but against defending Inferi, it's about the most dunderheaded thing you could do. Still, I guess the people coming after you will thank you for exploding in a blaze of glory and saving them the trouble of dealing with those things. The key is to prevent them from overwhelming you. Their strength is in numbers. Most can't fly, so get above them. If you can't, make barriers and force them to come at you single file."

You finish your statement to utter silence. Damn! You didn't even get to mention the shotgun. Everyone except Snape is staring at you like you've grown a second head. That part about most not being able to fly probably threw them for a loop. Everyone always thinks of them as dead humans, but anything will work. You could cast the Inferius wards down in the Chamber and see how many it takes to reanimate Salazaar's serpent. You wonder if Bill would help. It'd be one nasty surprise for Riddle if he has a secret entrance down there. Either that or you should ward the passageway up from the chamber – Field of Screams serving as a trigger to Purple Armageddon. If you had the plants grow down from the ceiling or out from the walls, they'd be biting at heads instead of legs – oh the possibilities!

"A surprisingly insightful answer Potter, perhaps you've finally learned to listen to your betters. Though, I'd be skeptical about placing my life in your less than capable hands." He stops for a second to leave that insult hanging before continuing. "Today's lesson is a continuation of wordless magic for those of you still not able to comprehend it. Potter! What are you doing?"

"Leaving." It's utterly amazing how much being in life or death situations can push your limits.

"Why?"

In response, you wordlessly cast an opening charm on the door and exit. If anyone wants a tutor, you'll send them to Kwan for his thrilling three day crash course. Naturally, you'll advise them to finish it in two days, or else.

Either way, you should go find the Korean and introduce him to the Room of Requirements. Instead of wasting a morning watching people fail at wordless magic, you should be training, carving, and preparing. Your first few days back at Hogwarts have left you with a nervous energy. You don't have enough allies and there are too many people you simply can't trust. It's going to get a lot worse before things get any better.

Turn Me Loose: A Harry Potter Adventure I Gotta Do It My Way

Chapter 4 – I Gotta Do It My Way

Monday October 14th, 1996

You limp down the passageway away from the Room of Requirement. Kwan's bludgeoner left a grapefruit-sized bruise on your thigh. He wasn't very appreciative of the Switching spell that moved his moustache to where his eyebrows were. Perhaps some time in the future the Fu Manchu unibrow will have its day! However, it won't be this day. Sadly, you were laughing too hard to successfully dodge his return fire.

It's worth the pain to be able to show that image in a Pensieve to Bill.

People always say that it is better to give than receive. The same advice applies to Kwan. It's far better to give punishment than receive. Fortunately, you're getting better at giving, but you're still receiving far too much.

Ron's standing in the corridor. He's got the Marauder's Map in his hand. You'd been wondering where it was. Great, now you can add a pain in your arse to the one in your leg.

"Hello again, Ron. Come to return my property?"

"I figured you were in there when you didn't show up on the map. You're lucky to be able to get in there. After classes let out for the day, there's usually a line of people waiting to use it."

"Five points to Gryffindor for your mastery of the obvious."

"Are you going to shut up and listen to me for a minute? I already said I didn't know what was going on until after you left. You want to be mad at me, fine. At least let me have my say first."

"Sure. Your family's taken my money, my house, and my memories. What're a few minutes of my time?"

"No need to get shirt. Look, about this summer..." The two of you are interrupted by several students heading for the Room of Requirement and looking pleased that no one is using it.

"Bloody hell, Ron! You really think I give a shit about the summer any more?"

"It might not be important to you, but it is to me."

You really don't want to hear this. Not right now. All you want is to hobble down, get some lunch and go sit in Potions class and pretend to care. Still, if you don't listen to him now, he'll only build up a head of steam and get stupid in public. "I'll walk. You can talk along the way."

He finally notices your limp. "Sure you don't want to go have that looked at first?"

"No. I'll use a Numbing charm before Potions. Until then, it'll remind me to move faster next time. So what's your story? Last thing I recall was listening to Hermione tell Ginny about your big blowup about how she and I were supposedly dating."

"Well, yeah, I was jealous. I'm a prat. You know what I'm like. I didn't know about the potions at first. When I learned about it I was a bit angry, but I lost it the first time they Obliviated you."

"Who did it?"

Ron doesn't answer for a second and looks down. Finally, he mutters, "Mum. I couldn't believe it when she did it."

"Why did that set you off?"

"You saw Lockhart in that ward. He was going to do that to us. Mum's not a professional Obliviator; she could have really injured you! The potions were one thing, but that's just not right!"

You snap back, "So mind control with potions is okay? How's that any better than Imperius?"

Yeah, Hermione said the same thing. I guess it's one of those things you get used to being raised in the magical world. Love potions never last. People build up a resistance after a time. The weak ones are just used by people to generate some interest, like giving a girl flowers or chocolate. Only the hardcore ones which really bewitch a person are taboo. Hell, Fred and George sell the mild ones in their shop."

The world must be going crazy! Ron Weasley is giving a philosophical argument on the differences between the Muggle and Magical cultures. Quick, someone check the temperature in hell, because it has got to be getting chilly down there!

"Okay, suppose Pansy slipped me one and I stupidly followed her until she could turn me over to her Death Eater parents?"

"She'd have to use a real strong one to do that. If you take something that Pansy gives to you, you deserve what you get. Unless Pansy is what gets you going?" He actually has the nerve to smile while saying that.

You want to smile at his attempted joke, but that isn't going to happen. "Not likely! Fine, I get it. Weak love potions are okay in most people's books. How about stealing people's money and going to Quidditch camp?"

"They'd already signed me up and paid to get me out of the way. Dad told me that Dumbledore didn't really want to include me. I guess they expected I'd bollocks things up, or figure out that something wasn't right."

"So your dad was in on it too." You're not surprised, just more disappointed than anything.

Ron pauses for a second and a look crosses his face that you usually associate with him getting a taste of something he didn't like. "Yeah. Never thought I'd be comparing my parents to the Malfoys, but it happened. Either way, take your pick; they didn't want me around you. I guess what no one expected was you reacting to the potions that fast. Maybe Snape spiced them up or you always had a thing for Hermione."

"I might have, but not any more. Supposedly, I acted more 'normal,' if that's the word, around Ginny, but I don't really care."

"Anyway, I didn't know they were using your money to send me until after I got back. If you want it back, just say the word."

You know Quidditch camp runs over a hundred galleons and raise one eye questioningly at him.

"Sirius set up a vault for me and one for Hermione. My parents are holding the key until I turn seventeen, but they've been trying to nice to me. So far the only thing I bought, other than my school supplies, was a better set of Keeper pads. I won't say the money isn't nice, but I'd rather be your friend."

Money isn't really something you need, but given how much of it you really have a hundred galleons is chump change. You grimace having to negotiate the stairwell on your injured leg. "I don't need the money back. As for being friends again, only time will tell. Actions mean more than words. I'll tell you the same thing I told Hermione. My friendship is earned these days, not given."

"Fair enough. I reckon that I'd be suspicious too."

"So, how was Quidditch camp? Everything you'd hoped for?"

Ron accepts your changing the topic, "Camp was pretty good. I'd have enjoyed it more if my parents hadn't told the camp I wasn't allowed to use the Floo. They thought I was homesick or something, when I was really trying to contact you."

"Really?" There's a hint of a drawl in your voice.

"Yeah, really. My dad redirected owls coming to the Burrow to Fred and George's store. I got back a day or two before you escaped, but I was confined to Fred and George's flat. My own bloody brothers holding me prisoner! They even made me a taste tester for their Wheezes, since I was their captive audience. After you escaped, they let me go back home. I told my parents what I thought of them and went to Charlie's before they dragged me off to Sirius' house for the rest of the summer."

"What about you and Hermione?"

"She came over to Charlie's a few times and we tried it as a couple, but it wasn't working. We went to Florean's and she caught me eyeing up a pretty bird and next thing I know we were rowing again. That was one of the 'good' dates."

Somehow, this soap opera has you drawn in. It's amusing to imagine what the "bad" dates went like. "What happened then?"

"We had it out the second day at the headquarters. She started saying I had issues with my mum or some kind of mental crap she came up with. I told her that you were the lucky one, because at least you wouldn't remember being her boyfriend."

Despite yourself, you laugh. Ron being a prat is easy to be mad at. Ron joking around and being his thick self isn't. Reminding yourself that you're supposed to be angry at him, you observe, "I can see you giving up being a Prefect; you don't like the work. You kept the Quidditch Captaincy, though."

"I didn't earn being a Prefect. It should've been you all along. I just wanted to be near Hermione last year, but hey, I live and breathe Quidditch. It's probably the one thing I've really worked for since I've been here. Katie didn't want it with her NEWTS. Charlie didn't think it was fair that he would be playing as you, much less being the Captain of the team. Ginny's a decent player, but she's just likes playing the game. That left me or the Beaters, and they stink!"

"You aren't exactly a great Keeper."

He looked a bit hurt. "I'm not in Wood's league, but I've gotten a lot better. Lavender said I just needed a confidence boost."

"Lavender, huh?"

"Yeah, turns out the girl is nutters about me, go figure. She caught up to me on the way back from our first practice and dragged me into a greenhouse. I swear she snogged the magic right out of me! If only she wouldn't call me 'Won-Won,' but I can put up with it."

"Won-Won?" Now that's funny!

"Well, she can't call me that if I have my tongue down her throat."

You had to concede that point. There's a minute or two of silence before he says, "So are we okay?"

"Maybe. We'll see. For now, I'll accept you at your word. A lot of people have lied to me. You could be lying to me right now. More importantly, I've got bigger problems than mending friendships right now. I've got a war to fight. I don't really have time for Quidditch or girlfriends. The jungle changed me. I'm not the same Harry Potter anymore. If you ask me who my best mate is, it's Bill. I'm a Curse Breaker and an Ambassador from Brazil."

"You've got to tell me the story behind that!"

It's a painful reminder that while Ron's apparently growing up, he's still a teenager. "Even if I could, right now I wouldn't. You don't know Occlumency and someone could kidnap you and rip it right out of your mind."

"Oh. I guess that makes sense."

"As much as anything does these days. Wait a second; I think I've learned my lesson for today. Let me do a numbing charm real fast." Pain can teach lessons, but this lesson has run its course.

"Where'd you pick that one up?"

"Kwan. The wandwork is a bit trickier, but it last twice as long as the ones they teach around here."

"Show me sometime. You know how it is on the pitch. It'll come in handy for practice."

"Yeah, sure. Catch me after Potions. How is this Slughorn guy anyway?"

Ron shrugs, "Think Lockhart with real talent. You get the lesson, but have to listen to him go on about all the people he's taught this potion to, irritating, but better than Snape any day."

Ron's a horrible liar. He's either telling the truth, or had his memory modified to think he's telling the truth. Funny, you would have never considered the last option a few months ago.

"Come on let's grab some food."

He hands you the folded up map back. "Mind sitting with Lavender?"

"Is she going to call you Won-Won?"

"Probably."

"In that case, lead on. I gotta hear this."

You sit with Ron and Hermione during Potions. The not-so-Golden Trio reunited. Let the good times roll! She gets this hopeful look on her face and you make a point looking away from her. There're no trust issues here, nosiree! It's mainly because you have no intention of trusting your life to either of these two ever again. That's what you have Bill, Kwan, Hack, and, to a lesser extent, Fleur for. Right now, you can see yourself possibly befriendng Ron again. Hermione, you're working your way up to tolerating her presence.

You're decent at Potions, but Snape spoiled your taste for it. Besides, the potions most likely to be found with a Curse Breaker are of the healing variety. Potions don't break wards, but they help keep the person that does break the wards on their feet.

You thumb through your book looking at the material you've missed. Kwan's intentionally explosive concoctions are far more interesting than working in a Potions lab. It's doubtful that any of the hitwizard's brews are on the curriculum.

Ron nudges you and you respond, "Yes, Won-Won."

He rolls his eyes at you, "Hey, check this out. I got lucky the first day and got an old book by this Half-blood Prince bloke, who's some kind of bloody genius! Normally, I hate second hand stuff. Most of my books belonged to Charlie and he doodled all over the place. Whoever this guy was he didn't mess around."

Hermione bristles from his other side, "As I have told Ronald on several occasions, following someone's handwritten instructions is a recipe for disaster! There's no way for him to know how much testing this person did. What if the person's recipes only work because he used fresh doxy wings instead of ones that have aged in a cabinet?"

She's obviously had no luck changing Ron's mind, so she's rehashing this to score points with you. Ron stares at her for a moment and turns back to you, "Anyway, my potions have been coming out great ever since I started using his recipes. She's just mad that I finish my potions before her now. Lav actually has me checking over her assignments now."

It's almost like you've never left. Perhaps some things never really change.

"I most certainly am not! Using someone else's shortcuts does not make you a good student. Your girlfriend might as well have a flobberworm checking over her work. You don't understand why this person changes the stirring rate or alters the temperature on the cauldron. Maybe if you could grasp the underlying principles..."

Yeah. Funbags is really spun up about this. Ron actually starts ignoring her as Slughorn calls attention to the class. If they were acting, they were giving an award winning performance! Ron whispers his final thought as the lecture begins. "Anyway, if I had followed them off the bat, I would have won this really cool potion on the first day of class. Now, I follow it all the time. Blimey, I wish this guy taught the class!"

The obese man looks at you with a smile that seems to dip down to his third chin. "Ah, Ambassador Potter! It's so nice to see you again. Welcome, welcome to the class. Oddly enough, this isn't the first time I've had the honor of teaching a high ranking diplomat. If you find yourself behind on any of the topics, my door is always open to you."

You wonder how many of his colleagues have been getting owls about his personal instruction of the legendary Harry Potter. Fortunately, politics is teaching you how to deal with self-serving people like Horace Slughorn with a smile pasted on your face. "I'm sure I'll manage, but I'm honored by your offer."

Hernando de Soto's statue would be proud of you.

"Harry, this would be much easier if you looked in my eyes and not continually stare at my breasts. Most women would find that behavior annoying."

"Sorry." Okay, maybe getting Fleur to give you some dance lessons ahead of this diplomatic function isn't such a great idea. Of course parts of you seem to think it's a smashing idea.

She laughs, which only makes those perky bundles of joy shudder slightly and draw your attention right back to them. She sighs, "Sadly, it's not like you haven't seen them before. Is your resistance to my aura weakening?" The fact that you've seen the "dynamic duo" devoid of any clothes on more than one occasion, and at least once with only traces of whipping cream on them, isn't helping. A pleasant reminder that Bill's favorite dessert isn't on the menu at Florean's, it's a Fleur Sundae.

You step back and shake your head. "No, I'm just going to claim being a case of teenage hormones in proximity to a very attractive woman." Karina, Amy, and then Lauren spoiled you. Before, you were hopeless around females. Now, you could be a bit of a man whore. Hell, Funbags offered herself up for the greater good the other night. Other than your distaste for that particular girl, the only other thing holding you back at the moment is a terribly shy Ravenclaw, who is much more than most people give her credit for.

Fleur rewards you with one of her dazzling "thank you" smiles. "I have spoken with Kwan. If you cannot learn from me, he has offered to teach you. He mentioned something about your footwork being a very large problem and some rather interesting suggestions on how he could fix that problem."

Dance lessons with Kwan – it doesn't sound like torture, but you know better. Lunch with Kwan is torture; a bedtime story with Kwan is torture. The truth of the matter is most anything involving Kwan translates into physical discomfort of some type.

His family must be scary. A Kwan family reunion, now that must be an unimaginable level of torture. Maybe you could send Riddle and Dumbledore invites to it and watch the fireworks.

"Learning to dance isn't worth risking my life over. I'll just have to *suffer* through this instead.

"How is Bill?"

"He should wake up today. You will be able to see him tomorrow. What of you and your friend Luna? Have you had a chance to talk to each other?"

She's steering you away from staring at her assets by bringing up the female you're really interested in. She's a sly witch, isn't she?

"Only briefly. We're still trying to figure out how to proceed. It sounds strange, but the letters may have made us too open between each other, and now that we're around each other it feels strange."

"The two of you should spend more time together. The only way to work through that is to be comfortable with each other. Take her on a picnic. Take her to this dance you must go to."

"I'd love to, but around here she's only known as a friend. Taking her out there in the real world paints a target on her."

"Yes, that would pose a problem. So who is your escort for this party?"

“Tonks.”

“The Auror from the Order? Isn’t she a bit…”

“Clumsy. Yeah. That’s why I don’t think I’ll have to dance very well.”

“Oh Harry, at these high society functions you will likely be expected to dance with more than just your escort. William and I will be there and I fully expect a dance with you. Perhaps you should consider taking this a bit more seriously, *oui* ?”

You groan in response as she restarts the music with a wave of her wand. Time to focus on her… eyes.

The two of you go back to her quarters and attempt to rouse “sleeping beauty.” Fleur does a few Diagnostic charms and says that it will still be another hour at least.

“So would you like a continuation of our dance lesson? I can put on some bulkier robes that will prove to be less of a distraction.”

You laugh it off. Covering her body with poorly fitted robes should be a crime. A far better solution would be for her to remove the robes completely. After a brief period of adjustment, say three or four hours, you wouldn’t be so distracted by her being topless. No, those are bad thoughts Harry – best friend’s fiancé and all that rubbish. Perhaps the best solution is to find a different activity. Something’s been bothering you ever since the battle two days ago. “How’s your Occlumency, Fleur?”

“I am versed in the art. It helps me reign in my aura. While not an adept at it, I am beyond the novice level. Why do you ask?”

“I want to go back and look at the fight with the Daemon. It might do good to have an outside observer to catch anything I might miss. You deserve to see what a hero Bill was.”

“Oh, I’m afraid I had to send my parent’s Pensieve back to France. I might not have specifically asked for their permission before lending it to William.”

“It’s okay. We picked up one while we were there.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Would you be willing to watch it with me? It’s not for the faint of heart. Thundercloud’s daughter and son-in-law looked on the verge of being sick when they came out of it.” Come to think of it, they looked a wee bit scared of you. No real need to mention Thundercloud’s granddaughter, Lauren, pretty much wanted to drag you upstairs and make babies.

“I would be honored to see it.”

Five minutes later, the two of you are standing in the middle of the lost city watching the phantom image of you circling above the temple preparing to detonate the sappers. Fleur scowls distastefully at all the undead milling about. She doesn’t appreciate the utter “coolness” of having an army of the living dead fighting on your side. You want to get the “Daemon Eye view” of this battle. The detonation is massive and you flinch instinctively and immediately feel like a fool for doing so.

The Daemon emerges shortly afterwards roaring for its freedom and begins cutting an angry swath through your hapless undead horde. You sneak a glance at Fleur and see she is stunned.

She points at it and states incredulously, “You and William defeated that? It must be a Greater Daemon!”

The abomination continues its rampage through the horde of zombies. Your counterpart in the vision attempts the Cruciatus curse. You recall the Daemon looking amused.

“Did you honestly think that would work?” The Daemon asks aloud with a low grumbling laugh.

Talking to Fleur, who really seems to be bothered by all the undead, “It swallowed Ravenclaw’s seer glass, which seemed to boost its Divination skills. It talked about all the possibilities, but we kicked its arrogant arse anyway.”

“Now who sounds full of himself little wizard?” The Daemon speaks again. The four arms of the monster rending the milling undead as the flesh eating plants snap at the legs of it and the zombies impeding the way forward.

A chill runs up your spine and you swallow hard. Slowly you look up at the Daemon’s face. It is looking directly at you and the lips on its goat face curl into a cruel smile.

This was a bad idea. Time to exit the memory. Something’s wrong! It’s not working, this isn’t good. “Oh don’t go just yet, little wizard. The fun is just beginning. Is this truly your memory, or perhaps you carry a connection to me now as well as all the other links to your essence?”

On the “This is Troubling” scale, this ranks off the charts. “You can see me, can’t you?”

“Yes and no. I see all possibilities Harry Potter. If you are listening to me right now it means you were victorious, or perhaps more correctly, it means you think that you’ve won.”

You really don't like the sound of that. "I beat you!"

It seems bored clawing its way through a sea of zombies laughing as it tosses one right through where you're standing. "Yes, yes. So you keep saying, mortal. Perhaps if you repeat it to yourself and the female there enough, it will be true."

To emphasize its point, the Daemon reaches "through" a stunned Fleur and pulls an Inferius from behind her hoisting it into the air. It did this several times during the fight to shield its face from the bullets ricocheting off the thick hide.

The Daemon continues to push forward while addressing both of you. "I see you are at a loss for words. It further reminds me of the limitations of such a finite being. I could tell you how I can see and hear you, but I doubt my explanation would be of any use to a lesser creature such as yourself. It would only serve to confuse you and waste my time."

"You've never met me!" Fleur protests shaking her wand at it, fast draw, you're impressed.

"Not in this possibility, young witch, but in the ones where another female accompanies this group, you are the one most often here. Your death shrieks are usually the loudest, except for the times Harry here foolishly brings the witch and her little boy with him. I have seen a rather memorable timeline you accompanied this group here and Chlotho possessed you instead of the American. Did you ever want to rule this insignificant planet under an iron fist? Your body could have."

She refuses to answer him, which only encourages the monster. "Did you know that when I head straight for the red headed male and kill him first, the child wins the majority of the time and the two of you end up as lovers."

Fleur's a bit unhinged at the Daemon talking to her. Quite honestly, you're not too happy about it either.

You respond, "That's enough!"

It roars in laughter. "No, I have no desire to dabble in the affairs of your heart. You almost never win when I head straight for to you. Killing one of your friends fuels your magic with anger. Without it, your only salvation lies with unleashing the monster inside of you. I like those odds better. We shall see if I am only talking to a possibility or a reality soon enough. I again offer you a truth, Harry James Potter – winning this battle does not win the war. Farewell mortal. I do not say goodbye, for there is always the path where we meet again."

The Daemon pushes forward and begins hurling the undead ahead of it into the ward zone. You and Fleur stand there looking at each other. The rest of the battle seems unimportant at the moment. For that matter, Riddle actually doesn't seem that important either.

Fleur puts her hand on your shoulder. "Harry, my father is a very important man in France. He has access to some of the darkest tomes concerning these creatures. If he cannot send them to me, I will go to France and do the research there. I have no abilities as a seer, but I think we should learn more about this Daemon in particular."

Why do you get the feeling you've fought your first Daemon, but not your last?

The two of you watch the battle play out as your enlarged jaguar form surrounded in a Patronus mist circles the injured Daemon. The end comes much quicker than you remembered, but then again, your point of view had been a bit skewed at the time. The Daemon's head rolls backwards and it stares out across the battlefield at you and Fleur, continuing to mock you even in defeat.

Exiting the Pensieve, you leave the memory swirling in the pool. "When you're 'finished' with Bill let him watch this and see what he thinks."

"Are you okay?"

"Why would I let a little thing like that bother me?"

Fleur puts her hands on her hips and gives you a scolding look. "Do not toy with me, Harry."

"I'm just going to go clear my head and carve for a few hours. Let's let sleeping monsters lie for the moment." Gesturing to Bill, you finish, "You've got your own sleeping monster to worry about."

Clearing your mind didn't really help that much and you're in a somber mood as Dumbledore announces the replacement Transfiguration teacher at dinner. You have to give Scrimgeour some credit; he moved quickly.

"Hogwarts is pleased to welcome back a familiar face to our halls. While we search for a permanent replacement for our Transfiguration vacancy, Minister Scrimgeour has graciously offered an interim solution. For the past two years Percival Weasley has been working in the Ministry, most recently as an aide to Minister Scrimgeour and his predecessor. Students in fourth year and above will recall his time as our Head Boy. Mr. Weasley's academic achievement and fervor for knowledge is unquestionable. I expect that he will acquit himself admirably."

Percy stood and bowed, but chose not to follow Delores Umbridge's route of making some kind of speech. He looked a bit uncomfortable up there. Currently, you're sitting at the Ravenclaw table again trying to be entertained by "Looney's" antics. Anthony Goldstein knits his brow and grumbles. "I didn't really care for the ponce when he was Head Boy. If he's a Ministry stooge, then I wonder if he'll be toad, junior?"

You stifle a chuckle as he continues, "Harry, maybe you could talk to Fleur Delacour and see if she'll be willing to teach. The two of you are pretty tight right? I know I'd be more interested in Transfiguration." For such a large boy Anthony easily dodges Su Li's swat.

"Dumbledore asked, but she turned him down. He's just an interim Professor. They didn't give him the High Inquisitor role. I don't think Scrimgeour

would repeat Fudge's stupidity. From what little I remember, Percy had top marks in Transfiguration."

You don't need to go into Fleur's lack of trust in the Headmaster or the fact that she's going to be researching forbidden knowledge about Daemons for you. You don't say those things out loud. Rumor has it that the ICW sends hitwizards after people caught accumulating knowledge of such creatures. Most governments claim they have destroyed any such scrolls and tomes in their possession, which is political speak for, "saving them for a very rainy day."

You can't see out the windows, but the clouds just got a little darker.

"You're awfully quiet. Is something the matter?"

Looking over at the tiny blonde headed terror walking next to you, you try to come up with the right words. "I don't even know where to begin."

"How about, 'Once upon a time?' That always has a nice ring to it." She smirks at you. Humor is a defense mechanism for her. Hell, it's an offense mechanism as well.

"I wish it was that easy. The Minister's up to something. Riddle's up to something. As long as Dumbledore is breathing, he's up to something. I feel like I don't have any room for missteps."

Luna just smiles at you, "You know how corrupt the Ministry is. Daddy is always saying what a hold the Rotfangs have on them. Vampires with poor dental hygiene are an irritable lot. The headmaster is aligned with the Gnomes of Zurich, who are the secret backers of the ICW. Don't let this get out, but I think Professor Flitwick is his contact. As for your enemy, I think if he should be more afraid of you."

"You're not taking this very seriously." It comes out a bit too harshly.

She gives you a sour look, "And you're overestimating your enemies. Mr. Moody seemed to be very obsessed with his enemies. Is that how you wish to end up? I'd much rather be looking for a fantastic creature around every corner than an enemy waiting to pounce. Regardless, you should consider this; the people you are concerned about are far from perfect. Even if the new Minister is a genius, he's still hampered by the organization Minister Fudge mismanaged. The Headmaster has been out maneuvered so many times since you've been here. Most recently, if what little you've told me is accurate, by a painting and our late non-magical janitor. That's hardly impressive. Finally, that pesky Dark Wizard, he's got a blind spot for you that will end up being his undoing."

You need a bit of cheer and she's trying. Of course, Luna doesn't know about veiled threats from the Netherworld.

"You're enemies are just as capable of making mistakes. Just do your best; the rest will sort itself out in good time."

The two of you reach the door to your quarters. "Do you want to come in?" Merlin! That line came out cheesy! You've always been the one being chased by the older female. Sounding stupid was expected back then.

"Sure. Let me see what a kind of room a Junior Ambassador rates here at the school." Luna eagerly pushes you aside and enters the suite. She spends the next few minutes looking around and being impressed with your fancy accommodations, glancing at the various tomes spread out on your desk and the collection of professional rune carving material on the workbench. You'd better count your chisels later, she looks very interested in them.

She perches on your desk and runs her hand over the cover of your copy of Golinard's Field Curse Breaking Manual. Sounding a bit coy, she asks, "Any chance you'll let me take a peak inside?"

"It's my personal spellbook. I don't know. You'd have to be pretty convincing."

She tosses her hair over her shoulder with a hint of flirtation. "You can't buy a copy of this book in this country without being a Curse Breaker's Apprentice. It's almost as hard to get your hands on as the Auror training manuals. They don't even have a copy of this in the Restricted Section. And here we have little old me, a Ravenclaw with a thirst for knowledge, how nicely do I need to ask?"

She's actually blushing slightly. Luna's trying to flirt with you. Okay, two can play at that game. "That's a pretty significant request. One day that book could end up in a Museum in an unbreakable case. Something on those pages could be the spell or ward scheme that defeated a Dark Lord.

"Wow! That *is* impressive, maybe it'll end up next to a Crumple Horned Snorkack. That'd really be something! I'd definitely bring my camera! So, say I gave you a nice long hug, would that get me to page one?"

"That might get the cover open, but it wouldn't even get you to the table of contents."

"I could always just open it now."

"Go ahead and try." You move close to her to watch the fun.

She does, but the book refuses to open. "Spelled shut I see."

Less than a foot of space separates the two of you. In the back of your mind, you start to wonder where this is heading. "Pass phrase and Locking charm, Luna. Golinard's is a Breaker's lifeblood. Better luck next time! I believe you were offering bribes. So far the cover gets opened for an extended hug. Care to sweeten the offer?"

She sets the book down and stands up with a determined look. She's very short. Lauren and Amy were both very short.

"I don't know; let me see what's on the other side of the cover first." She wraps her arms around you and eases into you, squeezing gently.

You take the opportunity to nuzzle against the top of her head and wrap your own arms around her. After about thirty seconds of this, she lets go with one arm and reaches back to tap the book. "I believe you should open the cover now, Ambassador Potter."

"Fair enough, the pass phrase is 'Here, Kitty, Kitty!' Don't worry, I'll change later tonight."

She opens the cover and looks inside, still keeping an arm around your waist. "Hmm, nothing spectacular so far. 'Property of Harry Potter, Curse Breaking Animagus. Have wand, will travel.' Cute."

"I thought so. So how badly do you want to see that table of contents?" You stop her hand as she tries to turn the page.

"Are you ticklish?" She asks.

"If anything, that'll get the cover closed."

"So you are. I'm glad I'm not."

"You seem a bit too quick to offer up that fact. Maybe you actually are and just want to mislead me."

"Maybe, then again maybe not. Still, if you're trying to tickle me, I can't be offering up more bribes."

"You brought it up."

She giggles, "I suppose I did. Now where were we? Oh, I was trying to get to the table of contents. How far would another one of those nice hugs get me?"

"Technically, I think your left arm is still around me. I still have both my arms around you. I believe we are still hugging."

"Hmmm. I hadn't considered that. A friendly peck on the cheek is at least worth the Table of Contents. Personally, I think it should be worth all of chapter one."

You change your arm positioning. Your arms are now on her waist and her one arm shifts to the middle of your back. "There's some quality material in chapter one. A peck on the cheek gets you Table of Contents plus the first five pages of chapter one."

"First eight pages." She's driving a hard bargain.

"You don't even know how long the first chapter is? Eight pages for a peck on both cheeks."

"A peck on each cheek! One peck gets me two or three pages of the Table of Contents plus at least six pages for the deal already on the table! The second peck only gets three more pages. Methinks the ambassador from Brazil is negotiating in bad faith. A peck on each cheek for twelve pages plus the table of contents."

Her other arm leaves the book and joins its counterpart as you counter her offer. The game just keeps getting more interesting. "I think it's called the law of diminishing returns. The second peck on the cheek might not be as exciting as the first one. Ten pages."

"But it would still be the first kiss on that cheek. Still new and every bit as exciting! Eleven, and I'm not going any lower."

"Deal." You lean down and close your eyes as a feather light kiss is planted on each cheek. How much farther is this going to go?

She smiles impishly as you look back at her. She's blushing brightly now. "Let's see what my reward is."

Luna lets go of you and twists, still in your arms and starts flipping pages. You edge slightly closer to her to look over the shoulder with your arms still encircling her waist. "Harry, the Table of Contents says chapter one is only ten pages! I do believe a penalty must be applied. Are you certain you've actually read this book?"

You playfully nuzzle at her hair again. "Sorry, it's been awhile since I looked at the introductory material. What kind of penalty were you thinking of?"

"It's somewhat difficult for me to think up a suitable penalty when you're doing that." Luna tries, but fails to sound annoyed.

"So I'm like a Confundus charm?"

"Perhaps, maybe a poorly cast one." Her voice has a slightly breathless quality to it.

"In that case I'll work on my casting technique." One of your hands comes up and sweeps her hair off her right shoulder and you twist your head in and start kissing her neck directly, bumping her radish earring with your nose. She takes a long breath of air and after the first few seconds her hand comes up and starts running through your hair as she whimpers back a slight moan.

You've gotten a substantial education in the art of kissing since that wretched date with Cho, and from when Ginny and Hermione had been complaining about how dreadful you were. Karina wasn't much help, quantity over quality. The two of you kissed sloppily and all over the place, like a pair of animals in heat, which given the circumstances is a fairly accurate summary of what took place.

Amy liked to be kissed, but not so much directly on the mouth. She liked various other places more, much more in fact. You took those lessons with you to Lauren and now Luna, the former was quite satisfied and the latter seems mightily impressed.

In between kissing, you move up to her ear and whisper, “Is my casting technique getting any better? Have you come up with a suitable penalty yet?”

“Um, it’s pretty hard to think right now. What were we talking about? Just keep practicing on my neck for a minute while I clear my head.”

You’re not really sure which of you really made the first full move, but after another minute or two of this, either you started to turn her or she turned into you, and the game entered another level with direct contact of the lips. There’s plenty of passion in her response, but also a certain hesitancy which you detect. It reminds you that you’re the one initiating all this. For the first time you’re the more experienced person. Hell, this is probably Luna’s first kiss. You do your best to make it memorable for her.

She turns full into you and wraps her arms around your neck. You pull her petite form close. The animal in you senses her attraction to you and responds fairly vigorously. She made a joke once about a “monster in your chest.” It’s not too far off. Pace yourself, Potter! Don’t spook her.

Luna puts on the brakes when your hands drift a bit lower onto her bum. You feel her stiffen and her hands come away from your neck. You grudgingly release your grip and step back. One thing is certain; she’s just been good and thoroughly snogged. It’d take a professional Obliviator to get this memory out of her mind. Her normally pale complexion is very flushed and her large blue-grey eyes seem even larger than usual.

“Sorry Harry. This is a little too fast for me. I’m not…” Her voice lacks any “dreamy” quality to it. Luna sounds almost wanton. She’s heaving a little making her small but perfectly adequate chest rise up and down slightly under those robes. It’s her head putting a stop to this. Her body’s telling you an entirely different story. As much as you’d like to read this “bedtime story” right now, it’s not a good idea. That animal instinct inside you growls in frustration.

“It’s okay. I understand.” You actually do and aren’t just saying that to try and make her feel better. It’s only been a week since you were sleeping with Lauren. A true Animagus responds to his or her emotions instead of suppressing them. Because the Sioux woman was also a true Animagus, the intensity was reciprocated. Throw in a few hours of close proximity with Fleur and if Luna said for you to “take her,” the two of you would be horizontal shortly and you’d be showing her all sorts of things you learned over the course of the summer.

She fans herself with her hand. “That was rather intense.”

You manage a smile. “I’m intense. It’s the only way I know how to be.”

Luna swallows, “Consider me warned.”

“At least you’ll know what to expect next time.”

Her eyes brighten at the prospect of a “next time.” With a smirk, she laughs, “Now, we have to assess the penalty and determine just how much that snog was worth.”

“I’d be willing to give up the rest of chapter two as the penalty, but since the snog just kind of happened, and it involved both parties equally, I don’t really see how you can come back and try to negotiate for it after the fact.”

“You’re a cruel person, Harry Potter.”

“Says the person, who just stopped our snogging session. Do you want a butterbeer?” That chest monster screams at you to ignore what she’s saying. She wants you! You push it back. If she is prey to be hunted, you can stalk her nice and slowly. It might even be more fun that way.

You go over to the chill box and remove a butterbeer for her. It’s a nice perk of no longer being part of the student body. A few kind words to Dobby along with a sack of galleons and you have a chill box full of butterbeer, some Honeyduke’s chocolates, and even some beverages from the Normal world which apparently Dumbledore’s brother stocks.

“Thanks.” She says opening up the bottle and taking a long drink from it. She sets it aside. “I’m still nervous about how this is going to work.”

That makes two of you. “In public, we should just be friends. Everyone knows you went to the Department of Mysteries with me. There’s no hiding that. You’re already going to be a target for that reason alone. Anything more and you’d become a high priority. Plus, you’re still doing your ‘Looney’ thing.”

Luna looks slightly torn. “I know.”

“Hey, we still have the journals and now there won’t be a delay time. I’m not good enough with Charms to whip up a set of mirrors, but I bet Fleur is and if she isn’t I could get your head of house to show me.”

“Fleur’s partly to blame for tonight.” Luna says off the subject.

“Why is that?” You ask suspiciously.

“She sent me a note this afternoon. In it, she said that you have a lot on your mind right now and that this would be a good time for me to consider expressing more than just a passing interest in you. Do you want to talk about what’s bothering you? You won’t find a better listener.”

“Do you know Occlumency yet?”

Isn't that conjuring an octopus? The Giant Squid in the lake wouldn't be too happy about that."

She doesn't miss a beat while deadpanning it. If you didn't know about her act, it would fool you. Luna smiles before continuing, "I picked up a book about it in the summer, shortly before our little blow up. I read the first couple of chapters, but haven't picked it up since. Could you help me with it?"

"Actually, I'm not very good at it either, but Fleur knows more than I do. I have a bit of a combined approach that involves crude Occlumency and my Animagus form. It's enough to protect my mind from Kwan's Legilimency and if I sleep in my form, it should prevent Riddle from getting at me."

"Speaking of which, I haven't seen that form yet." She snaps her fingers twice and points at the ground while taking another drink.

You shuffle nervously, for the first time tonight, slightly uncomfortable. "The last time I was in the form I'd noticed a few changes. If you don't mind, I want to talk to Bill about it first? Can we do it another time?"

"Is it part of what's bothering you?"

"Yeah."

She sets her drink down and then hugs you again. "Then I'll see it some other time, when it isn't bothering you. I need to get headed back to my dorms. Could you check your Map so we don't start an international scandal?"

It's your turn to tease her slightly. Pulling her into a quick kiss, you slide off her lips and to her ear, "But what will the Nargles be saying about us tomorrow, Miss Lovegood?"

"Naughty things, I assure you, Mr. Potter, but only the intelligent and well-informed can understand them, which rules out the majority of the student body."

"Thank goodness for that." You unfurl the map noting that Fleur and Bill are practically one dot on the parchment. Fleur has some nifty silencing charms in her repertoire. Seeing that the passageway was clear, she gives you a quick kiss and heads out the door.

"Good night, Harry."

"Good night, Luna."

"Not planning on getting rid of me anytime soon are you, Harry? Our friend seemed to hint at you and my fiancé. Should I be worried?"

Bill's laughing. You're not as cheerful. "I can't give the best man speech and then steal away the bride, can I?"

"No, that's considered bad sportsmanship in most cases."

"Awfully cavalier attitude you've got their Bill."

He tips his glass of Firewhiskey at you. "The only two people I can think of in this castle who lead a more reckless life than me are the hitwizard across the hallway and the man I'm looking at right now. Brains, good looks, and being the coolest man in England are my forte. Kwan's a better fighter and you're Harry Potter. Ominous Daemon warnings aside, I got another chance to watch you beat the stuffing out of that thing. If someone does manage to 'get' me, you'll make them pay and take care of my girl to boot."

"I won't try anything with Fleur." You try to sound deadly serious.

He laughs again, "I know mate. I'm more worried about her."

"What!" That wasn't the reply you were expecting.

"She seems really keen on making certain you and Luna make a go of it. Fleur's in love with me, but I can tell she feels strongly about you. She's trying to steer it towards a sisterly type of affection. She actually wishes that her sister was older, so she could pair the two of you up."

"Did she tell you this?"

"Gabby, yes. The sisterly thing, no. She didn't have to. She's still young and I'm a good deal better at reading people than most realize."

"Part of your innate coolness?"

"It must be. What can I say? Now, what's this I hear about the mess on the third floor?" He motions to the Pensieve he brought back along with the bottle of Firewhiskey. "Riddle's award put up a fight didn't it?"

"And then some. There's plenty of other information you need to know." You stuff the memory of the lost city fight back into your head and start concentrating on the events of a few days ago. You start with Dumbledore and Hermione in the headmaster's office. No one else knows about the Blood Wards. After it swirls in the cauldron, you gesture for him to proceed. There's no desire in you to relive this particular fight.

Bill exits the Pensieve after about ten minutes. "I don't know which would be more hazardous to your health, Dumbledore as your friend, or your enemy. I can see why you're worried about your Animagus form. Let's see it."

You ease out of the way to the way to the floor. Bill inspects you. "Yeah, the scales are still there, but they seem less pronounced than in the memory, but that could be a matter of your own perception affecting the memory. Any further than six feet from you, and I don't think anyone would be able to tell. Anyone closer than that is either a friend, or probably won't live to tell the tale. Did you actually poison Filch's cat?"

You nod.

"I thought so. I'm going to conjure a jar and we're going to "milk" your venom sacks. I can get that new Potions professor to test it for toxicity. I'll tell him I picked it up in Brazil or something."

It takes about ten minutes and you insist on Bill putting on some gauntlets, but the upper sacks yield quite a bit of toxin. He casts a preservation spell on the jar and seals it with wax paper. When you transform back, your gums are sore.

"So what do you think?"

"Who knows if this is permanent or not? We can get a camera and take a picture of you to see if the scales spread up the leg or retreat. We could measure the amount of venom you produce and determine if your venom sacks are getting bigger or smaller. I figure, the scientific method is our best bet here. Collect data and see what changes over time."

Sounds funny coming from a wizard, but Curse Breaking requires grounding in logic. "Sounds good, I guess."

"Well, be sure to let me know if you start growing horns or anything."

"Fuck you too, Bill!"

"Yeah, yeah. I've heard it before. Let's move along. How about we take care of that locket?"

"Right." You reach over and press against the touchstone to alert the house elves that you need assistance, yet another perk of having your own private quarters. Dobby arrives within ten seconds.

"Hello, Dobby."

"Mister Harry Potter has summoned Dobby! Dobby is so honored."

"I need a small favor Dobby!"

"Mister Harry Potter is asking for a favor from Dobby!" You eye Bill and he just smiles. More and more Dobby reminds you of a character that should be on a children's show.

"Yes Dobby. I need something retrieved from Number Twelve Grimmauld Place."

"Dobby would be honored to retrieve something for Mister Harry Potter." He immediately disappears.

Bill offers, "Not the brightest Light spell in the class is he?"

"Nope, but you can't fault his enthusiasm. Any bets on how long it will be before he comes back?"

Bill takes ten minutes, you take fifteen. Dobby comes back in six. He shuffles his feet, "Dobby didn't wait for Mister Harry Potter to tell him what he needs. Dobby is a bad elf!"

Bill's laughter makes it hard for you to reply. "Don't worry about it, Dobby. I think you're a great elf."

"Really?"

"Of course. Now, the item I am looking for is a locket. Wait Dobby, don't go... yet. Bugger."

"I'll take five minutes this time."

"I actually like fifteen. He'll go all over the house looking for lockets."

"Crap! You're right."

Sure enough, twenty-seven minutes later Dobby returns, he has eight lockets with him and some interesting marks that look suspiciously like fingernail scratches on his face. "Dobby would have been back sooner, but had problems getting this one off Mrs. Wheezy's neck."

He offers up a locket with some reddish colored hairs entwined in the chain. Nice to know Molly is still mooching accommodations off of you. You mull over kicking them out on their arses. Still, this was funny, but dampening the mood was the fact that none of the eight lockets were the locket with the large "S" on it.

After Bill ensures that his mum wasn't badly injured, you move back to the matter at hand. "Dobby, the one we're looking for has the letter 'S' on the front of it. Did you see one that looked like it?"

"Dobby has failed Mister Harry Potter! Dobby is miserable!" He runs straight into the wall and staggers backwards. He gets ready for another run, but you call out to him.

Dobby! Stop! You haven't failed. Relax. Now, please don't leave until I tell you to."

"Yes, Mister Harry Potter."

"First, I'd like you to go get Kreacher and bring him here. He might have hidden the locket, but I'll order him to bring it to me. Second, go ahead and return all these other lockets. You can just put this locket back on the nightstand next to Mrs. Wheezy."

Dobby stands there looking like he wants to pee. "Oh right, go ahead and leave." Bill's wiping the tears of laughter from his eyes.

Three minutes later Dobby returns dragging Kreacher with him. "Kreacher is a bad elf. He oversleeps and takes long breaks!"

Kreacher hisses at Dobby who looks slightly frightened of the grizzled house elf and pops away to return the lockets.

"Master returns. Kreacher hoped you had died and Kreacher could have a suitable master."

"Sorry to disappoint you, vermin. I haven't forgotten that your lie to me helped get Sirius killed."

It snarls at you. "Kreacher not responsible for careless Master. If new worthless Master had any spine, he'd kill Kreacher now."

He's trying to egg you on. "No, I'm planning on living a long time. I won't be so careless in my orders either. I need a specific artifact brought here from my house."

It grumbles, "Not your house."

"Oh yes it is and you know it. Now, I need the locket with the Green 'S' on it, the one that can't be opened. You will go and bring that to me now."

"Kreacher can't."

"Can't or won't?"

"Can't."

"Why?"

"Filthy Fletcher take many things from *your house*. Old pathetic Master order Kreacher not to hurt any members of precious Order, so Kreacher could not stop him."

Bloody Dung Fletcher! "When did he take it?"

"Two days after pathetic Master dies."

"What else did he take?"

"Coins, jewels, wands, cauldrons, magic carpet, brooms, crystal and alcohol. Master looks angry, maybe new Master isn't so worthless? What does Master want to do about it?"

"That's not any of your concern. Do you know where Fletcher is?"

"No. Idiot Master send Kreacher to Hogwarts to work."

"That's right. Resume your duties here at Hogwarts. You are not allowed to communicate by speech or written word with any students in this castle other than myself. You are not allowed to communicate with Professor Snape. Have either Draco Malfoy or Professor Snape spoken to you?"

"No."

"Have any other students spoken to you?"

"The foul Granger bitch, Kreacher hates her."

"Careful Kreacher, I might assign you to her if you don't behave."

"Worthless Master is cruel."

"Resume your duties here at Hogwarts."

"As you command, *Master*."

The piece of filth disappears leaving you looking at Bill. "Great, Dumbledore's fucking personnel choices bugger us again. Any idea where that rat bastard is?"

"Tell me what you really think, Harry. No, we'll have to wait until morning and ask Dumbledore."

The two of you enter Dumbledore's office and find Percy sitting in the chair in front of Dumbledore. The phoenix shifts on its perch and eyes you. *Nice to see you too, Fawkes.* "Ah William, it warms my heart to see you on your feet again."

Bill shrugs at the headmaster's greeting. He focuses his attention on Percy. "Good to see you again, brother. You've been upgraded from waiter at the Ministry. Congratulations on the promotion."

"I'd say thank you, but I don't believe that was intended as a compliment, William."

Dumbledore interjects. "Ah yes, Mr. Weasley and I were having a lively discussion about some of the more recent theories in the field of Transfiguration. Regrettably, I have been much too preoccupied to keep up on the latest research. I must commend you for a bold approach to your assignment. When you begin to cover this material for your sixth and seventh years, do be so kind as to let me know so that I may listen in on that series of lectures."

Percy looked a bit stunned at a Master of Transfiguration wanting pointers from him. Makes you wonder what Dumbledore's "angle" is, but you're too busy to look for hidden meanings today. Percy's voice squeaks slightly as he replies. "I'll be sure to let you know, sir."

"Now if you'll excuse us, your brother and the Ambassador obviously have a need to speak with me."

"Good day to you headmaster." He looks at both of you before mumbling, "You as well, Ambassador Potter, William."

Dumbledore waits until he hears the gargoyle slide back into place downstairs before looking up at you. "Something urgent lads? I had a rather strange firecall from Molly Weasley this morning." The room is well-lit by the early morning sun and his tall form sits behind the desk like something out of a portrait.

"Sorry about that, no, not really. Dobby left to perform a task before getting the complete instructions. I'm afraid he fouled things up."

"Indeed he caused a sizeable ruckus. Molly seemed quite upset."

"Yes, I'm sure she was, from the safety of my home. Of course you understand. You're used to having your underlings destroying your carefully laid plans. This is all still new to me."

He looks at Bill, who shakes his head. "My disappointment in my parents is only matched by my contempt of you at the moment. Harry's brought me up to speed on your manipulations."

"Your loyalty to Harry is admirable."

"Your willingness to use him for your own ends, isn't."

Bill really is the only Weasley worth a damn.

"We're getting nowhere," You state. "You want to know why we're here. Another one of your idiots may have cost us a chance to get the next Horcrux."

That gets things moving in the right direction. "How so, Harry? If you are prepared to leave, you need only give me a minute to gather some items. The sooner we move on this the better. May I be so bold to ask where we are going and what we are looking for?"

"Good question. It is a locket with a large green 'S' on it. It was located at headquarters. Kreacher told me last night that Dung Fletcher stole it along with many other things after Sirius died. Where is that fucking thief?"

Dumbledore's expression falters. "I'd heard rumors of Slytherin's locket. You say it was in Headquarters all along?"

"Held it in my hands last summer."

"This does not bode well. Mundungus is currently in Azkaban serving a one year sentence for trafficking in stolen goods. It appears that we now know where the goods came from. He refused to name the source of his goods, which now makes perfect sense as he could not violate the charm protecting headquarters."

"So where do you think the locket is now?"

"Only Mundungus can tell us for certain, but the best scenario has it in one of his many hiding places. The less desirable one is that it along with the other stolen goods resides in the hands of the Ministry, meaning we will have to identify you as the person affected by this crime. It would be tricky, but we would need to minimize what is told to Minister Scrimgeour. The last scenario is that the necklace has already been sold. In that case, we will need to learn the whereabouts of the buyer from Mundungus. I will go to Azkaban and speak with him."

Dung is **not** getting away with this! "I'm going too."

"I don't believe that is wise."

"I don't care what you believe. You're making the assumption that I want to keep Scrimgeour in the dark. I could just as easily cut a deal with him and leave you out of the loop."

The old man gives you a measured look. "That also would be most unwise."

"Someone was nice enough to point out to me that your scheming and power, you've been out maneuvering every step of the way. That's my stuff your man stole. You are the Secret Keeper and that means you allowed him into that house. Maybe if you had been more forthcoming in your suspicions about Horcruxes, I would have realized that the locket in headquarters was one of them! Instead, we're in here staring at each other like fools as yet something else has slipped by before we even noticed it."

He attempts to dismiss your argument. "Perhaps Harry. I will concede that many mistakes have been made along the way. It is quite possible that I have tried to do too much in the past and not rely on others. Still, you were not ready for the knowledge at the time."

You dismiss his comments by mostly ignoring them, "By your standards naturally. Either way, Scrimgeour isn't the idiot Fudge was. There's no way one or both of us is getting in to see Fletcher without sending up a big red flag. How much would you be willing to bet he'd be ten minutes behind us with a flask of Veritaserum to find out just what we talked about?"

Hang around enough crooked politicians and you start to figure out how things really work.

"Very true, Harry. You again have found a way to surprise me with new information. I have no easy solution for this and I recommend that we adjourn for the moment for breakfast. During the day, I ask that each of you consider possible avenues we can take and that we meet here this evening to discuss how best to proceed. Unless of course you would like to discuss any information you have on the final Horcrux. I have two candidates: Nagini, Tom's familiar, and a goblet rumored to have belonged to Madame Hufflepuff."

"One's right. The other isn't."

"Care to elaborate, Ambassador Potter?"

"Not at the moment. Maybe when you are more forthcoming."

"I see. In that case, I bid you both a good day."

Exiting, you look at Bill, "He loves this shit, doesn't he?"

"I think you're on to something there Harry. I wonder if I'm still welcome at the Order meetings."

"If you are, let me know. I think I'd like to go too. Do they serve good refreshments?"

"Mum usually cooks."

"I'll pass on that then. Drug me once, shame on you. Drug me twice ... We could always send Dobby back to cook especially for us? That'd be interesting to watch."

"Yeah, I suppose it would."

It's now Saturday; you're getting dressed to go to this Embassy Function. Supposedly, you will be staying the night and the better part of Sunday at the Brazilian Embassy. Like most things these days, that is a lie. You and the geezer get to spend Sunday morning on the Island of Azkaban conversing with Fletcher.

For the moment, all Minister Scrimgeour knows is that Dung stole some things belonging to you while you were away this summer and that you wish to personally question him about their whereabouts. Dumbledore is spinning it so that this trip sounds like his idea to earn a portion of your trust back. It's a wonder he can keep up with all his lies and half-truths.

First, you'll make a side trip to Auror Headquarters to see the items currently being held as evidence. With some luck, you won't have to make a trip to Azkaban, but you've got a bad feeling about this.

The mirror in front says that you look nice in these bothersome dress robes. Luna seconds the motion. "See, I told you that color goes well with your complexion."

"Ah, but everyone knows you're crazy."

Her tone gets that dreamy quality to it. "But perhaps everyone else is crazy and I am the only one sane. Have you ever considered that? Would you like my Butterbeer cork necklace? It will complete the outfit." She's dressed in her formal school robes for the remembrance ceremony in the Great Hall starting in a few hours.

You adopt a similarly dreamy tone. "Luna, as tempting as that sounds, I'll have to pass."

She starts to say something else when the adjoining door to your suite opens and Hermione walks in. "Harry, do you need any... help? Oh,hello, Luna."

"Hello, Hermione. You're looking better. The scufferbums have ceased haunting you. I was beginning to fear for you."

"Ever hear of knocking, Hermione? Unless of course you want me to walk into your quarters any time I want?" You need to put a proximity alarm around that door. You've already tried warding it directly, but something, most likely Dumbledore is preventing it from working.

"I'm sorry, Harry. You're right. It... it was very thoughtless of me to not announce myself properly."

“As you can see, I’m capable of dressing myself. Fleur has done an excellent job of giving me pointers for life in high society.”

Luna chimes in, “I’ve instructed the Ambassador on how to spot agents of the Rotfang conspiracy. They are a devious lot, but your parents are dentists, so you already know the telltale signs.”

The look on Hermione’s face is priceless. “Um, yes, I suppose. Harry, I really want to set things right between us. You’re not making this easy for me. I guess you’re entitled to that. I’ll go now before I upset you more.”

Great! She’s got a new crusade. Why can’t Hermione go back to freeing the elves? Maybe the centaurs need someone to convince them that humans aren’t really so bad. She leaves and you raise a privacy ward.

Luna looks at you questioningly. You shrug and explain, “She could try and listen, or she could start crying. I don’t want her to listen to us, and I sure as hell don’t want to hear her crying. What? You don’t approve?”

She cocks her head and looks at you. “Hermione’s never been deliberately cruel to Looney, but I don’t mistake her tolerance for kindness. She crossed you. Deal with her however you want. You don’t spoil my entertainment, and I won’t spoil yours.”

“Fair enough. You got yourself a deal.”

“Not until we seal it with a kiss.”

“She could walk back in…”

“Who would she tell? Better still, who would believe her?”

Hard to argue with that logic, isn’t it? Your lips had just barely touched when there’s a knock at the door coming from the hallway. Luna sighs in slight frustration as you walk to the door. Hagrid’s massive frame fills the doorway.

“Arry!”

It’s hard not to smile at the jovial half-giant dressed in the same outfit you saw him in during the Yule Ball. “How are you doing Hagrid?”

“Been better, been worse too. Can’t really complain. Ello there, Miss Lovegood.”

“Hello, Professor. How are the bowtruckles?”

“Good I suppose, do you really think you can learn to speak their language?”

“I’m working on it diligently, sir. It’s my OWL project, Harry.”

“Of course it is. So what brings you here, Hagrid?”

“I’ve got a bit of a delicate situation on my hands ‘Arry.”

“What has Hack done this time?” Your troll and your former teacher have hit it off famously. On your new “This is Troubling” scale, also known as TiTs, it rates a solid “What now?”

“Well, we sorta owe Aberforth fer three mebbe four barrels of ale, nuttin to fret over, just a bit of wrasslin that got outta hand. There’s also the small matter of Hack’s bar tab. He didn’t take the news that he isn’t going to yer party thing that well.”

Yeah, he was pretty upset. As much as you’d like to see him dance and again hear his impressive rendition of *Hotel California*, you’re going there to make a good impression. “I thought you two were banned from the bars in Hogsmeade?”

“No, no. That’s Rosmerta’s place and she’ll get over it in a week or two. Hack was probably wrong to drop his pants, but she shoulda realized he was going to do it when she said that.”

“It was good to hear from her again, even if it was a howler. I’m just glad it wasn’t a Hogsmeade weekend. Where is he?” You already know, he’s in the hut, but you need to ask anyway.

“He’s sleeping it off in my hut.”

You shake your head and go over to your desk. “How much?”

“Thirty galleons.”

“Should be fifty in this bag. That should cover the rest of the weekend. Try to leave the village intact.”

“Yer a great wizard, ‘Arry. Most wouldn’t take the time to befriend a troll. Word in the forest is that out past Grawp’s cave bout a half day’s walk there’s a group of trolls. I’d have already taken him out there, but old Aragog’s been ill lately.”

“Sorry to hear that.” Okay, it’s a bit of a white lie, the giant spider tried to kill you a few years ago, but Hagrid has an attachment to the creature.

“I know. He’s lived a long life and I don’t know how much longer he’s got left in ‘im. First. Minerva, and now this. I think we’re in for a rough year.” His statement is a bit somber.

"I agree, let's hope for the best, but prepare for the worst."

"Aye, sound advice. Don't be a stranger 'Arry. Drop by anytime."

After Hagrid walks away, you shut the door and look at the witch raiding your Butterbeer stash. "Learning to speak Bowtruckle?"

"Gets me out of doing homework all year. They make a little chittering noise. I'm pretty sure it's either 'I'm hungry,' or 'Leave me alone.' So what exactly did Madame Rosmerta say to make Hack drop his pants in public? Do I really want to know?"

You time it for when she's taking a swig. "Oh, that. There was a drunken wizard at the bar and she said that he was the biggest prick she'd ever met. After Hagrid explained what a prick was to Hack, he decided to introduce her to his."

It's worth it. She snorts a bit of beverage. "Gah! That's awful. This stuff stings when it goes up your nose."

"You asked."

Exiting the castle, you size up your "date." Tonks is fifteen minutes late, but she looks very nice, having chosen a tall, athletic form. The troubling thing is that she's said barely a word to you since you got back. "Bee in your bonnet, Tonks? Didn't like splitting time with Charlie pretending to be me?"

"I think I liked you better when you just sat in the corner and didn't say much to anyone." She reminds you of last year when you were at headquarters and kept to yourself. "It cost me most of my vacation with the department just to cover for you. That's after spending almost all my free time this summer chasing down leads on your whereabouts." She says off handedly.

"Sorry, I was busy getting myself out from under Dumbledore's thumb. Blame him if you're looking for someone. And if you're that worried about vacation, I can speak to Minister Scrimgeour and get it back for you."

"Don't put yourself out, Mr. Bigshot."

Okay then, so it's a little more than just resentment from a few weeks of pretending to be a sixth year boy and losing some vacation time. "Fine. Since we'll be spending some time together this evening, why don't you just say what's on your mind?"

"Do you really want to know?" Her tone isn't the friendliest which, given her normally jovial nature, says quite a bit.

"If you've got an axe to grind with me, let's take care of it before we get to Hogsmeade."

"Remus is a good man! He's full of self-loathing and you're just adding to it!"

Hadn't expected that one! That came out of nowhere! It sounds like a romantic tale – *The Auror and the Werewolf*. "Oh, is that all? You want to know what I think of Remus Lupin? Fuck Remus Lupin!"

Tonks form looks a bit more menacing. She spits out the next few words. "Why you ungrateful little shit..."

You cut her off. "Yeah, I should be grateful for him blindly following Dumbledore. The Order's payroll is coming out of my vaults, and Lupin acting as bookkeeper. Did anyone think to ask me about it? Hell no. Then, Lupin has the balls to stand in front of me saying that he'd still have done it anyway."

"He's trying to protect your wretched life!" Fleur, Bill, and Kwan are watching the byplay waiting to see how you handle this.

"I assume you know about the Potions and the Obliviations?"

"Remus didn't have anything to do with that, and you know it!"

"Oh-bliv-i-a-tionS, Tonks! I have no idea who did what. Don't you get it?"

"He was your parents' best friend!"

"Who stayed away from me for over a decade! And the Weasleys claimed they were my second family. Pick a better argument."

It starts a glaring contest. Bill tries to get everyone moving again. You shrug and start back down the path. She doesn't move.

"I'm not through with you yet, Potter."

"Actually, you are. Here's the reality, Tonks. The only person from the Order I trust is Moody. I don't trust Dumbledore, Lupin, most of the Weasleys, and I don't trust you. Tomorrow marks one week that I've been back in England. In that week, I've killed two people already. You're here because I'm supposed to have a female escort to this thing and you're the only female in the Order under thirty. Pull your head out of your arse right now, you stupid cow, or go the hell home. There's a good chance that someone will take a shot at me tonight. That means you need to be focused on the surroundings and not on Lupin crying in his cups."

Her expression is as hard as steel. "I'm an Auror! I know what I'm doing."

Really? You ever think that if you could have lasted more than four seconds with Bellatrix that Sirius might still be alive? If one of these people behind me takes a curse tonight because you can't carry your fucking weight, I will make you suffer!"

You take the slap face. That kind of insult is a "deal-breaker." By the time she's done, your wand is already leveled at her head. "Real smart, Tonks. You're as stupid as you are clumsy. Go for your wand first, then slap the guy. If I was an enemy, you'd already be dead. You're useless to me like this. Go home, go back to the castle, I don't care – go fuck yourself! Come back when you're not useless."

"I'm not going anywhere. My orders come from Dumbledore."

"I could just stun you and leave you here, but here's your wake up call. Just like Snape, you've got two masters. Scrimgeour will be at this party tonight. You insist on coming along and I mention your little assault on a foreign diplomat. Want to lose a pay grade, or worse, Auror?"

Face red with fury, Tonks storms back up the path towards the castle. Your dates don't always go so well, do they? Kwan had also drawn his wand. Quite possibly one of the reasons he's among the best.

Bill speaks, "Not exactly what I'd call winning friends and influencing people."

"Better to jettison her now than when the shit hits the *vertexis*. I'm guessing the Aurors really wanted her for her special skills. She could even be a right spiffy dueler, but I remember Kwan here and Collins laughing at me when I asked them to teach me how to duel. I need fighters not liabilities, and tonight she'd just get in the way."

"Good points, but we might want her down the line."

Kwan counters, "No, Potter's right. Stupid rookie Auror angry and full of herself. Angry people make mistakes. Maybe she wise up. Maybe she stay stupid. Maybe we stand here all night wasting time because we stupid."

Kwan has an eloquent way of summing up a conversation and the rest of you get going. Waiting for you at the edge of the wards are all six of the Brazilian "peacekeepers" assigned to Hogwarts. The lead one, a burly dark skinned man with short hair introduces himself, "Adao Santos, Ambassador Potter. You're party is short one person. I was told to expect five."

"My escort fell ill and will not be coming."

"I understand. We are expected to Floo from the Hogshead Inn. In keeping with security precautions, this has now been changed to a Portkey to coordinates two kilometers from the embassy. When we receive the 'all clear' signal from the gate, we will proceed via direct Apparition. If we do not receive the signal or encounter hostiles, I request that you reactivate the Portkey and return here. Do you have any questions?"

Perhaps you're still a bit angry after Tonks, but you say, "If we encounter hostiles, you have two of the most dangerous men in the world with you. I am a diplomat out of necessity, but I am a fighter first and foremost. That said, I am not a tactician. If we do run into a fight you will follow any instruction from Mr. Kwan here as if it came directly from me. If he signals retreat, we all retreat."

Like damn near everyone else, Santos seems skeptical of you, but he clearly knows who Kwan Chang Ho is and acknowledges your command.

Fortunately, your arrival at the Brazilian embassy is uneventful. The embassy itself is a fine looking manor house with a serviceable ward set protecting it. Alesandro Dimperio and several others greet you in the parlor leading to the ballroom. You kiss the back of his wife's hand, while trying to remember her name. Deborah! Crisis avoided. "No escort, Mr. Potter?"

Why are people always so curious who happens to be on your arm? "She became ill."

Her husband answers, "No matter. My assistant, Miss Lopez will serve as your escort. Sheila Lopez, Ambassador Harry Potter."

The young woman is decent looking, if a bit plain, brunette, and reminds you slightly of the warm, sunny beaches in Rio. She smiles and extends her hand. "We've met before, though I did like your hair better as a blonde."

Your former Dodgespell teammate seems quite pleased. You take her hand and kiss the backside in formal greeting. "It's nice to see you again, Sheila. Last I saw, you were an attendant at a dueling hall."

"And you were going by the name James Black and never did take me up on that game of pool."

"Something tells me I would have ended up owing you far too many galleons. What brings you to England?"

"It sounded like a better opportunity than working at my father's dueling hall. My uncle is Ambassador Dimperio's Chief of Staff."

"Yes, Mr. Silva, we meet again, sir. I had the pleasure of meeting your niece in Rio. It's refreshing to find a familiar face."

She seems a bit too excited. It ranks on the TiTs scale, but not very high. Female interest doesn't really compare to death and mayhem. "I look forward to several dances with you, Ambassador Potter."

You offer a word of caution. "As I do with you. Just don't read too much into this, Sheila."

She's startled, "Why?"

The first person my enemies will try to kill is any one I'm romantically linked to. You don't want to be that person."

She nods her head slowly, getting a rather rude introduction to the world that is Harry Potter. The Ambassador, his wife, and Sheila's uncle all follow the conversation. Alesandro nods, "Indeed, when speaking to this Skeeter woman, make it clear that Miss Lopez is a last minute arrangement at my request. Now, let us step into my office, so that we may discuss matters of state."

You make brief introductions for Fleur's sake and follow Alesandro into his office, sensing the privacy wards as you cross them. It's good to be a curse breaker! "Harry, our superiors would like a more detailed report of the events that took place at the school."

"There is not really much more I can say without compromising sensitive information."

He is displeased. "The explanation Albus Dumbledore has provided is feeble at best. I am more than a dabbler in the field of Enchanting. The level of power needed to cause the level of damage reported could not have come from such a tiny object. Waverly's principles of magical output don't support the level of destruction. This understandably concerns me."

"I'm not too happy about it either. The woman who died was a person I respected. How's your Occlumency?" You seem to be asking this question all the time.

"I have never been trained in the art, but even if I knew it, would it truly stop someone from torturing it out of me? I can avoid casual eye contact, but if I am captured potions and curses merely take longer."

The man has a point. Occlumency isn't everything. "You want to know, I'll tell you, but I also need a few favors..."

Alesandro cocks an eyebrow at you as you begin to explain.

You're resting between dances with Fleur, Sheila, and Deborah Dimperio when you here a sickly sweet voice that makes your skin crawl.

"How very nice to see you again, Mr. Potter."

"Who let you in, Delores?" She's about the last person on this planet you wanted to see. Technically this embassy is under Brazilian law. You could challenge her to a duel and kill her. Is it worth it? Probably not. You've already chatted with the Minister, and who knows what Rita is going to write. You've got other things on your mind ever since you saw the guest list.

To an outside observer the two of you appear to be old friends talking about good times. "I believe my title is Madame Undersecretary."

"And mine would be Ambassador, but for old time's sake you can call me a liar about Voldemort's return and I'll just stick to calling you Dumbbitch."

"Quite full of yourself aren't you, Mr. Potter? I won't forget how you left me to those monsters in the forest. Did you know that Minister Scrimgeour is dispatching me to Brazil to oversee the establishment of our embassy? Rest assured that I'll get to the bottom of all your lies."

"I should have brought my troll. I was worried that he wouldn't have a dance partner. Enjoy the warm weather and brush up on your Cooling charms then, Madame. Considering how consistently you were outwitted and outsmarted by a group of schoolchildren, I'm quivering in fear at what you will find in South America. Now if you'll excuse me, I'm going to find someone or something more pleasant to be seen with -- an overturned rubbish bin will do."

So, Scrimgeour obviously wants to know more about your Brazilian exploits and Umbridge convinced him that she's the zealot for the job. If Minister Dimperio wishes to expedite his Goblin War, he need only involve her in the negotiations.

At least you've pretty much scraped the bottom of the barrel of this party's guests...

"Good evening, Ambassador Potter. Would you care to dance?"

... or so you thought. The beautiful woman curtsies gracefully and extends her hand to you. You choke back the bile and brush your lips across the back of her hand. "Good evening, Lady Malfoy."

"You're surprisingly light on your feet. Quite honestly, I hadn't expected much from you, Ambassador Potter."

"I'm full of surprises, or you need better sources. The reporter woman writes what she thinks people want to read and your son suffers from delusions of grandeur."

Narcissa gives a derisive laugh. For a woman in her early forties, she's certainly attractive. You recall thinking that you'd do her, but only if Draco and Lucius were forced to watch. Her dress is a bluish-green affair that highlights her without making her look like a slut. "Oh and you are full of wit tonight, how nice."

"Did you come alone? I don't see Lord Malfoy."

"Oh, I'm afraid he couldn't make it this evening, dear. I'm sure he's looking forward to meeting you again."

Concentrating on your footwork, you continue dancing with her. "I'm actually hoping to catch up to Bellatrix first. I have memories of a house elf

besting Lucius. Bellatrix might provide a more lively opponent.”

“Oh dear, now who is suffering from delusions. Dear Bella would chew you up and spit you out.”

Your turn to laugh, “Which explains why she didn’t stay around to say hello after I killed Dolohov? Perhaps you didn’t get the whole story from the deranged woman. After all those years in Azkaban, can she still hold a polite conversation, or do you need to keep a rag handy to wipe away the drool?”

She scowls at you as the music ends and the next song begins. “I’m sure she is more interesting to listen to than Sirius these days. Shall we take another turn around the dance floor? I haven’t delivered my message yet.”

You expected the Sirius comment, let it slide. “Why not, Lady Malfoy? I didn’t realize that you were just a well dressed owl this evening.”

Narcissa brushes off your insult. “I’m going to enjoy watching the Dark Lord dispose of you, whelp.”

“He keeps trying, but your half-breed master has always been a bit of a disappointment.”

With a feral smile on her face she leers at you. “He knows what you are up to. There’s no way you can succeed. You’ll never find what you’re looking for. The only thing you’ll find is death. If you are fortunate, that death will be swift.”

You knew there was no way Voldemort could ignore your trip to Brazil and the dust up on the third floor. Back in that hidden city in Brazil is a talking statue. He’s as wise a “man” as you’ve ever met. You left him there, but you picked up a new pair of journals, so that you could continue consulting him. The “real” conquistador Hernando de Soto watched Francisco Pizarro conquer the Incan empire with a handful of fighters and a colossal bluff. Between the two of you, you came up with this gambit. You’re playing with not only your life but so many others. Screw it! If you’re playing, play to win.

It’s time to kick up some shit, time to put him on the defensive, time to prod him and see if he makes a mistake, like attacking you at Hogwarts. Kwan thinks it’s reckless and could backfire in spectacular fashion. Bill thinks it’s brilliant, but isn’t sure you should play it now. Fleur’s naturally concerned, but didn’t have any better ideas. Dumbledore doesn’t know, yet. That’s probably the best part. The look on his face will be priceless!

“Oh silly girl, if the young serpent knew what I was up to, he’d be more scared than even your feeble sister.” You lean close and drop your voice. “I have a message for your traitorous master. Tell him that most of his toys are destroyed. Tell him that Harry Potter went to the jungles of Brazil, but Veras Chilotha came back in his body. Did he really think that he would keep me imprisoned to mock for eternity? Could a mere child defeat the mighty Daemon left guarding the Horcrux? Tell the pretender that the roles are reversed this time. It is I who will destroy his followers this time, one by one, and leave him a helpless wraith. I’ll even use the smiling fossil Dumbledore as my unwitting pawn. The best part is the people here, in Brazil, and all over the world will cheer me on as their hero as I enact my revenge.”

You feel her tense in your arms. “Oh yes, little witch. He has his baubles protecting his existence and I have mine. In fact, make certain to show him this memory, Lady Malfoy. I want the pretender to hear my words and know that I will be coming for him, and the masses will rally to my side. Thank you, Tom Riddle, for engineering my ultimate victory! I foolishly would have been content with South America, but now I can have the whole world! Even if I never find your last few Horcruxes, who will bring you back when you have no followers? I found a memory in this boy’s mind of the fool Dumbledore. Didn’t that relic warn you that there are worse things than death?”

There’s a tremor in her voice, “You’re lying.” It’s actually a heady rush to have someone afraid of you. It must be where Riddle gets his jollies. You wonder if your “maniacal monologue” is over the top or just about right?

Now drive the message home and really sell it. The panic needs to spread to his followers. “Watch your master’s disfigured face when he sees the memory. Does he look concerned? Does he possibly look afraid? Will he kill his followers who know where his trinkets are? If you dare, ask him why he can no longer get into the mind inside of this body. That’s when you’ll have your answer.”

“The master isn’t afraid of anything! His power is all-encompassing!”

“Yet your master lurks in the shadows, spending an entire year trying and failing to learn a prophecy. His ridiculous anagram is ‘Flight from Death.’ His fear is his name! I am his fear brought to life, little witch! Oh pity, it looks like our song is done. I must go dance with the Ambassador’s wife again. She is a powerful and attractive woman, much like you. Should you survive this with your wealth and status intact, you might make a suitable concubine. It might be the best way for you to guarantee the safety of your spawn.”

She angrily sucks in her breath, “Leave Draco out of this!”

De Soto said Chilotha had a long history of debasing women. The more “European” the woman was, the better. “I don’t plan to touch him, he is of no consequence. However, I might consider touching you. I do hope no one you cared about was at the Rookwood estate this evening? I hear there may be some trouble there.” Sean and his associates are razing it as you speak. It’s a low priority target, but coupled with this threat, it should send a shockwave through his minions. After they finish there, they’re destroying Snape’s house as well, but that’s more a guilty pleasure on your part.

You walk away from the stunned woman, wiping the mental slime off of your mind and noting that her nipples have made an appearance through her dress. Oh dear god! It’s not just her sister who is the deviant freak. She’s a woman with a power fetish. You just hope you’ll never have to follow through with it.

As you dance with the charming Deborah Dimperio, you make certain to catch Narcissa’s eye and smile. The Daemon’s message in your memory taught you a lesson: keep your enemies wondering. Uncertainty can lead to fatal mistakes. Luna reminded you that overestimating can be just as much of a problem as underestimating. If Riddle panics, he’ll send people looking for non-existent Horcruxes all over the world. He’ll try to scout out

your mostly imaginary powerbase in South America and possibly lose some of his followers to the alerted Policia de Magia.

Best of all, only you and Riddle know the location of the hidden city. Neither of you can tell anyone else, because until Hernando disconnects the reservoir powering the Fidelius charm, the secret died with the real Chilotha. If he goes there, all those wards that survived the fight with the Daemon are hidden among the rubble that was once Veras Chilotha's temple. It's a deathtrap made by your hand, so maybe you'll get lucky.

The dance ends and Madame Dimperio offers you the private tour of the embassy that you'd arranged with her husband. It would be interesting to know what Narcissa makes of her leading you upstairs halfway through a party. Then again, her mind is probably in a disgusting place. Alesandro merely needs to keep an eye on Rita Skeeter and mention casually within earshot of Narcissa that he's concerned with your sudden rise in power.

All you have to do is pretend to be a Dark Lord pretending to be Harry Potter. That shouldn't be too hard, right?

Turn Me Loose: A Harry Potter Adventure Or No Way at All

Chapter 5 – Or No Way at All

“... and that’s what Riddle is going to think – that I am Veras Chilotha possessing my body and impersonating Harry Potter. I will of course require a bit of assistance on your part to carry this off.”

That’s the look you were waiting for, bulging non-twinkling eyes and a wrinkled face flushed with anger. He looks just about as angry as when he broke down the door and confronted the fake Alastor Moody. Nearly a minute passes before he says anything.

“If this is an attempt at a joke, Harry, I am not amused.” You resist the urge to flinch as his eyes bore into you.

“It’s not a joke.”

“Do you even realize how much you have damaged our chances to recover his remaining Horcruxes?”

“Obviously he doesn’t know where the locket is. Only your thief does at the moment. Narcissa already tipped his hand by saying he knew what we were up to.” Rowena Ravenclaw herself told you that the cup would be the surest test of your skills.

“As Mrs. Malfoy is almost certainly unaware of the Horcruxes, she could have been referring to almost anything--or bluffing.”

“I’m assuming he isn’t an idiot. The third floor of the castle is getting remodeled right now after I spent a summer in Brazil. That’s a bit difficult to ignore isn’t it? Face it, he already knows. He has two left and one has gone missing.”

“Very well, we are in agreement that he is now aware of our objective. It seems irresponsible to show our hand before getting him down to the final Horcrux. This was clearly not the correct time for such a ploy.”

I showed him my hand. You conveniently keep forgetting that you didn’t tell me anything about the Horcruxes. I had to learn about them from Bill, while I was escaping the Love potions and Obliviations.”

He relaxes and tries to project an air of ambivalence. “I do recall having this discussion with you already. Is there some new ground you’d like to cover?”

“Fine, new ground it is. Did you set any wards at the place where you retrieved the ring?”

“No, I was preoccupied with saving my life at the time, Harry.”

“And in the months since then? Shit! Why the hell not? It’s probably already too late to set a trap there.”

He doesn’t like being taken to task on something, “It was not appropriate at the time and could have alerted him. Again, had you involved me, we could have made such an arrangement, but in your haste to assert your independence from me, it is unlikely that we can capitalize on that opportunity. I must ask; did you fail to consult me out of spite because of the oath to protect the castle?”

You flush with anger, but know he’s trying to provoke you. Bill prepared you by using the same type of arguments Dumbledore might try. Throw it back at him, “I failed to consult you because I don’t trust you. Spite has nothing to do with it. You reap what you sow. How many straight answers have I gotten from you over the years?”

“I can, in fact admit when I am wrong and have done so quite recently as I recall.”

“Right before getting me to commit to an oath, but that was about your version of the greater good wasn’t it? Well this is about my version and I’m sorry if it conflicts with yours.”

“This plan you have concocted has far too many variables. What is it you expect to gain from this ploy? Please educate me.”

“He’ll make a mistake...”

“And how are you positioned to react to his mistake?”

“The Peacekeepers here are on high alert and the Ministry in Brazil will be keeping tabs on all arriving visitors with our accents. Someone asking questions around here won’t raise too much interest. In Sao Paulo, that’s a different story.”

“This assumes he will expend resources to determine how much of a threat you now pose. Instead it may drive him to unprecedented levels of carnage as he hurries to consolidate his own powerbase in response to yours.”

"He committed his entire inner circle to the Department of Mysteries. Flushing Riddle out into the open, where he can actually be fought, is better than waiting for him to strike. Wasn't that the objective of your organization last year?"

"That is a drastically oversimplified way of stating it. We were seeking to force him into revealing himself so as to alert the world to his presence. That was successful in spite of your interference. Your plan seems to involve starting a fight with a person that is currently immortal. That is hardly sound logic."

"Just because he can't be killed doesn't mean that he can't be beaten. You've driven him off and so have I. Do it a couple of times and his Death Eaters start to lose faith. Without his followers, he's just another powerful wizard. One who can't adapt very well despite being Salazar's heir."

"I'd like to hear how you've come to that conclusion, Harry."

"He panicked and came to the Department of Mysteries exposing himself to the world after spending a whole year trying secretly to get at the prophecy. He panicked again when you showed up and tried to possess me; then he fled only managing to rescue Bellatrix. The year of the tournament he had this drawn out convoluted plan to capture me. I'm tied to a statue and he has most of his inner circle right there. He panicked again the moment our wands connected, right after boasting to all his followers how he overlooked the ancient magic my mum invoked to protect me. That's how I see it."

"Forgive me if I do not see these events from your optimistic perspective. You seem to have forgotten, Harry, that his 'convoluted' plans for you have also been successful. He easily lured you to the Ministry and was able to pull you from Hogwarts grounds in the middle of the largest event in the recent history of the school."

Dumbledore's display of ongoing arrogance really bristles you off. Time to engage in a probably ineffective effort of ego-busting on the publicly proclaimed and self-convinced Greatest-Wizard-for-the-Light.

"Those two events were not *his* successes so much as *your* failures. We have these discussions *again*, Headmaster, because you seem incapable of remembering that I went to the Ministry simply because you did NOT inform me of the prophecy and the fact that only Tom and I could touch it. I guess you're saying your masterful success at drawing Riddle out into the open was six students going to the Department of Mysteries to fight twelve Death Eaters. And as to his ability to steal me away from Hogwarts, he succeeded then because you spent a year in close proximity to a Death Eater and never realized he wasn't one of you closest, long-term friends."

"No, Professor, it is *you* who continues to overestimate Tom. He's starting to run short on those artifacts protecting his existence, isn't he? Just because he can't die right now doesn't mean we can't Obliviate him until he's a hollow shell and shove him in the deepest darkest hole we can find. Or, we could stop him and toss him through the Veil. If we did do you think his objects can bring him back from there? I'd be willing to put that theory to the test." You leave off the idea of you and Kwan giving Riddle the same treatment his followers gave Frank and Alice Longbottom.

The silence wears on for a moment before you offer up something else. "I have no illusions Dumbledore about what we are up against. I was the one who destroyed the possessed janitor using a fraction of Riddle's power. I'm just telling you that if he walked through that door right now, the two of us together would have a better than even shot of taking him and sending him right back into his ghostly existence. If necessary I'll do it as many times as it takes. Either his followers will give up on him, or they'll start running short on flesh of the servant willingly given."

Dumbledore stands and paces around the heavily warded study in the Brazilian Embassy. "So now that the damage is already done, what do you expect Tom's response will be?"

He cannot admit you've raised valid points, so he acquiesces to your plan with an insulting reluctance.

You decide to ignore it. "He'll do his best to confirm it, but I'll be behind the castle's wards except when we're out looking for the rest of his objects. Thanks to you, no one with a Mark can get in except Snape, and he owes me a life debt."

"Just because people do not carry his Mark, does not mean that they will not carry out his will. What of the people beyond the castle's protection?"

"Inside the castle, I have Kwan, Bill, and in theory, you watching my back. The best he can muster inside will be desperate school children. If we can't handle school children, then we're going to lose anyway. Outside the wards, your people were taking their chances. Vance already paid the price. Pettigrew was in the original Order. I'm guessing he didn't have any problems telling Riddle who was in it last time. You don't have too many new members and those worth a damn were seen during the fight at the Department of Mysteries."

"Since Tom now expects you to be a Dark Lord, what will you do if instead of striking at you directly he kidnaps one of your friends? Are you prepared to sit by and do nothing if he does manage to get one of your comrades within his grasp?"

It's a fair enough question. He deserves an answer. "That's your issue Dumbledore. I'm supposed to kill him. Sirius's death taught me one thing, I can't save everyone. Thanks to you, there are far fewer people that I'd run into certain doom for. If he kidnaps a student, well, that falls under your responsibility doesn't it, Headmaster? Besides, if he thinks I'm Chlotho, doing that would be pointless."

Saving people is a very "last year" concept to you. You're a survivor, not a self-sacrificer. It's a fundamental change in your psyche. There is no doubt that Riddle will try to take someone you value. He might be shocked to find out how limited his selection will be.

With that line leading nowhere, he'll shift tactics. C'mon old man what's it going to be?

"I see you have greatly changed, Harry. Even with your callous disregard for human life, you are simply not ready for him. Before, he was uncertain because Harry Potter was the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord. Now, he may think that he is facing merely an embittered rival, one

whom he has already beaten before. There was a reason Chlotha was one of Grindelwald's warlords and not a true Dark Lord."

"I have no intentions of fighting him alone in some stupid duel with everyone standing there watching. I want him dodging curses from Kwan, Moody, you, Shackbolt, and anyone else we can get out there while I'm trying to kill him. In the meantime, I want him and more importantly his followers looking over their collective shoulders."

"From that, am I to assume *you* are behind the attacks against some of his faithful?"

Your answer in political speak, "You may assume whatever you want, sir. I won't lose any sleep over Death Eaters scrambling to protect their estates. If they're doing that, they aren't out killing people. I'm sure Amelia Bones, Hannah Abbot's mum, and Emmeline Vance would agree if they could. Now the question is are you going to cooperate?"

"It may not be as simple as that, Harry. Your activities, while understandable, are quite illegal, and if your vigilantism comes to light you could easily lose Minister Scrimgeour's support, or lose him as Minister altogether. His agenda has only tentative acceptance in the Wizengamot, and his government would probably not survive being publicly connected to you. It's also likely that Tom will begin to circulate rumors of your Dark tendencies, rumors that I am becoming less certain that I can deny."

You scoff at his remarks. "Says the leader of his own vigilante organization! I'm no Darker than you are. That probably isn't saying all that much about either of us. We just finished a year of 'Dumbledore is insane and Potter is unstable.' What's Riddle going to do, have the wife of a known Death Eater try to tarnish my reputation?"

"You could be questioned under Veritaserum."

"So could the Death Eaters; so could you. I'm not holding my breath for that to start happening anytime soon."

He gives you a scolding look. "And if Minister Scrimgeour's government cannot survive?"

"England drops into anarchy. Maybe that'll be the cost of getting the ICW involved? Do you want to be reactive or proactive? What's it going to be Dumbledore? In or out?"

"Don't judge the entirety of Wizard culture on your negative experiences with it, Harry. If you allow the government to collapse and society to fall into chaos, it is the powerless who will suffer. Would you condemn them to the Darkness out of your spite for me?"

"They're suffering already in case you haven't noticed, and England isn't the entire Wizarding world. On the other hand, one thing I have noticed is that you weren't really winning back in 1981, and you haven't changed your tactics since then. If I'm going to make mistakes, they'll be my mistakes, but I'm the only one who can kill him at this point. If he kills me the prophecy is fulfilled. Anyone else can kill him after that, but I'm not going out without a fight."

"I still contend that you are not ready for him. Your successes have left you very full of yourself, Harry. I can only pray that you are capable of delivering when it comes time to vanquish, Tom Riddle"

"As for my chances, I'll tell you this one truth Albus Dumbledore, the sappers we exploded barely hurt that Greater Daemon. They didn't destroy it. I did! If I can take it, I can take Riddle. If you want proof, you can see the memory when we get back to the castle."

He looks interested. In addition to that memory, as much as you don't want to, Bill convinced you that it would help smooth things over if you offered Dumbledore a financial incentive. "If you're looking for a gesture of good faith, I'll forego any charges against Remus and continue to fund the Order. However, he'll have to pass everything through Bill for approval. Now, we should go to Azkaban to find out what your man did with the locket."

He concedes this battle giving you a critical look as he runs his hand through his long gray beard. You know this particular war is far from over. "Very well, Harry. You seem set on this course of action and have already committed our side to this path. Let us depart."

Well that's as much of a concession as you're likely to get.

Even in the daylight, the prison fortress of Azkaban is a terrible place. Years here had nearly destroyed Sirius. A tiny outcropping of rocks, little more than an enchanted sandbar serves as a Portkey platform just outside the wards protecting the island. At the end of the dock is a pedestal with a brilliant blue stone set in it.

Dumbledore places his wand against the gem and motions for you to do the same. He's been silent since leaving the embassy. If he's trying to make you feel guilty, it's not working. This just reminds you of last year when he pretended you didn't exist because he was trying to keep things from you.

There's a bit of lingering resentment there on your part, and you feel justified. That was another fantastic plan on his part. You should have also mentioned that plan's success back at the embassy. Despite the fact that you were with him in his office confronting Lucius Malfoy, despite all the things Scabbers could tell Riddle about the first, second and third years, and whatever Barty Crouch managed to relay to Riddle, throughout your fifth year Dumbledore wanted Riddle to believe there was no close association between you and the Headmaster. Maybe he does think Tom is an idiot?

Even with Dumbledore's oath, you were tempted to bring Kwan, but this is a party for two. Touching your wand to the stone, you identify your magical signature. Once you do, one of the small boats detaches from its mooring at Azkaban and floats towards the nearby dock.

Bracing for it, you activate your Cursebreaker glasses and take a gander at the monster that truly is this prison.

Hogwarts was a kaleidoscope of colors, bright and dazzling. This is not. It's differing shades of darkness. Putrid looking green swirls, bland gray hues, and clouds of pitch black slowly undulate around the perimeter of the island – no doubt it is Dark magic for a dark prison.

Azkaban looks imposing, but you remember that there have been two mass breakouts in less than a year. The last occurring over the summer when all the folks captured in the Department of Mysteries were freed. It's likely that Riddle used an insider to do his bidding, but nonetheless, Azkaban is a bully with a glass jaw, and it reminds you of one of Bill's ever present Golden Rules of Curse Breaking. Wards are only as strong as the people keyed to them.

Both of you climb into the boat and it starts on a return journey to the island. The air grows colder as you sense the presence of the dementors. "I thought they had all left for Voldemort's side."

Dumbledore doesn't look back at you as he coolly responds, "Perhaps you should consider gathering more information about the combatants in this war. There appears to have been a rift in their ranks. Roughly two out of every three departed with the last breakout, but the rest remained, and there are even credible reports of dementors fighting with each other during that breakout. Minister Scrimgeour has increased the human presence here as a result. It is quite clear that he does not trust the remaining contingent."

"Sounds like they had some kind of civil war, or perhaps that's just what they want us to believe."

"That is an adequate summary of the situation, Ambassador. Our ability to communicate with their ilk is limited to the written word, and they have thus far declined to answer why they have stayed."

You brace to hear the voices of your parents again. Sad that it's the only way, outside of crossing wands with Riddle and watching Snape's memories that you know what they sound like. James and Lily, they were good people that stood in the way of something bigger than them. It's another lesson for you and a constant reminder of what you're up against.

Approaching the billowing cloaked figures, you wonder what Dumbledore fears the most.

"Learn your place mortal – at my feet! I am eternal. Your words are bold, but you lack any power to enforce them. I am power! The feeble energies you command are but a flicker of a candle, and I am the burning glory of the sun!"

The Daemon's voice whispers in your ear and you damn near jump. Shit! You should have guessed that just like your Patronus, your greatest fear could change just as easily, probably easier.

Dumbledore appraises your reaction. Bastard was clearly looking for it. Wonder if he'll try to send a boggart your way at some point. That would be a treat wouldn't it?

"Are you okay, Ambassador?"

"See the instrument of your doom. Let your tiny minds comprehend my glory. Know what you will soon face and know that you have no hope. I will feast on your souls. I will grind your bones into powder. The smell of freshly ground bone has always been one of my favorites."

"Just fine, how about you?" You could really do without reliving the Daemon's greatest speeches. Though you have to give the thing points for grandeur.

"Your death will be but the first of thousands."

"They will not approach us while we stay on the path."

"Is this truly your memory or perhaps you carry a connection to me now, as well as all the other links to your essence?"

"Just like they weren't supposed to attack me on the train or on your Quidditch pitch, I suppose? Let's go. I've handled more of them when I was less experienced."

"...winning this battle does not win the war. Farewell mortal. I do not say goodbye, for there is always the path where we meet again."

The dementors alternate between staring at you and sharing looks amongst themselves. You push forward; continuing to listen to the voice of the monster mocking you. The heavy stone doors don't close behind you fast enough.

There's a slight pang of regret. You actually wanted to hear your mum's voice.

They say prison can change a man. Based on the smell alone, that definitely seems to be the case in Azkaban. To be certain, the elves maintain this place. It is probably cleaner than Hogwarts. There's a sterile feel here, but that's offset by the stench of bodily odors assaulting your superior sense of smell.

Sporting a scraggly beard, Dung Fletcher looks the way he always does. Truthfully, he didn't smell much different. That's a sad comment about a sad man.

The Auror unlocks the door and lets you in. "You've got ten minutes."

Fletcher's wild eyes lock on the old man. He holds up his grimy hands. Dumbledore takes one. You decline the other. "Dumbledore! You've finally come! Thank the heavens! Hello Harry!"

"I hope you have been well in here, Mundungus. Though I am anxious to hear of your treatment, alas, we find ourselves here on a matter of some urgency. We require very specific information..."

"You gotta get me outta here!"

"Of course, Mundungus, in good time. First we need to ascertain the disposition of some of the items you may have appropriated from our special place."

Dumbledore's obviously the "good cop." Fortunately you have no problems being the "bad" one. "More like stole!"

Dung looks away and starts professing his innocence. Dumbledore takes a placating tone, "Harry, there is no need for such anger. Let's be civil. Now Mundungus, with a bit of cooperation, Harry may be able to wield some influence and get you released."

"Look, Sirius wanted me to have that stuff."

"Like hell he did! You bloody grave robber!"

"That's not the way it happened Harry! I swear! Sirius wanted me to get him some things to make his stay there more enjoyable and we came to an agreement."

You stop yourself from spitting on the man, "He had access to his vault already. The elf confirms you were taking things after Sirius died."

Fletcher gets angry, "That elf's a dirty liar! He doesn't like anyone and you know it!"

"But I am his master now, and he can't lie to me. You, on the other hand started lying the minute we came in here!"

The thief hems and haws until Dumbledore calls for calm. "Gentlemen, please. Let us move beyond the accusations. The ambassador and I were just having a pragmatic discussion about accepting things and moving on. I am assisting Harry in taking possession of the Black estate at the moment, and there are some noteworthy discrepancies. We are far more interested in a few specific items and we need to know whether they are located in one of your various repositories, in the custody of the Ministry, or if you have already liquidated these objects. With a bit of cooperation, I'm quite certain Harry may be able to expend some of his influence on your behalf."

Dumbledore has the attracting-more-flies-with-honey part down pat, though Dung's smell is probably doing most of the work in this case, but the old man is a smooth operator. In contrast, you have some idea of how Lucius and his ilk would approach it. Probably a *Crucio* or two and then rip it from his mind with Legilimency. Let's move this thing along. "Oh, the heck with it Dumbledore, it's not that important anyway! Let's just go back to Hogwarts."

"Wait! Wait! Don't get your knickers all in a twist. Which items are you looking for?"

Dumbledore had you extract a list of items from Kreacher detailing what had been stolen. The locket wouldn't be the first item the two of you asked about. Oddly, Dumbledore seemed reluctant to commit to Obliviating him.

It turns out that Dung had already sold to various shops in Knockturn Alley the knife that drips silver instead of poison, assorted jewels and gems, and other finery. Five rings, along with a number of candlesticks and the fine flatware are part of what the Ministry has in its storehouse as evidence against him. The table made from the legs of a Nundu and several amulets, including one with a large "S" on it, were sold to an "Arranger."

"What is an Arranger?"

Dung answers, "Well, they buy expensive and rare things for collectors. People who like fancy things in their collection, but don't wanna be seen buying them. Sometimes on commission or other times they gather stuff and have a little private auction."

"Well, I want that table back! Sirius wanted me to have it! What's this man's name?" You're doing your best to be a petulant child for when the Minister's people likely question Fletcher.

"He ain't no man, Harry. He's a goblin. Not all of them work in the bank you know. Don't know his real name, but everyone calls him Mr. Teeth on account that he redid all his teeth up in gold."

You've come to hate goblins – little backstabbing two-faced shits that they are. The rebel goblins in Brazil tried to kill you, and the ones legitimately in power planned on murdering you in the lost city. Then they betrayed your location to the Death Eaters and bounty hunters when you bested them.

"Fine, we'll go see this Mr. Teeth and find out if he still has my property."

Dumbledore turns to you, "For an ambassador, you really should stop sounding so childish, Harry. It is unbecoming of your new station. If you are unwilling to be calm about this, perhaps it's best that you remain silent as we have several more items to cover and not much time left for our visit."

That's a change in the script! Both of you had agreed prior to last night's party that you would act in this fashion. Dumbledore never mentioned that he'd have a go at you. Trying to digest what he was hoping to achieve, you keep quiet and apply some brainpower to the hidden meanings in his words. After five or six other items are covered, there's a tapping at the cell door and the Auror returns. "Times up, Chief Warlock."

Dung stands addressing Dumbledore, “I’m sorry if I’ve caused a bit of trouble, sir. I hope you’ll be speaking to the Minister soon to get me out of here.”

“Naturally. Ambassador Potter will do as I instruct him to in this matter.” He turns to you and pats your head like an obedient dog. “Tonight, you will draft a letter to the Minister requesting the charges against Mundungus be dropped immediately.”

“The hell I will!”

Dumbledore looks at you angrily. “More of your tantrums, Ambassador, over a bunch of silly trinkets? Why do you refuse my orders?” Okay, he wants you to be the bad guy in this. You can easily accommodate Dumbledore’s unvoiced request.

“He stole from me and I still haven’t forgotten what happened last year at my aunt’s house when he was supposed to be on guard duty! Let him stew in here for awhile.” You spin and walk out into the corridor as Dumbledore hurriedly apologizes to Dung and then joins you.

The trip back through the prison is silent, while you wonder about Dumbledore’s reasons for provoking you. It was clear that he wants Fletcher to stay in here for the time being. No doubt the guard will be reporting every detail of the exchange to the Minister as soon as possible.

The warden meets with you and returns both your wands. The doors open to the path back to the docks. As you prepare for the dementors, you notice only one standing next to the path. All the others are standing far away. You give Dumbledore a curious look and he replies with a barely noticeable shrug of his shoulders.

Drawing near to the lone dementor, you hear the faint whispers of the Daemon’s voice in the corners of your mind. It’s quiet enough that you can easily ignore it. The dementor points a bony finger at you causing both you and Dumbledore to stop. From inside its cloak, it withdraws a sheet of parchment and holds it out towards you. When Dumbledore extends his hand the dementor moves it out of his reach and again points it at you.

You should be used to crazy shit like this by now, but just when you think that things won’t get any stranger, the universe bowls a wicked googly at you. You take the sheet of parchment from it and it slowly backs away.

“What does it say, Harry?” Dumbledore’s voice is laced with concern.

The symbols on the page don’t make any sense. “It’s a runic language. Glyphs mostly, but nothing I’ve been exposed to.”

“Puzzling, they are more than capable of writing in English from what I understand. We will need to discern what they are trying to communicate to you, but for now we should be off.” He tries to downplay this, but you don’t really believe that and neither does he.

On the boat ride back, you finally ask, “The cheap shots back there were designed to make me leave Fletcher in Azkaban. Why do you want him there?”

“Because Harry, it is clear from your prior actions that you need proper instruction on baiting a trap, although I do not have all the details yet, only the roughest of starts on such a ruse. At this time I need my options open, and the safest place for Mundungus right now is within the walls of Azkaban.”

“Same old tricks, Dumbledore. Imprisoning someone for the greater good?”

He ignores your slight and responds, “No, although it may appear that way on the surface. Similarities can be used to make a ploy look less suspicious. Should it become necessary, we can make it appear that Mundungus has information much more important than he currently possesses. Under the correct circumstances that deception could be used to draw Tom into yet another assault on this location. For now, this is merely an option, which we may need in the days to come.”

Yeah, you were right. Dumbledore is a right foul bastard.

After a full hour in the Headmaster’s office allowing Dumbledore to view the memory of the battle with the Daemon, you return to the guest wing. Did you really want to see it again? No, but it was necessary to make certain that he didn’t overhear the monster’s “phantom” conversation. He congratulated you on the imaginative combination of your Patronus and your Animagus abilities and suggested that you consider writing a thesis. However, he was quick to point out that Tom wouldn’t be likely to fight with you in such a manner.

What did you expect; that he’d stroke your ego? Either way, he’s bound to have already reviewed as much as he saw of you fighting alongside of him against Voldefilch. Dumbledore knows you can play in his league. You allowed him to copy the dementor’s written message, but kept the original. Bill deserves first crack at it.

Concentrating, you search for Hack’s presence. He’s distant. Further away than Hogsmeade. Maybe, Hagrid took him into the forest like he’d planned?

Using your wand to send a simple announcing charm on Bill’s door, you wait for it to open. The better looking member of the duo greets you.

“Please Harry, come in.” Fleur asks. “How did it go?”

“I thought about coming in and acting like I was Oblivated just to see the look on Bill’s face, but it’s been a long day. Where is, oh ... hello Luna.”

Okay, it’s slightly suspicious to see Luna over at the table. She’s either had enough Butterbeers to make her face slightly red or she’s embarrassed that you “caught” her here. Did you interrupt one of Fleur’s coaching sessions or have you blundered into the equally dreaded “girl talk.” Careful Potter, you’re outnumbered. “Where’s Bill?”

"He is at the place we cannot name, searching that rather extensive library for something useful. One would think that he doesn't want me to leave here. I also am under the impression that he will be having words with his parents and expressing his disappointment. I expect him within the next hour or so. You're welcome to join us."

"What have you two been up to?"

"Just a few exercises in Occlumency for Luna. I was giving her a mild probe and we were discussing the results." Fleur whimsically laughs. Gee, what memory would Fleur have been looking for that left Luna looking like one of her radish earrings?

Fleur gestures at the table and you obediently sit next to Luna. "Hi Harry."

"Hello." Could the verbal and non-verbal language in here get any more stilted?

Fleur passes you a Muggle pop out of her chillbox. You're surprised that she remembered that you liked that brand. She looks first at you and then at Luna - then she rolls her eyes and sighs loudly. "Please tell us about your day, Harry?"

You look apologetically at Luna and say, "I can't say too much, sorry Luna."

"Very well, I have a solution to all our problems," Fleur says. "I need to know and the two of you will not act like boyfriend and girlfriend until I am otherwise occupied. So, if you will place the memories of today in the Pensieve, I will occupy my time and the two of you can be alone."

Now, both of you are blushing furiously. Maybe Fleur should just stick to embarrassing you through various acts of nudity? Again you comply, feeling like she is ordering you around. Why fight it? Resistance would only encourage the French witch. It takes a good deal of time to pull this memory out of your head. There's a lot of ground to cover.

When she enters the basin, you turn to Luna.

"Is she always this awful?" she asks.

"Yes."

"Does she really smother Bill in a hug whenever he enters the room?"

"Just about every time." On several occasions, she even jumps up and wraps her legs around Bill, but that's extra information Luna doesn't really need to hear.

A moment of silence passes before you continue, "What exactly has she been telling you to do?"

If possible, Luna looks even more mortified, "I don't want to talk about it. Did you have fun at the party?"

"I wouldn't exactly call it fun. Trust me on that one. I just got back from visiting Azkaban."

"Is it as horrible as they say?"

"Pretty much, but I didn't expect it to be so clean."

She looks at you for a moment before deciding on a course of action. "Close your eyes, Harry."

Now if it was Dudley telling you that, it'd be a good time to run, but for Luna it seems safe enough. Her chair moves slightly and seconds later her lips touch yours. There's a sweet innocence to the contact and you respond slowly, not wanting to scare her off. With Fleur a mere ten feet away, the scene feels somewhat naughty anyway.

A few more kisses and her mouth starts to open. Sure feels inviting. But like every good Cursebreaker knows, you should always check for traps. In most cases you'd conjure something and send it in first. It's too much of a bother and a real mood killer to draw your wand, so you'll just have to send the tip of your tongue to scout ahead. She stops for a moment the first time it brushes against her lips, but she doesn't pull away. You follow with a few more careful and calculated swipes against the perimeter of her defenses, wondering what will happen next. A few seconds later, she starts moving her mouth against yours and her lips part further – access granted!

Somewhere along the way your two tongues meet still mostly inside her mouth. Not a bad little exchange until you hear the door open. Luna jumps back like she'd been Banished as Bill and Kwan enter the room. Laughing good-naturedly, Bill assesses the situation and says, "Oi, Ambassador, get your own room."

"How was your visit with your parents?"

"Not as productive as I would have liked. The only family more stubborn than the Weasleys are the Prewitts, and the vaunted library offered only a meager selection on our current subject."

"I have something for you." You pull out the message from the dementor and hand it to him.

"Interesting, the script is very old, looks similar to Babylonian or maybe Phoenician. Okay, where did you come by it?"

"A dementor handed this to me at Azkaban. Could be anything, but even if it's an invite to a birthday party it might be important."

Bill makes a face. "Love notes from a demeter! That's a new one. Before I ask any further questions, we should talk about how much we can say in front of Miss Lovegood here. No offense Luna, but despite our tone things are quite serious."

You pause trying to compose an answer, but Luna beats you to it. "Why don't I go across the hall into your room, Harry?"

"I'll go with you and they can join Fleur in the Pensieve. We'll talk in a bit, Bill. Did Hagrid take Hack into the Forbidden Forest? He isn't on the grounds or in Hogsmeade."

Kwan answers, "Troll went with half-giant and will return tomorrow. We discuss other things as well." Bill walks over to Fleur and proceeds to goose her on the bum. Fleur jumps, but keeps her head in the Pensieve. Her right arm feels around on Bill for a moment, motions for him to join her in the basin, and then puts his hand firmly on her arse.

The hitwizard's comments don't sound encouraging, but you nod and lead Luna towards your room. Once inside, you hope to resume the 'clash of the tongues,' but she stops you.

"I get the feeling that I'm in the way," She said.

"Not really, but there are things happening, and some of them you're better off not knowing. I hope that makes sense. I do tell you what I can."

Luna shakes her hair and gives you a smile. "If there is anyone here that understands keeping a secret, it's me. Did you solve your problem with your Animagus form?"

"Not really, but there's no reason not to show you at this point." Luna has been pretty patient; she deserves a chance to step further into your world.

Stepping away from her, you shift into your jaguar form. Perspective changes as always and you hear her sharp intake of breath. She kneels down next to you and strokes the fur on your head.

"When you told me that you had this form, I believed you, but really seeing it is a completely different story. The books I'd looked at said that the black ones were rarer. I should have known..."

She smells even better in this form and you nuzzle against her.

"So, what has you all concerned? You certainly look impressive. I hope you can teach me!"

You hold up your paw for inspection and she runs her hands along it, feeling the scales and your slightly oversized claws. You give her a few seconds and shift back to your human form.

"The scales are interesting. I assume this is what is bothering you?"

"In the battle against the Daemon, I fought it in my jaguar form and ended up swallowing some of its blood or whatever the hell it was. You can see why this would bother me."

She reaches for your left hand and carefully examines it before giving you a reassuring grin. "Well, no sign of scales or anything else here, so it's limited to your animal form. Offhand, I'd say no snacking on nether creatures and things shouldn't be a problem."

Eager to change the subject, you ask, "So, are you ready to talk about whatever Fleur was embarrassing you with?"

She crinkles her nose. "Maybe after a bit more convincing..."

The right side of her neck, from the bottom of the ear down to the collarbone appeared to be the most sensitive area previously. It seems like a good place to start your interrogation. You pull her closer and put your back up against the wall letting her feel like she's the one in control. Her delicate hands run through your hair and flex periodically, which means she obviously likes what you are doing.

"How's this for convincing?" You breathe heavily into her ear.

"She was probing specifically for memories of you and me together. Don't take this the wrong way, but she's a bit of a perv."

"I think she prefers the term free spirit."

"Whatever." Additional commentary is squelched by a request to further her education in the art of snogging, and right now you couldn't really care what she and Fleur were talking about. You keep your hands busy massaging circles in her back, ensuring that they don't get any ideas about going lower on their own.

Minutes pass before she breaks contact and backs away. However, she maintains contact with your hands. It's nice to see you have a noticeable effect on her. "You mentioned something about being intense."

"I suppose I did, but I'm letting you set the pace."

She smiles slightly. "Why don't we sit for a minute or two?"

"Okay, but I know they're going to steal me away in a few minutes. So, have I been convincing enough?"

"I suppose." She pauses for effect and sits on the couch before continuing. "Fleur went straight for the memory of you and me 'negotiating' over your personal spellbook. If that wasn't bad enough, after she found it, she critiques our efforts and started offering suggestions on what I should do

next time. I was positively mortified!”

You shrug and join her on the couch, trying not to picture the things your French friend may have offered as suggestions. “She’s a Veela in love. From what I’ve gathered, they’re a very sensual people.”

“And you’re not bothered by her aura?” she says skeptically.

“Not really. She’s attractive to be sure, but she’s also Bill’s fiancée and very much in love with him. We have more of a brother and sister relationship going.” At least that’s what you and Bill both hope.

“Sorry, I was just being stupid.”

“Don’t worry about it. I just don’t want there to be misunderstandings like when we were writing each other. Let’s stop talking about her. I’m more interested in you.”

“Quit.” She blushes prettily.

“Well since we’re here and not currently snogging, you could tell me about what Looney has been up to?”

She smiles and launches into a few stories involving the folks in Ravenclaw. Luna is apparently brilliant at Locator spells. The stuff her housemates hide from her usually ends up further annoying the people hiding the items. Luna actually became mildly angry when someone pilfered her favorite pair of shoes. At two in the morning before an exam last year, those shoes turned up and started doing a tap dance on that person’s headboard. She demonstrates by taking off her shoes and Charming them. Smiling, she changes her sitting position and puts her feet in your lap while the animated footwear entertains the two of you.

She starts a second story but a knock at the door interrupts your fun. Time must have flown away from you or they finished quickly.

“Hello Harry. Professor Dumbledore sent me.” Nope. It’s Hermione. She’s staring at Luna’s feet in your lap. Well at least she knocked.

“What does he want?”

“It’s about our arrangement.” She replies cryptically.

Luna shakes her head and cancels the charm on her shoes, putting them back on. “Thank you for taking the time to listen to daddy’s complaints about the Rotfang’s influence in the southern hemisphere. I’m certain you’ll be able to convey the magnitude of the problem to your government. Good night, Ambassador Potter.”

Hermione waits until Luna leaves. “Harry, are you and Luna dating?”

“What the two of us are doing together is none of your business. Now what did you want?”

“The Headmaster says that you may have to leave school again at some point in the near future. He wants me to spend more time around you to charge the wards more quickly.”

You gesture towards the couch Luna just vacated. She sits. “Does she know about the arrangement?”

“No.”

“Are you going to tell her?”

“Hadn’t planned on it, and I don’t want to expose her to any unnecessary risk.”

“So you like her...”

“She doesn’t annoy me with questions like you do.”

“Well, if you really do like her maybe Professor Dumbledore can transfer the wards to her.”

You make no effort to hide the incredulous look on your face. “Quit looking for someone else to fix your mistake, Hermione. You signed up for this. Deal with it.”

“That’s not what I meant! You obviously don’t mind being around her. I’m just saying you’d probably rather be close to her than me. It might charge the wards faster.”

“Now who’s the one with the emotional depth of a teaspoon? I like being around her, but I don’t want to be forced to be around her, or use her like some kind of a means to an end. Furthermore, I don’t plan on making her anymore of a target in this war than she already is.”

She fumes for a minute and you couldn’t really give a crap what she’s thinking. Okay, you’re being hard on her, but she’s earned every second of this. Ginderella has enough sense to avoid you like the plague, and she probably has the same cavalier idea about love potions that Ron has. Hermione should’ve known better!

“I’m sorry. Every time I try to talk with you, I make things worse don’t I?”

“No argument there.”

“I just have to believe that I can fix this.”

“Some things can’t be fixed. You want some raw honesty, here it is. You should have bloody well known better! I’ve got a Pensieve over in the other room if you’d like to see my first real memory of this past summer. It’s me following you and Ginny around and listening to you talk about me like I’m some kind of fucking pet kneazle!”

“I was wrong! What more do you want from me? I’ve already tried to resign as Head Girl.”

Considering you just witnessed Dumbledore leave an Order member to rot in Azkaban, it’s not surprising that he refused her resignation. He probably talked her out of it and made her feel good about the decision by the end of it. “That’s the point, Hermione. I don’t want anything from you, not any more. I can’t trust you right now and you know the Prophecy which means you know what I’m up against. Think about it from where I’m sitting right now. Would you trust you?”

She pauses before admitting dejectedly, “No, I probably wouldn’t.”

Someone else knocks at your door. You don’t mind *these* festivities being interrupted. Bill looks surprised as he enters the room.

“Ward charging,” you answer the unspoken question.

“Go back to your room, Granger. I need to borrow Harry for probably the next hour.”

Hermione looks, “But the Headmaster said...”

“I’m thirty feet away. The wards will charge just fine. I’ll knock on the connecting door when I get back.”

You dismiss her and follow Bill back into his suite. Once inside, Kwan erects the privacy wards, and you start your “war council.”

Kwan starts, “Easiest problem first. Mercenaries suffered injuries. Leader, Sean, wants to bring in more. Wants more money.”

“The Phoenix funds still good, Bill?”

“Yeah.”

“Give Sean what *you* think he needs, Kwan. You know more about what’s actually required to be effective and when he’s just being greedy. Bill, you heard me agree to fund the Order from the Black vaults. Keep an eye on Lupin or whoever Dumbledore assigns to it.”

Bill nods. “Speaking of money, Harry, we have plenty in our trunks, but I want to start discreetly pulling some more out of Gringotts and keep this in reserve. If the uprising starts in South America, under their ‘shield’ treaties the branch here could refuse you access to your monies since you’re a Brazilian citizen.”

“Good thinking. Do it. Move as much as you need. Next order of business – what the bloody hell was with the dementors?”

Fleur offers, “They specifically gave the message to you. It could be a warning from this Riddle. It could be an offer of alliance. It could be any number of things.”

Bill says, “From what I understand, they can write in English, so there is a deliberate reason they chose this script. When we translate it, we’ll know more. I can probably do it, but it’ll be faster if we employ an outside specialist.” Bill sounds a bit miffed at outsourcing something in his specialty, but he’s a practical man who knows how much he has on his plate right now.

“Bill is right,” Fleur said. “My father has contacts throughout the world. He can put me in touch with the proper people and make it look like the request is coming from either the French Ministry or our family personally.”

The four of you debate the merits of this for a few minutes, deciding to go with Fleur’s plan. She starts making a copy of the original.

“Now the tricky part, the goblin Arranger – I think Dumbledore wants to make discreet inquiries and try to buy it back if it’s still available. Kwan, this is more your area. How would you handle it?”

“Money first, but prepare to use force if necessary.”

Bill doesn’t look happy. “If it comes to force, we’d better use the mercs to keep our hands clean. I’ve heard about the ‘Arranger.’ He has enough clout to operate outside of the goblin clan in England. That’s not an enemy we want to make if we don’t have to.”

“Can we have the mercs be the buyers?”

Kwan’s turn, “This delicate. Stupid mercenaries good for blowing things up, not much else. I will be the buyer. Goblins know of Kwan. I see what else this goblin can provide.”

The conversation goes on; plans are made and options discussed. After another hour you ask, “Is there any other thing we need to cover?”

Fleur speaks up. “Do you want to show him, William?”

"I still need to practice more."

"No, no, we all could use a good laugh."

Now, you're pretty interested in what they are talking about. "What have you been up to, Bill?"

He glares in mock anger at Fleur. "I've been working with the Mayan armband for over six weeks now, tapping into the power that Thundercloud left in there. I've made a breakthrough."

"What kind?" You suspect where this is going, but want to see anyway.

Bill chuckles and seconds later there is only a reddish-black mole-like creature where he stood. It takes a minute of staring to figure out exactly what he just became.

Fleur produces a galleon and drops to one knee waving it at him. Oh Merlin! This is too funny and appropriate. Bill the treasure hunter is a niffler Animagus!

"Aw isn't that cute." Bill responds with some chittering noises that leave little doubt what he is trying to say.

Fleur laughs, "I am considering getting a gold piercing and seeing if it fascinates him."

A few seconds later Bill starts to move unsteadily. He leaps forward and snatches the galleon from Fleur's hand. The tiny shape scurries under the bed. If Bill's stories are to be believed this isn't the first time he's hid under a bed before.

"I see that clarity is a problem."

"Yes, I have been telling him to ask you for assistance for the last few days, but he is stubborn and insists on doing it himself. I do have a Tracker on him and have sealed all the crevices under the bed. The idea of chasing him all over the castle has very little appeal to me."

Even Kwan is smiling as you consider ways to embarrass Bill. Fleur bends down to coax him out with a few more galleons from her handbag and some "baby talk." Seconds later, Bill comes skittering out from his hiding spot and makes tracks towards the stack of coins on the ground.

"Allow me, Fleur."

With a quick movement of your wand, you snap off a body bind. In light of all this seriousness, perhaps a bit of lightheartedness is in order. Plus, you'll need something for Bill's bachelor's party.

Reversing his transformation, Bill returns to human form. His head lolls to the side and his eyes dart back and forth clearly confused. It'll be another few minutes before he's coherent.

"Do we have time for a quick picture? Fleur, I don't suppose you happen to know a spell that will transfigure a bloke's clothes into, oh let's see maybe a French maid's outfit?"

Fleur gives you an evil smile before going to the dresser to retrieve her camera, "If he asks, I'll swear you cast the spell." Even Kwan laughs and offers a pointer or two.

Minutes later and completely unaware of his brief fashion shoot, Bill can finally string together a couple of sentences. "Technically, the armband is a Dark artifact, but it's a brilliant shortcut through the process. It took me six weeks to do what normally takes people over a year. I still need to get this clarity thing you keep talking about down, but it is amazing. Fleur is going to use it next; she thinks it will help her make the full blown avian transformation."

"Yes, normally it is only the pureblooded Veela that can perform this. I am very excited to try. Perhaps it may sound a bit spiteful, but there are several people I would like to demonstrate an Animagus form to. If you think that you have problems with the purebloods, you have never met the purebloods in Veela society."

By the time you have everything hashed out it is right around curfew. Hermione has already left for her rounds, which means she'll likely come bother you in another hour or two, but that's not a bad thing.

You spend a good thirty minutes meditating, reestablishing clarity with your inner animal and storing energy in the totem around your neck. You might need that energy somewhere down the line. You've been fighting your instincts, especially with Luna, and Thundercloud always stressed that there needs to be balance between your forms. Clarity is merely a destination. Balance is the journey that keeps the forms in harmony.

There's another knock on your door. It's too early for it to be Hermione.

You walk to the door. "Who is it?"

"Let me in, Potter. It's time we had a talk." The voice grates on your nerves.

Oh, that's just great. What a pleasant way to spend the evening, in conversation with Severus Snape. You don't need to think about what your animal instincts tell you to do with him.

Turn Me Loose: A Harry Potter Adventure And I'm Here to Please

Chapter 6 – And I'm Here to Please

You stare at the man in your doorway. "I've had a long day, Snape. Fuck off."

He puts his hand on the door and forces his way in. "Glib as ever, Potter. However, I have important matters to discuss. Let's pretend for a moment that you actually are a diplomat."

It's tempting to grab a pair of knuts out of your robes and tell him to go buy a personality, but it's the kind of thing someone says when they don't have a good comeback line. "Well, shut the damn door and let's hear what so bloody important."

Snape pushes the door closed. You cast privacy wards. Whatever this is, it's bound to be interesting. "So, who is handing out your marching orders tonight?"

"Oh, both of them are demanding information, but I am here to satisfy my own curiosity. What idiotic scheme are you attempting now?"

"You'll have to be more specific, I've got a good deal of idiocy going on right now." You wonder if he's heard about his little house at Spinner's End yet.

"Very droll, Potter, but rather fitting. I am referring to your ridiculous claim to be a Dark Wizard."

"And how do you know it's just a claim? Perhaps you're only seconds away from a horrible death."

Snape scowls, which is to say that his expression remains unchanged. "If you were possessed, I either wouldn't have the debt to you or it would be compelling me to try to free you. Since it is not and I can still sense it, I can only conclude that this is another one of your ridiculous lies."

Perhaps he still is only seconds away from a horrible death. You hadn't counted on Snape's life debt. "You've got it all figured out, why don't you tell me why I'm doing it?"

"You seem to be laboring under the misconception that this wizard you are pretending to be is something of a threat to the Dark Lord. He is clearly surprised, but he is not cowering in a corner. You were better off when he believed you were simply a lucky child. Stupidity has always been your strong suit, but even this has me baffled."

Still, it could be a blessing in disguise. Pondering this for a moment you decide to go with "Look, whether you want to believe it or not, maintaining this façade will help protect me. You won't believe me, but if he thinks I'm Chilotha he is underestimating me."

"Do you think this is a game?"

"No Snape, this is my life!"

"It won't be for much longer if you continue down this path, charlatan!" He's openly mocking you.

"I'll give you one thing Snape. You've always been a bloody bastard to me. At least you're consistent."

Snape's face twists in a mask of annoyance. "Do you want to know what I think? You haven't changed since you came through these doors six years ago. I think ..."

You cut him off. "Alright, you're a bit slow, so I'll spell it out for you. Riddle knows there was Chilotha's dead spirit, a pair of Horcruxes, and a caged Daemon there. He needs to think that Chilotha took me over and banished the Daemon he helped summon."

The cogs are spinning in the man's mind. Obviously, Tom hadn't thought it was worth mentioning and Snape's other puppeteer hasn't let him near the memory. "What are you saying, Potter?"

You motion over to the large trunk dominating one side of the wall. The bones and skin inside negate any expansion charms after a time. It'd ruined a pair of trunks already, so it was agreed to just buy a huge non-magical trunk. You throw open the lid and point to the skull. "If we line it with the skin, I was wondering what kind of potions could be brewed inside of it. If he believes that I'm his old buddy, he doesn't think I'm capable of destroying a Daemon's physical form."

“Impossible!”

“Wrong, very possible. I was thinking of storing it down in the Chamber next to the dead Basilisk, but that’s too far to go on a daily basis. I’m making the best of a bad situation. The mess on the third floor let the cat out of the bag. If it wasn’t for that debt, I’d have already shown you the door, but because of it, you’re probably the only person outside of my group I can trust to look out for me.”

Snape looks pensive. From the grinding of his teeth, he’s looking for a way to save face and still accept this. “Miracles do happen. You may actually be capable of thought. Maybe if you had developed this ability sooner your Godfather might still be alive.”

He’s stabbing out and trying to get under your skin. He picks the right topic. “You know one thing that’s always bothered me, Snape? I tipped you off in Umbridge’s office. The toad bitch had the time to march Hermione and me out the castle and into the forest for a confrontation with the Centaurs. Then we eluded her and met up with the rest of my friends so we could fly from here in Scotland all the way to London on a bunch of Thestrals. Somehow, after all of that we still beat the Order to the Ministry building. Care to explain the delay, Snape?”

“You seem to think the Order is like some well-lubricated Muggle machine, Potter. It is not. I’ll not bore you with the details, but I was reasonably certain you were being tricked, which I’m surprised hasn’t happened more often. While I was doing this, I had no idea that you would be recklessly charging to confront a wizard far more powerful than yourself!” He practically spits that out at you.

You pick up several pieces of blank parchment. “Dobby!”

The excitable elf appears. “Master Harry Potter is wanting something from poor Dobby!”

“I want to give a sheet of parchment to Tonks, Remus Lupin, Alastor Moody, Arthur Weasley, and Kingsley Shacklebolt. How fast could you do this? Less than an hour?”

He’s bouncing up and down. “Dobby will do this in thirty minutes!” He snatches the stack out of your hands and disappears leaving you wondering if you could start a pizza delivery service with enough elves.

You cock your head and look at Snape. “Thirty minutes! No wonder you’re just a glorified owl for passing misinformation between Riddle and Dumbledore.”

“Potter, you really have no clue what it takes to be a spy. Do you?”

You put on what you hope is your best look of mock adoration and clap your hands together. “I never thought of it that way. You must be the bravest man I’ve ever met!”

“For someone playing the part of a diplomat, you are a poor actor.”

“Bugger! You’re right. I couldn’t get it out with a straight face.” All faux humor leaves your face. “Face the facts; you’re a loser, Snape. At least Pettigrew only has one master’s boots to lick. You get to do it for two men trying to kill each other. How pathetic is that? The worst part is you could have been somebody. You were strong enough to hold off that broom jinx back in first year. You’re supposedly good with a wand, but forgive me if I have my doubts. Even if you can’t teach Potions, you can certainly brew them. Where has it all gotten you? Nowhere!”

Snape isn’t happy. He’s practically foaming at the mouth. Ironic, given the fact that you know he’ll try to save your life. Just like the predator you’ve become you close in for the kill. “Dumbledore’s greatest fear is Riddle wins or I win and turn dark. Riddle’s fear is dying and being forgotten. Do you know what my fear is Snape? Waking up and realizing that I’ve become a pawn like you.”

His reply is cut short by your door opening. In the hallway stands the centaur Firenze. You negate the privacy wards and he repeats. “My apologies for interrupting your conversation, but I am in need of your assistance Mr. Potter.”

“That’s alright, Professor Snape is just leaving. Thank you for stopping by. I’m glad we had this talk.”

“This isn’t over, Potter!”

“For tonight it is.”

You follow the Divination Professor marveling at how he handles the stairs with relative ease. He leads you silently to the school entrance and outside before saying a word. “The heavens move in a chaotic pattern regarding you. They imply that your path is both distant and near at the same time. There is also great peril ahead of you.”

“I pretty much could guess that, but I thank you just the same. Is that what you wanted to talk to me about?”

Firenze shakes his head and points towards Hagrid’s hut. “No, I believe I need you for this. I have tended their wounds as best I can. Do not worry; they are not in any danger. You would be wise to keep your troll out of the forest, at least until tempers cool.”

You don’t want to, but you have to ask anyway. “What were they doing?”

“When I stumbled upon them, they were fleeing from five of my kin. I do not know all the details, but I believe a wager was involved between Hagrid and your friend. They may have attempted to ride a Centaur they encountered. That is what I hope they were attempting to do. At any rate, they were asking specifically for you and I feared they would start waking up students at this late hour. Also, I sensed that you might need to be somewhere else this evening. If you don’t mind, I think I shall continue my stargazing.”

Up until now, you didn’t know what debauchery smelled like. Sure, there was a memorable occasion in Brazil where you’d been drunk and you’ve had enough experiences with the opposite sex to know what odors get left behind after a rather heated session. Until now, though, the smells have never combined into a bile-raising aroma-fest that you could’ve lived the rest of your life without experiencing. It smells like alcohol, blood, sweat, sex, and several other odors you choose not to try and identify.

“Arry!” Hagrid screams. Hack blearily eyes you and belches, increasing the ratio of alcohol related stench in the room.

The two are in a state of disrepair. Hagrid is sitting in an oversized chair and your troll is simply sprawled on Hagrid’s table.

You could always just stun the pair of them, shut the door and walk away. Both are somewhat resistant to magic, but you’re no ordinary wizard. It’d be the simplest solution.

“Puny Harry! Hack have lots of fun!”

“Can this wait until morning? You guys look a little bruised.”

“English trolls like Hack ... like Hack lots. Also like it rough.” Hack rubs his jaw as you try really hard not to breathe, but your eyes tear up and you feel like your nose hairs are melting. Obviously, knowing Hack’s opinion of the female mountain trolls indigenous to this land must be important enough to get you out here in the middle of the night.

“Yeh woulda been proud o him,” Hagrid slurs, “We came inta that camp and the females couldn’t a got enough o him! Don’t know if it’s the little wings or the Mrs Norris pelt but they was acting like they never seen a male before. Hell, I even got me a little action! That’s me, good old Hagrid, I’m here ta please!”

What exactly can you say to that? Other than during fourth year, Hagrid’s social life hadn’t really entered your thoughts, and now you hope you never, never, *never* have to think about it again! All you manage to come up with is, “That’s nice. Good to hear.”

Hagrid laughs while Hack thumps on the countertop. Both of them chorus, “It’s all the same in the dark!” This prompts another round of raucous mirth from the two.

You look for a way to gracefully exit, something along the lines of blowing a hole in the wall. Stunning yourself is now an option, but being unconscious in this room might not be such a brilliant idea.

“Hell, I’d still be there wif ‘er and she’d still be screaming my name over and over again, if the Chieftain didn’t catch old Hack here with both his mate and his daughter at the same time! I reckon a fight was gonna break out at some time or ‘nother anyway. Good thing Grawpy came along or we might notta gotten out of there!”

Hack raises his head and stares at Hagrid. “She scream ‘Hawg t’rid.’ It troll speak. Means ‘wrong hole’.”

Hagrid’s looks thoughtful and then he starts cackling like a madman. “Well I guess that explains a few things!”

Hack belches again and then joins him in laughter. It takes over a minute for the two to stop. You feel a headache joining your nausea.

When the dull roar quiets, you work up the courage to say, “Well that’s great. I think I’ll be going now.”

“Wait, ‘Arry! Hack tell him about the Centaurs!”

“Hack want to lie in own bed, not talk about horseys that won’t let Hack ride. Always wanted pony...” Hack’s mumbles and drifts off into a loud slobbering snore.

“Guess we shouldna ‘ave drunk that last barrel. Your troll’s a lightweight, ‘Arry!”

You never thought it would be possible; you actually wouldn’t mind being back there still arguing with Snape. “Okay ... well, mind if he sleeps it off here, Hagrid?”

“If I could, I would, but I gotta class ta teach in the morning. Be kinda hard to teach over that snoring. You’re a great wizard, ‘Arry. Go on and get him back up to his room.”

Sadly, being a “great wizard” isn’t what it’s cracked up to be. You decide not to point out that it was only five hours from the first class. Whoever is “lucky” enough to have him shouldn’t count on getting a quality lesson.

Some things, like magically resistant trolls, don’t levitate well. It’s an exhausting thirty minutes getting him back up to the visitor’s wing. You had to stop and reapply the Silencing charm twice along the way. It doesn’t exactly rank up there with banishing hordes of Dementors, slaying a giant

serpent, or defeating a Daemon, but getting him back inside and up to his room is a feat unto itself.

Finally, you drop Hack's massive frame onto his creaking oversized bed. Drawing a series of privacy wards and funneling a good bit of energy into them you hope they will last until the morning. You leave "sleeping beauty" to sleep it off. At least he had a good day, you suppose. It's a good bet that you haven't heard the last of the adventures of "Wrong Way" Rubeus and Hack the Troll Gigolo.

Morning comes all too soon. You stretch your jaguar body out and flick your tail in irritation. Being somewhat nocturnal, you'd rather just sleep in this morning. However there are things to do. Nostrils flare detecting the sweet smell of perfume. It's neither Luna's nor Fleur's, so that leaves only one candidate. You know her scent all too well.

One eye cracks open. Yep, it's Granger. She always shows up at the worst possible times, doesn't she? Her wand is in her hand and she's staring at you with wide eyes. Her lips are moving, but no sound reaches your ears. Damn! That's right you put a silencing ward over your bed in case Hack's magic resistance negated your temporary wards. Sometimes a Curse Breaker is too damn smart for his own good – another of Bill's blasted golden rules.

Slinking off the bed, you growl in annoyance at her and resume human form; not really caring that she gets to see you full frontal.

"Good morning, Granger. Let me guess, you knocked, waited, and then got impatient and came in anyway."

She nods, her eyes flicking down to see "Little Harry" in all his morning glory. "Breakfast ... breakfast ends in ... and then we have ... When did ...? How ...?"

You casually Summon your clothes and dress yourself with magic. "Spend some time in the real world, Hermione. Learn magic from real people instead of just reading about it. Then again, maybe you and Ron were holding me back all along?"

She ignores the verbal barb. Your new abilities are too much of a distraction. "But that's not possible! People don't pick that up over a summer! It takes years of practice to be...."

Her voice trails off as your Silencing spell envelopes her. You step inside of it. "How about we go down to the Great Hall and you can shout it down there too! Can you keep your mouth shut about this, or do I get to practice my Memory charms before I eat? Fleur says I'm pretty good, but I might be off because I'm hungry."

If possible, her eyes get a little wider. "I'm sorry Harry. I was just shocked and put my foot in my mouth again." She drops her eyes refusing to look at you. "I promise I won't say anything, but if you feel like you need to Obliviate me, I'll understand."

It's tempting. She's throwing herself on your mercy, which is a telling sign of just how badly her spirit is crushed. There's not a lot of fight left in her anymore. You notice she's trembling slightly. Is she actually afraid of you? She is! A tiny part of you feels bad; naturally, the rest of you feels like transfiguring her into a female mountain troll and sending Hack a little morning pick-me-up.

You keep her waiting for a few seconds and lower your wand. "Keep the memories, Hermione, but keep your comments to yourself. I sleep as a jaguar because it keeps Riddle out of my mind. The reason I couldn't learn Occlumency last year was my animal was trying to get out and the two don't mesh. Using your books and processes, most anyone can become an Animagus, even someone like Wormtail. Some people on the other hand, are born to be one. That's the difference, Hermione."

A flick of your wand negates the privacy ward and you call for Dobby.

The elf appears, "Yes, Mister Harry Potter!"

"Good morning. Can you grab a plate of breakfast for me and ...do you want some breakfast Hermione? Okay, two plates of breakfast then." Knowing how she dislikes people using elves to facilitate their day, it was tempting to make her ask Dobby for her plate, but that would be just rubbing it in.

Monday morning, oh great more Snape. Didn't you get enough of the bastard last night?

Snape is slightly agitated during Defense. "Potter! I need to assess your skills in non-verbal magic. Join me here, now!"

Rolling your eyes, you pick up your wand and shuffle to him. A slight buzzing sound fills your ears, along with Snape's whispered voice. Privacy charm? He leans forward as if giving you personal instructions. "Your first test as a Dark Wizard, Potter! Time to see if you have the commitment to carry out this ridiculous charade."

"Who's giving the orders this morning?"

"The Dark Lord. As there is a Hogsmeade weekend coming up, the recollection of this will no doubt find its way back to him. Dodge to your right; my first spell will be aimed slightly to your left. Shield the next one and then call this a pointless exercise and walk out as you did before."

Pacing over to your position on the dueling platform, you raise your wand to the ready position.

“Begin.”

Snape leads with a Bludgeoner aimed just as he stated. Sidestepping, you wordlessly conjure a standard shield and try your best to look bored. His silent Stunner fizzles on it.

Instead of quitting, you snap off a fast wordless Blinding curse, which catches Snape flatfooted. Okay, it’s probably petty, but years of his atrocious teaching methods allow you some leeway. Give the man a bit of credit, he doesn’t immediately remove it. He spins away to his right as your own Bludgeoner whizzes past him. Lone Thundercloud taught you several borderline spells. You use one of them. It’s a Stunner wrapped within a Vomiting hex. Snape collapses to the ground while removing your Blindness curse. Unconscious and convulsing, he retches.

A subtle flick of the wand moves his head so he doesn’t suffocate in his own breakfast and you walk towards the door enjoying the stunned looks of your housemates and the Slytherins. You stop and stare at Draco Malfoy while Summoning your books. “When you wake him, tell him that this was a frivolous waste of my time.”

Maybe being a dark wizard won’t be so bad after all?

“What are you smiling about?” Luna asks slyly. A quick check of the Marauder’s Map found her sitting out by the lake. Her thin blouse may have offered little protection from the cold, but the Warming charm she was using most certainly did.

Sitting down next to her, you chuckle. “I left Snape stunned and lying in a pool of vomit, so I’m in good spirits. Has your day been as fun?”

She adjusts the wand behind her ear and tilts her head at you, making her blue eyes seem unnaturally large. “Hagrid taught for about fifteen minutes, but suddenly dismissed the class saying he felt rather ill. I offered several suggestions from Daddy’s magazine, but the one involving three goat eyes seemed to make things worse for him. I hope this isn’t an outbreak of festering blortneds otherwise everyone will need to shave all their hair.”

You play along and verify with the map that no one is nearby, “All of it?”

Smiling, she replies, “I’m afraid so. Unless you think we can convince everyone to eat lunch upside down? ... What are you staring at? Do I have something on my teeth?”

Leaning closer, you kiss her. She responds, but tenses after a few seconds. Luna whispers in your ear after you move onto her tasty neck, “We’re out in the open, Harry.”

“I checked the Map. There’s no one around.”

She pushes you away and seems uncomfortable. “Still, someone could be watching from the castle.”

It reminds you of Karina Machado and how she constantly worried little Chico would walk in on the two of you. Luna must be a behind closed doors type of person. You offer a compromise. “We could always go and see if the Room of Requirement is available?”

“Where do you think most of my class ran off to the moment Hagrid released us? Demelza Robins mentioned something about recreating a Mediterranean Beach and showing everyone something called boogie boarding. I opted not to go and may have made a few interesting comments. I just wanted to stay out and enjoy the fresh air here by the water.”

You let it slide. She could just as easily have gone with the rest and sat by the water in the Room of Requirement and smelled the fresh air. “Come on, let’s go.”

“You really want to go there?” Luna seems apprehensive.

“Depends, did Ginny go with them?” She nods. “Well, I’ve been meaning to catch up with her and catch up on old times, but for some strange reason she’s been avoiding me. Plus I feel like having a good swim.”

A hastily scrawled piece of parchment on the door reads, “To open think ‘I want to join Demelza’s beach party’.”

The door opens onto a wooden platform with steps leading down to a beach below. Two changing booths, one for each sex, are on the platform along with several racks of swimwear. “What do you think? Should I take a Speedo?”

Luna has a yellow bikini with pink polka dots in her hand and is eyeing it suspiciously. “A what? It’s not much bigger than the bottom to this one.”

You chuckle and grab a regular set of green swim trunks and go into the changing room. A minute later, you’re waiting at the bottom of the stairs marveling at the room’s ability to recreate realistic sand. Your wand dangles from a conveniently available tie on the trunks. The beach stretches out

for roughly a fifty meters in each direction and there's another fifty to walk to the waterline. In addition to the fifth year Ravensclaws and Gryffindors there are a few seventh years from your house that must have gotten out of their classes early.

One of them comes walking towards you. She fills out a black one piece rather nicely with a tall and curvy frame. The seventh year looks very uncomfortable, but it's an improvement over the last time you saw her. Her injured arm is still a bit on the pale side.

"Hello Katie. I didn't know you were back. Good to see you."

She kicks the sand with her foot. "They told me that you were the one that saved me from that cursed necklace and then saved me again while I was recovering in the infirmary. I don't remember any of it, but you saved my life twice, thank you."

Smiling, you chuckle and try to downplay it. "It was nothing, really. Besides, I was already off the Quidditch team this year. I couldn't let the our best Chaser go down too. Are you going to be ready for the opening match?"

Katie nods her head ignoring your offer of an easier topic, "I'm a little rusty, but I'll be ready. Harry, it did mean something. I'm pretty sure I owe you one of those life debt things. I felt strange the moment you stepped in here, like my attention was suddenly drawn to you."

Life debts, despite having several, you've never done much research on them. If Snape experiences the same thing, that must drive him around the twist! Of course, it could explain a bit of Ginny's previous obsession with you. Shrugging, you consider the people that you know owe you one. "They're not all they're cracked up to be – trust me on that one."

She looks a little flustered as Luna walks down the stairs. "Did the Heliopaths erase your memory?"

Now Katie looks even slightly more confused. "Beg pardon?"

"Well, Daddy assumes the attempt on your life was an attempt to silence you based on what you may have discovered about the Heliopaths that were thrown out of power along with the previous Minister. It's in the newspaper."

Katie's hazel eyes widen slowly in recognition. Outside of the DA last year, you doubt either of them had any contact with each other. "Oh, yes of course that article Leanne showed me ... in the *Quibbler*, wasn't it?"

"Yes, Daddy sent me an owl and would like me to interview you at some point. Any information you can provide connecting the Heliopaths to the Rotfang Conspiracy would be greatly appreciated."

"I'm afraid I don't know anything about that."

Luna reaches down and scoops a handful of sand allowing it to flow through her fingers while she stares at it. "Well that's the problem with magics that affect the memory. You might have. Tell me, have you felt more sexually aroused than normal since the attack?"

Katie's draw drops. "Excuse me!?"

"It's a symptom of Heliopath mind control." Luna continues and looks up to the false sky of the room. "I wonder if we could change the sky to any color we wished in here. I'm feeling more in a purple mood today."

You admire her ability to make her target squirm and appear so bloody random at the same time. Deciding to "rescue" Katie for a third time, you interrupt. "I think you can probably ask Demelza if you really want to see that, Luna. It's been my experience that the room seems to obey the first person to enter it. Katie, I'm going to go take a quick dip. I'm really glad that you're okay."

"Thank you, Harry. If you need anything ..."

"I'll let you know, Katie. Just make certain to give Slytherin a sound thrashing."

"Count on it, Harry."

Katie walks off and you get a nice little glimpse her firm backside out of the corner of your eye, while turning to Luna. "That wasn't very nice. She was trying to thank me for saving her life."

She bends over to scoop up another handful of sand, not meeting your eyes and states, "Sorry, I was trying to come up with something witty involving her broom between her legs, but couldn't get the wording right. Either way, this was your idea; so, are we going to swim first or embarrass Ginny?"

You're not certain what to make of Luna at the moment. Maybe this was a bad idea. Still, now is as good a time as any to clear the air with Ginny Weasley. "Let's take care of Ginny now."

Ginny is wearing a blue bikini and sitting on a beach towel talking with Demelza and another girl in her year when you approach. She stops speaking and looks over her shoulder at you. Maybe there is something to that whole attention thing that Katie was talking about?

"Hello Ginny."

She looks up at you, slightly nervous. "Hello Harry."

"I've been back for several days now and I was just wondering why you didn't drop by and say hello. I'm hurt. I thought we were friends. I seem to have a few memories of being more than that as well." Your voice drips sarcasm.

Ginny shrugs her shoulders and glances away. "Hermione advised me to steer clear of you the first night you came back. I listened to her. Besides, I'm dating Neville now."

You kneel down next to her to get back into her field of vision. "Drat! There go my hopes of starting over. What, did Dean prove resistant to the love potions as well?"

A little bit of that temper surfaces, "If you want to know so badly ask him!"

"No, I don't really care one way or another. If Thomas was smart enough to see you for what you are, good on him, but I may have to have a few words with Neville to make certain he knows as well. Neville's a real good bloke."

Ginny snaps back with her eyes tearing up "Stay away from him! What do you want? An apology? Fine. I'm sorry. Happy now? Just leave me alone."

Somehow it isn't as much fun as you had imagined it would be. You made a little witch cry. The curious and disapproving stares of Robins and the other girl bore through you. Many other eyes are looking at your little group right now.

Robins speaks up, "I'm not really sure what's going on here, but why don't you move along, Harry?"

"That's what I'm doing Demelza. Making certain I move along. Making certain there aren't any more idiotic plans involving love potions in my future – right Ginny? Since you weren't going to come to me, I needed to come to you and make that perfectly clear."

With that, you jump up from the kneeling position right to your feet in one fluid motion and walk towards the water. Before Brazil, you didn't even know how to swim, but you've come to like it. The jaguar in you doesn't necessarily crave the water, but is quite capable of swimming and even fishing while swimming. You dive into the warm water and swim out past the people on the tiny boards. Luna merely walks out until she is knee deep and sits down letting the waves wash across her.

You felt a little dirty anyway.

"Are you happy to get that off your chest, Harry?"

You keep walking down the hallway with her beside you. "Not really, Luna. I just don't seem to fit in here anymore. Not that I ever did."

"You're not leaving again, are you?" She asks quietly.

"From time to time, I need to leave. There are things that need to be done, but there are equally important reasons that I need to keep coming back."

"More of the things about the war that you can't talk about, right?"

You give the petite blonde a smile. "Unfortunately, yes. Even if you were great at Occlumency, there would be things I couldn't tell you.

"For my own protection..."

"Not just that, but for my safety and everyone else who is working with me. There is one reason I don't mind coming back here to Hogwarts."

She blushes. "It's tough making this work between us, isn't it? When we're alone there's always the war we can't talk about and when we're in public I'm Looney."

You'd learned this lesson during the summer. She's not going to come out of her protective shell until she is ready. "Luna, I'm not going to try to force you to change just for me. I'm not exactly great in groups either, am I?"

"No, you're bloody awful."

You feign being hurt. "No words of encouragement? No, you just need more practice?"

She grins, probably the first real smile you've seen on her all day. "Sorry, there's no way around it. You're bloody awful - worse than me if you must know, because you're actually trying."

The two of you share a laugh and she says, "Check the map?"

"Everyone's on their way to lunch, why?"

“So that broom cupboard over there is empty?”

“It is.”

“Why don’t we skip lunch? Unlike your room, no one is going to barge in with news about the war and force me to leave. Plus, if your Locking and Silencing charms are really that good there’s no way the public is going to get in to muck things up.”

And people say the girl is insane...

Looking at the map some thirty minutes later, you realize that Dumbledore is loitering in the hallway. Well, at least he has the decency not to interrupt.

You look down at the young witch with the mussed up hair and sigh, “Give me a minute or two to deal with the old man and you’ll be able to leave.”

“We have to do this again sometime.”

“That sounds like a smashing idea.”

Straightening yourself up, you head out into the hallway. “What can I do for you, Dum...?”

The spell hits you in midsentence. You feel your body twisting unnaturally and you collapse to the ground. What the hell did he do to you? Bastard swore an Oath! His words are muffled and your view is somewhat fuzzy.

He’s towering over you. “Were she still with us, Minerva would likely remind me that we do not ever use Transfiguration on a student. I would be forced to remind her that you are no longer a student. I’ve been thinking. Lately, conversing with you could be compared to attempting to talk sense into a piece of furniture. In that light, I have decided to try just that and see if that tactic is more successful. Since your attendance has been rather spotty I’ve taken the liberty of informing your next professor that you wouldn’t be there. Ah, hello Miss Lovegood, you’d best run along to class.”

“Is that Harry?”

“Very astute deduction, five points to Ravenclaw.”

“He’s a footrest.”

“Probably for the next thirty minutes until his innate magic overcomes my enchantment. In the meantime, Harry and I shall adjourn to my office for a decidedly one-sided conversation. I do believe that you may have to give Harry some leeway this evening. He might not be in a very charitable mood. By the way, how is your father my dear?”

Luna responds slowly continuing to stare down at you. She leans down and gently strokes the upholstery that used to be your body. “He is doing well. The Rotfangs have lost their hold on him. I was rather hoping that Harry had succeeded in becoming a furniture-magus ... or is it furniture-magi? Either way, they’re extremely rare.”

“Indeed, they must be.”

“So, your plan is to sneak Harry into your enemy’s stronghold as a piece of furniture so that he may strike when they least expect it? Interesting, but I recommend leather instead of fabric, less chance of a Doxy infestation, unless of course Harry has made allies with the Doxies. Have they made him their king already? Shouldn’t there be a formal announcement? Unless of course, you and Harry are proposing a similar treaty with the Nargles and his new position would endanger that.”

“Doxies and Nargles don’t like each other, my dear?”

“No, Professor. Doxies have been dominant for centuries, but the Nargles developed a breeding plan for improved strength in the species. Now the Doxies take the opportunity to embarrass Nargles whenever they can, but it rather shortsighted, particularly since Doxies are known for their vision. But if you feel you don’t need the Nargles, then crowning Harry the Doxie king and finishing him out in leather should perfect your furniture infiltration plan.

Give her some credit. She’s not holding back against Dumbledore, and you’d bet the old coot will completely miss the comparison of himself to short-sighted Doxies. Harry Potter, King of All Doxies, it has a nice ring to it.

“Perhaps we shall consider that rather unorthodox approach, but in this case I have promised Harry some special lessons this year and until now have not been able to meet with him. This first lesson is on perspective. Now, do run along. You don’t want to be late for the afternoon session. Rest assured, he will be returned to you completely unharmed.”

Luna shrugs and turns to leave. “Don’t worry sir; your secret plan is safe with me.”

“A most curious child... I am not certain what you see in her, Harry, but who am I to question matters of the heart? Now, come along. I haven’t taught in years, so you must forgive me if my techniques are somewhat dated.”

Minutes later, your vision is clouded by Dumbledore's massive feet resting on top of you. Tiny Snitches dance across the turquoise socks. You still have all your senses; including smell. "Harry, I do believe I told you once long ago about my appreciation for socks. Always take care of your feet. I cannot emphasize that enough."

A smallish Fawkes lands on his right foot and squawks down at you. "Now Fawkes, you should be more respectful of our guests. Oh dear ... that wasn't very nice of you at all Fawkes. It may leave a stain, but I suppose there is a lesson in this for both of us, Harry. We, along with Tom, are exceptionally powerful wizards and must be wise and judicious with the use of our power. Take for instance that spell you used on Professor Snape this morning. Perhaps you were convinced that using such a gray spell would reinforce the mystique surrounding you. However, one must take into account that there are consequences to every action and that you are now reaping what you have sewn as a result. You have truly grown into a force to be reckoned with. However, Harry, you are not the only force to be reckoned with. Power, especially at a young age, requires both restraint and discretion. Perhaps that is where you can benefit from my years of experience."

He pauses and pulls an old wooden pipe from a desk drawer. "Do you mind if I have a smoke? I rarely indulge, but I find an occasional pipe relaxes me. Ah good, no objections."

Dumbledore lights the pipe and proceeds to blow tiny, smelly little smoke rings towards you. "Fighting a war is a very serious business and we haven't necessarily been too friendly with each other as of late. Rather than continue to use dear Severus as a proxy for the ill-feelings that surround us, I have decided that a bit of open hostility is in order. Over the years Professor Snape has often accused you of having a swelled head and inflated ego. Until recently, I merely took his words for what they were and moved on to the next topic. Unfortunately, your actions as of late have lent a bit of credence to his musings. In this, and in several other ways, I have failed you, Harry. Nonetheless, we must endeavor to step beyond our petty squabbles and cooperate with each other. I shouldn't have to remind you that if Tom is victorious, he won't be content with such base humiliation for the both of us. We are far more likely to be killed first and paraded around as trophies. Death is, of course, simply the next great adventure, but I am rather reluctant to begin it when there is still so much to be done here."

After a few more minutes of enduring his witty sayings, he stops. "Impressive. You're already beginning to revert at the fifteen minute mark. That in itself is commendable, well done indeed. Fawkes, do go ahead and take young Harry back to his room. Harry, thank you for affording me this time to air my concerns about our present working relationship, but I also have business to attend to. I have a meeting at the Ministry and then an evening session of the Wizengamot to attend. I shall not return until the morning and ask that you take time this evening to reflect on our working relationship and what the both of us need to do to improve it. I welcome any suggestions you might have divined during this period of forced contemplation."

At dinnertime, you're sitting with the Hufflepuffs and still fuming over your time as a damn piece of furniture! Dumbledore's little stunt has you in a rather foul mood, but there's no use holding anyone else accountable for that bastard's actions. It'd only reinforce the opinion that you're behaving immaturely. Plus, you know he's trying to yank your strings! The only question is what did he hope to achieve with humiliating you? It took you a good thirty minutes to calm down and start trying to look beyond the act and start looking at Dumbledore's motivations.

Unfortunately, Luna is already off to the evening detention earned as a result of being late. Still, she had slyly mentioned that if you ever ended up as a chaise lounge that she wouldn't mind relaxing on top of you.

You need to keep her away from Fleur when Bill's fiancé returns from France. She's already trying to redirect your anger with sexual innuendo.

Wayne Hopkins and Justin Finch-Fletchley from the DA last year invited you over and are asking you about Brazil and, of course, about the rumors already swirling around what happened with Snape this morning. You're explaining the basics of Dodgespell to the excited duo and a rather melancholy Susan Bones.

The sad but pretty witch reminds you that others have suffered dearly. Susan lost her aunt and by virtue of the murder of Hannah Abbott's mum, her best friend. "Have you heard from Hannah?"

Susan pokes her barely touched plate of food. She's a good deal thinner than you recalled and her hair is dull and listless. "I've received an international message or two. Her father had some pull at New Salem. She's adjusting to classes in America."

Had you taken Lauren up on her offered tour, would you have bumped into Hannah there? That would have been an interesting scene, now wouldn't it? "Next time you write to her tell her I said hello."

She drops her fork with a clatter on her plate and glares at you. "When are you going to stop him Harry?"

"Bee in your bonnet, Bones?" There's something to be said for alliteration. There's also the school motto about tickling a sleeping dragon. Susan doesn't want any part of you right now.

The red head hisses at you, "People are dying and you're sitting here describing a bloody game!"

A bit of anger wells up in you for the Hufflepuff witch. "Could you please tell me when I became your anointed savior?"

"You're Harry Potter." She growls back.

"Can't fault that logic, now can I? I spent a good portion of last year trying to get you people to train yourself and prepare. So let me ask you this Susan, when are you going to do something about all this? Or are you just going to sit there feeling miserable for yourself and hope that someone

else is going to solve all your problems? Isn't it about time you grow up?"

"You've got no right to say that!" Her shriek silences much of the conversation at this table and those neighboring it. Ravensclaws and Slytherins fall silent and hang on your reply.

"Funny, a second ago you were asking when I'd take care of this Dark Wizard problem. Maybe I need to get my hearing checked? Let's call it what it is, Susan. You want to know when I'm going to kill him. I've been stopping him for five years already with precious little help from the lot of you! Tell you what Susan Bones, prove to me that you're worth saving and I'll see what I can do. Wayne, Justin, it's been good catching up. Dodgespell is also pretty good at improving your casting speed. That might come in handy, if you catch my meaning."

Standing up, you feel the burn of eyes staring at you. Your gaze walks up and down the Slytherin table. Most shift uneasily under your glare. There's an empty spot where Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle usually sit. Pity, he should have seen this.

Shaking your head you leave the Great Hall. They're all a collection of poorly prepared children barely able to lift a finger to help themselves. No wonder Voldemort is winning! Hagrid once explained to you that if the Muggle world knew about the Magical one, they'd expect all their problems to be solved by magic. It seems like the Muggle world isn't the only one capable of suffering from those delusions.

Smart man that Hagrid, well provided you excuse his taste in bed warmers.

"I heard you had a little tirade at dinner time."

"I'm not in the mood, Bill." He doesn't know about your little encounter with Dumbledore yet.

"Good, because, you're not half as pretty as Fleur."

"Oh now I'm really hurt. You do realize that you're interrupting a Curse Breaker during carving? According to your Golden Rules, this had better be important."

"Do I detect a bit of sarcasm? Is little Harry feeling like he's all caged up in the big old castle when he could be out blowing something up?"

You set down your chisel. Normally, a half finished Rune is considered a crime, but your favorite red head has that gleam in his eye. He's up to something. "What do you have in mind?"

"You know that oath you took?"

"Don't toy with me, Bill! I've had a rather trying day. If you've figured out a hole in it, you need to let me know right the fuck now!"

"Touchy, touchy! Well it's only a theory at this point, but I've been looking through my copy of Chilotha's stuff and several of the books we took from the Black library and I have an idea. You know that baby thing Riddle made?"

"Hello, I was there."

"Well, I figured out that it's a homunculus. They're sometimes called blood bags. Some cultures use them as an anchor for magic based on blood. Others have been known to use stillborn children, but that's straying from the topic and more than a little disgusting. Either way, one of the books from the Black library has a recipe."

"Sounds rather Dark, but go on, I like where this is headed."

He guffaws. "It's borderline Necromancy. During more peaceful times, I'm sure it'd be worth a stint in Azkaban, but that Diplomatic Immunity of yours does come in handy."

"Is it Dark enough to really make Dumbledore squirm?" You ask with a hopeful look in your eyes. After all, the only hold that bastard has over you is to protect the school. If there's a way that you can keep the wards strong and get out from under his thumb, well you'd be oath bound to investigate it.

Curse Breakers in general have a much more flexible view on Dark magic. They have to, or they don't live that long. Back in Brazil, you were surprised when Bill said that the best 'breakers have a decided tint of gray in their outlook. Many ward sets are filled with runes designed to kill intruders indiscriminately. If the ward set does the job it's going to kill some anonymous person or thing. You might even be long dead before it happens.

"In the past, I'd have said yes, but we both know he isn't nearly as 'light' as he claims. Right now, I'm guessing we'll at least receive stern disapproval, but if this works, Harry, the homunculus should handle your ward charging duties and give you a bit more freedom."

There was a time not so long ago when you looked at this castle as an escape from the Dursleys – a sanctuary. That was then. This is now.

You give Bill a thin smile and try to picture Dumbledore's face when the two of you figuratively cram this down his throat. "What's a little borderline Necromancy among friends?"

Turn Me Loose: A Harry Potter Adventure I'm Even On My Knees

Chapter 7 – I'm Even on my Knees

You're standing over a hot cauldron feeling lightheaded. Blood from the slits on your palms drips down the stirring rod and mixes with the pungent chemicals floating in the brass pot below. The metallic taste of the third blood replenisher sours in your mouth, but you stir on and fight the waves of nausea that threaten to overwhelm your senses.

The book says when and not if you get sick to do it into the pot. Necromancy – it's not for the faint of heart or the weak-stomached. Oddly it's not the first time you've worked with your own vomit before. Thundercloud was very convinced of the power contained in the fluids of the body. Blood, bile, hair, sweat, and even waste all have been touched by the witch or wizard's magic. It's primal and often disgusting. Some try to compare the "art" of potion making to chemistry. That usually holds up except for time like these when a bloke such as you happens to be doing the whole three witches from Macbeth thing.

One thing's for certain, the Harry Potter of twelve months ago would have recoiled in horror at the scene in front of him. Fortunately, you aren't that idiot anymore.

It's probably a bit childish to imagine how angry Dumbledore is going to be, but you need that motivation right now to keep you going. You needed his help to get at the Horcrux here at Hogwarts. The locket isn't here and it's a good bet the cup isn't as well. You don't need him nearly as much as he needs you. When this works, because you're not willing to accept that it won't, it's time to get the hell out of here. Kwan is due back tomorrow and he sent an owl ahead simply saying he was successful and to pack for cold regions.

Kwan's a man of frustratingly few words, but he knows how insecure Owl Post is, so his caution is understandable. That doesn't make it any less irritating.

In typical wizarding world fashion, your little rant to Susan Bones has been the topic of Rita's commentary and all over the wireless for the last three days. It's almost tempting to send a letter to Riddle and ask him why he really wants to rule all of this. He must be truly nutters. Most believe you've been lying low, simply attending classes and keeping your mouth shut to cover the truth – complex rituals take time.

"Does Punny Harry need another Potion?" Your troll asks from his comfortable spot on his couch. He's shrunken himself down to a reasonable size and is walking with an intentional limp. With Hermione coming over to bother you on a daily basis, Hack's suite was the best place to dabble in slightly off-color magic. Besides, who is going to question any strange smells coming out of Hack's room? Bill is down in the Hogwarts library being seen and establishing his "plausible deniability", only one of you has that diplomatic immunity and if they threw your Cursebreaking buddy into Azkaban, Fleur would be upset and probably willing to level the prison to get him out.

In a Fleur versus Azkaban matchup, even without assistance, your money is on Fleur. "Not yet, but be sure to give me one right after I...." You spend the next few seconds emptying your stomach and blink several times while your eyes water. "Okay, give it to me."

Hack uncorks the bottle for you and holds it to your lips. Choking it down you fight back the sensation to blow chunks again. Only thirty more minutes of this to go before the two hours of chanting. Who says magic isn't fun? At least you've narrowed down the name of the thing to "Chuck" or "Ralph". "Barf" just wasn't going to cut it.

Now that you've done your best bulimic impression you have to know, "Hack what's with the limp?"

"Hack is Harry's assistant, like greatest troll who ever lived – Igor. Destroyed foolish wizard's monster, killed foolish wizard, and fathered fifty-seven children by fifteen different trolls."

"I haven't heard that version before."

"Wizards always tell it wrong, supposed to be a love story. Hack tell you sometime."

"I'm looking forward to it, buddy." It can't be worse than this.

Dear Harry,

I will not claim to understand the position you now find yourself in. Repairs continue here in the cavern. Those same repairs were also the reason I have not strayed beyond the barrier to update my journal until this morning. Please accept my apologies that I did not reply immediately.

As to your current position, given your description of the British press, I do not recommend a direct interview. I would instead employ the

Ambassadorial staff to prepare a written press release which can be interpreted, but not taken out of context as the spoken word can.

Having seen my fair share of history, I will tell you that the world is full of those waiting for someone to shoulder their burdens. Instead, seek to clarify your minor spat with this witch and turn it into a clarion call for action and personal responsibility in this conflict.

As to the conflict between yourself and Albus Dumbledore, I do not know the man, but I know the type. He is as convinced that his course of action is the best and is unlikely to be dissuaded. Steer a parallel course where you can and choose your battles wisely. I suspect the footstool incident was sparked by his knowledge that you do not like to be placed in situations where you are helpless. It is in your predator nature to chafe under that type of duress.

I approve of your plan to create the homoculus. Of course, take that for what it is. In the time of the real Conquistador who I ape, results were all that counted. If a darker spell would aid in subjugation of a village or help achieve a goal, a blind eye was turned. The level of hypocrisy would fill volumes, but you are merely trying to secure your freedom and this I know. Freeing yourself will again establish that you are a force to be reckoned with and remove his hold over you. Furthermore, it shows that you countered his provocation with a maneuver he did not expect rather than unleashing your fury. It may force him to reevaluate his dealings with you.

Finally, you are at a juncture where your worst enemy is yourself. Recognize that you have the power, but not the experience to wield it. I do not seek to slight you, but even you must admit this. All parties seeking to use you for good or ill will attempt to exploit this fact to their advantage. To achieve victory, you must be your own harshest critic and be willing to admit when you have made missteps.

Until our next communication I remain,

Hernando

Often, it takes an outsider to keep things in perspective. The statue of Hernando de Soto sequestered in his hidden city is about as far removed from your conflict as possible. You hand the journal to Bill who takes it from you and points to the thing making gurgling noises in front of you.

"I suppose this is the part where I say congratulations. It has your eyes, sort of – at least the one that manages to open. Do you feel any different?"

"Actually Bill, I do. I'm pretty sure Ralph here is chipping in now. I think it's about time we brought the old man in on our new arrival."

"Ralph?"

"Chuck sounded too much like your brother, so I went with Ralph. Isn't he adorable? Yeah, I know. He's disgusting. I almost named him Albus Severus Potter, but that just seemed cruel. Why don't I slip out to Hogsmeade and you make a discreet inquiry on how well the wards are charging?"

He spends a minute scanning Hernando's correspondence. "He'd make a good Headmaster if we could get rid of Dumbledore. As for your plan, Harry, you should just go straight out the gates. Whenever you try to 'slip out' anywhere, chaos ensues."

"Very funny, but the senior ambassador has requested that I go see Mr. Santos for instructions, so either way I've got a legitimate reason for going."

"De Soto's advice coming a bit too late?"

"No, Ambassador Dimperio seems to be thinking the same thing. Initially, we hoped it would blow over, but you know Skeeter and her ilk. He and some of his staff are coming to the castle this evening and we're going to hammer out either a press release or, Merlin help me, a speech. Obviously, you know which one I'd prefer."

Bill nods as you set "Ralph" back down in his/its bassinet. Dobby is taking care of the thing's feeding, but it's a good bet that Dobby and quality child care aren't necessarily a proper match. Look no further than how Draco turned out. Fortunately, that's where your former best mate Hermione comes in. She doesn't know it just yet, but with power comes responsibility and that's what she's just about to get.

"I said he's not allowed in here."

You put on your best innocent face and look at Rosmerta. "Hack's my bodyguard. I could have him stand outside, but that would sort of announce where I am." You always recall her being in a better mood. She's a bit of a grouch these days. The war must be tough on business or Rosmerta was expecting you to save her arse as well.

"If he puts so much as one toe out of line, Ambassador Potter, I guarantee you'll have yourself a diplomatic incident."

"He'll be ... we'll be good. I'm just meeting a friend or two." Odds are that if there's an incident here, it'll be much more destructive than Hack. Where you go chaos has a way of following, or maybe you're the one following chaos around – it gets hard to tell after awhile.

Grumbling, the barkeep points to a booth in the corner and reaches for her handbag. A waitress comes by and you order a Butterbeer and Hack gets ale. Adao Santos, the head of the Hogsmeade force slips in with his partner. The partner moves off to the opposite side of the inn. So far, the Death Eaters have been leaving the Peacekeepers alone and preferring to engage in hit and run attacks against isolated targets farther away from here.

Of course that won't last forever, but even so, your mercenaries are keeping the Death Eaters second guessing the safety of their own estates. Rumor has it that the Carrows, who seem to take incest to levels that make even the purebloods queasy, barely made it off the grounds of their one

bedroom hovel alive.

“Good afternoon, Ambassador.”

“Mr. Santos. How are things here in Hogsmeade?”

“It is the calm before the storm. It reminds me of the months preceding elections in our government – a few weeks of tense peace interrupted by an occasional bloodbath. If you truly intend to return to Brazil after all of this, you would be wise to keep that in mind. There have been no reports of Death Eater activity in Hogsmeade. In part, I believe this is due to the fact that their children attend Hogwarts too.”

“Good advice, sir. I’ll keep all this in mind. You are aware that the Ambassador will be coming to the castle this evening?”

Santos chuckles, “Straight to the point, I see. Yes, I am already aware that he will be on the move. We will be ready to provide a security escort from here to the castle. The official time of his arrival will be six o’clock, but anticipate that he will arrive sometime between five thirty and six thirty depending on his schedule. Please be ready to greet him at the entrance. I am assuming Headmaster Dumbledore is aware of all this?”

“Bill Weasley is bringing him up to speed on this as we speak.” No need to mention the “other things” that Bill is checking on.

“Very well Ambassador Potter, by your leave.” He stands to go and you bid him farewell knowing that the man doesn’t particularly care for you. It’s not that you were given this privilege when you don’t deserve it – hell that happens in governments everywhere. You think it’s because you’re not really Brazilian.

Were you a betting Animagus, you’d have to think that Dimperio’s maneuver sending you down here is just a reminder that you need to be including him in “the loop” as it were.

Finishing your butterbeer, you opt to take the long way back to the castle and pause by the Hogshead. Most students avoid it because of its “rough and tumble” reputation. You’re not really there for the ambiance, but for a conversation with the owner who is presently regarding you and your troll. Hack told you during one of his romps here that Aberforth said to stop by.

He doesn’t really greet you except to scowl in your direction. “Ayden, mind the bar, I’m going to stretch my legs and feed the animals out back.”

You and Hack exit and head around back and watch the old wizard check on his pigs and levitate a bucket of slop and dump it into the trough. Stepping into the area you feel the telltale signs raising hairs on the back of your neck. You just stepped across a ward line. A tap of your wand against the curse breaking glasses you wear in place of the eyewear you don’t need anymore shows an intricate weaving of colorful wards running all across the back of the bar.

“Oh don’t worry yourself, Potter. This is probably the most secure place in all of Hogsmeade to speak. So, you’re the youngster that has Albie all up in arms. I shoulda known you were trouble last year with that whole defense club thing. Of course, you looked like a deer in a light spell back then.”

“I’ve had a few run ins with your brother recently. I’m likely to have a few more in the weeks to come.”

“Spunk too! Well, I reckon you’re gonna need it too, boy. An old shit like my brother doesn’t just give up his spot in the sun without making you work for it!”

You cautiously sense that he doesn’t necessarily care for his brother all that much, but like anything involved with Dumbledore, it could be a half-truth. “So why did you call me here today, sir?”

He fishes in his pocket and hands you a small bag. Inside of it is an oddly shaped object, a crystal honeycomb. When you touch it, it glows with a faint reddish hue. “I wanted to take your measure for myself and see the boy who would be king. I’m still trying to figure out who to root for.”

“Wouldn’t Dumbledore blood run true in the end?”

“Ye’d think that, but there’s not a lot of love ‘tween the two of us. Let me tell you something, Potter, I’ve lived a long and painful life. A good deal of that pain can be found lying there at my brother’s feet. Always looking so far ahead, he’s not usually aware of what he’s walking over, or whose feet he’s stomping. I bought this bar and keep an eye on the town for him, sure enough, but he also knows that I’m always watching him as well.”

Interesting man, sort of an earthy version of his brother, “So, you’ve met me. Now what? What is this thing anyway?”

“I’ll answer the last first. That device detects a certain kind of contamination that we’re both familiar with, but we shouldn’t really speak of, now should we?”

There’s a moment of silence before he continues, “Your Troll friend has a lot more contamination on him if that’s worrying you. If you had more on you, I’d have probably had you pegged for a Summoner rather than someone who’d fought one.”

Tilting your head, “Tell me more about this contamination.”

“It’s a stain on your soul, boy. Stains don’t just go away overnight. Stains like that take years to fade, but take my word for it, they go away eventually. Even in victory, you still lose a bit of yourself. That’s part of what makes them so dangerous.”

You’ve suddenly got a good idea who Albus Dumbledore’s expert on daemons might be. “So the stories about you and the goats ...”

“Oh, it had goat’s heads, alright, but that’s an old story. One day, if I see fit, I’ll tell it to you. Meanwhile, we need to talk about that little note that

dementor handed you.”

“Have you translated it yet?” Again, the back of a bar near a chicken coop and a pig sty seems a bit odd for such a discussion. It’s ironic that this would be a “secure” area.

“If you’ve studied the right books, it doesn’t take long. They want to know if you speak for the Masters?”

“What?”

“Oh come one, Potter. Did you think they were giving you an order for fish and chips? They’re minor demons, left on our side of existence after the last Great War. The ones who stuck with the Ministry are just hanging around waiting for their ‘real’ masters to come back. Now the question is, how are you gonna answer them, Harry Potter? So, do you want to tell my brother or do you want me to have that honor?”

A hint of a smile crosses your face. “I’d like to do it, if you don’t mind.”

He cackles showing you that even though good dental care in the wizarding world is never far away that some still don’t bother. “Well now, it looks like I got me someone else to watch as well. It’s a rarity when someone ends up challenging him for the title of top dog, most times they’re older than you and think they know what they’re getting into. Still, part of me wants to see him come out on top, but the other part is so damn tired of seeing him as king of the pile that I think I’d enjoy seeing Albie knocked down a couple of pegs. You think he’s a shit now; you shoulda tried growing up with him.”

Pointing to the object and the bag he says, “Go on and give me that back now and get on back to the castle. I’ve already held you up long enough. When you tell Albie that we had this little chat, make sure to tell him I said his game’s been slipping for the last decade and that I don’t think he’s got it anymore. You tell him that for me, Potter.”

The honeycomb glow fades a bit in intensity but still remains when he takes it from you. Aberforth glares at it and then dismisses you. It brings a whole new meaning to the phrase “inner demons”. You watch as he walks into a shed/chicken coop. An animal scream follows seconds later and Aberforth emerges with a dead chicken in hand. The creepy old geezer did it without his wand to boot.

Less than a minute later, you and Hack are back on the path to the castle. Hack offers his usual perspective. “Old wizards strange. When trolls get too old and stop making sense, we kill them.”

“It’s not that easy, mate, but your people might have it right.” Top dog, huh? You have no interest in being a dog. Cats are far cooler and very territorial.

If you ever needed a reminder of your weaknesses, this meeting is driving them home. “In the future, Harry, when you feel the need to speak in a public setting and on the record, I recommend that you stick to the various topics and talking points I have assembled for you on these scrolls.”

The stack of paperwork in front of you doesn’t look all that big. “This can’t possibly cover everything.” Mr. Silva and your dancing partner Sheila Lopez are also in the room witnessing your “education” in the art of politics.

Ambassador Dimperio laughs, “Of course it doesn’t, but that is the beauty of Politics. You don’t actually answer any questions. You start to answer, but in lieu of a reply, you tie the question to one of your talking points. I’ll give you a demonstration. Ask me about what my opinions on the rising cost of ... let’s say Dragon Meat.”

You feel a bit silly, but go ahead anyway. “Ambassador, what are your opinions on the rising cost of Dragon Meat?”

He composes himself and looks thoughtful, “That’s a very good question, Mr. Potter. I suspect that the rising cost of goods represents the market reaction to the climate of uncertainty that surrounds England these days. As long as people continue to support this Dark Lord they should expect the prices they pay on most commodities to rise. It is a symptom of the far greater problem facing this country. The Peacekeeping forces from South America are committed to ensuring that the population will be able to move about in relative safety through Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade.”

Dimperio spreads his hands indicating that he is done. “Practice using terms such as, it is a symptom and yet another example, these allow you to move away from the subject of your question to back to areas you are more comfortable with. Political rhetoric is often every bit as effective as a properly cast Confundus charm. Were you being groomed for a life in this harsh environment, you would find me and Mr. Silva to be far more critical of your performance. Since you are not, I will simply instruct you in the basics and tell you to minimize the damage that you cause and make my life easier.”

You give him a determined look, “I’ll do my best.”

“See that you do. Otherwise, I will find it necessary to assign you your own spokesperson. Miss Lopez is the only person I can spare from the embassy staff at the moment and I am reluctant to place her in close proximity to you because of your involvement in this war.”

Fabricio Silva nods solemnly while his niece looks slightly put off at the idea that she can’t defend herself. The touchstone on your table glows indicating that someone is at the door who can actually read directions. Your wand cancels the privacy wards and opens the door to your least favorite Head Girl.

Hermione curtsies to the ambassador, “Headmaster Dumbledore sends his regards and would be honored if you would join him in his office.”

“Mr. Silva and I would be delighted to meet Headmaster Dumbledore. Ambassador Potter won’t be able to join us as he has matters that he needs to attend to here. Miss Lopez, assist him in drafting the rest of the press release.”

Watching the two men leave, you feel only partially slighted. There's nothing in Dumbledore's office that interests you.

Sheila huffs the moment they leave and taps her fingers against the bottom of her chin. She's one of those people where half the conversation involves what she is doing with her hands. "I think they're blowing this whole thing out of proportion. Am I in any less danger if the Death Eaters decide to attack the embassy? They say the wards here are the best in this land."

You shrug and recast the privacy wards, "Against an assault, probably, but against a singular attack or assassination attempt, it's not something you want to bet your vault on."

"You have a troll for a bodyguard and employ one of the most expensive Hitwizards on the planet. That's in addition to the presence of this Dumbledore wizard. Perhaps you carry this paranoia a bit too far at times?"

Fighting off the urge to tell her how you may ultimately need protection from Dumbledore, you reply, "So, let me see this press release."

"Certainly. I have a basic draft, but what it needs is your touch. Everyone knows that you are an Englishman. This needs to read like it was written by someone from this country, so my word choices might seem off. I need you to look through it and correct it. This would be much easier if you lived in Portugal and we both spoke Portuguese as our first language."

"My life would probably be easier as well, but we work with what we have. Let me see what you've got so far."

She hands you the parchment and you begin looking it over as if you are some type of know it all. Sheila is right, it doesn't really sound like it has been written by someone from England. Taking a biro in your hand, you start underlining the problem parts and making notes in the margins. With your free hand you point to the small icebox and tell your former Dodgespell teammate to indulge herself. She confessed during one of your dances that she has taken a liking to English butterbeer.

"I was reading in one of the hometown papers that your lady friend Karina is getting married next month."

Wow, that was fast! She must already be embracing her new role in the Colastos family. "Sadly, I haven't been keeping up with news from that part of the world, but I'm glad to see that she has her life back on track."

Sheila laughs and puts her feet on the empty part of the table allowing some of her skirt to fall away and showing a generous amount of leg. She doesn't have that much in the way of a chest, but her legs are in nice shape and they are firmly attached to her most alluring asset – her bum. "All the more reason you need a personal assistant, Ambassador Potter. Part of my position at the embassy involves summarizing the news from both the Americas and Europe into a daily report for Ambassador Dimperio. I could just as easily do that from here and send the report to him by owl."

From both the sound and the "look" of things, Sheila is lobbying for the position both on a professional and personal level. How about the direct approach? "You seem to want this job. Why?"

She smiles and runs her free hand through her short black hair, "I could say that I like the danger, but that might scare you. I could say that you are young and rather attractive, but that might make me seem superficial. Perhaps, I might even say that you already have more power, wealth and influence than most will ever achieve in a lifetime, but that might make me sound like a social climber. Instead, I will say that I am young enough to not fully understand my own reasons, but I simply want the job and am willing to accept the risk that it involves."

Well there's a dose of in your face honesty. Dimperio may not know how you're freeing yourself from Dumbledore's control, but he does know that you'll be on the move as soon as Kwan returns. Having an "official spokesperson" might fit into it, especially if Dumbledore will seek to perpetuate the lie that you're still hanging around here. Charlie and Tonks could very well get their old jobs back.

"That's a fairly persuasive argument, Miss Lopez, but I'll need to consider it first and decide whether it is worth persuading the Senior Ambassador to place you here. Both he and his Chief of Staff clearly don't like the idea. What do you think you'd get out of it?"

"You keep highlighting the bad things that happen to those associated with you. You championed Karina Machado, who was destitute, and now she is marrying into one of the most powerful families in our country."

"Your former boyfriend's brother and his partner Amanda were associated with me as well. They both died." You leave off the fact that it was you who did the killing.

"Yes, some happy endings and some sad ones as well, the papers print one thing, but I knew Paulo and Amanda well enough to understand that they likely deserved the fate they received. I assume there was betrayal involved?"

Looking up from the half-edited parchment. "I'm not at liberty to speak of those matters, Miss Lopez and you would be wise to not ask again."

"I agree. I was just making a point that bad things happen to those who betray you. I have no intentions of doing such a thing and thus, the chances of something bad happening to me decrease while the odds of something good happening increase."

Isn't she a silvery-tongued little witch? "Fair enough, I still need to think this through. Bollocks! What now?" You just noticed the touchstone glowing again. What does Hermione want this time?

You repeat your earlier movements and open the door. It's not Hermione. Instead, it's Luna. "Harry, I've been waiting for ..." she trails off getting a good look at the situation.

"Luna this is, Sheila Lopez from the embassy. Sheila, this is my friend Luna Lovegood."

Recently, you've become a student of body language. The sudden tension evident in Luna indicates an ominous portent. "Yes, she was your dancing partner at the embassy ball. It's nice to meet you."

Maybe it's the sudden flushing, or the fact the Luna didn't immediately jump into her "Looney" persona, but alarm bells quietly begin to ring on the fringe of your conscious. Right now the ill-positioned skirt and the generous portions of thigh don't really help matters either. "Right in one. We're doing a press release to counter the slurs of the Prophet. Would you like to give us a hand?"

"No, I dropped by to see if you were free, but since you're busy I'll leave." She spins on her heels and bolts from the room.

Sheila shakes her head and rubs her elbow with her palm. You recall it to be some kind of gesture about jealousy or something. "Let her go. You have more important things to do, Ambassador."

You toss the parchment back to her and start towards the door. "Rewrite what I've marked up and when I get back we can finish it."

You catch up with her while she's waiting for the staircase to move. "Alright Luna, what's going on?"

"Leave me alone, Harry."

"Look, you don't have to be jealous..."

"So, you're behind a locked door with privacy wards with a woman in a short skirt and a loose top and I'm not supposed to think anything's amiss?"

Staring at her flushed face you reach a conclusion. This isn't a very flattering side of Luna. Not only is this her first real relationship, it's probably her first real friendship. The big problem here is that you don't have the time to be the kind of caring and nurturing type – your well of human kindness has never been very full to begin with and as of late, its scraping bottom. The staircase swivels into position and Luna starts to head down it. Your arm prevents her and you cast a hurried privacy bubble.

"Let me go. I'm sure your friend is waiting for you." She says harshly.

"Yes, so we can get back to work. There's nothing going on. Stop being jealous and just try trusting me for a change."

"You want me to trust you, but I'm just around when you need a snog. I'm not a girlfriend, I'm a distraction."

"Where is this coming from?"

"I overheard her."

"Who? Sheila?"

"No, Bell."

"Katie? What's she have to do with anything?"

Luna's face scrunches up. "I heard her in the library with her friend Leanne. She's all hung up on this debt thing. She thinks it might go away if she just shags you!"

"What makes you think I would shag Katie? She's just a friend."

"Because you're a guy! Because you've already done it before with that Karina woman! Hell, because Fleur is just trying to shag you through me!"

"What?"

"Oh please! All these little hints and suggestions! She might as well brew up a batch of polyjuice and shag you as me!"

Alright, try the reassuring route. "Luna, you're overreacting. I'm not interested in Katie, Fleur's just a good friend, more importantly she's my best friend's fiancé, and Sheila is probably going to be my embassy assigned spokesperson."

"She looked awfully cozy in there."

"Yeah, Sheila was telling me how being my 'mouthpiece' could be great for her career. Being told by someone how they're planning to reap the benefits of being associated with me is a real turn on."

"Just like that Karina woman was using you to protect her son? You found that to be a turn on, didn't you? I recall having to pry the truth of the matter out of you."

Damn this girl can be frustrating! "Point number one, at that time we weren't dating. Point number two, it's over. Karina is getting married."

"Fine, what about Amy?"

When did she find out about Amy? "How do you know about Amy?"

"Fleur told me. Obviously you weren't going to."

You'll have to take this up with Fleur at some point. Maybe she really is trying to sabotage you? Hell, did she tell her about Lauren too? "Again, we weren't dating then. In fact, you were threatening to turn over my whereabouts to Dumbledore at that time. As to why I wouldn't mention it, take a look at the expression on your face. That's why."

"So, it's not just things about the war that you're keeping from me?"

Part of you admires her tenacious ability to continue twisting an argument around. Clearly this has been stewing inside her mind since whenever she found out about Amy. Of course, the other part wouldn't mind throttling some sense into her right about now. "We've only been dating for a few weeks, Luna. If you had asked about Amy or Lauren for that matter, I would have been embarrassed, but I would have told you about either of them. Instead, you've been holding onto this so you could use it in a fight. Congratulations Luna, you scored a point. Was it worth it?"

If possible, she looks angrier. "Who the bloody hell is Lauren?"

You just scored a point of your own. Okay, apparently Fleur didn't mention Lauren. "Just a second ago, you wanted full disclosure, make up your mind!"

"You unbelievable slag! I'm through with you! Go shag your assistant, go shag Katie, go shag Fleur and everyone else for all I care!"

"For fucks' sake Luna, leave Fleur out of this."

"Look how quick you are to defend her. You know she wants you and I'm tired of being her stand in."

"Alright, this isn't working. You want to call it off, fine, but be honest with yourself. I'm not the one with the problem. You are."

That stops her. "What do you mean?"

Despite appearances, you try to be a nice guy, but there are periods where you have a relapse or two. "Grow up Luna. You've got trust issues. Until you get by them, this isn't going to work. I was making time for you and not trying to push you in some direction you weren't ready for. What thanks do I get for it? None! Instead, I get this. Fine, you want to be through. We're through. I was leaving on one of my trips anyway. Now you can go back to being 'Looney' all the time."

You finally release her arm and she flees down the stairs. You should go after her, but what good would it do? The throbbing in your head is the start of a big headache. Hermione passes her coming up the stairs.

"Is something wrong, Harry? Did you and Luna have a fight?"

Holding up your hand, "Not tonight, Hermione. I'm tired of fighting with you and that's all we'll end up doing. For once, just let it be." You spin and walk back to your quarters while trying to convince yourself that it's all Luna's fault.

The problem is you know that's not entirely true.

In the early morning you finish packing what you need. Sheila indicated that she was more than willing to console you if you wanted. Frankly, you weren't in the mood and furthermore, you didn't want to make Luna right. For someone who has supposedly been "turned loose," you've been caged up far too long. That's about to change. Bill is fetching Dumbledore right now.

Luna hasn't made an appearance either. That's a big effing surprise.

You knock on Hermione's door and wait. A minute goes by before she answers in a dressing gown. "What is it Harry?"

"I'm leaving the castle today."

"You can't! What about the wards? Is this about you and Luna?"

You suppose it could look that way to her. "No. This is about the war. Follow me."

You have to hold her in the hallway, while good old Hack gets dressed. He seems to have taken a liking to sleeping *au natural*. By the time he's ready Bill and Dumbledore have joined you.

"Good morning Harry. William was most circumspect with the details, simply saying that you have solved the ward issue." Bill knows this is your show.

You open the door and usher them in. Hermione gasps when she sees the thing in the bassinet.

Dumbledore scowls, "A blood anchor, Harry? Dabbling further into the Dark Arts I see. I am very disappointed in you."

His "all knowing" armor takes another ding. "Aberforth says that you're slipping. I think he might be right. Either way, your approval doesn't really interest me anymore. By the way, he's translated the message. If you want to know, go give him a visit. Meanwhile, I'd like you to meet Ralph Potter. He'll be handling your ward charging needs during my absence."

"You realize that I should destroy this abomination. I would be well within my rights."

It's already part of the ward system. What will destroying it do to the wards? Furthermore, I'd be oath bound to stop you and with your oath not to harm me, I'm guessing the fight will be one sided."

Dumbledore's stare might as well be a dagger hurled at you, "You play a dangerous game, Harry."

"It's nothing more than using the loopholes of an oath I was forced into. It's not my specialty I admit, such manipulations are more your style, but since the wards continued to charge while I was in town – albeit at a slower rate, it seems that Ralph is an acceptable proxy for my presence here."

The old man quickly assesses the situation. For the moment, he concedes with an odd smile that shocks you and makes you that much more worried. He actually looks impressed. "As always, when placed in a crucible, you have responded. A most unusual solution to your problem, I congratulate you."

You were prepared for his ire. Instead, he seems to be patting you on the back and trying to take some credit for this. Maybe when you've become too jaded, this will all seem like one big game to you as well. Either way you should tell him what he wants to hear. "You're right. I couldn't have done it without you Dumbledore. Without all the obstacles and problems you've created for me, I wouldn't have come this far. You're some educator."

"Harry!"

"Oh come off it Hermione, he uses people with little or no concern for them. You still believe he cares and that's your problem. Anyway, I've had Dobby looking after the blood bag..."

"Did Mister Harry Potter call Dobby?" The elf appears as if on cue.

"No, Dobby."

"Dobby has been very careful not to overfeed creature ... again," the deranged elf says. "Dobby make certain creature is bathed six times a day. Dobby clean up all its messes. Dobby watches him constantly. Dobby hasn't slept yet. Dobby won't let Mister Harry Potter down! Dobby ..."

You cut the neurotic bundle of energy off. "Thank you Dobby. You're doing a wonderful job. Why don't you go back to the kitchen and start working on my breakfast. Afterwards, get some rest."

Waiting for him to disappear you return to what you were about to say. "As you can see, he's not exactly the wisest choice for unsupervised child care. That's where you come in Hermione."

"You want me to watch that?" There's a hint of indignation in her voice. Okay, it's more than a hint. It's pretty overt. "It's a hideous abomination!"

Dumbledore strokes his long beard. "Do not worry; I will assign Winky to assist you in this endeavor, Miss Granger. We cannot change what has been done and this does further extend our protections. Life often forces one to make the best of an uncomfortable situation."

She gapes at him while you continue, "I'm guessing you don't know much about these things, Hermione. Most of them only last twelve months at best; with this being my first attempt, I'm guessing six months. So, it means I have to come back eventually. Until then, you have a private suite and most importantly you're in this just as far as I am. The wards are just as much your problem as they are mine. Deal with it. Use Dobby and Winky to mind it and supervise them for all I care. Of course, we can always switch and you go off to fight a Dark Lord and his minions – oh wait, we can't. Stupid prophecy!"

Making her supervise a couple of house elves during this task is probably icing on a very messy cake, but it's not exactly like you're going to be out having a jolly old time.

Hermione "sucks it up" for the moment and shuts her pie hole. Naturally, this is the cue for Dumbledore to get back into the conversation. "From this, I can assume that your man has located the whereabouts of the missing item."

"Yes. He knows. I don't."

"Your Mr. Kwan is quite resourceful. My sources are still trying to meet with the goblin known as 'The Arranger'. I can assume that you do not wish me to accompany you on this expedition."

"We both know you're going to stick Tonks here playing me again. If the locket is too far away, we know she won't fool Voldemort. The two of us gone at the same time might make the castle too inviting of a target."

"Have you considered that I might have young Nymphadora impersonate not you, but me? I do not share your unfortunate connection to Tom."

You look at Bill. He's clearly trying to figure out if the benefits of having Dumbledore along outweigh the fact that he is a ruthless untrustworthy bastard.

Bill renders his judgment. "Since we plan on negotiating with this collector, Harry has enough clout as an ambassador from Brazil. Harry also has the funds that support us and the Order. Let us handle this, Headmaster. If we need you we'll send for you."

Wow! Bill leads with a blunt dismissal of one of the most powerful wizards in the world. You weren't the only one changed in the jungle! It's an upgrade from what you had planned on saying. You were about to say that you needed Dumbledore along like you needed a case of genital warts. Maybe Bill should have been the Ambassador?

"Naturally, I do not approve, but I understand your reluctance. I will stand by to assist as you see fit. Perhaps as a gesture of good faith, we could

agree on a mutually acceptable member of the Order to accompany you. Perhaps, I could offer you Alastor's services? Officially, he is a security consultant with the Ministry and not technically on active duty."

You like the idea of having both Kwan and Moody watching your back. They should be a formidable duo. One look at Bill confirms it. "Moody's fine. If you can convince him, I've got no objections."

"Very well I shall go locate him at once." Dumbledore turns and walks away at a brisk pace leaving a confused looking Hermione Granger in his wake.

You can't resist. "Is it finally sinking in, Hermione? There's the wizard on the chocolate frog card and then there's the real thing that's as pure as yellow snow. I've come to the conclusion that, since he wasn't really training me, he expected me to die facing Voldemort in the hopes that I'd weaken him enough that Dumbledore could finish him off. The problem is I'm not a lamb to be led to the slaughter."

She nods slowly. "Harry, do be careful. Even if they don't know it, a lot of people are depending on you."

It's the first time since you've been back that you don't have the urge to be mean to her. Ralph makes some kind of gurgling noise and Hermione cringes. You smile at her, "I think he likes you."

Seconds later your heightened sense of smell catches a whiff of something awful. That says quite a bit considering how many nasty odors Hack has exposed you to. Covering your face, you mutter, "Then again, maybe not."

Hermione is already drawing her wand to cast an air clearing charm. Hack simply shrugs, indicating that it wasn't him, and nods respectfully at the thing in the bassinet.

Kwan doesn't look any worse for wear except for a nasty jagged cut on his cheek. At the edges of the bandage, you can see blackened flesh where a cursed goblin dagger left its mark.

You also note that Kwan is sporting a new dagger dangling from his belt.

Bill looks around the Shrieking Shack while momentarily lost in thought. "Back in my seventh year, I had to check this place out. No ghosts, no wards. Needless to say, I was disappointed. Surprisingly enough, I learned that old abandoned places were a turn on for some witches."

"Why doesn't that surprise me? So Kwan, what information did this Arranger have to offer?"

"Goblin did not want to talk. I convinced him. You might say getting information a lot like pulling teeth." Kwan dumps six shiny golden teeth on the table to emphasize his point.

That had to have hurt. "Couldn't you have just used *Crucio*?"

The Korean laughs. Even his laugh is sinister, "What makes you think I didn't? Either way, not important. Goblin talked to me and now goblin talk to no one else."

Bill looks concerned, "That could have repercussions. He was a powerful goblin."

"True. Sometimes solving one problem creates two more, but it was necessary. Greedy creature can't tell anyone else what he told me."

It's a chilling reminder never to make Kwan mad at you. "So where is the locket?"

"Goblin sold it to a wizard. Wizard comes from Russia – the southern end of the Ural mountains. He rides a Thestral and is called The Red Horseman." Kwan looks at Bill knowingly.

For his part, Bill pales slightly. "Are you sure? Shit, we might need more than Moody as backup."

"What's there?" You ask as Kwan nods to your fellow ward crafter. It's another of those instances where you have no idea what they are talking about. Since both of them look concerned, it's obviously not good news.

"Harry, there are some things people don't talk about – some places people don't go. Somewhere in the Ural mountains is a valley and in that valley there's an ancient crone named Baba Yaga, the Bone Mother."

You'd read about her hut that walks on giant chicken legs; even going so far as to make a few jokes about it. "She's still alive? She must be as old as the Flamels!"

Kwan says, "We should bring the mercenaries too. Hope she will deal with us, but if we have to fight we will need backup."

Bill goes on to tell you the rumors and myths surrounding the witch. It is widely believed that she mentored Gellert Grindelwald in the Dark Arts and elemental magic for the price of Rasputin's murder and his help bringing about the end of the Romanovs.

"It's never easy is it?" What bothers you even more is the memory of Rowena Ravenclaw telling you that retrieving Helga's Cup would be your toughest challenge. If going into the lair of a witch that makes Dumbledore look like a spring chicken is what's required to get the Locket, what the world are you going to face trying to get the Cup?

The "This is Troubling" scale just spiked at "Bloody Fucking Hell".

Turn Me Loose: A Harry Potter Adventure Making Love to Whoever I Please

Chapter 8 – Making Love to Whoever I Please

Your problems are legion. Your allies are few. Its times like these that you know you're in over your head, but there's no one "above" you. Harry James Potter runs his own faction in this war. You have a serviceable alliance with Minister Dimperio and your adopted nation of Brazil, a loose alliance with Minister Scrimgeour and your native land of England, and a very tense alliance with Albus Dumbledore and the Order of the Phoenix.

As if this wasn't enough, you've got girl problems and all the usual and some of the unusual angst that defines a person's teenaged years. And it's not going to get any easier. You have developed an unhealthy fascination with Luna Lovegood, probably because she was another problem you could "fix".

If you asked Kwan, he'd simply tell you that "stupid cook turned diplomat" can't fix everything and shouldn't go looking for more trouble. Kwan's a smart man, even if it's only your thoughts trying to sound like him. It's why you need to cut Luna loose.

Well that and her "I never want to see you again" tirade. That might also have factored into the decision as well.

Fortunately, you're leaving the cramped confines of good old Hoggry Hogwarts and that's more than enough to put a smile on the old kisser. True, you'll be heading into the mountains of Russia to face off against a legendary ancient witch. At least some of the legends have her helping people. You'll try to overlook the ones about her eating small children and try and look at the glass as being half full.

Half full of what remains to be seen.

For two in the morning, there's an awful lot of activity in this castle. You've finished packing all your equipment in your fancy magically expanding trunk. Under your robes, you wear a vest made of Peruvian Vipertooth hide. It offers only modest protection, but greater freedom of motion. It has helped keep you alive so far. Here's to hoping that trend continues. A second larger non-magical trunk carries some of the daemon bones, skin and blood. The rest of it is staying under Dumbledore's questionable care and for his part the old man has agreed to safeguard it. The bone is amazingly tough to carve, but it's the best material you've had to work with in your limited career as a Journeyman Cursebreaker. It's the best material Bill's had to ever work with as well.

"Harry, is there anything else I should know?" Charlie looks pensive. He doesn't seem eager to "play" you again. Truth be told, you wouldn't mind going back to being James Black. Maybe you should hold open auditions – Who wants to be Harry Potter? Coming soon to a telly near you!

"Yeah, don't fuck it up ... at least any more than it already is. Well that and avoid any women offering you a drink. That goes without saying."

This draws a howling laugh from his brother Bill, checking over his gear. "I think you're doing a better job of bugging things up, Harry. Charlie's pretty much starting at rock bottom, so unless he wants to start digging, he can't go anywhere but up. Besides, I think Ms. Chang likes him better with glasses." He tries to mimic a female voice. "Charlie please, just put them on for me."

Charlie looks miffed. You have to admit, when Bill first told you that story you laughed pretty hard. "That hurts, Bill. I know you're suffering from withdrawal because Fleur's in France, but that's no excuse for taking cheap shots."

"Oh, if I were going below the belt I'd ask if she like your equipment better than Harry's."

Charlie shrugs it off. "Are you looking to start your trip with a few broken bones there, Billy? I didn't think Fleur let you keep your stones anymore. We both know you're piss in a duel and roughhousing was never your strong suit. You don't want to mess with a Dragon handler."

"That's why I've got Harry. He takes care of my light work and any Death Eaters that come along." It must be a brother thing. They alternate threats with laughter. You're surprised their traitorous mum doesn't have more gray hair.

"So, Charlie, is this a solo assignment, or are you switching off with Tonks?" Bill asks the question you've been wondering about as well.

"Just me as far as I know." Your Dumbledore alarm is starting to ring. The old man mentioned that he might have his pet shapeshifter doing Headmaster duty. Harry Potter being set loose on society is one thing. Albus Dumbledore is another. This doesn't bode well.

Then again, name one thing that actually does "bode well" – yeah, thought so.

You nod to Hack who lifts the trunk that can't be spelled. His flimsy cover story is that he's out with Hagrid in the forests again. Honestly, who is this really going to fool anyway? Riddle will know shortly after you leave England, unless he's prone to ignoring the little mental connection you two have.

"Let's get the hell out of here."

Dobby appears and clamps onto your leg, a thick fur coat dragging behind him. "Harry Potter is leaving Hogwarts! Dobby is so sad! He will need coat to keep him warm!"

You try to remove the zealot from your leg while Bill gives you an amused look. "It's alright Dobby. I'll be back, and in the meantime, you have important tasks."

"Yes! Yes! Dobby will not fail the great Harry Potter." The elf scratches his head for a moment. "Oh Dobby remembers why he is here! Miss Hermione Granger is busy with um ... the thing we're not supposed to speak of and asked Dobby to give something to the great Harry Potter! She says it will bring Harry Potter good luck."

As you smile thinking about Ralph Potter, the newest edition to the "should not be named" club, Dobby fishes around in his pocket and starts to pull some kind of necklace out. There's a small vial attached to it. Not another fucking potion! And you thought she really wanted to get back in your good graces. You stop him. "Dobby, just take it back to her. Tell her I appreciate the gesture, but no thanks."

Dobby looks uncertain, but you shoo him off and he disappears.

"Come on, Moody is waiting in Hogsmeade and if we're more than five minutes late he'll assume that we're imposters and try to kill us." Bill says.

Given what you know of the man, it is liable to be true.

"Gabrielle will be so upset that she missed you. She is visiting cousins this week." Fleur says. Is it your imagination, or is her accent more pronounced here in her homeland? The Delacour chateau in southern France reeks of the same opulence you found in Brazil's high society. She seems relieved that you already have the translation of the Dementor's message from Aberforth Dumbledore, but troubled by the results just the same.

"Probably best not to mention our visit then." You shrug looking out the large window and enjoying the picturesque view afforded. For a brief moment you wonder how you would have grown up with the wealth and support of your parents. Maybe if you had, you wouldn't feel so out of place here.

"Last time William went to my uncle for help it did not seem like it would be much of a problem. I do not quite understand. They are just pictures taken from up in the sky."

One of Fleur's paternal uncles is a squib, who works for the European Space Agency. Bill used this same tactic to locate unexplored locations in South America. "I think I do," you say, "The pictures are in an area that is sensitive to the Muggle governments. The Russians have a military complex in that region, and your uncle is risking a lot just to show us these pictures."

"Is that why you did not go along?"

You nod. Bill could easily blend in. Officially, he's being "interviewed" for an internship by Fleur's uncle. A teenager would stand out like a sore thumb. Kwan also didn't go for fear that his magical leg would adversely affect the Muggle technology.

"So, why did you want to speak with me?" Fleur asks coyly. "Is it about Luna? William said there was, how do you say it, trouble in paradise."

That's a bit of an understatement. "Why did you tell her about the women in South America?"

Fleur appears pensive, "She asked me to compare her to those other women, so I did. Luna can be quite clever and said you had told her all about them, but wanted my opinion."

The witch can probably sense your irritation; you're not really making any attempt to hide it. "So, what did you tell her?"

"I suppose all she heard was that both Karina and the non-magical girl, Amy, were both more physically attractive and more experienced than she was. What I was really trying to tell her is that you are interested in her on a different level than just the physical. She obviously missed that part."

"You didn't mention Lauren."

"I never met her, so it would be unfair for me to comment, plus she was only asking about the women you encountered in South America. Though you may have mentioned her, I highly doubted you would discuss the details of your relationship with that witch."

"Good point. Either way it is over."

"Do not say that, Harry," she says with determination. "We can make this right. I will speak to her when I return to Hogwarts."

Your "no" comes out a tad more forcefully than you had perhaps wanted, startling her. "We need to leave it be. I've got too much going on right now. The last thing I need is more girl problems."

"Did you at least bring the magical journal so you could start a correspondence again?"

The only journal you are carrying is linked to the statue of Hernando De Soto. You need wise advice— emotional teenage outbursts you can do without.

She places her palm against your cheek. You flush slightly at the contact. "I am truly sorry, Harry. You deserve to be happy. In this, I have failed

you."

You know that she feels guilty; she didn't even try to flirt with you once.

Waiting for Bill to return with the photographs of the area, you pass the day training with Kwan and the protected grounds allow you the opportunity to spend a modest amount of time in your Animagus form during daylight. It feels great to stretch your legs a bit. Cleaning up, you spend the afternoon carving runes from the daemon bone. The charging runes draw at least thirty percent more power than comparable runes carved out of "mere" dragonbone and Bill's first ward scheme using the material was significantly more potent, but a true power hog.

It makes for an interesting dilemma of stored potential magical energy versus released magical energy or what is known in the rune crafting business as the Le Fey Paradox after the famous witch. Is it preferable to have a weaker ward powered for a longer period of time, or a powerful, but slow to recharge attack? Legend has it that she went with the latter, but underestimated the forces Merlin used to assault her southern fortress.

You're still not certain on which side of the debate you fall. Bill likes his explosions big. He rates a strong Le Fey. You like the merits of both powerful wards and longer lasting wards putting you somewhere in the middle. One of his golden rules that Bill routinely flouts is "don't get too carried away." He's an artiste and always wants to do more to express himself.

Knowing your friend, not a single bit of this bone will ever reach the open market. Neither of you needs the money and there's a certain "wow" factor in being the only people who get to play with this stuff. Bill espouses the virtues of hoarding every chance he gets. It's probably why he and the goblins got along so well.

Dinner is a subdued affair and Bill hasn't returned. Fleur's parents are polite and kind. Her Mum, Apolline, claims to have a touch of seer in her and predicts dark days ahead – especially for you. You "behave" and decide not to comment on how damn near anyone could make that prediction.

Her father, under the false assumption that you really want to be an ambassador, decides to engage you in a political conversation, and considering his position as France's Foreign Secretary this actually constitutes "High Level Talks" between Brazil and France. Mr. Delacour is quite interested in Brazil's sudden presence in Europe and the rumors of unrest among the goblins. You let him know that trouble, at least on the regional scale, is coming regarding the goblins and that it might be wise to be prepared. For your part, he gets asked about France's level of preparations and what assistance they are offering the Scrimgeour administration.

If nothing else it's an excellent opportunity to practice using and decoding doublespeak with a seasoned practitioner, despite the fact that it makes your head hurt. He appreciates the information you offer and mentions the possibility of visiting the embassy in the coming months for possible talks. Dimperio should be impressed – both of them.

What you conclude from this exchange is that France is "*En Garde*" and practicing politics should be a "Dark Art."

A tired looking Bill Weasley returns after dinner. He hands Kwan a folder full of pictures and spends a few minutes with his future in-laws before deciding he needs to clean up.

Fleur stays for a few minutes before disappearing. With a peck on her cheek, her last words to you are, "If you happen to meet someone in the near future, know that she is a friend."

It's tempting to ask her to stop speaking in riddles, but she is already on her way out the door. Bill probably had just enough time to set the silencing charms.

Living under a staircase for much of your life has made you a bit of a light sleeper. Your feline enhanced senses and nocturnal nature have only made things even more difficult for you. Silencing charms do the trick nicely, but since Bill has already taken care of that, so you're not concerned.

Your door creaking open does concern you. The scent and shape is unfamiliar but distinctly female. A second later you return to your human form. "Can I help you?"

Her stuttering reply is in a thick French accent. "I ... Fleur sent me. She thought you might want some company."

"Who are you?" You reach for the touchstone to illuminate the room.

"No lights, no full names, and most importantly no complications. My name is ... call me Nicolette. Fleur said I should call you James and that we could be good for each other. She thinks I need to, as you English say, 'move on' and says that you are in a similar predicament and also need to get someone out of your system. I learned long ago to trust her judgment."

It's certainly not your usual damsel in distress moment. After a bit of silence while you struggle to digest this she says, "Aren't you going to invite me in?"

The slight cracking in her voice betrays that she is a little nervous. How exactly do you get in these situations? How can you get in them more often? .

Better think of some words to say before the witch bolts. "I'm sorry. These things don't ... well let's just say I'm surprised. Please come in."

It sounded awkward coming out, but you must have said the right thing. In the dim light, you can see that her hair is dark and there are none of the telltale signs that she is a Veela. "Nicolette" is just a shapely witch in a very loose robe.

Correction, she's a shapely witch who seems to have just dropped her robe. Rather clumsy of her, but considering the lack of anything under it you doubt it was an accident.

You mull the idea over. Fortunately, you're a teenager. The decision is a remarkably easy one. Nicolette is probably cold. You should be a gentleman and offer her a spot on this nice warm bed.

There might be something to this notion that Fleur is trying to sleep with you using other witches. It's worth repeating ... err, investigating – you meant to say investigating.

This time of the year is not the warmest in Russia. You're in a province called Chelyabinsk. There's a small magical community called Oarut here near the Tencha River. Apparently normals, Muggles, or whatever they call them here avoid the area because of Soviet nuclear dumping – an odd nugget of truth from the fairy tales with witches living in places no one goes.

Powerful wards have been used to carve a tiny oasis out of what would be considered badlands – freshening the air and water. It's like good old Hagrid said, if the non-magical folk knew about our abilities, we'd be stuck solving all their problems.

"Stay over there. Don't draw attention! Act only if necessary." Kwan whispers and thrusts you toward a table – guess he doesn't have much faith in your diplomatic skills. At least they brought you along, leaving Hack, Moody, and the mercenaries in a cave nearby. Bill wants to appear as innocent as possible. Its one instance where being an ickle teenager actually works to your favor. Plus, it shows Kwan trusts you enough to be his back up. That alone speaks volumes about how far you've come.

A few days trek to the north and west, there is a valley that pretty much belongs to Baba Yaga. Your ad-hoc adventuring group is here to find a guide and hopefully reach the location without too much trouble.

Of course, the definition of too much trouble is open to interpretation. A charm helps you listen in to the conversation as your cohorts approach a motley-looking collection of locals spending the early afternoon in drink. Kwan speaks enough Russian without the aid of magic to handle introductions while Bill motions for the barkeep to bring over more alcohol.

You glance around the room as they make small talk with the locals. A couple is eating a meal and the woman is scolding her husband for his laziness – poor bloke.

"What do you want?" The owner asks with a low growl. He reminds you of Aberforth.

You fish out a two galleons. "Lunch. What do you have?"

"Lamb shank with potatoes and carrots. Is very good. Drink?"

"Just water."

He scoops up the coins and drops four sickles in return and walks back to the counter, as you continue to survey the room. Over in the other corner is an attractive brunette eating her meal and watching the proceedings. She dabs her chin with a napkin and sees you looking at her. Her smile causes you to avert your gaze.

Right about then is when the wizard Kwan was talking to makes a protective runic sign in the air and points an accusing digit at the hitwizard. "Few go there and most not of their choosing! You would be wise to avoid it."

Bill leans in putting on his best friendly face, "Sergei, we simply wish an audience with her."

One of the others mutters, "The last foreigners who went to have an audience with the Bone Mother never left, but on nights when the wind blows from that direction, you can still hear their screams."

"Well we certainly intend no harm..."

"Englishman, the Black Horseman himself came to town to remind us how much she values her privacy."

Kwan shrugs, "Perhaps you could tell us how to speak to one of her horseman then."

"They come only when she needs something or for their own purposes. Do not seek them out!"

The couple has stopped their bickering and decided to leave. The woman, dragging her husband out all the while muttering that nothing good will come of this and they'd best be elsewhere.

By that time your meal has arrived; the seasoned lamb is very good. It makes dear old Aunt Petunia's taste like yesterday's garbage.

The woman finishes her meal and starts for the door. She starts to open it, but turns and walks towards your table. "Your friends aren't having much luck." This close you feel a slight pull reminding you of Fleur – Veela or something else? Almost all Veela have blonde hair, so that opens up the possibility of nymph or dryad. You note that she has extremely bright hazel eyes.

"No, apparently not." It takes a moment to realize that she is using English and not the charm. You set your utensils down despite wanting to finish off the remaining lamb.

"What business do you have with the Mistress of the Urals?"

"I'm not at liberty to say. Would you like to sit?"

She slides the chair out and sits down. Her hand reaches over and scoops up some of the lamb you'd sliced away. She eats it savoring the spices. "Yuri's lamb special is exquisite. The recipe has been in his family for generations. Do you like it?"

"It is very good. Worth every sickle." If you had to guess you'd say she was in her late twenties or early thirties. "I'm Harry."

"Svetlanna, pleased to make you acquaintance."

You glance over her shoulder and watch what's going on with Bill and Kwan. She thieves another morsel and chides, "Do not worry for your friends. They are a bunch of scared and harmless fools. I hear rumors that all is not well in the Isles. Is this true?"

"You could say that." You pick up your knife and fork and cut a larger piece off, since you're sharing now.

"Are you emissaries of this returned Dark Lord come to seek the Bone Mother's wisdom?"

You offer her another piece. "Hardly."

She reaches across and touches your forehead with the tip of her finger and traces a certain mark that's supposed to be covered by your illusion. "Yes, I suppose not considering the scar on your forehead. Is it true that is really from a killing curse?"

It's official. You really are bloody awful at illusions. "I don't even know why I bother."

"It's actually not that bad. I simply have a keen eye for deception."

"Well that's reassuring, I suppose."

She laughs and leans forward with a mischievous grin, "So the enemy of this Dark Lord comes to seek an audience with the all-knowing – and here I thought today was going to be boring! Do you intend to pit evil against evil and see who wins?"

"Our business here is a private matter."

"Well if I am to take you there, I should at least know a little of what is going on, Mr. Potter."

"How much do you want?"

Svetlanna carefully regards you with her head perched on crossed hands. "Is very dangerous unless you know the way. Apparition wards that do not prevent apparition, but rip the person to shreds, brooms suddenly fall from the sky for no reason, and I guarantee if you try to Portkey in or out you'll never be seen or heard from again. Did you bring Thestral, Hippogriff, or other flying beast?"

Hack's tiny wings obviously don't count, so you shake your head. Svetlanna continues, "Is probably for the best. The White Horseman trains the Thestrals to attack any fliers that enter the valley. If you truly don't want to fight with her, it would not make for a good start. We will have to go mostly on foot. Four days, five if the giant clan is on the prowl. I will do this for two hundred galleons – half up front."

"My associates handle the money. I will go fetch them."

"And what do you handle, Harry Potter?"

It's your turn to smile. Damn if it isn't good to be back out in the world instead of stuck in that musty castle, "Whatever the universe chooses to put in my way."

"I can't believe you're agreeing to this foolishness, Svetlanna! You of all people should know better." The barkeep looks at the four of you, shakes his head, and walks away.

"Years ago, my grandmother met her end at Baba Yaga's wand." She explains as Yuri, the innkeeper walks away.

"We're not here to fight her if its revenge you're looking for." Kwan cautions. They had dragged her outside for a brief demonstration of her skills, before labeling her as "adequate for the job."

"*Nyet*, revenge would be welcome, but it is foolish to contemplate. I do however like gold. It buys nice things. Why do you wish to speak to her?"

Bill takes over, "She has something that was stolen from us and sold to a goblin collector. It was purchased by one of her horsemen. We would like to get it back?"

"You know money means very little to her. She will likely send you off on any number of dangerous quests – such is her way."

You choke back a groan. It sounds like a bad fairytale already or that Dungeons and Dragons game Justin in Hufflepuff talked about in first year. It's widely rumored that when Gellert Grindelwald came to her, his quest was to eliminate Rasputin and a number of Romanovs – indirectly leading

to the Russian Revolution. Hopefully, you won't be fermenting any civil wars or toppling governments this time. You've already got enough on your "to do" list at the moment.

Bill replies, "We'll cross that bridge when we get to it."

"Two hundred galleons – half now, half when we arrive."

"Pricey, but workable. We want binding paperwork – non-disclosure of our activities, non-disclosure of the object we seek, and assistance in combat along with standard non-betrayal clauses."

She mulls it over, "I will only attack a member of the party in self-defense. I will not, for any reason raise my wand against Baba Yaga or her horsemen. I wish to live to spend the two hundred and fifty galleons all this will cost you."

A dark thought crosses your mind as Bill and the Russian witch continue to haggle over the terms, everyone who asked for more money in Brazil ended up dead. She's a damn sight better looking than Thundercloud, Sanchez, or Collins, so you hope karma isn't listening.

"...and if I refuse, it will take you weeks to even find which valley it is."

Bill smiles and pulls out a folder from his briefcase and hands her the photos. "Wrong."

Svetlanna flips through the photos. Her brown eyes get progressively larger with each picture, "Bozhe Moi! How is this possible?"

"Muggle satellites, the distortions are usually caused by the presence of wards." Bill answers. "Our best guess is that this distortion near the eastern edge is likely where her Hut is?"

"No, no. The Hut is allowed to freely roam the valley. She only uses it on those occasions when she travels outside the valley. This is astounding! Baba Yaga has a castle that would be right in that area. I am very impressed, but since you have this, why do you need me?"

"Just because we know the destination doesn't mean we know the safest route to get there. That's where you come in."

She continues looking at the pictures, "Yes, that is understandable. Fine, I will sign the paperwork for two hundred and twenty with half up front. Draw up the contract and I will return with my belongings in one hour. We will sign then."

A little over an hour later, your group Apparates to the edge of the encampment. She takes stock of the situation while you key her to the wards, "For one who claims to visit Baba Yaga in peace, you bring many fighters."

You shrug, "I've been told I have an annoying tendency to rush headlong into problems. This is just my way of overcompensating. Besides, which one of us was talking about a tribe of giants awhile back?"

The woman responds by thumping you on the back and laughing. "I like your humor, Harry Potter."

Bill shoots you a knowing look, but doesn't say anything, for the moment. He's been needling you about the mysterious "Nicolette" and your penchant for older women for the past couple of days. Considering you're a teenager, just about every female is going to be an older woman and you've already shown how badly you fail to relate to the girls your age.

Kwan motions for Sean, the leader of the mercs to follow and all of you go inside the main tent. Bill hands Svetlanna the pictures again. She points to the southern ring of mountains. "Best approach is from the south west. Mountains in this area have lots of metal in them and the wards are not as strong as they should be. The Red Horseman can be seen patrolling this area. He is the most reasonable of her followers. If we can convince him to take us to her, it will be a fairly easy trip."

You speak up, "And if he doesn't?"

Arching an eyebrow at you, she replies, "Then the universe has placed another obstacle in your way, Harry Potter. There are also many creatures in the mountains. The Giants are usually to the north, but trolls and other beasts call the borders of her territory home."

"Once we're past the mountains what defenses are there?"

Kwan doesn't get an answer as one of the mercenaries, ironically the one who has an ax to grind with your hitwizard buddy and shares Bill's brother's name enters. "There's a wizard on a Thestral circling above our camp."

Sean says, "Has he made any threatening moves yet, Charlie?"

"Not yet. Kendra, Ivan, and all three Dave's have him covered."

"What's Ivan think of his aura?"

Charlie rolls his eyes. He doesn't think much of the Serbian's aura reading skills. "He said the wizard is dangerous, but nothing we can't handle."

Bill smiles and looks at Svetlanna, "Well if we do this right, this may be the easiest money you've ever made. Let's go be sociable."

The rest of you file out of the tent. The Horseman lands in a clearing. It's the White Horseman. He walks to the edge of the camp's temporary wards and stands with his arms crossed. "What business do you have in the land of my mistress, foreigners?"

Bill starts to move forward, but Svetlanna stops him. "I have met him before. Despite the color of his robes, he has very little 'light' in him. Let me try to speak to him first."

"By all means, ladies first."

The witch walks towards the wards and speaks, "Noble Horseman, these wizards wish to parlay with the Bone Mother. Will you permit them safe passage into the valley?"

The man scratches his small black goatee and studies your guide carefully, "Why should I, Svetlanna of the hills? My mistress values her privacy. I do not see any compelling reason to disturb her. You should know better than to ask!"

She nods, and turns back to your group and points to Bill, "You will have to make your case."

Bill nods. Good old underling-turned-Transfiguration-teacher Percy might be the supposed "diplomat" of the Weasley clan, but anything the lot of them can do, Bill can do better. If anyone can get this done, it's Bill.

Five minutes later, Bill has explained that something of great value was stolen and sold to one of the Horseman and that this group was here to retrieve it – peacefully.

The White Horseman looks around. "She has entire rooms filled with gold. Your money will not interest her. If you are deemed worthy, she will grant you an audience. Prove yourself, Englishman. In the southern end of the valley is a graveyard. There is a large monument in that graveyard. If you can place your hand on that monument, it will alert all the horsemen and we will escort you to the castle of our liege lady, but only if you can make it through the mountains on your own."

"This is not some kind of a game," Bill says tersely.

He scoffs, "Those are my terms, take them or leave them. It and you matter very little to me. If you wish to make yourself matter, earn the right to be in her presence." Finished, the White Horseman walks back to his skeletal steed and climbs on with practiced ease and takes to the air.

Bill and Svetlanna return. She says, "If the Horsemen know we are here that means she does as well. It appears that this is your test. I suspect he and the others will arrange more obstacles for us. Still, the wards are weakest in that area, so it stands as my suggestion."

"Maybe we should try another direction if they are going reinforce the southern end of the mountains." Moody offers instead, his penchant for doing what isn't expected surfacing.

Kwan shakes his head, "Horseman wants us to beat his challenge, more about honor than battle. Bypassing would be an insult. I say we go south."

There is much discussion. Moody and some of the mercenaries want to try a western approach. Ultimately, it isn't a democracy. Bill's calling the shots. For the most part Bill is a happy go lucky bloke. You know this is the part he hates the most – making decisions that may lead to someone's death.

After careful thought he says, "Her minions already know where we are. If they can spot us here, they'll likely be watching our movements and when we start disrupting and bypassing the wards, they'll definitely know where we are. We can either split into two forces or stay as one group. Since they'll be using giants, I like our numbers better together. "

Moody sees the sense in Bill's logic, "Do we proceed now, or wait until the morning?"

Bill turns to the guide, "How close can we get to the wards via Apparition or Portkey?"

"Assuming they are not extending those wards as we speak, there are areas roughly five miles from the southern approach."

"We've got maybe two hours of daylight left. Break camp now. We'll move to that area now. It takes time and effort to extend those wards. We go now and they won't be able to do it. We'll Portkey to ten miles out and use brooms for the last five miles. Stay low to the ground and fly cautiously in case we encounter a disruptive field. Harry, I want you, Moody, and Svetlanna up front. She knows the territory, Moody's eye and our glasses should help us spot the wards, and you're our best flier if things get sticky. I'll bring the main group up from roughly two hundred yards behind."

The guide ends up riding backseat on your broom. Top speed on her broom is barely half of the Firebolt. "Truth be told, I have never been much for broom flight," she laments. "I suppose I'll need to get a new one at some point."

"What about a magic carpet? They're legal and plentiful in these parts from what I hear."

Her tone is bemused, "Me on a dusty old carpet? Like some Arabian Fakir – no thank you."

"I think your problem is you haven't been using a good enough broom. Whoa, what's that? Moody! Look over there? What do you think?"

The scarred Auror looks in the direction you're pointing at. "Good eye Potter, it looks like a wide area perimeter ward. Let's land here. This is as far as we go."

The next morning starts abruptly with a woman's scream. You scramble out of the command tent and find the hitwizard Kendra standing in front of a statue. "I saw him just thirty minutes ago."

The statue looks remarkably like Ivan the minor seer. Given the contorted expression of pain on his face and the fact his wand hand is frozen in the middle of casting a spell, you don't think he was happy about what happened. Come to think about it you aren't entirely pleased either. Sean is already barking orders for the rest of the mercs to pair up and check the camp.

"Is he dead?"

Bill's already checking him out with his wand. "I've seen something like this the Egyptian tombs – true petrification. There are specialists in Cairo that can probably undo this. One thing's for certain, we can't do a damn thing about him now. Harry, check the perimeter wards. See if they've been breached. Svetlanna, I need your wand."

You start walking away as the witch says, "May I ask why? Your contract would indicate whether or not I have broken my word."

"True, but if the wards haven't been breached, you're the only other thing that's changed in the past few days. Your wand please."

You scan the carved set of perimeter wards and find them nullified. "Bill, there's a breach over here. This set is down, hard. Someone poked a hole big enough for Hack to walk through."

He finishes testing her wand anyway and hands it back to her before coming over to look things over. You're not sure what's got his knickers in a twist more that one of the mercs is now a statue or that somebody beat his wards. If you were a betting man, you'd guess the wards.

"Harry, when we make camp tonight, I want a double layer perimeter and on the second layer I want a failure alarm tied to the front layer. We can do temporary ones drawn in the air or carve them real fast in sandstone. They don't need to be pretty, just last six to eight hours."

You nod. "What about the merc? Do we just leave him here? We could tie a bunch of daemon bone to him and see if that could leech the magic out of him?"

"That's a good idea, but we don't know how long that could take or if reversing it that way would kill him. He's not going anywhere. We could ward him up so anyone coming to collect him gets something nasty, for instance, death, and pick him up on the way back."

Yeah, he really doesn't like his wards being bypassed. "Ease off on the violent instincts there, Bill. They could have just killed him, but they didn't. That Horseman seemed to be playing this like it's some kind of game and this looks like their opening shot."

You break down the rest of the wards while Bill and Sean go over the options for the petrified mercenary. In the end, they decide to have two of the "Daves" fly him outside the perimeter and Portkey him to the town. Ivan gets to "rent" a room at the inn for a week. This will delay your departure for roughly one hour, but it's probably better than turning him into a trap.

Eventually, the duo returns and you start the trek into the mountains. Only thirty minutes pass, before you begin to appreciate the wonders of magical travel. Of course Hack has to do this carrying two dragonbone sappers to use when, *not if*, Madame Yaga's "challenges" advance beyond these minor ones.

"Your turn, Harry. Disarm this one." Bill calls out spreading the love. He's already done the first two ward traps encountered. Either he's tiring or starting to calm down. Whatever he's feeling, it's your turn to unravel someone else's magic.

"Right up your alley Harry, primarily Norse and Slavic based runes. Looks like some kind of sound amplification ward. What do you think?"

Bill's got that "snarky" look on his face. You ask your first analytical question. "Unless there's a big nasty critter in a cave somewhere and this is its dinner bell, this ward is probably meant to send an avalanche down on us."

"That's why you're in the field, Journeyman Potter. So how do you propose to take it down?"

"Have you checked for anything that'll trigger it if we put a silencing wall around it?"

Bill thumps his chest. "I'm wounded Harry, right here. Who do you take me for?"

You scan the area like the suitably paranoid man you've become. There's the failsafe – the runic version of a pair of tin cups and a piece of string that would send the sound out beyond all but a ridiculously large silencing field.

"Do you really want me to answer that, Bill? Okay, have someone erect a cone of silence on the blowhole over there, Kwan or Moody surrounds me and the main ward with another one. My chant will be less effective silenced, but it'll do the trick and we'll have our own safeguards in place. You stay on your toes in case we missed anything. Sound like a game plan?"

He smiles, "Like using a Reducto to clean dishes, crude and inefficient, but it's a guarantee that the spots will be gone when you're done. I like it. Sean, have somebody cover that area with silence and a second person in case it starts to collapse. Mr. Kwan, I know how much you prefer it when Harry here isn't speaking, so if you'll do the honors. Alastor, you and I are on lookout for Five-Second Frank."

"Five-Second Frank" is a Breaker's term for the ward you don't see coming and the five seconds the unsuspecting Cursebreaker has left to live. Years, perhaps even centuries ago, someone put this ward here. Maybe even the old crone herself! It's time to test your mettle against a person who could already be dead and see which one of you wins. It's what really gets the blood pumping. Premier Cursebreakers live for this kind of test.

The first few words leave your lips and the silencing field slams down on you. Ignoring the silence, you keep chanting and weaving your wand in an

intricate, repeating pattern. The area around you becomes thick with the sensation of magic as you press against the energy of the ward. Fortunately, there aren't a lot of charging runes on this slab of granite. It is simply meant to make a big noise, which doesn't have to last very long to trigger an avalanche. In less than a minute, the ward is already failing. At the ninety second mark, it's all over. Two well placed curses and the controller runes for this scheme are destroyed and the threat is marginalized – ward disabled.

Turning, you mouth to Kwan, "You can let the charm down?"

The bastard has the nerve to act like he can't understand you. He dodges the stunner you send his direction out of annoyance, but lets the field drop. You're about to start cussing him out when a thunderous gong resonates from high above. How? What? You beat the ward.

"There!" Moody calls out while pointing to the mountains above the pass. Even from this distance it's easy to see the large figure of a troll next to a gong. Well, you did your job and disabled the ward and avoided "Five Second Frank." Too bad they had a "Ten Second Troll" for a manual release.

Tons of snow start to dislodge from both sides of the pass – bugger. Well inside the ward perimeter, it would be foolish to try to fly, Apparate, or Portkey. Even you're not powerful enough to vanish whole mountains.

"Shit! Now what?" Someone screams.

Its times like these, when the whole world – or at least a good portion of it – is coming down on you that you have to ask yourself if leaving Brazil was such a great idea. It had a nice climate. The people, who weren't trying to kill you, were pleasant. Most importantly, no one was trying to bury you alive.

The seconds are ticking away – time to come up with something brilliant or stupid enough to save your life.

Turn Me Loose: A Harry Potter Adventure I Gotta Do It My Way (reprise)

Chapter 9 – I Gotta Do It My Way (reprise)

This marks the second occasion in the last few months that someone has tried to bury you alive. The last time, you had a bank vault to duck into. Apparition, flying, and Portkeys aren't good options and there isn't a bank vault handy.

Or is there...?

You back away and say, "Everyone, get into the cave." Losing composure midway through an avalanche isn't really helpful. The low rumbling of the sheets of snow and ice are starting to build – so is the tension.

"What cave?" One of the mercenaries nearby shouts.

"This one! Right here! *Tonare!*" Your blasting curse smashes into the side of the mountain and creates an indentation.

"It'll never be big enough!"

You point at the equipment floating on a magical disk. "It just needs to be big enough for the tent!"

Moody, Kwan, and Bill quickly jump on the idea and their curses join yours. The mercs and your trail guide, Svetlanna, warm up to the idea seconds later and soon the small hole begins to grow even larger. Your spells act like pile drivers, digging ever deeper. Maybe the shortest distance between two points is actually your wand. Seven blasting curses cast in rapid succession leave you magically and physically winded. The others easily added fifty or sixty more to your efforts.

The result isn't pretty, but you're not really here to admire the view. Instead of giving the dust a chance to settle, Moody is vanishing it. Kwan, and the leader of the mercenaries, Sean, positions the command tent into the hole.

Moody's eye scans wildly. "Potter, engorge one of those rocks so we have something to plug the front of the cave."

You comply with a heart charged by adrenaline. Maybe there's something to be said about being a thrill junkie. People are piling into the tent while Moody helps you levitate the enhanced rock in front of the entrance. You spare a look up in the sky where Hack is heading towards that troll ringing the gong and sense your familiar getting excited as well.

Mad Eye's shout rings in your ear. "Weasley, quit buggering with those sappers and get your arse in here!"

The red head looks up from rolling the last hunk into a crevice he made for them. "We'll need to be able to find them after the avalanche." Bringing them into the tent is a bad idea. One of them accidentally goes off and the tent might be rendered inert. That would be a good recipe for a quick death.

The old wizard points at the approaching wall of doom, "Are they worth dying over?"

Bill's a fairly pragmatic individual. "Point taken. This should be good enough."

He sprints over and ducks behind the two of you. Mad Eye grunts in your ear and gestures at the rock, "Okay lad, pull it right up to the hole nice and tight. We don't want that white stuff to pound it in here."

There are obvious sexual connotations. You wonder if he's a nutter or a creepy old man – best to settle on a bit of both and ignore it.

Less than a minute later, the makeshift barricade shifts under the weight of the snow.

Bill looks around. You, he, and Kwan have been here before. He says, "Okay, we'll need to put on bubblehead charms in a minute before we start digging our way out. Lets take our time when we do this and do it in teams so that most of us are rested when we make it to the surface. Odds are that there's going to be a welcoming committee up there when we break through."

Kwan replies, "He is right. Expect to fight."

You leave the deep thinking to them and move towards the back of the tent. Svetlanna is resting on a chair nearby and smiles at you. She motions to the seat beside her. "You think on your feet and have good instincts for one so young."

Sagging into the cushions, you shrug. "It's not the years, it's the miles."

She tosses her black hair over her shoulder and laughs while placing a hand on your knee. "I take it there's a story behind that statement."

"You could say that."

"Perhaps you will tell me then?"

"It's a very long story and the air in here won't last. How about another time?"

Svetlanna nods understandingly. "Very well, I will curb my curiosity for the moment. Will your troll be assisting in the effort to dig us out? It is a most peculiar specimen. I have never in my travels seen one able to adjust its size like that one can."

"That's Hack. He's one of a kind. He'll probably be on the lookout as we dig our way out of this. Not much gets by you does it?" You check the bond with your "familiar." He's up on top of the mountain and seems very excited. Good for him. For a second you wouldn't mind if the bond included some form of telepathy, but frankly, the idea of Hack speaking directly into your mind might have a real downside.

"No, I am very perceptive. In my line of work, it is every bit as helpful as that totem I've spotted poking out from under your shirt."

Bill comes over. "Harry, you and our guide here are paired up. When Kwan and I start to tire, we'll get the two of you. Work until you're tired and then get Moody and Sean. They'll take over for you. Now, rest up, cut the chatter, and conserve our air."

You nod and perform a bubblehead. From the looks of things, you have much of the next hour to relax. That's what your life really boils down to - brief periods of desperate insanity and near death experiences followed by idleness.

At some point, assuming you live long enough, you're going to make a therapist very, very rich.

According to Bill, Cursebreakers spend a lot of time inside a Bubblehead charm. Tombs filled with poisonous gasses and other fumes are an occupational hazard. Removing your copy of Golinard's from a trunk, you start reading. You're too wired to just sit around. Studying or carving seems like a good way to pass the time. Returning to your chair, you open the book and settle in. The Russian witch leans closer and begins reading as well. Part of you is somewhat offended by her willingness to ignore personal boundaries, but a larger part likes the proximity of a very attractive brunette witch who, by all appearances, seems very interested in you.

An issue surfaces before fifteen minutes pass – Hack is still very excited and you can sense it. Hopefully, that troll up on the mountain is a female, otherwise Hack has some serious explaining to do! When you told him to take it out, you didn't mean dinner and a roll in the hay.

This adds to the mixed blessing of having Svetlanna so close to you. You have your suspicions that she has either nymph or dryad blood in her. More than once, she's run her index finger on the back of your hand to encourage you to turn the page. It's very ... nice. This studying session doesn't appear to be very productive. You're not getting all that much out of it, or maybe you are and that's the problem.

Later, Bill returns looking slightly haggard and interrupts the "not really" studying session.

The tunnel is very narrow, barely allowing you to squeeze by her. If you thought having her in a chair next to you was distracting, the tight confines of the tunnel make it even worse, or better depending on your perspective. The two of you quickly reach an accord. One keeps up a light spell and braces the other with their body while the other pushes forward, magically carving a tunnel through the snow pack. Some of the snow is transfigured into wooden bracing.

Oddly, it reminds you of growing up and Dudley's old snow forts. Aunt Petunia intentionally kept you inside until her spawn finished his and then sent you out to shovel the walk while he pelted you.

It makes you long for the good old days, when people were just trying to humiliate you, rather than kill you.

The progress is slow, but steady. Blasting curses would be quicker, but the danger of collapse much greater, which leaves vanishing as the primary method of digging. Piercing curses sent into the overhead haven't poked through to daylight yet. It's a guess, but there's probably twenty to thirty feet of snow to get through.

You focus on the task at hand and do your best to ignore the closeness of the witch. Even with all this snow and ice surrounding you, things are a tad warm. Svetlanna's free arm encircles your waist for support and tenses with each spell you cast. You can't see back over your shoulder, but her lit wand darts around watching for possible cave-ins.

You force a bit extra into the next few spells knowing that she's sensing your power every time. Bill once said, "chicks dig power, danger, and excitement." Bill's a smart man.

Okay, so you're a bit of a show off. Why can't Harry Potter cash in on a bit of the Harry Potter phenomenon? Is there something wrong with that?

Magical fatigue sets in after the constant vanishing. Svetlanna sets additional bracing and then switches with you. The tunnel is about fifteen feet longer. It's a long way from digging your way out of that goblin vault in South America. At least this time you aren't smarting from losing a team member.

Using his wand, Kwan writes a message in the air.

Almost through. Everyone into the tunnel. Last one bring the tent.

You're surprised and had thought this was going to take much longer. Inside the tunnel, you realize why. There's a magically enlarged niffler Animagus burrowing his way forward with surprising speed and Moody banishing galleons into the snow to "steer" him.

It's both clever and resourceful. You definitely have to give Bill that. Even if he hasn't reached clarity with his animal spirit, he's getting something useful out of it. The ex-Auror's magic eye is scanning the ceiling of the tunnel.

His wand moves quickly, shrinking Bill back to regular size and returning him to human form. There's a group of goblins above us. They're armed and prodding the ground with spears and using worgs to scent the area. There's at least one giant as well. Get ready!

You've developed a serious dislike for goblins, nasty little creatures. Perhaps you shouldn't judge a whole race by the dozens that have tried to kill you. There was that Grip... something or other. Other than the cart ride, he didn't try to kill you.

Moody signals that there are five goblins directly above the party. With a maniacal gleam in his eye, reminding you that the old Auror isn't necessarily the most stable bloke in the valley, the wizard vanishes the remaining ceiling. Today's forecast calls for lots of snow and a chance of humanoids raining down from above. Within seconds, there are five dead goblins. To the ones on the surface, it must have looked like one of those horror movies on the telly, with their comrades just suddenly dropping out of sight like that.

Lacking the time to fully appreciate goblin fright movies, you get out of the trench. A spell on your boots allows you to leap out and land on the snow. The area looks a lot different buried under the avalanche.

For the first time in hours, you can see the sun. The light glares a bit off of the snow and is a tad painful to your eyes. The goblins are spread out, most in fur with goggles. The nearest group is twenty feet away. They don't look happy to see you. C'mon Potter, give them a chance. Let's all get along. It's what Dumbledore would do. Actually, the scheming bastard would try to use them in a convoluted scheme which would somehow jeopardize your life, but that's not the point.

Either way, that point is moot. They're throwing spears in your direction. Kill them. Kill them all. A conjured wind blows the missiles off course. Obviously, the goblins in these parts didn't get the memo about the worg potion being banned.

Jackals, firebats, boars, and bears – oh my! You've handled worse with less backup, but you've never tussled with giants before. There are three of them here. Your heart starts to race, feeding the pent up adrenaline into the rest of your system. Call it arrogance, but if a Daemon in a hidden city couldn't off you, there's no way you're going to die in a snowy pass at the hands of a pack of goblins!

Pointing your wand at the area around the closest giant, you try to conjure a golem out of the snow pack and give the thing a playmate. It's a bit of an overreach on your part as the construct rises to about fifteen foot versus the twenty-five foot giant. The giant's club smashes into "Frosty the snow golem" and rips most the right side off. The rest collapses into the angry monster and slows him down a bit. Lesson learned here, just because you can summon a giant snow golem doesn't necessarily mean that it'll be of any use.

Spells erupt from the wands of your allies. Gusts of magical wind drive the snow into your face. There are several of Baba Yaga's wizards there in the distance, but they don't seem to be directly attacking. It's all one big game to them! The chaos and confusion makes the Department of Mysteries look like a minor disagreement. Of course Tom's little club wasn't playing for keeps, otherwise the headline in the Prophet would have been, *Potter and Five Others Killed in the Ministry!*

A jackal sprinting towards you dies, split in two from your overpowered cutter. The goblin swordsman running behind it stares in shock at his severed arm, but only for a moment before resuming his charge. Give the damn thing some credit – and a well placed piercing curse.

Life has hardened you – death even more so. The predator in you that fuels your Animagus doesn't flinch at killing like the boy you once were might have. After all, death is random. Good people like Cedric, Sirius, Thundercloud, and McGonagall can die suddenly and without warning.

Then again, the bad guys can die just like that too...

The nearest giant stumbles as it takes spell fire from Kwan, Moody, and two mercenaries. A pair of Imperiused bears nip at his haunches like puppies. Your cutter slices through the animal skins it wears and gouges open a wound in his shoulder. As the monster struggles to rise, you spot a spec in the sky descending rapidly. As it closes the distance to the giant, the shape swells and balloons in size; adding mass and bringing a smile to your face.

Look! Up in the sky...It's a bird! It's a plane! It's Hack!

The troll slams into the giant like those wrestling shows Dudley used to watch forcing the giant to scream in agony. Hack gives no mercy and puts the giant into a choke hold. You move to cover, wildly firing blasting curses and sending goblins and worgs flying through the air like a big budget

movie. Spears and crossbow bolts fly through the air in defiance of the deadly rainbow of magic.

Others follow you, helping to press the advantage and drive them into retreat. Bill hits one of the other giants with a blinding curse, causing it to stagger and flail about. Without their magic users offering direct assistance, goblin numbers don't count for much. A female scream to your left draws your attention. It's Kendra, one of the mercs. She's got a crossbow bolt through her shoulder and is frantically reaching in her pouch for a bezoar. A shield spell attempts to protect her from further harm.

One of the "Daves" tries to assist only to get hit by a pair of bolts in his back and drives him into her arms bowling them both over. The deadly bolts passed through the witch's shield like tissue. Rune enhanced shieldbreakers - they're every bit as illegal as the worg potion and enchanted to defeat the standard Protego. Professor Binns and his exhaustive lectures on goblin wars come through again. Apparently, it's the most useful class in the Hogwarts curriculum. There's a brilliant piece of irony. Your eyes track the deadly missiles back to the source – a trio of goblin snipers taking shelter behind the rocks.

"Invito Fulgrex!" They're too far away for precise aim, but the sheer power of the spell calling lightning down from the sky devastates the area. You do it again and send a bolt into the blinded giant knocking him to the ground. Playing fast and loose with the elements sends a heady rush through your body.

That little display, along with the incapacitated giants breaks the goblin's backs. They start running. The wizards in the distance mount their Thestrals and fly away. It's tempting to send some spells after them, but instead you move up next to your troll.

Hack lets the giant's head loll to the ground and clambers off the larger monster's back. It's difficult to see whether he killed it or if the giant simply passed out. The one you knocked down struggles to its feet and runs off like a drunkard.

"What happened with the troll up on the mountain?" As if you didn't already know.

He snorts and gives a honest to goodness smirk, "Too many to fight down here." He sweeps his arms wide at the area surrounding the two of you before continuing, "Hack not stupid. If choice is screw pretty troll or fight many giants ... well Puny Harry already know which choice Hack make."

"Well, I'm glad you found something or someone to do in the meantime."

His lips curl into a crude smile revealing yellow and dingy teeth. Hack walks about thirty paces and stops. "Need club. It buried right here."

"You sure?"

"Yes. Puny Harry get Hack's shield and club?"

The Dragonbone shield would be pricey, but doable to replace. A Daemonbone club, on the other hand, is virtually irreplaceable. It's unfortunate, but the good news is that Daemon's are rather scarce on this plane of existence. If they weren't, the whole world would be in trouble.

Hurray, more digging. "Can you hold me out and over the spot?"

Hack scoops you up and the excavation begins. The guide wanders over to the two of you.

"You did not disappoint, Harry Potter. May I ask what you are doing?"

"My troll needs his weapons. One of them is right beneath me."

She scoffs, "That seems like a waste, but you English have your ways."

"Yes and this one seems rather ineffective. Hack, put me down. Thanks mate. Any suggestions on making a deep hole quickly?"

"Fiendfyre?" Svetlanna offers with a hint of humor on her face.

You've read up on that level of nastiness, "Yes, but I'd like to live through the experience, if you don't mind. Though bloodfire might do the trick."

She considers your idea for a moment and then reaches into her parka and pulls out a cylinder. You recognize it from the boot of Vernon's car – a magnesium flare. "Engorge this. It was too dangerous to use to dig our way out, but for digging a hole down fast, it works very well."

Hats off to the trail guide. You were never much of a kid for science, but you recall that water doesn't put these things out. Already the foot long object is starting to melt a hole at the bottom of the pit you blasted. Waving your wand, you make it swell to roughly five times its size. That gets things going nicely. Now with a tip nearly a foot wide and a levitation charm to keep it moving in the right direction, all you have to do is relax and let gravity and extreme heat do the hard work for you. Svetlanna casts freezing charms to prevent the hole from backfilling.

Progress is swift and soon the flare shrinks to its original size and is next to Hack's weapon. It takes two attempts to get a charmed rope to wrap itself around the club, but in short order Hack is reunited with his possession. Unfortunately, his Dragonbone shield is nowhere to be seen. The guide eyes the weapon curiously.

"It looks different from Dragonbone. What is it?"

"Basilisk." You answer with a casual lie. In days of old, you would have just blurted the truth without a second thought. Thanks to people like Dumbledore and a crooked Auror named Paulo, that willingness to blindly trust people is a flaw you've expunged from your character the hard way.

"Ha ha! Puny Harry too modest." Hack said with a laugh, then held the club so she could get a good look at it. "Is bone of bad Daemon... great

troughy of biggest fight Hack ever see. Bad Daemon very strong, nearly kill Hack. Puny Harry not so puny then. Kill Daemon with great magics!"

Of course it helps when you don't have to worry about Hack's mastery of the subtle misdirection. Still, you can't fault him for being proud. Svetlanna arches an eyebrow at you before smiling. "I assume this is part of the story you will tell me when I have earned your trust? Do not worry, Harry Potter. I will speak of this to no one."

You nod looking back across the snow. Kendra is receiving medical attention and several wizards are just standing around the body of the other mercenary. The fact that they aren't actively doing anything to aid him tells you all you need to know. There's one less Dave to try and remember. The only reason he came here is because you were paying him money. A year ago, you'd be crushed with guilt. Now, you're just worried that his loss might endanger the success of this mission.

Camp that night is a subdued affair. Four hours was spent recovering the rest of the gear and precious little ground was covered between the avalanche site and where Bill called a halt. You help him set a full disillusionment ward lined with an aversion field covering the tent. It's the most complicated defense yet and the fervor he throws himself into it reinforces how responsible he feels. Bill's an alright bloke. Right now you get the feeling that he "cares" just a bit more than you.

Weariness sets in as the sky begins to darken. He inspects your work and declares it satisfactory, "Not half-bad, Harry. Listen, I'm going to put three people at a time on patrol outside the tents. The extra firepower might come in handy and if there's really a traitor, it'll be more obvious."

"Sounds like a good plan, who am I paired up with?"

"No one."

"Really? Why?"

Bill shakes his head, "You're powerful, but even powerful people get worn out channeling that much magic. You need the rest."

"No I don't." You hate being treated like some kind of child.

"Yes you do. Two of those giants survived – a bit worse for wear, but survived nonetheless. If they have friends and they decide to come back, I need you rested and ready for another round. That spell you were casually tossing about, Moody said he'd likely kill himself if he tried it twice in a row. Kwan agreed with him. Baba Yaga's wizards saw it too. If they didn't take us seriously before, I know they are now."

"That's ironic. I'm finally getting respect. Maybe I should have come to Russia sooner."

Your joke gets a wry smile out of Bill. "I think the mercs are finally afraid of you. Either way, I'm not assigning our guide to patrol either. If she is a traitor, keeping her inside tonight will prevent anyone getting ambushed. Keep an eye on her, will you?"

As far as assignments go, it's not a bad one. "I think I can do that. I've been trying to figure out if she's got some nymph or dryad in her."

Bill shrugs. "I hadn't really felt a pull. Maybe, I'm just too used to Fleur to notice someone else doing it. She's attractive enough I suppose. She also seems to have her eye on you. Just be careful, if you know what I mean?"

"Right in one, mate!" A few months ago, you wouldn't have had a clue what he was saying. At least now you do.

"Good, now that that's settled and the wards are up, you go back in and get some food. I'll key everyone else to the wards and we'll settle in for the night. Too bad we don't have our old camp cook on this trip. I kinda miss the little bugger."

You give Bill a crude gesture and go inside where the temperature's always nice. Dinner this evening is beef stew from a tin and some rolls. Two quick Warming charms followed by some butter and they are edible. You eat it mechanically and sort of miss that scrawny kid who cooked the meals as well. Back in South America, it was, "Stay sharp, Harry. We need you on watch tonight." Somewhere along the way it became, "Rest up, Harry. We'll probably need you to kill something soon."

"You seem distracted." Svetlanna sits in the chair next to you. You sense a privacy bubble pop up. She points at a bracelet she wears.

"Just thinking about simpler times."

"Times are never quite as simple as you remember them to be. The problems of today often unravel with the passage of months or years."

Svetlanna sounds like Dumbledore. That's an image you definitely don't want! "I suppose you're right. What do you think Baba Yaga is doing right now?"

She tilts her head thoughtfully, "The Bone Mother?", she sits silently for a moment before giving a little sigh, "Honestly, I couldn't begin to guess what she might be up to. It is said she is the most capricious of witches. So who knows? Perhaps she is testing us all, her minions included. Though I'm certain I would not want to be one of her horsemen should they fail in her assignments." She pauses a moment then adds, "Then again, perhaps she has learned of your maps and is merely slowing our advance to consider how best to deal with you. A guess, yes? But possible I suppose. They say she knows all that transpires in her realm."

You've seen how Riddle's toadies react when pushed to the wall. Until Baba Yaga herself shows, this is all just an exercise in futility. "Tell me what you know about the Horseman themselves."

"Since she stays in her valley, they are as close as most will ever come to her. The respect they command is based on her authority. To those who do recognize that, they are still a threat, but not invulnerable. I suspect in the next battle, they will take a more direct role. All three are accomplished spell casters, does that worry you?"

"I've fought enough accomplished spell casters to know that anyone can be beaten under the right circumstances..."

Chuckling, she replies, "Indeed, Harry. Apparently, even Daemons can be beaten under the right circumstances. The troll's club, is that a leg bone?"

"Forearm." One of four the thing had to be precise.

"It was a very large Daemon then."

"Haven't seen enough to really compare, but I suppose you're right."

"Your answers are short and evasive."

"Why are you so interested?" You ask finishing the last bit of your stew.

"I think the better question is – why are *you* so interesting?"

"Just lucky I guess."

She touches your shoulder, "I respectfully disagree. You are clearly not going to be deterred until you meet her. You hint at slaying a Daemon and are the mortal enemy of a self-proclaimed Dark Lord – all this at such a tender age. I have lived here in proximity of one legendary figure for much of my life and now another is about to enter her valley. Such events do not occur very often. I sense the hand of destiny at work."

Shrugging, you vanish your bowl. "She has something of mine that is stolen. I want it back. It's really that simple. As for Destiny's hands, she can keep them to herself." You never were much for Divination or other predictive arts.

It draws a suitable laugh from her. She waits a minute before changing the subject. "I notice three of us are not being asked to guard the camp tonight. The wounded mercenary, she is a given, but the two of us were not assigned either. I am obviously not trusted, despite my best efforts, and I presume you are here to keep an eye on me."

"Bill wants me rested for the next fight. I assume he also wants you rested and able to spot any ambushes."

"You are a gracious liar, but I appreciate the gesture nonetheless. I should thank Bill, as it gives me a greater opportunity to speak with you and learn your secrets, Harry." Her index finger reaches out and tentatively starts tracing lazy runic patterns on the back of your hand.

"What about *your* secrets, Svetlanna?"

"My mother took me from this area after my grandmother met her end at Baba Yaga's wand. We traveled far and wide fearing that her horsemen would come for us. They never did. When I was old enough, I came back and sadly discovered that my grandmother had never been considered a genuine threat to the Bone Mother. She was a minor nuisance at best. All those years spent running for our lives were somewhat of a waste. Even when the horsemen learned who I was, there seemed to be no ill will. It was all rather anti-climatic."

Her tale is interesting. In some respects, you could picture James, Lily, or even Sirius doing the same with you – running all around the world and trying to stay one step ahead of the Death Eaters. Without the blood protections, it might have been your life.

"So you aren't consumed by the need for revenge."

"No. I was too young to know my grandmother. This all happened when I was but three years old. Chasing the specters of those long dead is no way to live. Perhaps there is a nugget of truth in that statement for you as well." She looks away as she says this but continues to gently trace runes on your skin. There's a pleasant tingling sensation accompanying it. You're getting the "magic finger" treatment! Without a wand or the pungent odor of potions, it's just simple body magic used successfully by healers and according to Bill, exotic entertainers. Yet another useful area the vaunted Hogwarts education seems to gloss over. There's probably not a damn thing left worth learning at that school.

Pointed question, so you answer, "I'm not going to kill Voldemort out of revenge. He's trying to kill me and won't stop until one of us is dead. I'd prefer it be him."

"That is an excellent answer. Now, I also notice that those who sleep in the same area as you do are on guard duty. Let us go back there and continue our discussion in private."

It's an odd request considering her privacy ward. You think you know where this is heading. "Honestly, I'm not that tired."

"Nor am I, but since you are to keep an eye on me, I'd like to show you as much of me as possible."

That really appeals to the man-whore in you. Still, you should make certain. "Aren't you concerned about the age difference?"

"Not particularly, wizards my age fail to hold my attention. You may object to Destiny's hands on you, but I think you'll enjoy mine."

You follow her to your sleeping area and cast a privacy charm after drawing the curtains. Well, Bill did order you to stay close to her, and you're willing to do whatever it takes for the team, because that's the kind of guy you are.

Harry Potter. Team Player. Sounds like a winner.

"You did manage to get some rest last night lad?" Moody's magical eye swivels in his socket. With Barty Crouch, it stayed mostly still and acted like a "standard" eye. The real Alastor Moody lets it wander around independently. Wonder if it contributes to his mania at all. There's no way that tent fabric, even the magical type, could stop that eye. Obviously, he saw you and the Russian witch "resting" last night – the creepy voyeuristic bastard.

"Lots. Thanks for asking." He's going to chew you out, but the sex was good enough that you don't really care.

"Out in the field is a bad place to lose sight of why we're and what we're up against. Suppose she wanted to get you alone and behind a privacy ward for something other than a swing in your hammock?"

"Good point, but she didn't."

Kwan slides in on your other side. This can't be good. You're in that spot right between the rock and the hard place. "Just when I thought you weren't stupid anymore you surprise me."

You try to come up with a joke about having three guys at a table and only four legs between them. It's not working. "I kept her in my sight for pretty much the whole night. There weren't many places she could have hidden a wand or a knife and, unless I'm mistaken, if it came down to unarmed combat, jaguar Animagus trumps most everything."

"Don't get cocky youngster." Moody warns as Bill and Sean join the table.

"They're right, Harry. We've got a lot of work in front of us. I've been looking at the maps and there are more of these choke points ahead. They're out there laying their next trap as we speak." Bill's tone doesn't carry that much ire in it. It's a guess, but you suspect he's more proud than annoyed.

"Consider me scolded. The more important question, the one that doesn't have anything to do with how I spent last night, is what do we need to do now?"

The dark-haired mercenary leader offers his suggestion, "We pull back and make a second approach from either the west or the north. They'll be wasting their time setting up the defenses here and will be hard pressed to move their giants and goblins at the same time. Without brooms, apparition, Portkeys, or Thestrals, they've got the maneuverability advantage and they know it. They'll set a few wards and know that we'll have to take time to dismantle them."

Kwan looks away thoughtfully. "Except we *can* move faster..."

Most everyone, including you looks at him with a slight bit of confusion as he starts to explain.

You zip across the landscape. Sledding, it's one of the many childhood experiences you've missed out on growing up. In this case it's a mixture of sleds equipped with sails propelled by a magical wind. They are all cobbled together with materials found in the command tent. Two now activated sappers carved from the hip bones of a Greater Daemon are lashed to the trailing sled with a hundred foot of rope tethering and pulling it. Bill and Sean have the dubious honor of driving that lead sled.

The Daemonbone is living up to its billing as the area seems to be losing its magical energy. The enchanted wind pushing each sled along periodically fails every few minutes. Far ahead run a trio of engorged monkeys the size of small apes – Curious George, Fred, and Percy looking for traps.

The first "ape" just exploded in a pillar of flames. Bill shouts, "Trap ahead." The sleds slow to a stop. Hack returns to his regular size and goes to fetch the sled with the sappers. Meanwhile, you, Moody, and Bill move forward to begin draining the wards with more conjurations. As the sled bearing Daemonbone passes, you get the sensation of a void sucking the energy out of the air. Your summoned creatures start to loose cohesion and collapse.

Out of the corner of your eye, you see Moody slip to the ground as his leg and probably the eye falter. The tent and all its comforts are left far behind, hidden, and waiting for recovery.

The wards continue to discharge, but starved of energy to replenish them, their magic quickly fizzles.

Bill watches the jets of energy weaken until they pose little threat. "Move out!"

With his command, the makeshift sleds start again. You hop back onto yours and immediately conjure another ape to get out in front and trip more wards. Conjuring even a hundred feet from an active sapper is taxing, but still workable. The long rope attached to the sapper sled finally starts pulling on it. That sled starts moving. Soon that ward will be recharged, but you'll be long gone before then.

Kwan's plan is simple – Magical Blitzkrieg. Instead of fully breaking the wards, you're bypassing them and leaving them intact. It goes against Bill's mantra to not fully disable the wards, and he feels like he's cheating. Either way, it's the difference between a few minutes and a full hour.

Wards take time to set up and, much like the French Maginot Line in World War Two, the creators are counting on them to slow you down while they

prepare something bigger and better. At this speed, you'll hopefully catch them flatfooted and unable to adjust.

Guess who's coming to dinner, but going to arrive at lunchtime? You try not to think about the fact that the people behind the Blitzkrieg idea ultimately lost.

Bill initially balked at using the Daemonbone, wanting to save it for something more important, Moody asked him exactly what that might be, pretty much quashing the objections.

Minutes later the group of sleds outruns a second landslide meant to bury the expedition. Yesterday's traps – either they set this up previously or they're already running out of ideas. Maybe tomorrow they'll have something geared towards Kwan's sled assault, but that assumes they're still around tomorrow. You don't intend to give them that opportunity.

Adding your magical wind to Svetlanna's pushes the sled faster. She has a very intent look on her face, but spares you the briefest of smiles. Technically, you're sledding uphill right now.

"Not quite as fun as flying, but we're moving at a good clip. With some luck, they'll never know what hit them." You say to her.

"I think you're right. Hold on! We're starting to head downhill!" She cancels the wind and concentrates on steering while you and the mercenary named Charlie focus on watching for any hazards in the path ahead.

Minutes pass and the sled continues its swift pace. Cushioning charms are applied where needed. Obstacles are banished or vanished out of the way. It brings a whole new meaning to "dashing through the snow." Someone's coming to town, but the only "jolly fat guy" is a troll looking to make a killing.

Up ahead, you spot groups of goblins and four giants. It looks like they are making fortifications that are about half complete. Odds are they've been worked through the night by the Thestral riding wizards circling above.

From the looks of things, there's a second group of wizards arranging wards stones. Several goblins run out as you continue by. Moody slashes a firewhip across them slicing many in half.

Horns sound and heads spin towards your direction. You send Jake Collins' famous butchering curse into the midst of others. Spells reach out to the panicked group of warders and scatter them. They are joined by blasters and exploding curses. Just as everyone hoped, you caught them with their pants down! Let the mayhem commence.

Leaping off the slowing sled, you roll under a Cutting curse and send a trio of Piercing curses into a stocky, balding wizard wrapped in heavy furs. Watching him collapse you think back to this morning, when Alastor Moody told you one of James Potter's favorite sayings – "Strike hard, strike fast, and leave chaos in your wake."

If Dad's watching from above, you think he approves. With some luck, it will be a long time before you can ask him.

Turn Me Loose: A Harry Potter Adventure Or No Way at All (reprise)

Chapter 10 – Or No Way At All (reprise)

Absolute mayhem – that's what a battle really is. It's a chaotic blend of spears, rocks, crossbow bolts, blades, and of course spells. That's what you find yourself in the middle of at the moment.

Baba Yaga's forces aren't even close to being prepared for your assault and now it's their turn to suffer the consequences. The wizard who just ate your three piercing curses lies in a pool of reddening snow. The man probably had a wife and kids. He also had a choice – be in your way or be somewhere else.

He made the wrong choice. Moreover, he's about to have lots of company.

A goblin, hurriedly quaffing his Worg potion, tries to fire his crossbow at you, one-handed. You vanish the bolt as it leaves the device and follow with "The Bloody Puddle Maker" - it's not so much a bonecrusher as it is a bone detonator. His entire arm ruptures in mid-transformation as bone chips moving at high-speed cause further injury to him and the two others close by. The wretched creature finishes its transformation into a now one-winged firebat flopping on the snow like a fish out of water.

You've already processed his death and moved on to the next opponent – a witch this time. She moves well for an older bird close to Mrs. Weasley's age. You roll out of the way of her firewhip as it slices through the snow, gouging a furrow in the white powder beneath your feet. It'll cut your flesh just as easily if you let it.

A flick of the wand and a snarled incantation later, you have your own firewhip, and both of you begin a fight resembling those rhythmic gymnasts Auntie Petunia used to watch on the telly. Fire does make nearly everything better! The winner here doesn't get a gold medal, just another chance to keep fighting.

She screams at you in a dialect you don't recognize as her tongue of flame passes close ... too close for your comfort. Had you been a moment slower, you'd lost an arm, or worse. Diving under it, you close the distance to her. She tries to dodge your counter, but you're faster than she anticipated and almost on top of her. Her whip is on a backward trajectory after missing its mark. Yours isn't and the lethal flames cut her arm off at the elbow. She collapses to the ground, clutches at her suddenly free arm, and activates a Portkey.

Their Portkeys must be keyed to the wards or she was willing to risk probable death against the certain death of staying. The predator spirit in your soul feels cheated out of the kill, but the more practical side realizes that it's one less enemy on the battlefield.

Your battle with the witch pulled you to an isolated part of the battlefield – either that or the others gave the two of you a wide berth. It doesn't matter. Getting back into the fight where you can do some good does. Transforming, you cover the distance quickly as an Animagus. Hack wrestles with one of the giants. Another is threatening Moody and a couple of the mercenaries.

That's another thing about large-scale battles, you don't have time to sit and decide who to help. Instinct takes over and you know that your troll has that giant in hand despite the apparent mismatch. You feel his confidence – maybe it is feeding off your own. Moody and the others are at a disadvantage with the heavily magic resistant humanoid so close.

The monster is a nearly twenty-five foot tall rampaging terror. It bleeds from numerous wounds and probably won't live beyond the battle, but it obviously doesn't care. That massive wooden club with iron spikes swings around as you come out of your transformation. You banish one of the mercs out of the way of certain death. The creature's other hand snaps out and grabs Alastor Moody like a rag doll.

Credit the grizzled former Auror, he immediately blinds the giant with a Conjunctive curse followed by a blaster that mangles one of them completely. That's obviously the thinking that's kept him alive for so long. You cast a cutter at the back of its leading leg – hamstringing the bastard!

The giant teeters, goes to one knee, and tries to slam Moody into the snow. You snap off a Cushioning charm and hope it helps as the two mercs lash out at it. The falling mass forces you to scramble out of the way, but only for a moment. The teachings of Kwan Chang-Ho leap to mind.

The second most vulnerable point on a giant, or a dragon for that matter, is its eyes. Most, except for a psychotic hitwizard wouldn't think of the ear canal – a large-enough-for-a-wand direct path to the squishy cranial material. Of course, the tricky part is getting a giant in a position to take advantage of that easy access port.

Your Blasting curse shatters its eardrum and scrambles its brains. It's not getting back up. One of the remaining 'Daves,' his right arm bloodied

and limp, is already levitating the massive hand off of Moody. The compacted snow takes on a springy feel and you get your hopes up.

They are dashed when you see the barely moving form of Alastor Moody. He strains just to spit out a mouth full of blood. Your spell spared him instantaneous death, but that just means that he gets to suffer.

The already injured Dave says, "I'll do what I can for him. Get back in the fight!"

He's right. Your knowledge of healing spells is way too limited to help out here. This one's out of your hands. Nevertheless, there's a burning anger in your chest for Moody. That anger fuels your magic and it needs to be directed at someone. There's a whole battlefield full of "someones" right over there.

Rage is an old, familiar feeling. The Dursleys nurtured it and fed it to you on a daily basis. They forced you to bottle up that feeling. The animal inside you is probably the result of all that pent up aggression.

Spells erupt from your wand, a physical manifestation of your anger. The walls they were constructing collapse under a volley of explosive curses. At your command a summoned rock weaves in front of a killing curse. The caster becomes your next target.

You recognize him. He's known as The White Horseman - one of Baba Yaga's main henchmen. Conjuring wind, you blow a snow squall at him. Your hopes of enveloping and blinding him are dashed when the man dispels the driving winds.

Eyes lock and spells begin to fly. You traded the now one-armed woman for another dance partner. "Whitey" didn't get where he was by being a push over and neither did you. Well, maybe that's an overstatement. You used to be a creampuff, but have since outgrown it.

Kwan Chang-Ho's lessons in combat come to you like sheer instinct. When possible always dodge the spells to conserve your firepower. The heavy-duty spells require power to perform correctly. If you know the spell, evade it. If you don't, shield and evade it. Then again, Kwan doesn't have your kind of power - does he?

The old saying, "Chop off the head and the snake dies," applies here. He's one of the leaders. Defeat him and the rest of them will break. It's really that simple - except, of course, the whole defeating him part.

A solid shield soaks up his punishment, as the older man weaves unknown spells in your direction. You keep moving, changing your directions and profile, waiting for him to let up and looking for your opening. There it is! No time for schoolyard spells.

You cast, "Ossium Scindus!" - the bone ripper, followed by, "Aveugli" - A blinding curse, perhaps not the best choice, but the end motion of the ripper spell chains right into the first motion of the blinder, and it will keep him on his heels.

The Horseman dodges the ripper and shields the blinding curse that follows. You go with another option. There's a goblin loading his crossbow.

"Imperio." Unforgivable? In England, yes, and perhaps here. You didn't stop to read the local provisions. Either way, the damn goblin experiences a momentary lapse of loyalty - somewhat like the typical Hogwarts student. The goblin's "magekiller" bolt wings the horseman, lodging in his non-wand arm. Enraged, "Whitey" disembowels your hapless pawn with another arcane spell you fail to recognize.

Less than twenty feet separate the two of you. His face is a mask of anger and you sidestep his Killing curse. The bolt was no doubt poisoned. The longer you can keep him from doing anything about it, the more the advantage shifts to your favor. Keep up the pressure! Fast Cutting curses, bludgeoners, and piercers swarm around him like a cloud of deadly insects. A cutter breaks through and stains his ivory robes. It is followed by a bludgeoner that spins him to the ground and shatters ribs.

The White Horseman struggles to bring up his wand, but you swat away his curse with a dueling shield. He begins to writhe in pain as Svetlanna comes up by your side - obviously she doesn't care too much for the local laws either.

Her eyes blaze with fury and she speaks with an aura of command. "He won't be able to activate his Portkey, like this. Finish the others, Harry. I will hold him."

You turn to leave, already looking for the next opponent, but you get that feeling of wrongness. Glancing back at Svetlanna, you see her arm - twice as long as it should be, reaching for you. An oversized hand wraps around your wand hand and she activates a Portkey.

Shit!

Coming out of the Portkey, she's still got your wand arm wrapped up. Svetlanna is incredibly strong. You shift into your Animagus form and twist out of her grasp. Her limbs continue to reshape themselves as you snarl. She's a metamorphagus!

The room is large and well lit. There are many others present - too many others! More arrive via Portkey and they aren't part of your team. Angry looks follow your every move.

Svetlanna returns to "normal" and looks unafraid of the angry jaguar mere feet away from her. She holds your wand in her grasp, damn you hoped it would transformed with you. Still, you have your backup wand.

"Relax, Harry Potter. Resume your human form. Assuming you do nothing foolish, no harm will come to you."

Sparing a glance at a somewhat familiar witch, screaming while getting her arm reattached, you somehow doubt that. Since you're not already dead, you might as well play along. Becoming human again, you shrug. "Metamorph huh? I just thought you were very flexible."

"I am that and so much more," she replies.

Glancing around you see two healers hovering over the White Horseman. You did a number on him. "Well, I guess this is the part where I say, 'Take me to your leader,' isn't it?"

"Very well, the Bone Mother is ready to see you. Follow me. As for the rest of you, I'm certain you know how poorly you performed."

She leads you past the wounded and through the hallway. The walls are lined with paintings and artwork from around the world. At least she's not Baba Yaga, herself. Bill would never let you live that down. Speaking of which, "What about the rest of my group? What are her plans for them?"

"They are of no consequence. The remaining humanoids will slow them down, for now. I suspect that your business here will be concluded long before they become a threat. Honestly, if you didn't have those photographs and a plan for penetrating the defenses, I would have never agreed to be your guide. The valley's protections will have to be upgraded."

The witch opens a set of doors into a private chamber. Much like Dumbledore's office, it is filled with magical devices. The old bastard would be jealous. You recognize several of them, but you're not interested in such bric-a-brac at the moment. Caged songbirds with tiny human faces immediately begin singing a soft tune.

One item draws your attention, however. Beside a large and rather comfortable looking chaise lounge rests a hookah-looking device. Floating inside it is a very familiar locket. It glows with a pale blue light and emits tiny wisps of smoke. Apparently, smoking really isn't just bad for someone's body – it's bad for the soul.

"What about your grandmother? Was that a lie too?"

"Svetlanna was the last one to seriously challenge me. Wearing her form amuses me and allows me the means to travel out amongst the people. It is far easier to eat the lamb special when the cook isn't quivering in fear."

Oh that sounds bad, that trickle of bile in the back of your throat confirms it. "Please tell me you're not Baba Yaga."

"I could Harry, but it would be another lie. Would you be more comfortable if I adopted another form? I did say that men my age fail to hold my attention."

Gross! She's the old crone! And you slept with her. "No, this is fine."

She sits on the lounge and uses the hookah, savoring whatever it is she's breathing in. "Would you care to try? It is quite invigorating."

It's also rather sick. "You do know what that is, or rather who that is?"

"Naturally, it is a Horcrux and a fairly powerful one at that. From your interest in it, I now know the identity of the maker."

She relaxes and strips off her furs revealing the simple robe that you were rather eager to get her out of just a short while ago. Another dribble of bile swirls at the back of your throat.

"There are many paths to immortality. For one blessed with shape changing abilities, such as myself, there are doors open to me that are closed to others. Those stories about me eating children are mostly lies, but souls are another item altogether. This locket is a veritable feast. I am loathe to part with it, but I assume you have an offer in mind."

Hurray, it gets better! She's a soul-eating, shape changing, old crone – one part gorgeous witch and one part Dementor. You should just puke and get it over with.

Of course she's eating Voldemort's soul, so there is a definite upside. "How long before the piece of his soul is gone?"

"A few years, no more than three at the most."

"A little too long for my liking - I'm just planning on destroying it. Is there any way I can convince you to speed up the process?"

She laughs, "It would be like throwing out a feast. However, because I like you, and because I suspect you have enough Daemonbone to offer as compensation, I'll do it. But tell me, what will you do about his other one?"

"I'll find the cup."

"The cup? I wasn't talking about a cup. I was referring to that scar on your head."

"What?" That's something you weren't prepared for and you really don't like the sound of it. "What do you mean the scar?"

"Oh dear, I thought you knew. There's a piece of him with you. At first I couldn't understand my own attraction for you. I normally like my boys a bit older, but around you I was unable to explain or deny my infatuation."

You don't have a good comeback to this. In the light of this new development, your witty banter fails. All you have left in your inventory is, "What?"

"Don't get me wrong, Harry. Your power, your drive, and your youth – it is a rather tasty package, one made even more delicious by the taint of the soul I am devouring. It drew me like a moth to a flame."

The locket doesn't seem that important at the moment. "Can you remove it?"

She motions for you to sit and lacking any other idea you sit next to her. She traces the scar with her finger. The motion stirs a reaction in you that you definitely don't want at this particular time. Svetlanna, it's easier to think of her by that name, brings her lips to it and moves them slowly across it.

This is disgustingly erotic.

She breaks away and you notice her chest heaving a bit and the flush of her cheeks. "I'm afraid that the only rituals I know for extracting that shard of your enemy would be fatal to you as well. That is obviously not the result you are looking for. Though if you destroy both this cup you speak of and his physical form, you may be forced down that path to ensure he cannot return."

"Fantastic! Even more good news!"

"Still, you may be able to use this to your advantage – I offer no guarantee, but his magic will be less effective against his own Horcrux. If your enemy does not know this, it could be of great use to you."

You want to tell her that this nugget of hope she is offering you is about as useful as a galleon buried in a steaming pile of dragon dung, but she seems genuine – for a seven-hundred year old witch, who has been lying to you all this time.

Svetlanna, sensing your discomfort, stands and stretches. She summons an owl. "Write your friends and have them to hold their position. There is no further need for bloodshed."

You scribble a quick note, telling Bill that you're okay and negotiating for the locket and signing it with one of his runic schemes to give him confidence that you're not writing this under duress – or at least much duress.

"How much bone do you want and what will you use the Daemonbone for?"

"What do you think my hut is made of? Chickenbones? I've been planning a renovation for several years, but lacked the raw material."

"How much do you know about them? The one I fought left me with an impression that we could possibly meet again."

"They're known for lying and twisting the truth, only a few have the gift of prophecy and they are all greater ..." Her voice trails off before she looks at you with a sly smile. "I was about to say surely not, but you and I Harry, we are legend. Tell me about the Daemon you faced and I will tell you how much I require. I will also consult my scrolls and learn what I can for you of this creature. You will likely find none more knowledgeable than I."

You show her a Pensieve memory – not the battle, but the first time you entered Chlotho's temple, when it was still trapped behind the barrier. The two of you watch it deliver the taunts. Given your last experience with these memories, you pay special attention to the creature for any "hidden messages" it may have.

It's surprising how terrified you looked back then. The Daemon turns its head and smiles broadly at the two of you and winks!

Damn that thing is unnerving!

Exiting, Svetlanna says, "From the shape, I believe I know this one. It is a master of falsehoods and half-truths – and a most dangerous foe."

"Any suggestions if I have to fight it again?"

"How powerful is your Patronus?"

"Enough to hurt it. Combined with my Animagus form, it was enough to defeat its physical body."

"Make weapons from its bones. Infuse them with the power of your Patronus. Poison them with the blood of a failed thief and that of a repentant liar and pray that you'll never have to use it. Now, let us barter for the Horcrux."

It ends up costing you an arm and a leg – fortunately, not your own, but she removes the locket after taking a long inhale on the hookah. One killing curse later and the locket is no more. Riddle is another step closer to his next great adventure. The one inside of you is troubling. The marked as an equal part of the prophecy come to mind, as does the neither can live part.

Svetlanna interrupts your musings. "Now, what do you have to offer for my services as a Daemon scholar?"

Sighing, you ask, "What else do you want?"

Her fingers work her robe open. "Though I have a rational explanation for my infatuation with you and know it will lessen eventually, I still have the infatuation."

The bile in your throat returns, but then again you're a teenaged male. Since Bill is already going to give you no end of shit about this, you might as well.

After all, she is incredibly flexible.

A few hours and one encounter you're trying to decide whether or not to forget later, you land your Thestral at the area where Bill and the others are

waiting. The Red Horseman is your escort and there to collect the Daemonbone. It's hard not to think back to your last Thestral ride. So much has changed since then.

Don't worry about the Horcrux in your head, get rid of the cup first, Voldemort next, and then worry about whether or not you have to take one for the good of humanity.

Looking to your approaching red-haired friend, you ask, "Hey Bill, did Moody make it?"

He shakes his head. "We lost Sean and one of the Daves as well. That arse Charlie claims he's in charge of the mercs now. He's just been waiting for you to show up so he can officially end their contract."

"Why?"

"You're technically the employer. You have to release them from their papers."

You look at Kwan who looks tired. "And if I don't?"

"The price doubles, but they must continue working."

"What do you think? Is it worth it?"

"No, they've lost too much. Edge is worn away – too fat from your coins. Will be looking over their shoulders to see who dies next and wondering if they'll live to spend their money."

You can't exactly blame them, "Fine, I'll cut them loose. Kwan, can you find us some replacements."

The Korean nods, "Always someone willing to die for money. I have contacts in Korea and Mexico. It will take time."

Without Kwan your backside just became less safe, but you're a big boy. "Go ahead and get a crew together and meet us back in England."

Bill looks at the pouch you're carrying. "Is that the locket? Is it done?"

"Yes."

"What'd it cost us?"

"Daemonbone – one arm and a leg. That gentleman over there is waiting for it."

He cringes. "That's almost everything we brought with us! Harry, you should have worn the old crone down a little."

"I did." Not the way he would think, but being vague is the best path here. The less said about that – the better. "She also agreed to do some research into our four-armed goat-headed friend. She has an extensive collection of scrolls."

"Okay, as long as she delivers some useful information."

"I think we can trust her about as much as we trust Dumbledore. She seems to like me and her motivations are more transparent than his."

"Fair enough, I'll go get the bone. You and Kwan go fire the mercs."

A few minutes later, you find yourself in front of Charlie. There's an atmosphere of insincerity wafting about.

"I'm sorry to see you guys go. They gave me a salve to fix Ivan."

The merc nods and accepts the jar from you. "The money was good, Potter, but Sean let things go to his head. You're a good employer, but it's time to move on."

Kwan doesn't care about being nice, "Terms still apply. None of your people working for his enemies for one year."

"I know the terms, slant-eyes," a subtle reminder that Charlie doesn't care for Kwan.

Kwan smiles. It's the kind of leer that can still send a chill up your spine. "Maybe when all this over, I come and find you."

"Maybe we could settle this right now, old man?"

Someone's a bit eager to die. Kwan laughs at him. "You're time will come, but I still work for Phoenix Expeditions."

That reminds you, the name of the company needs to be changed. Fawkes doesn't exactly like you much anymore. You watch Charlie posture for a minute before losing interest. Even with only one leg, Kwan could take him.

You, Bill, and Hack have the responsibility of escorting Alastor Moody's body home – proof that even legends can die.

Using the same high-speed sledding, your group retrieves the rest of the supplies and makes good time out of the Bone Mother's territory. At the

edge of the witch's valley, you see a familiar figure circling the sky. What does Dumbledore want? More importantly, what on Earth does Baba Yaga have that keeps a phoenix out?

It swoops down and looks at Moody's body strapped to the back of the sled. The phoenix turns an accusing gaze at you, as if to say, "How could you let this happen?"

"Yeah, where were you when we needed you?"

Fawkes answers with an angry hiss. Flitting over to Bill, it extends a leg. He removes the message.

William,

I hope your mission is going well. Normally, I would be reluctant to interrupt, but sadly circumstances at the castle force my hand. Events are occurring in England at a rapid pace and Harry is needed back here.

The Castle's wards are once again in danger of failing. It is regrettable, but the blood anchor has been stolen and taken from school grounds. My hope is that it is now destroyed, for I fear what Riddle is capable of with a piece of blood magic in his hands.

The theft corresponds with the disappearance of Miss Parkinson from the school, so I do not believe we have to look far for a suspect.

If that were the only piece of bad news, it would certainly be serious, but I'm afraid the situation is dire.

The Goblin Nations in both Britain and Brazil have gone into open revolt. Those on the continent have not joined in at the moment, but that situation could change at any time. Naturally, I suspect our enemy's hand in this. Gringott's has closed its doors and sealed off their vault system. This has, of course, had an adverse effect on the financial system.

Although Harry's return is greatly needed, I wish you the best of luck in the recovery of the stolen artifact.

Albus Dumbledore

Bill finishes reading it aloud and looks at you. "Ready to fight a Goblin war?"

"Sure, why not. Go ahead and put it on my list of things to do."

"Hack and I will bring Moody back. You catch a ride with Fawkes."

You shrug, "If it will take me. How about it?"

The phoenix looks like it would rather drink curdled milk, but heads in your direction.

Bill calls out to you, "So what was the story with Svetlanna anyway?"

"She was really Baba Yaga?"

Bill stares in amazement as Fawkes digs its claws in to your shoulder. "That's disgusting!"

As the swirl of magic begins, you laugh and shout, "For someone pushing seven hundred, she wasn't a bad shag!"

The magic fades and you find yourself standing in the middle of the Great Hall at mealtime. Instantly, you feel the weight of Hogwarts wards – siphoning on your magic like a greedy sponge. Everyone is staring at you including Dumbledore, many with their eyes bulging and mouths open. Fawkes did that on purpose - damn bird!

Dumbledore clears his throat. "Ahem, with that we welcome back, Mr. Potter."

"Bugger."

Turn Me Loose: A Harry Potter Adventure And Then You Came Around

Chapter 11 – And Then You Came Around

Clearing your throat, you look at all the people staring at you. Fawkes squeezes extra hard and you feel a sharp pain in your back as it springs off of you and takes flight. It hovers over you and hisses until you bat it away with your hand. That piece of shit clawed you for no damn reason!

You reach with your arm, but the injury is between your shoulder blades and hard to get at. With your wand, you cast a poorly aimed healing spell, which takes some of the sting out of the wound.

"Is something the matter, Harry?" Dumbledore asks, feigning innocence.

"Of course not! You can't control what goes on in this school anymore than you can your familiar. Why am I not fucking surprised?"

There's a collective gulp amongst the students in the room.

"Harry, Ambassador Potter, you seem a trifle distressed. Perhaps you should go to your quarters and rest?" He adds, which only serves to irritate you more.

You stalk forward towards the head table and pull the pouch containing Slytherin's Locket off. The rest of the teachers, except for Snape seem to shy away from the anger you are radiating.

Smacking the pouch on the table in front of him, you hiss, "And then there was one. All it cost was a few mercs and the life of Alastor Moody."

A crack appears in Dumbledore's impassive façade, "Alastor?"

"Went down fighting, probably the way he wanted to, but at least we accomplished our objective. Bill is bringing the body back to England. Care to explain how you messed up? What the hell happened here?"

"We shall speak about it later, Harry. Perhaps Severus will accompany you back to your quarters and brief you." Dumbledore asserts some of his authority. He's trying to rile you. You need to calm down or you'll fall into his next little trap!

Snape looks like he'd rather be participating in a sing-a-long, but stands nonetheless. He's such a good lapdog. Meanwhile, you look at the gloved hand of the Headmaster and the so-called leader of the light.

"That cursed wound is getting worse isn't it?"

"It is of no concern, Ambassador Potter. You are dismissed."

"It seems like the old man isn't long for this world, Snape. Even with all his power, his phoenix, and two Potions Masters at his disposal, it's getting the better of him. I'm beginning to think that either of us could take him." You walk along side a bitter man, fighting an internal battle not to become just like him – another of Dumbledore's pawns.

"You would be wise to keep your theories to yourself, Potter."

"It's causing him to get sloppy and rush his plans. He was always more subtle in the past."

You cast a glance at the potions master as you walk along. He says nothing, but you don't have to be a Legilimens to know his mind is whirring at the possibilities.

"What? No answer to that, Snape? So what are you supposed to be briefing me on?"

You open the door to your suite and find it much the way you left it, and walk in with Snape following. Hermione had the homunculus in her room and it stands to reason that it was stolen from there.

"The blood anchor was stolen by Pansy Parkinson and she has since fled the school. Granger was found stupefied and obliterated with significant traces of Dark Magic around her."

"Parkinson and whoever else was with her probably used the Imperius Curse on Hermione didn't they?"

Snape doesn't bother denying it. "I agree."

"We have no idea what she might have told Pansy? They might already know that Granger is a living key to Hogwarts wards."

"That is the fear. Granger's security is being handled by the metamorph, if that is any reassurance."

"Not particularly, and I think you hold the same opinion of Tonks as I do." Holy house elf balls! You and Snape are agreeing about how screwed up things are.

"The two house elves that served you attempted to prevent the abduction. Both were killed. The Know-It-All is rather devastated about it."

That stops you in your tracks. You liked Winky, and for all his insanity, Dobby was a friend. Dumbledore hides behind his carefully crafted façade, but you feel the anger coursing through your veins.

"Kreacher!"

The grizzled looking elf appears, "You summoned me master?"

"What do you know about Dobby and Winky's death?"

"Only that they died, killed by humans."

"Potter what are you doing?" Snape asks.

"The ringleader was Pansy Parkinson. Do you know this witch?"

"Potter..."

"Yes, Kreacher knows the Parkinson family. Kreacher knows the witch with the pig-like nose."

"If I order you to kill her, can you do it?"

Kreacher smiles. It is the first time you've ever seen him do it – a scary sight indeed. "Master is proving he is worthy. Kreacher, like all elves, is forbidden from directly killing magical humans, but like all rules there are ways..."

"Potter!"

"What Snape? If she had decided to kill Hermione, the whole castle could have exploded, likely killing everyone in it! Do you want to die because of that old man's flawed plans?"

"Think with your brain for a minute, Potter! The Dark Lord isn't about to sacrifice all his followers' children."

"You honestly expect me to believe that? He destroyed an entire city in South America and killed his partner and all their followers to make certain his secret Horcrux hidey-hole was never found. I was there! Saw it with my own eyes. You're a fine one to try and tell me what he is and isn't capable of. People like him and Dumbledore know that there are always more followers and it's about time you figured that out too!"

The pale faced man knows you're right, but is too stubborn to admit it.

You turn back to your elf and make a Portkey to the Shrieking Shack out of a penknife, "Fine, don't kill her. Watch their estate. If she sets foot outside of the wards, stab her with this and use the word 'scum' to activate it. It will bring you to a deserted house in Hogsmeade. Incapacitate her by any means necessary to stop her from Apparating away and come and get either me," You pause and look at the other man in the room, "or Professor Snape, and we will deal with her personally."

The elf nods and takes the penknife and disappears. You turn back to Snape, "So how much like my father am I now?"

"What do you want Parkinson for? Is it just for killing your elves?" Snape's testing you.

"No. We both know she did it on someone's orders. Pansy isn't that bright. My guess is the trail leads right to Malfoy and once I get proof, he will get what's coming to him."

A river of anger surges across Snape's face, "You will not harm Malfoy. I will take care of him. Is that understood?"

"Why? It's not just because he's one of your pet Slytherins. What's your game in this, Snape?"

"My reasons are my own, Potter, but this much I will make perfectly clear: anything dealing with Draco Malfoy comes through me. Do not try me."

You smile at him. You're quite capable of lying to him. The truth is capable of changing. "Fine Snape, ickle baby Malfoy is all yours. But you'd best keep the boy on a short leash. If he crosses me, it would be very bad for him."

"If he is harmed, Potter, there will be repercussions."

"There are repercussions for everything, Snape. What about the Goblins? What is Scrimgeour doing?"

"Most of them are down in their vaults, holding Britain's money hostage. The rest are actively raiding. The centaurs caught a contingent in the Forbidden Forest and there was a significant battle. Were I to guess, either the Dark Lord was planning an assault against Hogsmeade, or he was trying to scout out Hogwarts' Defenses."

"How much do you think he knows about Hogwarts and the wards?"

Snape appears ready to hurl some kind of insult, but stops. "Finally an intelligent question from you. During his time as a student, it is unlikely the Dark Lord learned much about the defenses, but we can assume that he learned enough during his time here possessing Quirrel and whatever Barty Crouch might have provided. Incorporating the blood protections buys the school time, but only so much."

"We should seal off the Chamber of Secrets." Bill would be proud; you've started thinking like a Cursebreaker and evaluating possible back doors.

"It's done already, over the summer in fact."

"How'd you get a Parselmouth to open the tunnel?"

"The entranceway was a sink, Potter. Think! We live in a world of magic. A blasting curse and any number of spells could have done the job, but taking a tactic from his enemies, the Headmaster used a very powerful Confundus charm and opened it."

"Did he collapse it, or trap it?"

"You can discuss it with him. I was only there to see if there was anything that could be recovered from the dead creature. Once I determined that the body had decayed too much to be of use, I left. He told me later that access to the School via the Chamber would no longer be a problem."

You don't like that answer, "Knowing him, it's probably as safe as Flamel's stone was."

"Ah yes, the fledgling Cursebreaker rears his head. Tell me Potter, how would you do it?"

"Necrowards. There's a sixty foot dead creature down there. No sense in letting it go to waste. I've seen a nasty Bone Golem created out of the bodies of a few hundred goblins. I'm guessing there are a bunch of dead bodies out in the Forbidden Forest. Then get nasty coming up the tunnels. Litter them with a mixture of one time wards, followed by the more powerful stuff. Everything lethal."

Snape nods briefly, "Perhaps you should approach the Headmaster and determine if his defenses are better than the ones you propose. I will say this, if the Headmaster does indeed pass on, I will likely be taking over."

"What about Flitwick? Isn't he the Deputy now?"

"With the goblins in revolt, do you really think Scrimgeour and the Governors would turn to one with their blood in him? As for Sprout, she is ineffective at best. You and I will be stuck together until the blood protections fade from the castle. I believe this is his way of encouraging us to work together. I don't like it and I know you don't like it either, Potter, but we will need to begin preparing for that possibility. For now, let us try to look past our mutual hatred of each other and work towards the common goal of making certain that both of us live to see the end of this war."

"Deal, Snape."

"Agreed, Potter."

The man turns and walks out of your room. You feel dirty. You just made a deal with Severus Snape, the second biggest bastard roaming the halls of Hogwarts.

You pick up a report left by an Owl containing communications from Ambassador Dimperio and the Brazilian embassy – yet another faction in this war that is loosely allied with you.

Riddle has a small but focused group bolstered by the goblin nation throwing its lot in with him. You have only smoke and mirrors holding together a patchwork opposition consisting of the Ministry, the Order, whatever mercenaries Kwan can scrounge up for the funds that are still accessible to you, and whatever is hiding in the cupboards.

The only glimmer of good news is Riddle is down to one Horcrux. His followers have proven that they lack the will to press on without him. That's the only real solution – kill Tom Riddle.

Lacking anything else to do, you pull out some dragonbone and begin carving. One thing you saw in Baba Yaga's private chamber that impressed

you, other than the way she could contort her metamorph body, was a shield on the wall with nasty single-use wards attached to it. Hack needs a new shield; one covered with a dozen flaming arrow wards or something even nastier could come in handy for killing goblins or anything else that gets in your troll's way.

There is a knock at the door connecting your room with the Head Girl's. It's another one of Dumbledore's semi-willing chess pieces coming to visit. There's no use avoiding her.

"Come on in, Hermione."

The witch, looking somewhat haggard and in need of a long nap enters. Tonks is behind her. "You're not welcome in here, Nymphadora."

"I go where she goes," the Auror answers.

"Please, you'll be next door. Harry can and will protect me."

"Like he protected McGonagall?" Tonks fires back looking like she wants to scrap with me.

"Whoever told you that ... well, we both know who told you that; he was closer to McGonagall when she died than I was. I promise, if someone attacks Hermione while she's in this room, I'll do a better job against them than you did against Bellatrix. Is that acceptable?"

Tonks slams the door.

"Was that really necessary, Harry?" Hermione asks walking slowly.

"From my standpoint it was. Where was your so-called security when Parkinson ambushed you?"

The Head Girl's brow furrows and she says, "She was imitating Dumbledore at his request. I believe he was away from the castle at the time of the attack."

"It figures – gives him a good alibi."

"There's nothing we can do about it now. I'm glad you're back. Was the item you gave to the Headmaster a Horcrux?"

"Right in one, Hermione. There's still one left, but I'm working on it."

"I'm scared, Harry. The wards started getting weaker as soon as that Parkinson bint stole the anchor and I could feel the drain of the castle on me even more this time. She even stole my dose of good luck potion that I won from Professor Slughorn!" Granger sags into the chair across from where you're sitting and sets a jar of salve roughly on the table.

Part of you wants to lie to her too and tell her that you have it all under control. The rest of you can't be bothered to try and put her at ease. "You've got every reason to be scared. From everything I've heard, the Death Eaters are winning right now. The Ministry is tied up playing games with the goblin nation and Dumbledore just doesn't inspire me the way he used to. What's that by the way?"

"Madame Pomfrey gave it to me for the wound Fawkes left on your back. Can I ask why Fawkes did that to you?"

"You can, but I won't answer, other than to say that I'm pretty sure Dumbledore had a hand in it."

She sighs, "I understand. I'm beginning to despise the magical world. Everything's so secretive and everyone has their own agenda."

"I'm not surprised. I half think they gave you the time turner in third year to grease the wheels, so to speak for when they needed to use you."

Hermione looks like she wants to deny it and defend McGonagall's memory, but opts not to. Instead, she says, "I'm very sorry about Dobby and Winky."

"Yeah, me too. Elves don't really have an agenda, which is why they're the ultimate dupes. Me? I'm sorry about Moody and the five mercenaries that died." You open your chill box and give her a butterbeer. You could use one as well.

She accepts it with a crestfallen expression and replies, "Moody was probably the best the Order had. How'd he die? If you don't want to talk about it, I understand."

"No, it's alright. A giant crushed his chest, but Moody was blinding it and cursing up a storm. I couldn't get there in time to save him. All I could do was kill the giant before it got anyone else."

Her eyes open wide, clearly remembering our encounter with Hagrid's "little" brother, who was clearly a runt. "You killed a giant?"

"And plenty of goblins, and at least one Russian wizard. It's an ugly world outside these walls. As for a giant, it's not as difficult as you might think, get it to the ground, and the head is full of weak spots. I've got to remember to stop by and apologize to Professor Binns for all the useful

information from his class and give him a few souvenirs."

"You're kidding, right?"

"Only a little. I fought goblins in Brazil, among other things." You fish out a pair of Worg potions and a nasty little knife, made for smaller than human hands, from your pack and hold them up for her inspection. "So, how are you doing, getting attacked and all that?"

You're pretty much used to being attacked by now, and betrayed as well, but it's probably overwhelming to the witch across from you.

"Escorted everywhere by Tonks, can't do any of my Head Girl duties, not allowed anywhere near a Slytherin. I heard Professor Snape told his students that Tonks is allowed to use lethal force on anyone raising a wand against me. I don't know if he's bluffing or serious. How about you, Harry? Here I am whining about my lot in life and you're able to sit here and casually talk about who and what you killed recently. If you ever need someone to talk to, I'm here. I'd like to try and be your friend again."

It's nice that she's trying to build a bridge, you could tell her about watching Baba Yaga "smoke" a piece of Voldemort's soul and then exchange that Horcrux for sexual favors, but poor Granger isn't nearly jaded enough for that. It'd likely fry her brain.

"I appreciate the offer, but for now, I'll pass. I do have Bill and sometimes Fleur to talk to. Anyway, I think I'll turn in, after I figure out a way to put on this salve."

"Relax, Harry, I'll put it on for you. It's the least I can do."

You stand and pull the shirt you're wearing up exposing your back. Granger removes the charmed bandage you put on after Snape left and gives a low whistle, "Remind me not to make Fawkes angry at me. Hold still. Hmm, it tingles to the touch."

Feeling her finger spread the stuff over the wound, does in fact produce a pleasant feeling.

"How's it look back there?" You ask, finally enjoying something from the infirmary that doesn't stink to high heaven or taste awful.

"The wound's closing up, nicely. Do you need some more?"

"Yeah, it feels pretty good."

Granger uses three fingers covered in it and uses her palm to rub it in and the tingling sensation intensifies. The seconds pass, and you whimper when her hand leaves your skin, but groan when both her hands return covered in salve. Her hands are straying from the wound and roaming all over your back in a slow massage. You shouldn't be, but you're thoroughly enjoying it.

Everywhere her skin touches yours that delicious sensation follows. You toss the sweatshirt and Hermione's moaning slightly. A distant voice in your mind warns you that something is wrong, but it is overridden by all the things that feel right.

Her hands, covered in that wonderful substance massage your shoulders and reach around to your chest. You spin in her arms and see her flushed face and glazed look in her eyes, but only for a second before you're locked in a kiss. Your fingers dip into the salve and work their way under her shirt, teasing the small of her back and feeling her shiver from your touch. Another distant warning in the corner of your mind is ignored.

The rules of the game are clear and simple, the more flesh in contact, the stronger the sensation. Clothing becomes the enemy and the solution is to get rid of it – all of it.

That little warning voice in the corner of your mind -- it's cheering you on now.

Hermione became physically exhausted by the end of the first hour. It's probably a credit to your physical regimen that you could keep going. By the end of the next hour she was begging you to try and wash it off. You half-carried her and half-staggered to your bathtub, only to find out whatever this stuff was it must be oil based. The soapy bathwater simply became another venue for the two of you to continue the relentlessly erotic contact.

Dragging her out of the tub after she passes out and almost drowns, you collapse in the bed, still desperate to maintain contact with her.

The effects of the salve last well into the night. It's a good thing that it has a healing component to it. Even with that, you feel raw and exhausted.

Sometime later, she shifts against you and wakes. You both stink of sweat and sex. Her untamed hair is matted down and, quite frankly, everywhere. The funbags lost their appeal about two hours ago. The ironic fact that the best sex you've ever didn't come from the immortal metamorph, Fleur's "mystery" friend, the Native American Animagus, the Canadian private school girl, or the single mother from Brazil, but from the virginal English witch who quite literally had no idea what she was doing. True, Hermione had a magical edge and you actually fear what Baba Yaga would be like exposed to that substance.

A series of snuffles interrupt your musings.

"Are you okay?" You ask dreading the answer.

The snuffles intensify – bollocks! Dragons, Daemons, and Giants are more your league. A blubbing witch isn't – just ask Cho. There's a small

part of you that's somewhat offended that she's crying after sleeping with you.

"Calm down, Hermione."

"I didn't want...to do that!"

"Yeah, me neither. If it's any consolation, you were great."

"That wasn't me," she hisses. "That was some mad possessed version of me!"

"I wasn't exactly myself either. Sorry about the biting." You didn't know you had it in you. "I guess Dumbledore really wanted his wards charged."

Hermione turns off the tear spigots, "He's really as awful as you say he is." It's not a question, just a statement.

"And he justifies every single thing he's done."

"Why'd he do it? The wards weren't that weak!"

"He's desperate and dying."

"Are you sure?"

You nod and brush some of the hair out of her face. "The gloved hand means that cursed wound is getting worse, or he's trying to imitate that one singer..."

The joke gets a little laugh out of her and you continue, "Seriously, he has two Potions Masters and a phoenix and it's not enough to save him. His moves lack his usual subtleness and I think he's stopped caring about who he's hurting. That makes him as dangerous as the *other* bad guy."

"What about us?" she asks.

"I think we're okay, we buried the hatchet...or the penis...take your pick."

Hermione's tear stained eyes open wide and she shakes her head. "That's an awful joke, Harry."

Processing everything that just happened leads to one horrible conclusion. "Hermione, you haven't taken any other potions lately have you?"

"Well they had me on the invigorating draughts to help against the wards draining. Why are you asking?"

"Were any of them green and foul tasting?"

"They were all foul tasting. I stopped paying attention after awhile. You don't..."

"Think they slipped you a fertility potion in the middle of all this, yeah, they might have."

Her tears start again and you can sense her panic rising. "This can't be happening! I was saving myself for my wedding night! I don't...What will... Not possible!"

It's painful, but you grab her shoulders. "Calm down! We won't be able to tell for a few days. Don't panic."

"That's easy for you to say! I'm too young to be a mother!" She blurts out the obvious. You'd say that you're too young as well, but your arrangement with Thundercloud's granddaughter, Lauren sort of flies in the face of that.

"Just relax. We'll get through this." Hope she doesn't ask you how, you don't really have a clue, but it sounds like something you should say.

It takes a few minutes of reassuring her to get calm down. All you can do is hold her tight and tell her that things will work out. Eventually, the naked witch falls asleep in your arms again and allows you some time to figure out your next course of action.

This whole thing is likely his way of getting back at you for the homunculus. One thing is certain, there's a good chance that Albus Dumbledore won't live long enough for that wound to kill him. You'll probably kill him long before that and the frightening thing is that he probably wants you to.

Turn Me Loose: A Harry Potter Adventure Tried to Tie Me Down

Chapter 12 – Tried to Tie Me Down

You skip a stone onto the Great Lake and watch the expanding rings before the rock finally drops into water. You're troubled. It's nothing new really. The relatively carefree life you once lived continues to slip away. Back in the jungles of Brazil, there was always something to blow up or destroy.

That won't work here at the oh-so prim and proper Hogwarts. Besides, there's only one thing here worth destroying and his name is Albus Dumbledore. One of the first things you did this morning, after sending the tearful, but exhausted Hermione Granger back to her Head Girl suite was check the map.

Naturally, he wasn't there. The portrait in your room politely said that Dumbledore would be in London for the day. The man has a definite pattern, antagonize you and then run away for awhile and let you stew it over.

Your sensitive hearing picks up on the footsteps crunching in the freshly fallen snow. The boots are attached to the body of Luna Lovegood. She has an irritated look on her face. This doesn't surprise you. You check the map and make certain it is her.

"So you're out here brooding, since I didn't respond to your summons?" Mentally, you can add an accusatory tone to the irritating look.

"You'll excuse me if I don't have the foggiest idea what you're talking about."

"The woman protecting Granger told me at breakfast that you wanted to see me."

Letting out a sad chuckle, you say, "I think Tonks was just trying to get some revenge on me. Amazing, that we're in the middle of a war and people can still be so effing petty!"

Luna tries to stare through you and get to the truth. There was probably a time when you were an open book, but things have changed and she gets nothing for her efforts. "Why would that be revenge?"

"Fawkes injured me. The healer gave Hermione some 'healing' balm. The use of it left us in a rather compromising position. My guess is Tonks wanted you to find us like that because she's still all shirty about how I treat her and her pet werewolf."

"You and Granger?" It's not surprising that's all she got out of it.

"It sure as hell wasn't by choice!"

"Why would Dumbledore do that?"

"It goes back to the summer and when he was trying to make certain she was my girlfriend. There's an oath preventing me from telling you the specifics, but there was a reason she kept coming into my suite to spend time with me. The Headmaster decided to up the ante, and now I'm trying to figure out what to do about it."

"Why are you telling me this?" Her eyes are searching around and you can see the hurt on her face. Any second now, she'll retreat like a turtle into her shell and start babbling about Snorkacks and the like, wrapping herself in the "Looney" personality.

You could tell her about the incomplete Horcrux in your head and the fact that you'll probably have to die shortly after killing Riddle. That's probably a little too much grief to drop on her.

Her arms cross and the expression on her face changes, "Well obviously, Harry..."

Yeah, just like clockwork. You cut her off, "Stop! Quit it! Don't bother with trying to be 'Looney'. I'm telling you this because life's too short, Luna. The goblins are revolting, the Death Eaters are running loose, Dumbledore's scheming, and I'm too damn tired to lie to you and tell you things are going to be okay. They're not! It's going to get worse before it gets better – if it gets better."

Her mouth hangs there open for a few seconds before she closes it. You continue on, "Look, I've still got some pull as a diplomat, even if I just learned that half of the peacekeepers have been sent back home to deal with the goblins in Brazil. If you want out, I can probably make it happen. Brazil is nice ... pretty much any time of the year. Maybe I need to start thinking about getting people out of here."

"Is it really that bad, Harry?" Your morbid summary penetrates her veil of teenage angst.

"From my perspective it is. Sorry, I'm venting and you're the only one around to hear it. Bill and Hack won't be back for a few days. Kwan will be a

bit longer. I'm usually a bit more chipper with them around."

"I don't know what to say," she admits.

"I think I do. My last little trip wasn't as long as this summer, but I've changed almost as much. I'm sorry things didn't work out between us. For my part, I tried to hide from the war when I was with you and it made you feel left out of everything else. You don't deserve to be treated like a distraction and dismissed every time I had to talk about something 'important.' I should have done better by you."

Whoever "they" are, they say confession is good for the soul. Yours might be a bit tainted by a horcrux and some daemon blood, but it couldn't hurt. Sitting out here and recapping what went wrong with Luna and generally feeling sorry for yourself isn't going to solve anything. There is one person in the castle you can trust. He doesn't really have a choice, and you're interested to see if his hand was involved in last night's debauchery. Dumbledore isn't around to face your wrath, but his puppet isn't so lucky.

You stand, "Thanks for listening to me, Luna. Remember my offer – if you think you and your father need to get out of here, I'll do what I can. Now, I've got to go be the bastard you think I am and stir up some trouble."

If this were some kind of movie, she'd stop you, throw her arms around you, and tell you that all is forgiven. Unfortunately, this is the real world and even the most well-adjusted teenaged female, which Luna certainly isn't, would have a hard time with everything you just dumped on her. You glance over your shoulder. She's staring back at you with tears in her eyes.

Ten years in a cupboard can build up some serious emotional armor. Every now and again, something gets through it and hurts you. Swallowing hard, you turn back toward the castle.

The snowflakes are getting wetter as the temperature rises. It reminds you of some sad song by this Fogelberg bloke Petunia used to play a lot when you were a kid.

Funny, that seems so long ago.

"Potter?" He's surprised to see you. You were cordial enough to knock on his office door.

You toss him the empty tin of salve from last night's insanity with Hermione and say, "Your handiwork?"

He plucks it out of the air and sniffs the container. "No. If this is what I think it is, Professor Slughorn makes them as party favors for some of his more 'adult' themed parties. Please tell me you didn't have your troll apply this."

You cringe at the thought and shake your head. "No, it was Hermione."

He shrugs and says, "Hardly any difference."

His barb doesn't draw a rise out of you. You might not be referring to her as "Granger" anymore, but running to her defense is counterproductive. "Do you know if he's doing anything else to her, fertility potions?"

Again, Snape shakes his head. "He only uses me for the draughts to replenish his energy and fight his cursed hand, but he would hardly need my services or Horace's for such a simple concoction. The Weasley broodmare is obviously well-versed in such brews. Or, he could simply send away for one. The nurse might know, but she is easily duped."

There was a time when his casual indifference and outright disrespect for most any other human being would anger you. Now, he's becoming a model for professional detachment. There's a shiver up your spine that you are starting to admire qualities in this failed human being in front of you.

"So, is there something else I can do for you, Potter? The girl didn't have any infections, did she?"

"Dumbledore is trying to goad me. He's expecting a reaction from me. I was hoping you might know why."

Snape smiles and says, "I have my suspicions, but nothing concrete."

"Would you care to share those suspicions?"

"Not particularly."

"Bastard."

"I consider that a compliment, Potter. However, if you would like to speak with Professor Slughorn, I am supposed to meet him for tea shortly. He always seems interested when your name comes up."

"You're just looking for a way to get out of tea with him, aren't you?"

Snape smiles, which is frightening in its own right, and stands. "Do you wish to speak to him or not, Potter?"

You follow him out of his office and head down toward the dungeons, wondering if Snape misses being the Slytherin Head of House. He probably loved the power but hated the responsibilities.

The sight of the two of you stalking the hallway must be an odd thing to behold. With it being a Sunday, only a few people are around to see it. He

knocks on Slughorn's door and waits. After a moment of waiting, he spells open the door.

Slughorn lies on the floor. His lips are blue and there's dried foam around them. One hand is clutching his throat and the other is stretched out. It's a good bet that you're not going to get anything useful out of him. This is why you carry a pair of bezoars with you. In what seems like a lifetime ago, you helped Dumbledore recruit this man to come back here.

Snape steps over the body, and eyes the bottle and glasses on the table. There's a second body slumped onto the ground next to the Professor's desk – Cormac McLaggen, a seventh year Gryffindor and one of the blokes who was really involved in the "Slug Club."

On the positive side, no one has to have tea with Professor Slughorn ... ever again.

"There's a note attached to the bottle. It was meant for Dumbledore."

Someone wants him dead. Actually, someone other than you wants him dead. Snape looks angry – too angry for just a couple of dead bodies. You watch him vanish the note in disgust.

"You know who did this, don't you?"

"Potter," he warns, "leave this alone."

"Sorry, even if I wanted to, the old man's oath says I need to protect the students in the castle. It's that little shit Malfoy, isn't it?"

He appears torn. "Potter, you will not speak of this. Leave. I will summon the other professors and we will deal with the matter."

"Maybe, I'll just go interrogate ickle Draco..."

His wand flashes and yours is out as quickly. You can see his hand shaking and remember how vehement he was about being the one to deal with Draco. "What's wrong, Snape? That little debt you owe me conflicting with what you want to do? Why go out of your way to protect him?"

He doesn't have to answer; the truth hits you like a ton of bricks. Snape's face contorts in pain. "You've sworn an oath to protect him, and it's conflicting with the debt you owe me! Ain't fate a little scheming bitch! I could probably just sit here and watch it tear you apart, but I won't."

Snape doubles over and releases his breath. "Leave Draco to me."

You pause and think about how this has changed things. The idea of Draco killing Dumbledore could actually fit into your plans.

"Professor, I think we might be onto something here."

"Wakey, wakey, Draco." You splash some water into the boy's face. He's bound and tied to a chair.

"Puh ... Potter!" he sputters.

As tempting as it is to make fun of his speech impediment, you move on. "I told you it wouldn't be too hard to trick him, Ron."

"Ron" is really Snape hiding under a glamour. Unlike you, Snape is quite skilled at them. It makes you wonder how he got so good at impersonating students. That's a disturbing thought best left alone.

"You'll pay for this."

"Actually, I could probably charge for this. Two galleons to come in here and smack the little ponce around a bit. I bet even half of Slytherin would pay up along with the other houses."

"What do you want?"

"Answers to some questions."

"What makes you think I'll tell you?"

"Ever had Veritaserum?"

His eyes fly open and he protests, "You're bluffing! You have to be a Ministry official to administer it!"

Leaning forward, you smile and say, "I'm a member of the Brazilian Ministry, Draco. I've got my own little stash. I didn't even need to break into Professor Snape's stockroom. It's what happens when you have some real power and aren't just getting by on your family's name."

"I don't know anything!"

"As much as I'd like to believe that, we both know it just isn't true. Ron, do you want to do the honors, three drops to the tongue?"

You present the vial to "Ron" with a flourish. Draco continues his protests, "Weasley can't follow directions worth a spit. He'll likely poison me!"

"Well there's irony for you. Actually Ron's marks in Potions are remarkable this year. I think Snape was holding him back." You can't resist making

that dig. Ron's potion skills are mostly due to him using a book marked up by a previous owner.

It takes both of you to get his mouth open and Snape administers the truth serum.

"Alright, down to business. Are you under orders to kill Albus Dumbledore?"

"Yes." He answers and immediately looks panicked.

"S'okay, Malfoy. We already knew that. I just needed some confirmation. Were you behind the cursed necklace and the poisoned bottle of alcohol?"

He strains to fight it, but eventually says, "Yes."

"So, you used a cursed object on Katie Bell and are responsible for the deaths of a student and a professor."

"I haven't heard about any student or professor."

"Slughorn and Cormac McLaggen are dead. Poisoned by a bottle that was meant for Dumbledore. Now a quick owl sent to Scrimgeour and you'd be sitting in Azkaban before the day was out, but Ron and I want to know the whole plan. We might be able to work out a deal where you don't get kissed by a dementor. First though, did you help Pansy Parkinson attack Hermione Granger and steal an item left in her care?"

He pales slightly, but looks defiant. "Yes. I didn't know you were dabbling in Dark Magic, Potter. Rest assured if anything happens to me, I'll make certain to tarnish your 'golden boy' image." Well, give him points for being truthful.

You pause and wonder what would Kwan Chang-Ho do in a situation like this. Grabbing his nose between your index and middle fingers, you twist hard until he yelps in pain. Letting go, you bring the flat of your booted foot up into his chest and push Draco and the chair he's bound to back onto the ground. He hits hard, but shakes the cobwebs out of his head and spits at you.

"Well, if I'm losing my golden boy image, I might as well just go ahead and kill you, Draco. You're a Death Eater's sprog and I've got Diplomatic Immunity on my side. Since you're still telling the truth here, Draco, is whatever you're doing in the Room of Requirement linked to killing Dumbledore?"

He fights really hard on this one. The potion is beginning to wear off, or maybe it's the weight of your knee on his chest, but he nods gasping for breath.

"Good. Now we're getting somewhere. How about you tell us the plan?"

"Never!" He's fighting it really hard now. It's probably some Death Eater thing and makes you curious what they do for fun at his house.

"Don't worry. We'll obliviate you later. You won't even know you told us what you're going to do."

Your partner in crime leans down next to him as you repeat your demand for him to tell you the plan. It's really just so Snape can get in his mind, and whatever Draco is doing will be right there waiting for him.

After all, who would ever suspect Ron Weasley of being a master legilimens? You're at the point of telling Draco that you'd like to try your hand at a little amateur dentistry when Snape stands up and stuns Malfoy.

"He's trying to fix a vanishing cabinet. The same one Montague was lost in. The other vanishing cabinet was in Borgin and Burkes, but it has been moved to a more secure location. He intends to fix it and use it to bypass the wards and lead a group of Death Eaters into the castle to kill Dumbledore."

You evaluate the plan. "It's more than I would have given him credit for. Where do you think the other cabinet is?"

"Either the Malfoy estate, or Gringotts."

"We could take the fight right to Voldemort and the goblins at the same time. Let's wake him up and find out how close he is to fixing the cabinet. When Bill gets back, we can trap the hell out of that corridor and take out whoever comes through."

Your reluctant ally nods. "That should reduce his strength, but will you have enough wands to counterstrike?"

"I should be able to get a few of the remaining peacekeepers. Everyone else I can bring will be mercenaries. We might be able to deal Scrimgeour in for a squad or two of Aurors. What about the Order?"

"They will follow the Headmaster's lead and I doubt he would sanction this idea or allow us to use the castle to launch an attack."

It comes back to the old man again. Bill will probably be able to talk Charlie into joining us, but the rest of the Order won't budge unless Dumbledore says so, especially with Moody gone. "We're going to have to get rid of him. My oath to protect the castle shouldn't stop me. The question is, do we let Draco kill him or not."

"Even in your newly enlightened state Potter, you remain an idiot. He doesn't have to be killed to be removed from the field of play." Dumbledore would be proud. Two of his "projects" are setting aside their differences and working toward a common goal.

"What are you thinking, Professor Snape?" You even made a point of addressing him formally.

"I gave you the answer the very first day we met, boy."

"Harry, William please sit," Dumbledore does his best to sound accommodating as we enter the spacious room. The tiny chick that is Fawkes hisses at you, but you've come to expect that treatment from the phoenix. It is far less intimidating in its current form.

Bill is less-than-pleased with the latest developments. Maybe since he's unleashed his inner animagus he's more in touch with his baser instincts. Still, he's almost as angry as you are given the situation.

You toss the first verbal fireball and say, "You'll forgive me for declining any meeting with you unless Bill is here. I think its best that our encounters from now on are done with witnesses present."

"I completely understand, Harry," Dumbledore says. "Things have been trying over the past few days with the tragic passing of a teacher and a student. Forgive me for not summoning you sooner."

"You assured Minister Scrimgeour that it was more to do with Professor Slughorn's social status than anything directed at the school. Because of your blasted oath, I'm compelled to investigate and that cover story doesn't impress me." You already know the truth, but that's beside the point.

Dumbledore shrugs and says, "I can only tell you what I know. We will have to wait for the final Auror's report, but I suspect this is random."

It's a lie, but you've come to expect it from the man. Bill smacks both his knees in disgust and says, "You could act like you care about the people in this castle! Do you honestly believe you can excuse what you did to Harry and that girl?"

Your Cursebreaker buddy is a tad peeved. He's raging because you can't afford to be off your game.

"William, I do resent that comment. Sometimes the greater good requires sacrifices. Harry requires freedom to fulfill his destiny, and I have facilitated that. I could just as easily assign blame for Alastor's death to you, but I will simply say that you have never been in my position and cannot possibly understand."

You shake your head at him. "Bill, it's alright. We could sit here all day, every day, for a decade and he won't change."

Dumbledore steeples his fingers and replies, "I am quite capable of change, but I am committed to the greater good, and sometimes distasteful acts are necessary as you yourself have already seen. So, let us move on to something we can change. I was thinking about the message from the remaining dementors of Azkaban. How do you suppose we should respond to them?"

You shake your head and say, "They're obviously waiting for the greater daemons to come back. I doubt we could fool them for long."

Bill agrees, "The ones that stayed are content guarding Azkaban. I don't really see how we could use them in the conflict; at some point they'd betray us."

"True, but perhaps we could actively turn them against the dementors who have joined the Death Eaters under the guise of proving their worth to their overlords. I strongly suspect that a dementor is perfectly capable of killing another dementor, and we have yet to locate sufficient numbers of animagi to duplicate Harry's rather inventive use of a Patronus and his form to slay the creatures."

"I can handle them if they show up."

"Yes, but you may be otherwise engaged at the time, Harry. It is something worth considering."

You hate admitting that Dumbledore has a point. Bill's niffler form wouldn't have those soul suckers quivering in their cloaks and even if Fleur manages to succeed in making a transformation by way of that Mayan armband, her form would probably be avian, and also not terribly threatening.

"Alright, let's keep it in mind," Bill says. "How is the Order dealing with the loss of Moody?"

"It's a definite blow to morale. The Minister is planning a funeral for him. Your presence will likely be requested."

Judging by how fast he changed the subject, it is likely more than just a "blow to their morale." Albus is long past caring what his foot soldiers think. Hell, you're beginning to wonder how he faked it through Diggory's memorial. The effing bastard was probably glad he had a body and could prevent the Ministry from ignoring this situation.

Snape enters with a frothy goblet in his hands. It brings back memories from third year with Lupin. "Albus, I have your draught. With your recent absence, I've strengthened the dosage."

"Yes, yes," he says dismissively. "I'll get to it in a moment."

You cast an amused look at Snape being treated like a house elf and stifle a laugh. The man now pulling double duty as Defense and Potions professor is less amused, and responds with a scathing glare that might have worked against the Harry Potter of yesteryear.

"You'll forgive me Headmaster, but I must monitor your reaction to the increased potency, and I must return to the classroom."

"We can come back another time," you offer.

"No, this will take but a moment." Dumbledore plucks the goblet and begins to drink with a sense of urgency. He's got it halfway down when he

stops and gets a panicked look on his face.

"Severus ...No!" he croaks. The look reminds you of the old toad and scorpion fable. It is in Snape's nature. You'd do well to remember that.

He makes a feeble attempt to draw his wand, but Snape grasps the man's wrist and holds it steady. Fawkes is too young to do anything but continue to hiss. Bill's quick wand movements banish a handful of specially prepared powder that freezes the portraits in their frames. They'd be dealt with during the cleanup. The Sorting Hat leans forward from its perch and looks on in interest. You wonder how many coups it has seen during the thousand years of its existence.

Leaning forward, you smile at the man rapidly losing his battle against the Draught of Living Death and say, "It's just like you said, 'sometimes the greater good requires sacrifices'. Don't worry. We'll try to remember to wake you for the final battle."

Turn Me Loose: A Harry Potter Adventure I Was Such a Clown

Chapter 13 – I Was Such a Clown

"Sadly, with his cursed injuries becoming resistant to even increased doses, Dumbledore asked to be put into a magical sleep so that he could be available during the crucial endgame. His advice to everyone was to, 'Stay the course and look to your hearts, for in there you will find the strength to carry on.' That is precisely why we are here to do today."

Snape is a very convincing liar. He's a colossal bastard too, but that's beside the point.

"Why should we believe you?" Some idiot named Diggle asks.

"He's telling the truth. I was there," you answer and throw Snape a bone. Of course, Harry Potter would never, ever lie.

"Why didn't he contact us?"

Snape's sigh comes out more like a growl. "The man was dying! Every second we delayed was another step closer to his death! I'm sorry he didn't have time to schedule a meeting and wait for everyone's timely responses. Are there any other idiotic questions?"

That seems to settle that matter.

"But what do we do now?"

Okay, maybe it didn't.

"The Headmaster requested that Tonks continue to impersonate him. He left us with several already created excuses for his numerous absences. The majority of the decisions that concern the school's next year have been made and the few that haven't will either be deferred, or given to Professor Flitwick in his capacity as Deputy Headmaster. As for the rest of you, Dumbledore has already assigned you your roles. Relay your information through me and I will pass it on to the rest of you at our meetings."

"So, you're taking charge?" Another voice partly-asked and mostly challenged.

Snape glared at the Order member using his patented sneer before responding, "I would never claim to be leading this rabble in front of me. You're not children ... you're supposedly trained wizards and witches working for a common cause. Do what you've been doing; perhaps even try to do a bit harder. The Headmaster requested that I facilitate the meetings and keep them from descending into the usual chaos and petty bickering. That is all I intend to do. If you need direction, or have completed a task, ask someone or use some of your own initiative for a change!"

You've got to hand it to Snape. The man is so blatantly condescending and dismissive that no one would ever suspect that he's lying out his arse. In your earlier years at this fine institution of higher learning, you would never have admitted to appreciating Snape on any level, but he does manage to take being a "complete and utter wanker" to a new level.

A quick glance through the room is all the proof you need that you didn't want to "run the Order" either. With only one or two exceptions, the lot of them would be as useful in a fight as Hippogriff kibble ... actually; kibble might be preferable to some of them. Snape's going to have a tough time with these tossers, but he's probably into this control thing – telling them he's not going to run things and then actually doing what he just said he wouldn't. It's blatant misdirection and will probably work on this lot.

"With all that's happened I'm not sure I should stay." Hestia Jones comments a little too loudly.

"By all means, Jones. Feel free." Snape isn't used to people who can just walk out on him. He's used to a captive audience, be it students or 'bound up rent-a-dates'. Well, technically you don't know for certain about the latter, but there are always rumors.

"Easy for you to say, Snape. Not everyone gets to hide behind the wards of this castle."

He can't fake that look of disgust. "But I would remind you, that the Dark Lord would have likely tortured the late Ms. Vance for the names of all the current members of the Order and I sincerely doubt that he would spare you from his wrath because you tendered your resignation. If nothing else, it could even make you more expendable."

The petty bickering continues as your eyes settle on Molly Weasley and you fight down the urge to inflict pain on her. One thing you have "learned" in this school is how to hold a grudge and that daft bitch might have been following orders when she dosed you with love potions, but the minute that became a problem, she made the situation worse with Obliviations.

You should just forget it, – there's a joke in there somewhere – but it's been gnawing at you ever since the she, her husband, and twin sons

wandered into the office. Only your friendship with Bill keeps you from doing something nasty to them. Every “good” cursebreaker has to have a mean streak somewhere and you’re getting better by the day. Ron, you take him at his word that he was trying to help you. He’s a poor excuse for a liar to begin with. Ginny is best left forgotten, an afterthought at most. That would probably irk her more than anything else. Bill vouches for Charlie and that’s good enough for you.

That leaves these four.

“Hey Harry, ease up on the death glare there, mate.” Bill causally mentions like we’re watching a bloody football game on the telly.

“I haven’t taken anyone to the woodshed lately and they’re standing right over there practically begging for it. Ten galleons says she comes over here and tries to tell me it was for my own good.”

“I’d take that bet. All four of them have been warned to steer clear of the most dangerous man in the United Kingdom.”

Neither Voldemort nor Kwan is present, so he must mean you. “I’m not sure if it’s true.”

“The facts speak for themselves, Harry. Most of the people who try to screw you over end up dead or worse.”

“I still feel the need to annoy them.”

“Fleur does too. She mentioned that we should hold off on the wedding for awhile, so she can flaunt our ‘living in sin’ in front of Mom. I’ve been looking at this nice place out near the beach, but Fleur is making a compelling argument for living in France.”

“Do I want to know if she’s giving you the carrot or the stick?” You ask allowing Bill to distract you from attacking members of his family. He did just compliment you.

“Actually, it’s what she can do with a carrot that’s really interesting. I’ll tell you when you’re older.”

“If I were to sink to your level, Bill, I could tell you a few things about highly skilled metamorphs that might raise the hair on your neck.”

“When you started to get trapped in Karina’s web over the summer, I figured you had a thing for older witches. I just didn’t know how old.”

You cringe. He went there and played the age card. Shrugging it off, you respond, “It helped a great deal that she was incredibly hot. It could be worse. I could be a cradle robber like you.”

Both of you laugh as the meeting has mostly broken up. Molly and her brood escaped while you were trading jabs over vegetables, veelas, and metamorphs. Going after them was small potatoes and wouldn’t have gone over with the rest of the Order members. Assuming you survive all of this, which quite honestly isn’t likely given the fact there’s a partially-formed Horcrux in your skull, there will be time to settle some accounts afterwards.

After the final Order member has left, you cast a glance at Fawkes’ empty perch and whisper, “I wonder what Dumbledore’s familiar is up to?”

“I’ve been thinking the same thing,” Bill replies. “It pitched a fit until we put Dumbledore into his bed and then it vanishes. Maybe it agrees with us that it was for the so-called greater good?”

“Or maybe it is lying low and waiting to attack?” You counter.

“That’s why we’re different, Harry. I’m an optimist.”

“Delusional is more like it.”

“For once, I find myself agreeing with Potter,” Snape’s voice interrupts. “Most Deatheaters won’t blindly wander into one of your traps, and you’re woefully inadequate as a duelist. You’ll need to work your way back up to me, Weasley.”

You look at Bill and notice the flush in his cheeks. He did mention that he was going to do some work on his fighting skills and now, you know who he was practicing with.

“Think you could take me, Snape?” You throw down a challenge. There’s no doubt one or both of you would end up in the infirmary, but you wouldn’t mind beating the stuffing out of him.

“It doesn’t matter what I think, Potter. You’re the one who must face down a Dark Lord. If you’re not able to defeat me, you’re in far greater trouble than I could possibly imagine.”

At least Snape makes you look like an optimist.

“It’s still too early to tell,” Hermione says. She’s trying and failing to sound like this is all some laboratory experiment ... a potion that may or may not pan out.

“Not that you planned to go out wandering, but I recommend staying inside the castle, until you know for certain.”

“Why’d he do it, Harry? Did he expect us to suddenly fall in love or something?”

He said a few things before he went into a magical sleep. I only half-believe him, but Dumbledore was a very old man. His perspective might be skewed by what was acceptable in his time. My best guess is after I did the little thing with Ralph, he got the inspiration to do it and figured that it would give me something else to fight for.”

Hermione is sitting on her bed. She’s refused to step foot in your chambers since “the incident.” Flipping some of her hair out of her eyes, she says, “I guess you’re right, for all he knows, I could be thinking about getting rid of it.”

You roll your eyes, “Not likely. Oh, he might have had some post-Victorian notions, but he’s a manipulative bastard and he knows people. I might have changed on my adventures outside of this castle, but you’re still pretty much the same.”

She starts to look both hurt and irate, but you head her off at the pass. “I don’t mean that in a bad way. What I mean is that you’re still the same Hermione Granger that’s irked by House Elf servants and the double standard that exists between Muggleborn and Purebloods. The girl who went on a crusade to save Buckbeak from execution has too much moral fiber to do something like that. She wouldn’t get rid of a child just to spite Dumbledore. You value life too much. He knew it, and used that to his advantage. The world needs more people like you, Hermione. Plus, since it would endanger the wards and by extension the castle, I’d be oath bound to stop you.”

The blush on her face is a reminder that she also doesn’t take praise outside an academic environment well. “Thank you for saying that, Harry. I’m just a bit put out that he took the coward’s way out and left you to sort out all of this.”

She stops and considers the same story that was given to the Order. A half-smile crosses her face, the one she gets when she’s figured something out. “He did take the coward’s way out didn’t he?”

“One way or another, yes, but you could say that about much of his recent life. He was fighting the same losing strategy against Riddle that he used in the last war. It wasn’t winning then, and it isn’t winning now. Instead, he waited for prophecy to help him out of this sticky wicket. I’m not losing any sleep over him getting too much sleep.”

“I see,” Hermione says slowly, clearly not wanting to press you further. “If I really am pregnant, the child may never be able to leave Hogwarts. He or she could be a squib, or there’s any number of possibilities.” She doesn’t even mention the unspoken one that it might not live beyond birth. There’s a reason that blood magic of this sort usually carries a prison sentence.

“I’m going to sign some papers with Bill. They won’t mean squat until we liberate my vaults from the goblin nation, but you won’t have to worry about money. I’ll make sure of that.”

There’s a long – dare you say it – “pregnant” pause, while both of you search for something to say. She breaks the ice and says, “Thank you, Harry.”

“Of course that gesture won’t mean much unless I kill Voldemort.”

“I was trying not to think about that, Harry. Do you have any news on that front?”

“Bill found some of his notes about possible Horcrux locations. We’re going to check one out in a few days. Hopefully, Helga’s cup is there.”

“Be careful. He knows you’re after it and has probably strengthened their defenses, or even moved them and turned the whole place into a huge trap.”

You nod. “Bill’s a top flight breaker and I’m as quick a study as they come. We’ve seen his handiwork back in South America. It relies heavily on power and is ruthless, but his weakness is that he’s mostly interested in killing something and doesn’t go out of his way to hide it.”

“Don’t underestimate him based on ward schemes he created decades ago; just look how much you’ve changed in less than a year. He could easily have professionals design traps. Remember what happened to Dumbledore’s hand!”

She’s genuinely concerned. “Point taken, Bill and I will be prepared. But one thing I do know is that he’s got an arrogant streak. He wouldn’t leave this to others. It’s too important. He’d do it himself, and he’s better at destroying other people’s wards, not setting his own up. Speaking of Bill, I’ve got to go meet him. I’ll see you later.”

“Bye Harry.” She gives you a brief hug and a chaste peck on the cheek. It’s a far cry from the tongue wrestling of a few nights past.

You head back into your room. You didn’t really need to go see Bill at the moment, but there’s an air of awkwardness between you and her now. A line was crossed that shouldn’t have been. and pretending it doesn’t matter only makes it stand out more. She’s still the same, but you’re a deeply jaded wizard now.

If the world can use more people like Hermione Granger, can the same be said about you?

“Charming place,” you quip. “It has a nice view of the ocean, all that fresh sea air”

“Unmistakable aura of dark magic,” Bill adds completing your thought. “The opening is here, but it’s got a blood bind on it and a few other nasty critters attached. One looks like a voice activated rune. I’ve also identified an active sentry ward that’s designed to wake up what’s behind door number one.”

“The carving on the blood bind looks old and worn. The sentry ward looks rather new, don’t you think?”

Rather perceptive of you, young cursebreaker. You and Riddle share blood, but he knows that too, which explains the voice ward. We don't know what to say. So my clever journeyman, how do propose we tackle this?"

You look at Hack. The troll is staring down into the angry waters below. "Well, I think one of us should go back to Hogwarts and get our last Daemonbone Sapper and start draining every ounce of ambient magic around. He put up several new wards and I'm betting he's borrowing from Peter to pay Paul. If we're lucky, he won't have enough energy left to power up his nasty stuff."

Bill cringes, "Not the Daemonbone, Harry. We're practically burning through it! It's priceless!"

"Our lives are worth more than a fossil," you reply. The crazy redhead has a slight obsession with the stuff.

"What if we need it to lay siege to Gringotts?"

"Do you need me to leave you and the Daemonbone alone for a few minutes? I won't tell Fleur." You pause for a moment and add, "Besides, if we go after Gringotts, we'll have the Ministry and who knows how many mercs backing us up. I don't see a lot of backup here, do you?"

His shoulders slump, indicating that he's accepted your perfectly valid point, but isn't terribly happy about it. He stops and looks into the crystal glass he's set up near the entrance. "A sapper takes all the fun out of it, but I guess it's better to err on the side of overkill. I'm not getting anything on the foe glass. No one is near, unless they're cloaked. Too bad our dark detectors don't work anymore."

"They do, but they go berserk around me and Hack. Do you want to do rock, scissors, paper to see who goes back?"

"Nah, I'll go, but I need to take Hack with me. I'll be hanged if I'm carrying the sapper."

"Fair enough, I'll stay here and take care of anything that shows up."

"I'll bring the 'big box of Muggle stuff.' We might need something else out of it."

He leads Hack away and they take a portkey back to Hogsmeade. There's no sense in just running in there with wands drawn and trying to "break by the seat of your pants." Visions of Maria Sanchez getting impaled by a bone golem dance through your mind.

The hint of movement out of the corner of your eye gives you just enough time to get out of the way as the conjured ropes race over your head. They wrap around the foe glass and send it crashing to the ground. Bill's going to be irked, foe glasses aren't cheap!

A Death Eater comes out of the disillusionment charm firing spells. The fact that he waited until you were alone tells you that you're not dealing with an idiot. He did wait for you to be alone. Then again, he's stuck out here on "guard the cave" duty, so he's probably not an inner circle member. Quick wandwork from you sends a blaster and a cutter in his direction. He shields the first, but the second opens up his shoulder nicely. An overpowered Disarming charm sends his wand flying and him back against the blocked entrance to Riddle's vacation grotto. The blood from the wound smears against the rock. He screams in panic, but it's too late. A few dozen spears shoot out of the ground and surrounding area turning Mr. Unfortunate into a Death Eater Kabob ... well maybe Death Eater pincushion is probably a better analogy. Now, he's like a sad looking scarecrow at the front of the cave.

That was over too quickly. It was almost anti-climatic. Then again, you've spent months training with a world class hitwizard and this was just some bloke in a mask, so maybe you shouldn't quibble about it all that much. Still, you scan the area searching for more enemies and shift into your animagus form and try to discern the scents surrounding the cave. There are several. The one that stands out the most is laced with a hint of a flowery perfume. It's probably female, but then again with Lucius on their side, you can't be certain.

Bill won't like the fact that you opened the cave without him. On the other hand, you now know what happens when you don't give the correct passphrase to the voice ward.

Reverting back to human, you summon the mask off him and witness the pained expression left on the face of that deceased Slytherin bloke you beat in your first ever quidditch match ... what's his face ... Montague? No that was someone else. Higgs! Terry "Bloody" (in all sense of the word) Higgs.

"Tough break there, Higgs." You would have preferred taking him alive to find out if there were more than just him, but your gut says that if Riddle had two or three people just hanging around to guard a cave, then he has more fighters than anyone thought.

For the next twenty minutes it's just you and the Death Eater corpse. Finally, Bill whistles as he and Hack arrive a few feet from you. "I can't leave you alone, can I?"

You point at the body. "He started it. Some blood got on the wall and the trap sprang. I've already checked – the spears are single use wards that were tied to the voice ward. Since he's a peon, he's probably out here for eight to twelve hours, which means we ought to move it, or we ambush his replacement and interrogate him."

"Guess we don't need the sapper now," Bill says slightly amused. The last mass of bone big enough for use as a sapper is the Daemon's skull. It's kind of eerie looking.

Hack follows the two of you in carrying the box of Muggle items. The cave is dark and you smell stale water. It has all the feeling of one of those bad movies you'd likely see on the telly. A look at the walls shows the same tired old zombie rune scheme that was scribbled everywhere in the lost city – some things don't change.

"Care to guess where all the Inferi are?" Bill points down towards the murky water.

Bill conjures some light and sends it across to the other side of the cave. It goes on for a ways. There's a tiny island out in the middle and a rope and pulley system attached to a boat. Sitting on that small island is 'something'. Whatever it is, it makes the hair on your neck stand up. That's not a good sign.

You run a diagnostic on the pulley and see that it's crawling with vileness.

Without turning to Bill, you say, "We need to figure out another way across. I think I've got an idea, but it's going to take an hour or so. Why don't you set up an ambush for the next guard? I'll take Hack and get us an easy way across this water."

"What have you got in mind, Harry?"

You tell him.

Far away from Bill and the cave, another boat docks at a much larger island. You reach down and tap the object wrapped in black cloth. "Wait here. I won't be long. Come on Hack, grab this and follow me."

The comically-tiny flying troll grows from his smallest size and hefts the item with ease.

"I still don't know how you managed to arrange a trip out to Azkaban so fast, Potter," The boat captain says, perturbed that he was unceremoniously yanked from his home to take you across the water to the island prison. "Who are you in such an all-fired hurry to see, and what's under the blanket?"

Thirty minutes was spent visiting Scrimgeour and trading information for a sizeable favor. You'll probably hear about it from the Senior Brazilian Ambassador, but there simply isn't time for you to follow protocol.

"I'm not at liberty to say," you answer.

"Ambassador Potter," the warden says approaching you flanked by a pair of Aurors, "The Minister of Magic said you carried instructions and I was to provide assistance to you."

You hand the sealed orders to him and watch his face twist incomprehensively while reading it. "This is most unusual. I'm not entirely sure..."

"Just take me to them, I'll do the rest."

"Are you sure you know what you're asking for, Ambassador?" He says leading you off the beaten path to the stone square that looks terribly out of place on the jagged outcroppings of the island. He picks up a rubber mallet and sounds a gong. The noise is loud and seems to reverberate off the prison.

The black shapes circling the island drift downwards and you prepare to hear the whispers of the most frightful creature ever allowed to walk this earth.

Most of the Dementors linger back on the rocks, looking like a rather strange picture for someone's calendar. A trio approach.

"I have orders from the Minister of Magic," the warden begins in a hesitant voice. "Six of you are to accompany Ambassador Potter and do his bidding."

A skeletal hand reaches out and the warden hands the papers to it. One of the others produces a sheet of parchment and they begin writing on it. The scribe offers it to you.

We asked you a question. What is your answer, human? We will render no assistance until you comply.

"I don't speak for the Masters. But if you'd like to ask him yourself, be my guest." With a flourish, you remove the cloak covering the Daemon skull. You pause for effect, letting the trio recoil before continuing, "If I killed it, you can damn well be certain that I can kill you as well. So, I'd suggest six of you carry your arses to the mainland, now!"

More words etched on parchment.

We do not believe you are capable of killing us, let alone a master.

"I suppose you want proof. Anyone in particular?"

The lead Dementor nods and gestures to the one that hadn't done any writing.

You look at it and try not to let the chill make you shiver. "Okay then, nothing personal. *Expecto Patronum!*"

The jaguar comes out and all three step back from its burning white fury. The lead Dementor crosses its arms as if to say, "Impressive, but not really that impressive."

Wasting no time, you shift into your Animagus form and allow the mist to wrap around you. The cold is still there, but your mind has changed to the point that their aura of fear and helplessness no longer bothers you. Once again, you are the beast that kills in a single bound. The Dementor feebly throws up its arms and tries to ward you off. Your weight knocks it to the ground and your claws do the nasty work of mauling it. Restraining

yourself from biting the hardest part; you've no idea or desire to see what these abominations taste like. Bones snaps like kindling and the cloak shreds under a merciless attack. The thing tries to take to the air, but your right forepaw pins it while the left rakes down the front like a house cat swatting a toy.

Desiccated flesh rips open and an oily black ichor sizzles on your patronus-encased limbs before drifting upwards in a heinous smelling smoke.

Like the predator you truly are, you step off the dying husk and walk toward the leader resuming your human form in mid-stride. "Is that proof enough for you, or would you care for another demonstration?"

It's nice to have something that embodies fear itself actually a bit put out by you. That's probably the kind of power kick that Riddle gets off on. It shakes its head "no" and points to the scribe. Five others detach themselves from the main group and follow the scribe.

Glancing back at the warden and two Aurors, "I hear there's been a new emphasis on Animagery as of late, with the bulk of the Dementors in Voldemort's camp. I can't imagine why. Good day to you, warden. Please convey my deepest thanks to Minister Scrimgeour. Hack, we're on a deadline. Let's get moving."

The troll gives you a feral grin, "Wizards wave sticks and talk too much. Hack likes when Puny Harry kills things! Still too many words and not enough killing, but more like a troll."

"Thanks buddy, I appreciate that." A lot of times with Hack, it's the meaning behind the words and not so much what he's saying ... sort of.

Bill has a surprise for you when you return – a trussed up Pansy Parkinson. Walt Disney was right; it is a small world after all!

"She arrived about a half-hour after you left," he explains. "She was pretty perturbed when old Higgs wouldn't show his face. I got the drop on her just before she tried to do a runner."

"Hey, Pansy!" You try to sound excited. "We really should catch up. I've missed you."

She doesn't look too scared until the six Dementors float down to the little plateau in front of the ledge. "What are you doing with those, Potter?"

"Well, there's six and me, I was thinking about starting a Quidditch squad." Turning to the Dementors, you say, "I need five of you to get in there and freeze us a path to that island in the middle. Whichever one of you that does the writing, hang out here. If she doesn't answer the questions the way I want, you just might get yourself a little snack."

"You w-w-wouldn't dare!" It would sound more convincing if the black haired witch wasn't stuttering.

"Um, you could ask Terry over there what I w-w-wouldn't d-d-do." Technically, that was just an accident, but Pansy doesn't need to know that.

Bill gets up and motions for Hack. "C'mon, let's get the equipment in the cave."

"Hack wants to watch," the troll pouts but stands up. That's a bit squicky.

"What happened to the blood anchor, Pansy?"

"Get bent, Potter! There's no way in hell that I'm going to tell ..." she trails off as you motion the one Dementor closer. "I gave it to the Dark Lord."

"See, we can get along if we try, Pansy. Besides Draco, did anyone else help you attack Hermione?"

"Draco didn't have anything to do with it!"

"Sure he didn't." You already know the answer.

"What are you going to do to me, Potter? Take me back to Dumbledore?"

"I bet you'd like that. No, we're either going to turn you over to the Ministry or if I'm feeling nasty, we'll just Obliviate you and leave you here. I can only imagine your master is going to be pretty irate when he discovers this cave has been ransacked and you couldn't stop it. He'll probably turn you into the next guardian thing for something he wants to protect. Maybe you'll be able to talk your way out of it and blame old Higgs there, but I doubt it. Either way, I know somebody who's been looking for you."

You call for Kreacher and wait for a minute wondering if the elf is actually going to show.

The elf pops into existence inside the wards, a reminder that anti-apparition wards don't mean squat to them. Considering your current "breaking crew" includes Dementors, maybe you should offer him a spot.

Starting to ponder what house elf magic can do against wards, you're interrupted by the screaming elf, "What is Bad Master doing here? Kreacher already took locket from here long ago!"

"Wait a damn second! What do you mean?"

"Best Master Regulus already defeated Dark Lord's traps! Put fake locket in basin and had Kreacher take real one to Great and Noble House of Black."

Are you sure?" The image of that fish-eyed alien screaming, "*It's a trap!*" from the videotape Dudley watched so much when you were a kid comes to mind.

Kreacher gives you that look ... the one you usually give people who doubt you for some reason or another.

A quick stunner knocks the equally shocked Parkinson over. "Watch her. Make certain she doesn't escape!"

Up on your feet, you motion to the Dementor and say, "You! With me!"

It glides, while you sprint into the cave. The progress is impressive. With the guardians of Azkaban hovering only a foot or so above the water, the ice sheet is spreading rather quickly. A few undead hands reach out of the water to grab at the frayed bottoms of the Dementor's robes. At least three of them are now stuck in the ice, with fingers barely moving.

"Bill! It's a trap! Pull back."

"Of course it's a trap. We already knew that!"

"There's no Horcrux here." Shit, he's not following you – better clue him in before whatever hell is in here breaks loose.

You run onto the ice bridge and immediately collapse in pain. It's not as bad as Kwan's Cruciatus Curse, but it definitely doesn't tickle. Before, you didn't go beyond the shoreline. Damn it to hell, you were the effing trigger!

Turning, you crawl the ten feet back toward the shore only to watch the entrance collapse and be sealed by a landslide. The pain stops a couple of feet from shore and you activate your cursebreaker specs, the cave lights up like an inferno. A broom rider would either splatter into the walls or nosedive into the lake. There're anti-apparition and Portkey wards. Most of the rest of the energy is related to the zombie wards. Right there, just under the ice, there's a thin red ribbon of magic just floating there – some kind of blood barrier that's keyed to you and Riddle. It's the inverse of a blood line that prevents family members from triggering wards.

Clever Tom! Blood starts pumping faster as your wand comes out. Zombies are starting to climb onto the ice bridge. That thing on the island just stood up and plunged into the water and is making a beeline for you, moving nothing like a shambling inferi.

You start casting spells to cover Hack and Bill's retreat. No sounds come out as some kind of blanket silencer drops over the cave. It saps some of the power from your spells, but you're no shrinking violet in that department. A pair of the Dementors are grabbed and dragged into the water which freezes solid instantly.

Things are about to get nasty.

There's not much room on the shoreline. You motion for the Dementor to get airborne and give you more room. Its proximity isn't doing your already weakened spellcasting any good. Levitating some rocks, you form a crude barricade and banish the zombies on the ice bridge between Bill and the shore.

Weasley moves like a naked veela is waiting for him and damn near slides into the half-made rock barrier. Bill pauses and pulls a cylinder out of his pack. You recognize his signature single use" ward – 9 Reductors in a can. He chucks it at the pursuers and you see the energy when it detonates. "Tiny" Hack is flying above him, struggling with the bulk of his large club. Closer to you, the ice near the shore cracks and heads and arms start to come through. Reaching into a bag at your waste, you scatter several ward stones like landmines. There all single use and nothing terribly special, but you'll take whatever they can give you. You work on finishing the barrier as Hack returns to his "regular size and picks up his Daemonbone club.

He lets out a silent roar and begins smashing the approaching undead. The "Thing" from the island is lost in the sea of bodies approaching. All you can do is keep an eye out for it. The barrier is as done as it is going to get and you turn your attention to helping Hack. Glancing at Bill, you see he's frustrated with the effectiveness of his spells and has just pulled an AK-47 out of the "Muggle Box of Fun."

Considering what you're facing, it might not be a bad idea to conserve your energy. It's been a long time since you've done anything except hold your shotgun and recall the good times. Now is a bloody perfect time to correct that.

It's near the top of the box, right next to that Soviet RPG-7 launcher that Kwan never let you touch. This'd be a perfect time to use it except for the effing backblast on them and the fact you'd be spending valuable inferi killing time figuring out how to use it.

Savoring the feeling of déjà vu, you holster the wand and grab the Mossberg. It's time to get down to blowing away some zombie bastards! The 590 feels slightly lighter than you remember, or is it you that's gotten stronger? Doesn't matter. Either way, you crouch and poke the weapon around Hack's knee and pull the trigger. There's the flash of the muzzle report, but no sound which is actually a blessing considering how little room there is.

Haha ! Get some! Get some! Get some!

You and Bill are burning through some serious ammo and that initial onslaught buys Hack some breathing room.

Where is it? Where is that damn thing? The zombies are dangerous, but manageable; you're more worried about whatever monster Riddle had on the island.

One of the larger rocks from your barrier suddenly rises. You spin and find time slows to a crawl. There are moments of terror you'll never forget

like Sirius Black going through the veil when you were helpless to save him, being betrayed by a pair of Brazilian aurors, or seeing Veras Chilotha kill a teammate you thought was Bill at the time, and that first pants wetting encounter with a Greater Daemon.

Staring down Voldemort's latest creation is just like that. There wasn't a bloody long time to put much thought into what it could be, but of all the things you'd ever expected, this perversion in front of you definitely wasn't on your list. Its coppery colored, almost like a metal golem, in places, but the rest retains a fleshy look. The monster is holding a Dementor by the neck and a rock that easily weight thirty stone above its head – a feat Hack could easily match, but he's a bit tied up at the moment.

The monster's head is what disturbs you the most. As a kid, you'd always imagined Aunt Petunia with glowing red eyes. The reality is much more terrifying than anything you'd ever dreamed up in that tiny cupboard under the stairs.

Instinctively, you pull the trigger on the Mossberg and hope it'll be enough. It isn't. She's knocked backward and the rock falls down, rolling to the side and leaving a gap in the barricade. Inferi start moving toward it, but the monster uses the Dementor rag doll to brush them aside before releasing the hapless creature. Several more shotgun slugs impact on the abomination's carapace, but other than momentarily knocking it backwards cause no harm.

Unexpectedly, the Mossberg comes up empty. There's no way you've gone through one hundred and fifty-nine rounds that quickly! Hack's daemonbone club, the proximity of the Dementors, or this thing could have drained the magic from the shotgun. You discard it and don't have time to figure it out. So much for conserving your energy.

Expecto Patronum! If Petunia is now some kind of daemon, this ought to slow her down!

The ethereal jaguar pounces on her and they struggle, the coppery skin seems to sizzle and bubble against the power of your magic. Her hands, more like metal claws finally rip it to shreds and it steps through the dissipating mist, mouth open, her meticulously perfect teeth now a gaping maw of blackened, horrific death.

Brit's get a bad rep when it comes to dental care, but this is ridiculous! Expecto Patronum!

You feel significantly weaker as she gets closer and your patronus doesn't pack as much punch against her. Added to the fact is that you have to pick off some of the inferi that blunder into the gap in the wall. The closer it gets, the weaker you're feeling. Panic starts to set in. The side effect is that your next patronus flares with more power, but you don't think that's going to stop her.

The sinking feeling inside your chest is the knowledge that there are still too many zombies for you to change into your animagus form and fight her. You need more time and something to slow her down.

A niffler patronus joins the fight, leaping onto Petunia's back and digging with powerful claws. Bill's seen your plight and knows something is dreadfully wrong. He banishes the big rock into it, knocking her twenty feet backwards and casting another patronus. He shoves something into your hand. You stare at it for a moment, confused. Clay? What the ...? No! C-4! Well, technically it's some Balkan stuff Kwan loves called RDX, but who gives a shit! You slap a sticking charm on it and banish the gooey mass at what used to be your Aunt Petunia. It catches it in one hand as Bill's blasting curse hits it.

The blast shakes the entire area and that nasty water sprays everywhere. There's a sudden blackness. For a moment, you think it's another cave in, but it's just Hack, turning and increasing his mass to his largest size, shielding both you and Bill. The troll spasms and you sense the agonizing pain through your connection to him, but he ignores it and spins around to lay waste to remaining monsters. You can't see Daemon Petunia, but you can see the wounds on Hack's back. Quick spellwork starts closing them and he twitches with every soundless *Episkey* you scream. You splash the contents of a two healing potions haphazardly over skin gouged by slivers of rock. The fact that he's "Daemon infused" saved him, but it also weakens the magic you're trying to use to heal him.

Hack fights with savagery and determination even though he can't rise beyond one knee and he comes dangerously close to falling over with each sweep of his club. You rejoin the fight, refusing to let your friend do this alone and shove Bill to shake the cobwebs out of his noggin. There's an awful looking gash on his forehead that you close. It might leave a scar. Assuming you two live, you can joke about having a matching set of scarred heads. Considering how Fawkes feels about you Scarhead Expeditions might be a more apt name than Phoenix Expeditions.

Those thoughts run through your mind as your spells rip into the churning mass of undead slogging its way toward the shore. At first you think it won't be enough, but the "undead wave" falters and breaks under your spellchained barrage of cutters and blasters.

Weakened and gasping for breath, you're leaning on the equally shaken troll. Bill is manually loading clips into the AK-47 and mopping up the rest when a figure comes up out of the water. The panic returns for a moment as you fear that the Petunia/Daemon/Golem hybrid is unscathed.

Fortunately, it isn't. The arm that caught the explosive charge has been blown completely off. Her head is bent to one side and she's almost staring upward. The copper carapace is marred by spiderweb cracks all along the surface. Bill jams a new clip into his Russian assault rifle and drives round after round into the monsters once impenetrable skin.

She falls forward with the one remaining hand gesturing feebly at you. You dig deep into your depleted resources and summon one more patronus. The jaguar skims across the surface of the water and strikes. Petunia shudders. Pieces loosened by Muggle explosives and gunfire fall off and she collapses like a broken toy. The neck flops forward and the one eye locks on to you. The mouth, leaking what you hope is blood moves, saying something. You're not sure what it is until she does it a second time.

"Save Dudley."

You nod and she releases whatever hold she had left on this world. You hated the women, more than humanly possible, but she didn't deserve this.

Still silenced, you turn to assess the situation. You've got a few wounds you're just starting to notice after coming down from the adrenaline high, but this round goes to the good guys. That, of course, assumes you're still the good guys. Time to heal up and get the hell out of here!

As you quaff a healing potion, a rock flies past your waist and into the head of a crawling inferi who was getting close enough to start gnawing on your leg. You look to Bill, but he's still picking off the last inferi. Looking further, you spot your savior – Kreacher! Effing elf finally made himself useful.

You start to say something, before realizing that it's still futile. Waving your wand you write in the air.

"I told you to watch Parkinson."

Kreacher waves his hands and the smoke message is rearranged.

"Bad Master has bigger problems."

"What?"

Kreacher points to the caved in entrance. *"Dark Lord is out there waiting for Bad Master."*

"Can you transport all of us out of here?" You're grasping at straws, but this is a perfectly good time for doing just that.

Kreacher's giving you that look again. *"Didn't realize Bad Master was an idiot. If elves could transport humans, Dobby would have never let you be at Hogwarts that year!"*

Yeah, that does make sense. Okay, you were wrong. Now, things are really going to get nasty.

Turn Me Loose: A Harry Potter Adventure You Had to Have It Your Way, I'm Saying No Way

Chapter 14 – You Had to Have it Your Way I'm Saying No Way

You've spent a good deal of time over the last few years (ever since that incident a graveyard) wondering just where Tom Riddle (also known as Voldemort) is. To some, it would border on paranoia, but in your defense, he is fairly preoccupied with killing you. It's like the old saying – you might be paranoid, but that doesn't mean someone is not out to get you.

Problem solved. You know exactly where Riddle is. He's on the other side of a few tons of earth ... waiting to kill you.

That's about the only silver lining you can come up with in this. Your assets include an unconscious troll, a homicidal house elf, three dementors (with the other three dragged into the bottom of the water inside this cave and turned into dementor-cicles), a box full of Muggle weapons, ammunition, and explosives. Finally there are two dinged-up and exhausted cursebreakers. A few inferi are still wandering around, but they're useless outside of the cave and an annoyance inside.

Got any ideas, Bill? You draw in the air with your wand. The area is silenced as well. The fun never stops. If you'd remembered to pack some Peruvian Instant Darkness powder things might be a bit easier. Maybe there is time to send Kreacher back for some? No. Not likely.

They'll probably let us dig ourselves out and wait to kill us. If we had the sapper, we could activate it and drop the wards in here pretty quick. Maybe the elf can get it for us? If not, we can look for the master set of runes and break just the Anti-apparition wards and get the hell out of here.

You like his idea. Of course, finding the master set of runes in a fairly large cave that is in complete darkness, is a bit much to ask. The broomstick jinxes make getting up to the ceiling problematic and your gut feeling says that Riddle put them under the waterline. Sure you want to cross wands with Voldemort again. It's all been leading up to this, hasn't it? But you want to do it on your own terms and not his.

We could send Kreacher to the Ministry and have them send enough Aurors to chase him off for now. You're not the only one who loses sleep wondering where the Dark Lord is. Scrimgeour doesn't like the tosser either. How many times over the years did you have to run to somebody else's aid? When's it going to be someone else's turn to be the cavalry?

The Order? Bill asks.

You shake your head and reply. *Snape can't leave the castle and he and Shackbolt are the only two left that are worth a damn in a fight. We need a distraction, not something else for him to kill while waiting for us.*

Bill gestures at Kwan's box of weapons and explosives. *Boom boom time?*

What do you mean?

Drop a ten second explosive rune in there and have the elf transport it to the other side of the cave in. If we play it right, we'll take a few of them out.

What if that drops the rest of the mountain on us?

We fall back to the island over there. If the cave starts to go, the wards will go along with it. As soon as they fall, we're out of here? If the cave doesn't go, we bust our way out, and use our dementor friends as shields.

Hack? You point at the troll. You can probably get him to the little island in the middle, but the troll is notoriously resistant to magic and difficult to Apparate when he's conscious.

Bill frowns. Hack needs more medical attention than either of you two can provide. No breaker worth a damn likes it when teammates go down.

Firebolt? You offer. You're lightning fast on that broom. The problem is even that might not be fast enough.

Maybe, but my broom could never keep up. He responds. *What if I turn into my niffler form and you carry me?*

Not a bad idea, Bill. Maybe I can transfigure Hack into something small enough and it will hold until we reach the edge of the water and can use a Portkey.

Stupid plans are your specialty. This seems like the most workable of the stupid ideas available at the moment and Bill begins to add some embellishments that should slightly enhance the odds of your survival. Tests performed on the unconscious troll show that he reverts to his normal –

if that's a word you can use to describe your friend – form in one minute. So, you've got a whopping sixty seconds to shrink him, blow the tunnel open, fly through the Death Eater gauntlet, while evading Tom Riddle himself and Portkey the hell out of there. Easy right?

You suppose it could be more complicated and difficult, but you're fairly satisfied about how completely fucked up this will be.

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There are no further preparations to make. You've summoned a golem out of one of the larger pieces of rubble and it is clearing the debris away. The thing will be one more item that will hopefully get between you and Death Eater spells in a couple of minutes. One thing you absolutely must do before jumping on that broom is clear the entrance to the cave. There's still a serious broom jinx inside the cavern. Bill is drawing some temporary wards.

That's when all hell breaks loose. A huge chunk of the mass just disappears right in front of your golem. Tom is tired of waiting!

Showtime.

Bill jumps toward you and changes in midair. Tiny niffler claws dig into your back while the three remaining dementors rush out of the cave. One intercepts a sickly green death curse that causes it no harm.

You finish turning Hack into a suitcase and grab the handle. Sprinting toward the cave mouth, you trigger the temporary wards with your wand work and close your eyes. Brilliant light flashes even through your closed lids. At least you were prepared for it. The dementors have their backs to it.

You hit the mouth of the cave and swing your leg onto the broom as your golem explodes and you feel the pain in your scar. On a positive note, you can hear again.

"Die Potter!" Not exactly the first words you want to hear though.

The golem you summoned buys you a second to get airborne as Riddle's disintegration curse vaporizes the thing and the dust cloud allows you to accelerate right through someone's owl-shaped patronus that was warding the dementors back.

Yanking hard on the Firebolt, you, Bill and "suitcase" Hack veer hard left and away from Riddle, bowling bowl over a Death Eater in front of you. Somehow, you manage to hold onto Hack as you throw a few destructive spells over your shoulder into the mayhem behind you, but you can tell the transfiguration is beginning to wear off. The suitcase is already adding weight and that is forcing you to fight the Firebolt to stay level. A part of you realizes that you didn't factor in the fact that you wouldn't be able to concentrate fully on maintaining the Transfiguration spell while in the midst of a fight.

Any second now, Kreacher!

A giant hand reaches out of the ground and grabs your left leg, jerking you forward. It clamps down like a vice and you scream as the pressure shatters your bones. You are dangled off the end of the cliff barely holding onto your broom, but losing your grip on Hack. The case, now with feet, slips from your grasp and falls onto a ledge below you.

Caught like you have one leg in a bear trap, you summon a shield behind you out of the rock. You have the luxury of knowing what's coming.

Riddle's mouth opens wider than humanly possible and his gloating smile proclaims final victory as dispels your shield and raises his wand for the killing blow. Your eyes lock and you feel him pushing through your defenses, but you're looking past him at the wooden crate being banished out of the cave mouth.

The enemy spins realizing what is happening as the box filled with Muggle ammunition and explosives detonates. The stone hand vanishes and ironically, Riddle's shield helps protect you and Bill. Even so, you're flung away by the shockwave. The injured leg makes controlling the spinning Firebolt even more difficult. Bill is tossed off and plummets to the unforgiving waves below.

Steadying the broom, you reach out with tendrils of magic, slowing his fall and drive the racing broom toward him. You catch him like a Quaffle and cradle him in your arms. Spinning, you glance back and see that Hack is now back in his regular form. Some bodies have landed on the rocks and in the water.

For a brief moment you consider going back for your troll. He's still alive. You know that, but the cloud on the plateau clears unexpectedly and you see Riddle kneeling at the edge. He's injured, but not nearly as bad as you are and he's angry. Already he's sweeping his arm toward you and bolts of energy leave his wand like World War Two anti-aircraft cannons.

All you can do is hope Hack lives to forgive you as you activate the necklace Portkey before Voldemort's spells arrive.

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There actually was a time when you thought the bone growing potion hurt. To be honest, your experiences with pain were pretty limited at age twelve. Fast forward a few years and it isn't so bad – by comparison. At least you have your own quarters and don't have to worry about too many people pestering you. Thirty-six hours after the debacle at the cave, the bones in your lower leg are mostly back together and you're resting somewhat comfortably, although the man standing at the foot of your bed isn't helping matters.

"So Potter, I trust you learned not to take the Dark Lord for granted?" Snape asks in a casual manner mocking you.

"He wasn't exactly in good shape either. That was his best shot at an ambush and it failed," you remind the "de facto" Headmaster of Hogwarts. With Dumbledore sleeping this one off and McGonagall dead, Flitwick is running the day to day operations with the occasional use of Tonks and

her abilities, but as far as you are concerned Snape is Hogwarts now. Oddly, it's not the nightmare scenario you thought it would be.

"Did it?" Snape responds with scorn. "He has your troll familiar now. From your own admission, he crafted a dangerous creature out of Lily's wallflower of a sister. Imagine what he could do with something more substantial than a housewife for base material."

The git has a point. You were shocked to learn that Snape actually knew Petunia at some point in his life. Bill was set to rally some of the Order members to go and retrieve Hack, but you sensed Hack was being moved. Kreacher wasn't terribly happy about being sent back to the cave, but he returned and confirmed that the troll was long gone.

"He's probably under Gringotts now," you say.

"Yes, and I fully expect that the beast will be made into bait for a trap. I would advise against a repeat of the foolishness that led to Black's demise."

"I've come a long way since then, Snape."

"For both our sakes, I hope so."

"Where is Bill?" You haven't seen him since he'd disbanded the rescue mission.

"Your man, Kwan has sent word via the Brazilian embassy. He is back in the country with a band of mercenaries. Weasley slipped out of the castle to rendezvous with him."

Sipping on a Muggle cola through a straw, you smack the mattress and say, "Damn! If we'd had him at the cave, things might've gone better."

"For a change, I agree with you, Potter."

You ask, "What do you think Riddle's next move will be?" Snape is more qualified than anyone else to make guesses about the bastard. It takes one to know one.

"Your encounter with him did net him a prisoner, but it cost him. Based on what Weasley showed me in the pensieve, he could have lost as many as nine Death Eaters. We know one was Miss Parkinson, but the identities of the others are a mystery. My guess is that he would have brought any available members of his inner circle, so they could see him vanquish you once and for all. So, it is reasonable to say that he lost the services of several powerful spell casters. Perhaps we no longer have to deal with the likes of Lestrage, Malfoy, or the Carrows. At the very least, they will be healing their wounds. I suspect, he will turn his attention back to raids against the Ministry for the immediate future. It will net him a few victories with relative ease and save face with the Goblin nation. It should buy us at most two weeks, but I believe he will assault the castle at some point."

"That's what I was thinking as well," you say, ignoring the mental distaste at thinking the same thing as Snape. Still it does make you wonder something. "So what happens if I lose and he wins, Snape? What move do you make after that? Humor me."

The man smiles at you and there is no hint of compassion on his face. "You ask for a honest answer, so I will give you one. I have the still sleeping Dumbledore and the castle to offer him. Assuming that is enough, I will either take my place at his side in the new order of things, or I will see how vulnerable he is now that the prophecy concerning you has been fulfilled. Rest assured, Potter, I will do what is in the interest of my own survival."

"Wouldn't expect otherwise, but remember your debt to me extends to Hermione and the child she's carrying."

"Quite likely," Snape concedes. "If he does not bring down the wards, Granger will still be alive. She and your spawn will be protected. I can send Dumbledore's body out as a peace offering. Negotiating with the Dark Lord from behind Hogwarts' protection is preferable to doing it without. If he does bring down the wards, she'll perish as they fall and the point is moot."

You nod. He is a completely unrepentant bastard, but he isn't lying to you.

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"Shouldn't you be resting," Bill asks. He gestures to the magic carpet you're floating on. "Those things are illegal in England, you know." The Marauder's Map floats next to him. "I was wondering how you were making such good time."

"Kwan borrowed it from one of his mercs for me. I'll play the diplomatic immunity card, if I have to. I don't know about you, but the castle feels just a bit safer with Kwan around. Still, he insulted me for getting injured and letting Hack get captured. After that, he promised to find a way to make me faster. You'd think that after another run in with Riddle, anything Kwan promises wouldn't scare me so much."

Bill laughs and says, "But it did, didn't it?"

"Too right you are," you agree. "Voldemort just wants to kill me in a grand spectacle. Kwan seriously wants to hurt me."

The two of you share a quick laugh. Bill asks, "So what brings you out at this ungodly hour?" It's three in the morning and he is working on "booby trapping" the area around the Room of Requirement. It's a task that can't be done while students are roaming the halls.

Sadly, you can't use any of Chlothar's assorted nastiness here, because of Snape's oath to protect Draco. That said, one of these days, the little light-haired piece of shit is going to actually fix that vanishing closet and lead a group of Death Eaters into the castle. Bill is in charge of organizing the "welcoming party" for the guests. Even though there is nothing lethal here, your buddy has gotten quite creative. Between the babbling hexes, stuttering charms, confundus curses, and something he picked up from a Greek 'breaker he met in Egypt called "Sisyphus' Rock," the bloody fools will be lucky if they manage to cast a spell when the trap is sprung.

"I was getting lonely in my quarters. The only people that visit me besides you and Kwan are Pomfrey, Snape, and Hermione. Pomfrey's been strange around me ever since the third floor was leveled."

"I'm guessing since you saw her panic and leave the Bell girl to her death that she doesn't want to be near you." Bill says, using his wand to draw a straight line from the wall to the door to the Room of Requirement.

"Right in one, if I had to guess," you answer. "Just because Snape appears to be on my side for now doesn't mean I actually enjoy his presence. Finally, there's Hermione. Things are just plain weird between us."

"You could always shag her again. Unless you're worried she'll get even more pregnant than she already is!"

"Low blow, Weasley. Maybe when you're older I'll explain to you how all the problems between people of different sexes can't be solved by inserting tab 'a' into slot 'b'."

"So is your first novel after the war going to be a memoir about defeating a Dark Lord, or Relationships according to Harry Potter?"

You chuckle and reply, "Haven't decided. Maybe I'll use the title 'I Did It My Way' for whichever I end up choosing."

"There's a Muggle that would sue. Actually, I'm not entirely certain he's a Muggle. Better choose something else. How about, 'Harry Potter's Life or I Have No Idea What I'm Doing?' We could change the 'What' out for a 'Who' and you'll be covered either way."

"Good thing you're a better 'breaker than you are a comedian. Here, I brought you presents." You offer the leather bag to him. "Aside from the awkward visits, I found plenty of time to carve."

"Oh ho, what's this?" Bill pulls out a glass jar filled with tiny little statues. "Soapstone bees?"

"A baker's dozen. Charmed to animate when the command phrase is said. That vanishes the lid too. I went ahead and put stinging hexes on the surface. I figure that I'll float up to the top of the hallway and use a sticking charm right there in the shadows."

"Not bad, Harry. I might have to steal this idea from you for future work. You should have left out the stingers and gone to Snape for a paralytic poison to soak them in. Not too many will be coming through the door with a bezoar in their mouth."

"Didn't think of a potion," you mutter, "Already stealing from the journeyman you're supposed to be mentoring?" You float up and invert the jar while sticking it to a crossbeam.

Bill shrugs and says, "Potions aren't good long term solutions. They lose their potency after time, but for something that's going to last a few weeks, don't overlook the possibility of using potions. As for your baseless accusation, I'll let that slide Journeyman Potter. How many times have I told you the golden rule of cursebreaking? Good 'breakers come up with their own schemes. Great ones make someone else's good scheme better. You've got the talent, Harry. I look forward to what I can appropriate from you next."

Well there is the old saying that imitation is a form of flattery. You feel ... flattered.

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You collapse in pain before Kwan's curse strikes you. Usually it's the other way around. He immediately lets it go, but the pain doesn't go away.

The old man limps over to you. "What is it? Is it leg?"

"No, I think Voldemort just did something to Hack."

"Is the troll dead?"

"No, I can still sense him."

"Then we assume he has someone ready to torture troll when you and he fight. You must be prepared. We keep training. If pain goes away, let me know and I put hex on you."

The funny part is that he really expects you to tell him when Voldemort stops whatever he is doing to your friend. "Can't say I've missed our little sessions."

The Korean hitwizard glares at you. "You still too arrogant. Faced Dark Lord and lived again. One day soon, you have to stand and fight. Think you are ready to fight him, today?"

"Not today, but I can try and work him into my schedule next week."

Kwan makes a guttural growl of disgust and says, "All one big joke to you isn't it? Think he will fight you fairly? In some kind of stupid duel? Remember when you asked me to teach you how to duel?"

"Easy Kwan. I know what I'm up against. Best thing to do is make fun of it. Otherwise I'd have gone insane a long time ago."

"Joke with Bill. Serious with me. I go away and you turn back into stupid kitty cook!"

Obviously, something is bothering Kwan. It couldn't be that he's concerned about you, could it? "I'm ready to do anything necessary to beat him."

There's a long pause while you're climbing back to your feet. "Do you mind a personal question?"

"What do you want to know?" He asks.

"I've always wondered why you never use the Killing Curse? I'm just curious," you ask. "You don't have a problem with either of the other two Unforgivables, but in all the time I've known you, I've never seen you do it."

The hitwizard sighs and looks downward. You've never seen him do that before! "Two years ago, we had a job. Kill a powerful Greek mage named Manos. He was slippery one, polyjuiced decoys, bodyguards, professional wards everywhere he went. Took time, but I managed to get inside the estate and finish job. Big fight. Nasty fight. Killed many bodyguards and finally Manos. Thought everything was done when girl, same age as you are now came in - Manos' granddaughter home from Durmstrang for winter break. She was a decent fighter and there was no need to kill her. I controlled her with an Imperio and was starting to fix her memories, but Collins said it was taking too long and used Killing Curse."

"You were connected to her when she died." You speak the obvious.

"Yes. Her life flashed before my eyes and then disappeared. Still able to kill, but have never been able to use Killing Curse since."

Being the only person to ever survive one of those spells, you can appreciate what he is saying.

You start to say something to him, but he cuts you off. "Enough talk. Back to work. Dark Lord still wants to kill you."

Now you know why he always says to not get too fond of that curse.

Kwan stands and looks at you. "Dark Lord wants to kill you himself, doesn't he?"

"Yes."

"He probably tells all his followers that only he can kill Harry Potter, right?"

"It's a pretty good assumption."

Kwan gets an evil smile on his face. He's going somewhere with this and wherever it heads, you already like it. "What are you thinking, Kwan?"

He explains.

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Amazingly enough, the next step in your "master plan" has been waiting around for Draco "effing" Malfoy to fix a damn vanishing cabinet. Would it be too obvious if you had Kreacher leave some manuals on the art of enchanting on the idiot's pillow? It's tempting to just send a bunch of people in there to help him and Obliviate him after the fact, but Snape is in charge of that aspect of things, so the days pass ... and you hate it!

Snape's predictions have been amazingly accurate. You have to give the man some credit – he knows how dark wizards think. There were several raids against soft Ministry targets. Honestly, the goblins couldn't give a shit about Hogwarts and Harry Potter. They became allies with Riddle to break the British Ministry and get payback for every lost goblin war before this.

You suppose students in History of Magic might be paying a bit more attention to Binns' lectures.

In your hands is word from Brazil that the goblin nation in that part of the world was even more prepared than any thought. Things are getting messy. The rest of the South American ministries are turning a blind eye to the help their tribes of goblins are rendering to keep their branches of Gringotts open.

You toss the messages that the owl from your embassy sent this morning to Hermione. The senior ambassador would likely be furious with you just handing out sensitive information like that to a foreign national, but he's not here and you weren't exactly given this post for your diplomatic skills.

"To tell you the truth Hermione, I just can't stand them. I trained with them, worked side by side with goblins for days on end, and went into a cursed city. Then they betrayed us. I doubt I'll ever trust a goblin again."

She shrugs and says, "Try to see it from their perspective. What have we done to warrant them trusting magical society? The ministry is run by awful people like Umbridge. Something tells me that she's the rule and not the exception."

"Playing devil's advocate, or are you actually sympathizing with them?"

Crinkling her nose, you see a bit of her disgust, "Not really, I just understand what motivates them. In the eyes of the purebloods, Muggleborns aren't much higher up the chain than goblins. If your enemy gets his way, I expect the lot of wizards and witches raised by Muggles to get much worse."

This is a "safe" topic – the war. Personal discussions get uncomfortable very fast. As long as it's about anything other than that, things are good between the two of you.

"You've got a point, but it still doesn't mean much. The goblin leaders aren't any better than ours. I've watched them sell portions of their tribe out when it suits them. They use war with the humans to maintain control of their population and keep them in power."

"Ron asked about you in class the other day. I didn't tell him you'd been injured." She changes the topic, obviously bored with talking about goblins.

“How’s he doing? Still seeing Brown?”

“In broom closets from the fifth floor to the seventh. She boasted that she’s taking him on the tour of Hogwarts.”

“Sounds like Won-Won is pleasantly occupied.”

“Luna confronted me today,” she says. You sense the awkwardness ahead.

“What did she say?”

“She knew we slept together. It was strange. She was oddly lucid. Why on earth did you tell her about us?”

“She told me Tonks tried to get her to come up and see me that morning. I said it was Tonks trying to get payback for me being mean to Lupin and she wanted to know why.”

“Luna isn’t in her right mind. She could be walking down the hallway and just babble it out, for everyone to hear.”

“No, she won’t,” you respond.

“How can you be certain?”

You pause, wondering if it is another breach of trust. You did tell Luna about sleeping with Hermione, and Hermione is worried. Screw it! Let the chips fall where they may. You don’t have time for this stupid, teenage angst. “Her whole persona is an act, Hermione.”

“What?”

“Looney. It’s just something she does. She’s been playing a game ever since she got to Hogwarts.”

“You mean she’s not barmy?”

“Oh, she’s just as screwed up as you and me. She developed the whole Looney Lovegood persona as a defense mechanism.”

Hermione is having trouble processing this. “When did you find out?”

“The day after I ran away from the Weasleys. She and her father were at the airport and she was normal as could be. We became decent friends over the summer through correspondence and tried to give it a go when I got back. If it hadn’t been for all the stupid shit going on around me, we might’ve made it work.”

“Were you in love with her?”

That question stops you in your tracks and makes you think. “I don’t really know. I was having a great time. When she was around things were never quite that bad. In the end, it doesn’t really matter, I guess. She wasn’t going to come out of her shell and the relationship became more of a distraction than anything else. We might have been perfect for each other, but that’s what happens when the ‘right’ people try to get together at the ‘wrong’ time.”

“That’s so sad!” Hermione says while tearing up. “You should try to patch things up with her.”

“That’d be nice, but I’d just end up breaking her heart.”

“Why’s that?”

“The same reason we’d never work out, Hermione. I probably won’t survive, even if I kill Riddle. My scar isn’t just a connection to him. Baba Yaga confirmed that it’s a partial horcrux.”

“That’s not possible!”

“Didn’t someone say that magic makes the impossible possible? Unfortunately, it’s a likely scenario. Even if I destroy the cup, his spirit might latch onto me. Like he tried at the ministry last year. Except this time, he’d have nowhere else to go.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Well, step one is to kill Riddle. Anything after that, I’m going to make up on the spot, but both Kwan and Bill know what to do if they have to. They’re my best friends. I trust them with my life. If necessary, I’ll trust them with my death.”

“But the prophecy ...”

You swish your hand back and forth, dismissing her words. “Neither can live, nor will live. It’s open to interpretation. I’m hoping for the best, but preparing for the worst. That’s why I’m telling you now. I don’t want you to be shocked if I don’t survive. Patching things up with Luna would just be setting her up for even more heartbreak.”

A knock on the door interrupts this emotional bloodletting. You’re extremely grateful. It’s Bill and he’s got that look on his face. Maybe you’re due for a dose of karma.

Just got word from Charlie - the cabinet's been activated. I sent an owl to the peacekeepers in Hogsmeade. They're on their way up here. The students are being sent back to their dorms. Get your dragonhide on and meet me in the seventh floor corridor. It's showtime."

Bill's already leaving as Hermione approaches and asks, "What's happening, Harry?"

"Go get Tonks and get to Snape," you tell her. "He'll probably need your help – even if he won't admit it." Just like that, all the waiting is over. Strangely, you feel like you squandered something precious.

"Be careful, Harry." She hugs you. It's nice. It might be the last hug you ever get.

Hermione breaks away and goes into her quarters to fetch her bodyguard. You get the worn piece of armor out of your chest. Sliding it on, you feel a bit safer, but very much alone. You've made a sizeable number of mistakes in your short life.

"Here's hoping I live to regret them," you say to the empty room.

-x-x-x-x-x

Barricades of stone, hardened against spells and transfiguration litter the corridor ... Flitwick's main contribution. You, Bill, Kwan, eight Brazilian peacekeepers, a dozen mercenaries, a handful of Aurors, and several members from the staff at Hogwarts will fight from behind them. The Charms professor's other offering is a glamour hiding all this from view.

The exit from the Room of Requirements is the designated kill zone. Part of you prays that Riddle will come himself, but you don't think that's his style. You'll have to chase him through the tunnels and passageways of Gringotts. You know it. You've accepted it. Now, it's just a matter of how much you can weaken him and what chance that gives your counterpunch of succeeding.

"I'm sorry, boy," the slightly slurred speech of Sybil Trewlany whispers in your ear. Her breath is worse than Vernon's on one of his binges. "All signs point to your death today."

"Death is just the next great adventure. With luck, it'll be better than this one. As long as I take him out, what happens next matters little. Do the powers have an answer for that?"

The drunk witch is a bit put out by your reply. "You should not speak ill of the powers. They know all."

"Well if they know all, they knew I was going to say that. And if they're willing to turn this world over to Riddle because I hurt their all-powerful egos, that makes them awfully petty, doesn't it?"

Telling her that everyone makes up stuff during her class, now that would be petty! You refrain as she moves away from where you're positioned. There's a disturbance in the back of the group and you turn to listen in. Snape or Flitwick has a couple of the Prefects listening to the wireless and one of them just came running up.

"They're reports that the Ministry and Diagon Alley are under attack!"

"Raids and feints to keep any reinforcements in London," Snape says and turns to Percy Weasley, the erstwhile replacement for Minerva McGonagall. "Weasley, you still have connections at the highest levels. Get in touch with them and make certain they know the main thrust will be here at Hogwarts."

"But how can we be certain?"

"I didn't ask you for your opinion, Weasley. I told you to go and do something. Move!"

"Severus! Come quickly!" Somehow the ethereal voice of Binns manages to rise above the din. He's floating partially through the wall.

"What is it?" Snape barks. You don't really envy the man at all.

"Someone should really take a picture. It would be very helpful to show my classes. Goblin war barges on the Great Lake. Who would've ever thought?"

Several spell casters crowd the window next to the ghost of the History of Magic professor.

"He's right!" Sprout says, horrified. "Three off them, and two smaller craft that look like transports. There's so many of them! It's an army."

"Quite right," Binns agrees. "I don't know how well the walls will hold up against those catapults."

Snape surveys the situation. "Obviously, the Dark Lord is throwing down the gauntlet. Potter, I'll have to use the Aurors, the staff, and the members of the Order to meet this threat. The defense of the castle takes precedence. You will have to deal with this hallway and decide if you will counterattack."

No! "We'll only get one shot at this. We have to press the attack!"

"Need I remind you of your oath, boy?" Snape says between redirecting those that answer to him.

"Well the way I see things, the school won't ever be out of danger until Riddle is dead and I've got a chance to end things. If you need help, wake up Rip Van Winkle, but I'll be long gone."

"So be it, Potter," Snape says, fixing his gaze on you. "Do what you must. Filius, activate the armored suits. We'll need to evacuate both Ravenclaw and Gryffindor towers. Put them all in Hufflepuff and ask for volunteers from the sixth and seventh years to hold the corridor leading to the Hufflepuff common room. Pomona, will lead that group."

"What about Slytherin?"

"I doubt any will emerge from their room. Better still, secure their door and remove a possible wildcard. I shall go and wake Dumbledore."

"You'll need to leave a couple of Aurors to deal with the prisoners, Snape. I'm spread too thin as it is and can't leave anyone behind. Otherwise, we'll just have to kill everyone."

As better than half your force withdraws, the door to the Room of Requirements swings open. Draco Malfoy steps boldly into the corridor holding a mummified hand and hurling darkness powder into the air. That part of the hallway goes dark.

Like it's going to help them. Bill holds one hand up and starts ticking off his five fingers. Ten seconds pass as the last one closes back into his fist and he shouts, "Bill Weasley says, stop right there!"

There's a momentary pause when the command phrase is uttered and for the briefest instant, you think something was keyed incorrectly and the scheme doesn't activate. The moment of panic passes and you sense the wave of magic roaring like a freight train. In that little section of darkness, all hell breaks loose. Stunners, stingers, and paralyzers rain down like a force of nature. The floor becomes impossibly slick. Most importantly, hands reach out of the wall and clasp the door firmly, locking it in the open position. A second hand holds a noxious potion and hurls the beaker inside the room.

Under your invisibility cloak and a Bubblehead charm, and hiding in the back corner of that room, is Charlie Weasley. He's been there for three days now and is "master of the room." It will prevent the Death Eaters from using the room to stop your ambush.

A gust of wind from Kwan's wand dissipates the powder and reveals those screaming and already stunned. Draco is prone on the ground with a couple of goblins piled on top of him. Yeah, someone should have brought a camera. Several other Death Eaters are either out or unable to continue.

"Harry! Dementors."

You see them coming out and being used just like shields. Spells fizzle against their bodies. *"Expecto Patronum!"*

The niffler and the jaguar race down the hallway and force the creatures to try and flee. It opens those behind them to the layers of harassing wards. Random shots come down the hall, but they are either shielded or avoid. Bill starts levitating young Malfoy toward our lines. The little plonker needs to be stashed away securely.

"Advance," Kwan commands. The stones roll forward providing a moving shield and shaking the floors of the hallway. Bill taps his wristwatch, sending a message to his brother and a second door to the room opens up allowing you, Kwan and some of the others apply Bubblehead charms and enter as Bill controls the wards and mops up the hallway.

Inside, the room is filled with mostly goblins. Many are milling about. Some attempt to get back into the vanishing closet, but are stymied by those exiting. It's chaos. Beautiful, sweet chaos. Knowing Bill has already moved ickle Draco, the kid gloves can come off.

Everything on that side of the room is fair game. Filled with thoughts of righteous retribution, you, Kwan and a dozen other wands open up with your nastiest surprises for the choking goblins and the semi-coherent Death Eaters. It isn't even much of a fight.

Of course you shouldn't get cocky, who knows what is waiting for you on the other side of that cabinet in Gringotts.

-x-x-x-x-x-x

"It figures you'd survive. Trust a bad penny to keep turning up," you say looking at the disheveled wizard leaning against the wall. You see your reflection on the "skin" of his arm.

"Sorry to disappointing you, Harry," Peter Pettigrew answers and coughs up a phlegm filled mixture of mucus and blood. He's lost a lot of hair and there are some awful blemishes on his skin.

"Obviously, that won't be a problem for too much longer," you answer.

"What are you talking about?"

"Metal poisoning. That arm is killing you." You glance over your shoulder at the dead, dying, injured, and unconscious. The Death Eaters number a couple of dozen. Those still alive are being bound and given to the two Aurors. There are a couple of big names in there, the Carrows, a Nott, Greyback, and a Yaxley, but not Lucius or Bellatrix. The goblins number in the hundreds. No quarter is given to them. Those still alive are executed on the spot. Sure it's a double standard, but you doubt there will ever be an inquiry.

"No, it's just a passing illness. The master told me so." Peter doesn't sound very confident in his reply.

"If I had time, Wormtail. I'd go get the notes of the spell's creator and watch your face when you realize you've been lied to."

"Never! I'm his most loyal!" He protests. It's not even amusing. It's pathetic.

You're an expendable dupe, Pettigrew. Even if you started taking bezoars this moment, you wouldn't buy yourself a month at most. I've got no reason to lie to you. I'm just going to turn you over to the Aurors in a moment and never see your face again. Goodbye Peter."

He looks crestfallen, but calls out, "Wait, Harry! I can still help you. Your troll. I know where he is."

"Nice try, but I can track him as soon as I go through the cabinet. What else do you have to offer?"

"The cup! I can show you where the cup is!"

Well that is interesting. "Bill, you have the veritaserum?"

He nods and drips the three drops into Peter's mouth. Wormtail doesn't resist.

"Do you know the location of Helga Hufflepuff's cup?"

"Yes."

"Do you know that it is a Horcrux?"

"Yes."

"Did Ri ... Voldemort tell you?"

"No. I figured it out myself."

"Why did you offer to tell me?"

"I'm indebted to you. If I am truly dying, I want to die having discharged my debts. Otherwise, I'll likely turn into a ghost. I don't want to end up like that."

Well that explains things. "Where is Hufflepuff's cup?"

"It is protected at the landing to the old vaults. Four levels below where you will exit from the cabinet. Your troll is being held nearby. The master is keeping him as insurance."

"What kind of insurance?"

"I do not know what he plans, but I suspect it is a ritual."

"Is Voldemort in Gringott's?"

"Yes, along with goblins, trolls, dragons, and even a chimera."

"Can you throw off the Imperius Curse in less than a day?"

"No, unless the caster is weak."

You turn, "Kwan, we've got a guide and a spare body. You're needed."

"We are almost secure," the Korean says as he steps to your side. "Last of the prisoners being taken care of."

"This is Peter Pettigrew. He knows where the cup and Hack are. We're taking him with us."

"You're going to die, Potter! I just wish I could be there to watch it." The voice belongs to the now conscious Draco Malfoy.

"You really think so, Draco?" you say. It's a pity his mouth isn't still paralyzed. "So, did you take Hermione's good luck potion?"

"It didn't work, if you must know," the Slytherin answers.

"People make their own luck, Draco. If it really did work, it might be the only reason you're alive. I'd almost like to take you with me, under the Imperius Curse. A shield is about all you're good for, Malfoy." It's enjoyable to watch his eyes bulge. "But I'll leave you to Snape and Dumbledore's mercy."

"Harry," Bill interrupts. "Snape's patronus just found me. That means the old man is on the move. We've overstayed our welcome."

"You're right." You don't have anything left to say to Dumbledore. He'll be as dead as Peter soon enough. The only question is whether you'll beat him to the grave.

"Done talking?" Kwan asks. He removes his fake leg and quaffs a polyjuice potion, made with hair clippings before he lost the leg. His hair even darkens slightly. Only now do you see how he's aged in the last few months.

All the mercs and the peacekeepers are drinking their polyjuice potions and turning into ... you. Kwan's theory is that Voldemort's forces know they'll face his wrath if they seriously hurt Harry Potter. That's a distinct advantage. So, with the exception of Kwan, Bill, and Peter everyone else looks exactly like you. He wants Harry Potter. You'll give him Harry Potter ... twenty times over.

To Kwan, you say, “How come you didn’t dupe me?”

“If I die, I don’t want to be locked in your stupid body. Besides, round eyes don’t look good on me.”

“Can’t argue with that logic,” you reply. “Let’s go. Riddle wants Harry Potter! Let’s give him more Harry Potter than he ever dreamed of!”

With that, you head to the vanishing closet. Your life has led to this moment. Destiny is calling.

“Ready for this Harry?” Bill asks, squeezing into the space next to you.

“Probably not. But one way or another, this ends today. See you on the other side.”

Turn Me Loose: A Harry Potter Adventure So Why Don't You Turn Me Loose?

Chapter 15

So Why Don't You Turn Me Loose?

The trip through to the other side is about what you've come to expect from magical travel – dizzying, nauseating, and uncomfortable – but it is over fairly quickly and you and Bill stumble out into the dimly lit area and join the battle already in progress.

It's like the Gringott's branch in the lost city all over again. This time, there aren't any inferi. Instead, there's a cave full of goblins. Leveling your wand, you add to the firepower of the wizards who came through a minute or so before.

In South America, there was only silence. With the Bubblehead charms, you couldn't even hear the other spells or gunfire.

This time, screams, explosions, and the sounds of the dead and dying fill the air as you drive the disgusting vermin back and establish a foothold in the tunnels under the goblin bank.

"Move! Move! *Lacero!*" You shout and slice your way through a pair of blade wielding goblins. A quick charm taught to you by Flitwick animates the blades of the fallen and turns them on the group immediately beyond them. When those fall, you fire off an overpowered banisher that sends at least ten of them sailing through the air.

War is ugly. It moves so fast that sometimes that you can't keep up unless you simply become brutal and ruthless. More spells fueled by your adrenaline pound the now fleeing goblins. A kinder and gentler Harry Potter would let them go. You're not him. You trained with a group of goblins for that trip into zombie hell and know a thing or two about their tactics. The survivors will break into groups to warn the others and reorganize. Then, they'll ambush your group using every side tunnel, crevice, and hole they can fit into.

A quick guess is that there were about eighty gobs stationed here, maybe as a second wave to secure the inside of the castle. Now, there is a little less than half that number and your hired muscle is chewing them up and spitting them out.

You waste no time and start working through a quick chain of various Cutting curses intermixed with Reductors. Unfortunately, you can't risk the more powerful blasting curses in such a confined area. In a sick, detached way, it reminds you of weeding at the Dursley's.

It is strange how the slaughter of dozens of living beings doesn't bother you that much. Of course, they're filthy, stinking, traitorous goblins, who've allied themselves with Riddle. Something like an inferius has no choice to be evil. The goblin clans under Gringott's chose to do this. They do things like steal children from homes in the middle of the night for slaver markets in both the magical and muggle world.

Now, they must face the consequences of those choices ... in other words, you.

You switch to a wide area Cutter and push more energy into it. Three bloody worg firebats fall to the stone floor and flop on it while bleeding out. You kick one of the smoldering bodies out of the way and push forward. More wands join yours. It seems odd to fight alongside people wearing Death Eater masks and cloaks, but the first six wizards through the closet disguised themselves in the enemy's garb to cause confusion – Kwan's idea. He has a long history of using his opponents' weaknesses against them and the fact that these idiots walk around in capes and masks make things much easier.

The frantic pace slows even as the dust cloud builds and air clearing charms are required to help with visibility. With the entire group in now, the sheer volume of the spells decimates the remaining creatures. Two minutes of non stop fighting give way to an eerie silence with only the moans of the dying breaking it.

This group wasn't even a challenge. They were what Jake Collins commonly referred to as REMFs or rear echelon mother fuckers. The highly skilled warriors were already slaughtered inside Hogwarts or are outside the castle on the war barges, probably giving Dumbledore and Snape fits. Those left are the ones that aren't big enough or deadly enough to be in the first wave.

Now it's time to break out the muggle firepower and give your assault group a rest. The vanishing closet is only so big, so the crates come through and have the reduction charms removed.

Kwan couldn't get much on short notice and let you know how much he didn't appreciate his "stash" being destroyed back at Riddle's cave. There's no Mossberg this time, so you have to settle for a charmed Remington pump action. The next wave of goblins will be bringing crossbows to a gunfight. It won't go well ... for them.

Hack is close. You can feel him down there and he knows you're coming.

"Rearguard," Kwan orders. "Go seal the tunnel leading down to here and then fortify this position." Four wizards don't make much of a rearguard,

but you can't really spare any more and have any chance of success. Still, they carry two charmed M-60 machine guns and float several crates of ammunition with them. The rest of the Mercs and Brazilian Aurors carry either AK-47s or shotguns and seem skeptical. That's probably what made Kwan and Collins such a dangerous tandem. They didn't think twice about using Muggle weapons.

Kwan carries a sniper rifle. It fires a fifty caliber shell. He'd wanted to bring a 40mm grenade launcher, but the possibility of causing a cave in was just too great. The question you're not certain you want answered is whether or not the sabot light armor piercing slug will penetrate a dragon's hide.

There are plenty of things down here more dangerous than a pack of goblins. You watch as some of the Mercs smash vials of dragon repellent on their robes. It's a specialized potion that in theory makes it less likely that a dragon will try to eat you. Clinical trials are favorable, but the results are questionable, mainly because it's tough to tell when a dragon is going to eat something whole or char it to a crisp before consuming. The balm stinks, loses effectiveness in wide open spaces, and offers no flame resistance, but the user can rest assured that if the dragon does indeed eat the burnt cinder of the corpse that it will probably have a bad aftertaste. You're sure that's comforting on some level.

Obviously, you don't have time for that kind of crap, but don't want to irritate the troops with your opinion.

Kwan, on the other hand, has no qualms about that, "Enough foolishness. If I say my pee protects you from dragons would you let me urinate on you? Move! Now!"

The main artery is ahead. This isn't the winding cart paths to the vaults. According to Bill's hand drawn and slightly dated map, those are reachable, adjacent to your position. This is where the goblins move and live. None of the suit wearing, welcome to Gringott's types down here either. You've long since realized that is just a "dog and pony" or is it "worg and firebat" show for the sake of looking less threatening. Down here, it's just a bunch of killers in loincloths, leathers, and furs.

"Watch out!" Bill calls to a Brazilian peacekeeper and yanks him back as you pump a round of buckshot into the area. The goblin wedged into the crack ahead can't get out of the way in time and takes a full broadside. The poisoned knife it carried clatters on the smooth stone of the corridor.

"How did you know?" He asks first in his native tongue and then in English.

"I've spent years in goblin tunnels. They can wedge themselves into narrow cracks everywhere, in the walls or on ledges in the ceiling. Watch for ambushes and don't forget where your bezoars are. They will be using poison."

Something you have no difficulties noticing is the charging footsteps of six trolls supported by a score or so goblins - probably the first guards of any significance that the survivors of the earlier battle could rally. They're the mountain trolls, common to Britain, and slightly taller and stronger than an average jungle troll, but less resistant to magic. And that's where you're going to make them pay.

Your sneer would likely make Snape pleased. Three first year students working with nothing more than what could be found in a water closet took one of them down. You've come a long way since then, and this time there's a bit more than just Hermione and Ron backing you up. The only troll bogeys you'll get on your wand is if their heads explode like a melon and you get some of the backblast. You level the Remington and start firing away.

Honestly, if it was just your twelve gauge, you'd be in trouble, but the sheer volume of gunfire is somewhat deafening even with noise reduction charms on the weapons. The lead troll stumbles in disbelief as buckshot sands away flesh and steel jacketed slugs gouge deeper wounds.

The one behind it dashes the creature to the ground. Directly next to you, a wand fires the killing curse and for a moment, you're shadow is illuminated by that spell. The troll falters, but does not collapse. The curse wasn't thrown with much conviction from a mind controlled Peter Pettigrew. Too bad Diggory wasn't lucky enough to catch Wormtail on an off day.

A couple of other curses impact that troll along with rifle and shotgun fire. That finishes what the traitor started. The fools won't conserve their energy! There's a loud clang and a bolt shatters on Pettigrew's metallic arm that's protecting his emotionless mask of a face and you wonder if the rat could've done that without the influence of Kwan's imperious curse.

The battle cries of the goblins mix with the screams of pain from the trolls and injured goblins, and wizards shouting spells. A bloody and dirt covered troll rises and prepares to throw its spear. Your wand draw is faster and you disintegrate it just after it leaves the creature's hand. It turns to run, but is cut down in a hail of gunfire. Just like that, the second wave is done. The problem is, you know it won't get any easier from here on out. These mercenaries are already burning through the ammo too fast and those uncomfortable with it are already switching back to using magic.

One merc is slouched over on the wall. Kwan pulls him backward only to discover a bolt through the man's eye. Since he's polyjuiced to look like you, it's somewhat disturbing seeing yourself quite dead from a lucky shot.

At the juncture to the main artery, the goblins scatter rather than engage. The distant sounds of gongs and bells ring out, but you've caught them flat footed. Kwan instructs Peter to change into his Animagus form and go down to free your troll friend while ten identical versions of you work to seal this section's main artery. You chip in and help mold the ground into a wall. Goblins from above would have to bring something more substantial than a couple of trolls to dig through it anytime soon and Kwan's illusion placed right in front of it would make them wonder why they weren't making any headway.

You cough and do your best to clear your lungs, realizing that if you're lucky enough to survive all of this, you'll be hacking up black shit for the next few weeks.

Bill and two mercs carry bags of what look like marbles. They toss them down each side tunnel. Each "marble" is a potion filled gelatin ball containing acids and whatever the NEWT level potion students have been brewing these last few weeks. Since goblins typically don't wear any kind of footwear, it should be particularly effective at slowing down anyone trying to out flank the attack.

Tempo. Long battles are all about tempo. The big guns are likely still being roused. You glance at the master strategist and ask, “Kwan? Time for the shields?”

“Yes. We’re approaching their habitats. Conserve your strength and ammunition. Everyone, prepare your shields.” The cavern widens and you see frantic movements ahead as the goblins try to rally their defenses.

They cannot be allowed to slow you down! To reach the area where the Death Eaters and Voldemort are, your group must overrun them in a hurry. That’s where the shields and the other assorted goodies come in handy.

You slide the wooden shield off your back and onto your left arm. It has a dozen one shot fire arrow runes carved into it. You did yours personally and the rest were done by the fifth through seventh year rune students. Bill nods and grabs his runic shield and takes the one from the dead body. With two to three arrows for every rune, it will be like there are a hundred archers here as well. Altogether, you’ll unleash a volley of flaming death that should scatter whatever resistance is up ahead.

Kwan reaches into his bag and pulls out a pair of origami birds and releases them. He points his wand at a ballista being manned by six goblins and the animated constructs fly as fast as real birds sweeping in and exploding. They knock out the heavy weapon before it could line up a shot. With the corridor wide enough that most of the fifteen remaining wizards can walk in a line, you all charge forward until Kwan gives the signal.

Up ahead, you get a good look at a goblin village on the landing. It reminds you of the pictures Lauren Thundercloud had in her room of the cliff dwelling American Indians of the southwest. Structures carved directly into the rock, remind you of jugs from which a steady stream of goblins spill out and flow down the earthen ramp. A stone wall with a pair of wooden gates blocks the corridor leading downward. The wall is equipped with two more ballista crews, but a trio of blasting curses at each turns them into so much rubble and carves large divots out of the protective wall.

A few additional spells are lobbed to further disorganize the few hundred goblins massing there. The gates are in the process of opening and you almost wish Hagrid was here. He’d be chuffed to see that nine headed hydra being led by a giant using a cat o’ nine tails coming up the passageway. Unfortunately, you’re not nearly as pleased to see it or the giant escort.

A goblin general astride what must be Fluffy’s litter-mate is hurriedly preparing his battle lines. Everyone halts about fifty feet out, just at the effective range of their tiny crossbows. The general is caught trying to get his missile troops close enough and organizing a charge.

“First volley, fire!” Kwan commands.

You brace for the release and press your wand into one of the controller runes. Four of the runes activate and a cluster of twelve flaming arrows emerge from the crudely made wooden shield. Immediately, you reposition and wait for Kwan to give the next order. The cave brightens and the shrieks of terror rise to a deafening level.

“Fire second volley!” The next cluster leaves just as the first strikes. The results are devastating. It’s been well established that you don’t like the goblins, but part of you almost pities them. Each wave consists of easily one hundred and fifty arrows. The goblin general is slouched in his saddle while the gravely injured Cerebus crawls away. Those that survived the onslaught are already fleeing. Most run back up the ramp, but some make the fatal mistake of fleeing through the gates only to realize the nine hungry mouths of the hydra are waiting for them.

Kwan assesses the situation. “Save third volley for Hydra. Aim high and blind it or take out a head. Advance! Clear path to the wall. We fight it there. Use rifles to finish goblins.”

You’ve come to know the Hitwizard too well. He’s nervous. Words disappear from his English when he’s being rushed.

The giant driving it forward takes shelter behind the hydra’s mass as you move forward. Yeah, it’s that big. You opt for the shotgun and sweep the area while rushing forward. Some that were “playing dead” find they are no longer playing. Being one of the first to reach the half-open gates you are forced to busy yourself with mopping up the goblin resistance. It’s frustrating to see the amount of exhaustion mirrored in the faces of all your doppelgangers. This is only the beginning and there’s still a long way to go.

Somewhere back at Hogwarts there’s probably a bunch of scared first and second years frantically asking the upper classes what to do if they actually have to fight a goblin today. You’re somewhat jealous. You’d be willing to trade with them right now. The filthy critters are the least of your worries.

“What’s the word, Bill?” You say as he slides up to the other side of the gate and puts his back to the wall. He’s limping and you can see him swallowing a bezoar. He flushes the wound with his wand and then closes it before holstering the wand and gripping his AK-47.

“Effing goblin slashed my leg as I went by.”

“Tough break. Got anything in your bag of tricks for the hydra?”

“I was kind of hoping you’d have taken it out already.” Somehow he manages a grin.

A pair of your duplicates tries throwing blasting curses at it and you watch as they pretty much fizzle against the creature’s thick armored shell. The damage is mostly cosmetic and the ground trembles with each impact. Bill empties a full clip into the advancing mass, but the scales are just too strong. Kwan’s heavy rifle breaks through the hydra’s scales, but don’t seem to do much damage beyond that.

“Well shit!” Bill says, “Might as well be spitting on it. You ready to go all giant jaguar on its arse?”

“I was hoping to save that for later. Seriously Bill, have you taken a good look at how big that thing is? I’d rather take out some of the heads or at least a few eyes first. Conjunctive curses worked well enough for Krum against the dragon in the tournament. I’ll try that while you see if you can hit

an eye or two with your rifle.”

“Aim for the center heads. On three! One. Two. Three.”

Bill hits and a head thrashes in pain. You’re about to cast again when Kwan’s hand on your shoulder stops you. “Let the others do that! Your aim stinks anyway. Help me.”

You aren’t certain what he wants you to do, but he uses a cutter on the ropes lashing the thick wooden poles together and one of them falls to the ground. Two more quick slices and Kwan makes a point at the end. He transfigures the tip into a metal point. It’s a giant metal tipped spear.

“That’d be great if Hack was here and could throw it,” you say.

Kwan laughs and he levitates it, bringing the point around toward the advancing monster. “How strong is stupid kitty cook’s banisher today?”

Second guessing Kwan should be illegal.

“Let’s find out!” Gripping your wand like a cricket bat, you swing it upwards and scream the spell. The giant wooden bolt launches and arcs toward the hydra. The crudely made spear slams into the beast somewhat high, but the point drives into the base of one of the monster’s necks. That head rears back and looses a blood-curdling scream before flopping forward and falling silent.

Encouraged by your success, the rest of your group redoubles their efforts to slow the damn thing down. Golems teaming with boulders coated in sticking charms latch onto the Hydra’s legs, impeding the mighty serpent’s progress.

The Korean is already breaking off the next piece and you call to your cursebreaking buddy, “Bill, do the transfiguration on the tip. We need stronger metal.”

“I’m on it!” Bill says joining your makeshift magical ballista crew.

It’s a good news-bad news deal. As the hydra gets closer, your hastily created giant spears are doing more damage and sinking deeper into the flesh. There are three wedged into the monster’s massive front torso and it screams with every hit. The only problem is that the hydra is still getting closer and its six remaining heads are very angry and still moving.

With your Parseltongue skills, it sounds like someone screaming in a foreign language. Hydras must be closer to snakes than dragons. Maybe if you could speak to it, you could convince it to turn around. Of course if you had a few RPG-7s, you could do the same thing without all the talking.

Since you don’t, you banish the next spear into it and yank one of the growth potions from your belt. Popping the seal you say, “Concentrate your fire on its right side. I’ll try and take it from the left.”

You drop the miscellaneous Muggle and magical gear and shed the dragon armor vest and drink the contents. Snape brewed this draught and you’re curious to see how big it will make your animagus form.

First your vision distorts slightly as you shift into your jaguar. Then you feel the sensation while your flesh expands. You’re just taller than the wall, at perhaps fifteen foot. That puts you roughly level with the hydra’s torso. It still dwarfs you, but you’ve made a living being David and leaving Goliaths in your wake. What’s one more?

Coiling your legs, you leap over the wall and speed toward the monster. Breaking left, you leap onto the flat area where some fleeing goblins scatter away from you. The nearest head is already descending. You leap and get under it, wrapping your entire body around it like one of Mrs. Figg’s cats on Dudley’s leg that time he tried to play kick the cat. With claws digging in and prying scales off of the neck, you rear back and clamp down on the neck. Those poison fangs push and strain and drive into flesh.

Hydras don’t taste like chicken - they remind you of that iguana chili Lone Thundercloud had you make a few times. Except it’s all bloody, raw, and missing a selection of spices. Other than that, it’s not too bad. Who’d have thought? Sadly, it’s too much to hope the thing drops dead from a single poisonous bite, but a glance at all the other irritated heads says that it’s time to go somewhere else. There’s a nice spot on the back that looks hard for all those teeth to get at you and that might slow it down some. Plus if the poison isn’t doing much up here, you should try and bring it closer to the heart.

It tries to buck you, but it’s no match for your agility. The necks are thicker at the base, but the armor plates are only on the underside. Genetics fails the giant reptile in this instance. This area is thick and meaty. You claw and bite, hoping for an artery or something equally damaging.

Two heads dive. You leap off onto the ground and find yourself on the defensive dodging both the heads and the spells from the panicking wizards behind you.

Faster! You need to be faster. There’s just so much of it.

You accelerate this time to the left. A jump up and off the wall of the cavern redirects you toward the creature’s back again. Instinct alone guides you. There is no real plan. A jaguar is the “beast that kills in a single bound,” but the hydra is just too massive for a lone strike. You must attack it again and again until it falls under the weight of the wounds.

Bite, claw, scratch. Leap. Evade! Repeat. Anything to slow it down. Rolling off the monster’s backside you go after the nearest leg. It’s fleshy. You do your best imitation of Dudley and a leg of lamb. It shakes you off and kicks you backward. The blow sends you back into the cave wall and the impact momentarily stuns you. The claws on its foot are dulled by all the walking on stone, but they still break skin. You’re bleeding, but not that bad.

There's a sudden sharp pain on your flank. The giant driving it forward just whipped you! Yowling in pain, you turn on it. Bill and the others will have to handle the great serpent as best they can while you deal with this. The hydra is much bigger, but the giant is on roughly equal footing and he knows it. He slashes with his club at close range. Leaping away from the swing allows it to catch you but not do much damage. The momentum propels you sideways and further to the giant's left. A cloud of dust and pain causes you to sputter and snarl. His only weapon on this side is the whip. You plow into it willing to take the blow of the iron chains on your back in exchange for running him to the ground.

Giants do taste like chicken ... unwashed, decaying chicken that's been rolled around in feces before being served. You gag on the arm he stuffs into your mouth, but keep working the claws on the midsection area. He rolls over on you and it reminds you of the weight of Dudders and all his Harry Hunters on those occasions they caught you.

More pain. You twist and wriggle, releasing the bloody and useless hunk of meat that used to be an arm. The giant flails and you feel his remaining arm fumbling for something on his waist. He's got a knife! Well, considering the relative size of the two of you, it is a knife. Really, it's more like a Scottish Claymore. He rears back and intends to pin you to the ground like a butterfly in someone's collection.

You move faster and use the space created to snap forward and lock your jaws around his neck. There's a squeeze and a snap. Locking eyes with the monster, you watch the life fade from his eyes.

Death is violent, often messy, but it was him or you. Satisfied with the outcome, you roll away and spit the foul tasting, greasy flesh out and hack like a house cat with a hairball. The hydra is still moving, but it has slowed noticeably. It's preoccupied with the tiny morsels of magical flesh and seems to have forgotten you for a second. Your companions have been thinned out a little by the snapping jaws of the remaining heads. It makes you worry about how many fighters Riddle has held in reserve.

Still, you need something to get that awful taste of giant out of your mouth and it looks like a second course of hydra is on the menu.

With a barely audible hiss-like growl and a flick of a bloody tongue, you advance on it from behind.

-x-x-x-x-x-x

"I tell you what, Harry, you sure know how to make one hell of a mess! You'll likely need this," Bill says and tosses you a towel. You finish transforming back and your human form and catch it.

None of the hydra's heads are moving. In reality, only two of them are still attached, but one of the forelegs is still twitching and convulsing. The growth potion lasted three minutes longer than it needed to.

"I'll write on its tombstone and thank it for dinner," you quip and wipe the fluid covering your mouth and cheeks on the towel. It's a gory mess. Being an Animagus isn't always the prettiest thing in the world, but it's pretty damn useful.

"Huh?"

"Never mind," you say and shrug. It sucks when you're the only one who gets the reference. You turn your attention to Kwan as he gets a head count and the results aren't particularly satisfying. Judging from the number of polyjuiced pieces of Harry Potter strewn about, your merry band has lost another four members. The rest of the group looks uncertain if they want to continue. Is that what you really look like when you're indecisive?

One of "you" begins a rather animated conversation in Korean with your favorite hitwizard. He hops up and down and points angrily to the hydra's body.

Bending down, you retrieve your wands, armor, and cursebreaking glasses. Bill shakes his head at the argument taking place and says, "What did they expect? Did they think Gringotts would guard their caverns with a bunch of animated teddy bears? Fortunately, that's their biggest beastie. There're more than enough of us left to stop a dragon or whatever else they can drag out."

"Unless they brought in another one for it to mate with after you quit," you add.

"Ever the optimist, Harry."

"Why are you so happy?"

"Survivor's delirium ... I didn't think we were going to make it there until you pounced on that thing. My life's still flashing in front of my eyes and it's a bloody good show!"

"Great, I'm stuck with the insane Weasley brother. So would you change anything?"

"I'd have taken you under my wing sooner," he says. You were prepared for something involving Fleur and a bunch of edible items and he goes and plays the friendship card on you!

"Since when am I under your wing?"

"The mark of a great teacher is subtleness. Shall we go over there and help Kwan kick a little tail?"

"Nah," you say, "He eats clowns like this for breakfast."

"Yeah, but we need to get moving."

You peer into the dimly lit cavern ahead and the pressure inside your skull is building. Summoning all the pain, frustration, and hatred, you push

back. Two can play at that game. Fumbling in the darkness at your belt, you pop a simple pepper up potion. You need energy, but not too much. There are dozens of draughts out there that are more effective, but you can't cheat the system too much. You'd peak and then crash if the fight goes longer than ten minutes.

Snape taught you too well. How's that for irony?

"No we don't. He's on his way. Kwan! The main event's coming down the passageway. Get a defensive perimeter."

-x-x-x-x-x-x

His Death Eaters come first. They pour out from the darkness at the other end of the cavern and immediately start tossing spells. The distance is a few hundred feet. Instead of engaging at long range, Bill sprays his AK-47, hoping they hadn't bothered to enchant their robes against weapons. At least one didn't and falls screaming. Others join in and the enemy advance stalls behind hastily erected shields. You don't mind at all and are grateful for the brief respite.

Riddle is coming. Any second now, he'll show himself. Every other time, he's been waiting for you at the end of some elaborate trap or ambush and you've had to rely on others or luck to escape. This is different. Now, you've come for him and face him on "neutral" ground.

Kwan takes a moment to reload the powerful sniper rifle and finish the one Bill injured. There's a flare from the Death Eater's shield as it collapses under the raw power of a fifty caliber round.

Cold and calculating, he lines up a second shot and another Death Eater dies. You toy with the idea of picking up the Remington, but the shotgun's limited range wouldn't be able to break through their defenses from this distance. Instead, you focus on protecting Kwan and the few remaining assault rifles from the spells being hurled in their direction.

The rest period comes to an abrupt halt when a figure steps into the light. His face is even less than human than you remember. The black robes seem to absorb the light. Oblivious to the gunfire, he walks straight ahead, shoulders forward, and wand twitching in agitation. He carries himself with a swagger that reminds you of the days when you had faith in Dumbledore.

"Fools," Voldemort shouts. His voice rises above the loud stuttering of the rifles. "You cower from Muggle toys! Rise and fight or be found unworthy."

Kwan empties a full magazine from his weapon. The shells are vanished before they ever reach him. You had hoped it might be that easy, but it's not meant to be.

"We meet again, Harry Potter! So eager to die?" Voldemort's voice comes from every direction at once. You have to admit that it's a nifty little trick. "And you're so thoughtful. How nice of you to bring me a gift. I get to kill you over and over again, or do you wish to continue pretending to be my old friend from South America."

Well at least he isn't intimidated by you. Speaking of Veras Chilotha, you switch your holly wand out for the one you took from the spirit possessing Collins' body. You have no time for the brother wand effect.

This is it, Potter! Now or never. The voice in your head is a blend of Kwan and Snape ... doubly frightening.

You hold fire for a moment and watch him strike down one of your dopplegangers and pounce when you have an opening. Throwing caution to the wind, you unleash Collins' Tex-Mex butchering curse, which leads into your "kitchen sink" spellchain. It's made up of a German favored blasting curse, a bone exploder some craftsman in the underbelly of Singapore created, African and Greek piercers, and topped off with a good old fashioned Norwegian ice spear. The solid mass right at the end can often get through a weakened mage shield.

He's too quick! Riddle frustrates you by pulling a boulder out of thin air and banishing it into the "teeth" of your onslaught. The jagged column of ice splatters ineffectively on the pock-marked stone. Kwan uses a banisher like a pool cue and sends the rock careening away.

Like you are really going to fight him alone! No bloody way in hell! The fight back at the cave was just a quick exchange of spells. This time, it's going to be a slugfest.

All around you, spellfire lights up the cavern. The growls of transfigured beasts blend in with the screams and the explosions. Its war, stripped bare of the make believe glamour children envision when they get their first wands.

Trusting Kwan with your defense, you keep casting. There's a familiar shiver of fear running down your spine, but you fight through it. That fear can actually be a good thing. Bill calls it "Goldilocks" - as in "just the right amount of terror to help you in a fight." It sharpens your senses, reminds you that you are mortal, and sends jolts of adrenaline coursing through your tired body.

You fought Chilotha to a standstill, but it was really Kwan that killed him. Chilotha was just a shadow of Riddle's strength. Even so, you have certain advantages. The Dark Lord is used to cowering opponents with both his magic and the terror generated by his reputation. Against a determined opponent, like yourself or Dumbledore, he can only rely on his skill. By refusing to collapse in front of him, you've taken away half his arsenal.

Also, you know he doesn't fight wizards of your caliber all the time. If the rumors are to be believed, the toughest opponent he's had to face down since the debacle at the Ministry last spring was Amelia Bones. In contrast, you've been in far too many life and death situations since then.

With that knowledge comes confidence. He's just started fighting while you've been fighting for the last eight months! There's something to be said for having momentum ... and a hitwizard. That helps too.

Kwan disrupts the trio of bone breakers Riddle answers with as you switch to a blasting curse heavy spellchain. It's a dance of destruction. Wait

for the tempo change. Here it comes ... now!

Just like you've practiced a million times in the Room of Requirement, you hit the fourth spell in this chain and switch to defending as Kwan goes on the offensive with his "exotic" chain. Riddle's repertoire is substantially better than yours, but Kwan likely has a few that even he has never seen before. You have the power, he the skill. Making your enemy adjust to the changing styles keeps him off balance.

There's a sudden jolt of agony and your shield buckles. It allows part of a wounding curse to get through, digging a furrow into your dragon hide vest and almost breaking skin. Hack! What are they doing to you? Riddle doesn't fight fair anymore than you do.

Brushing aside Kwan's efforts, Riddle's next spell rips a massive stalagmite from the ground and sends it like a missile, forcing the both of you switch to defensive to destroy it. The dust burns. Instinct kicks in and you counter with a gale force wind driving the cloud of Voldemort transfigured acid away. Kwan sprays you with water and then douses himself while you somehow find the strength and focus to conjure the same solid shield Riddle was forced into using against Dumbledore back in the Ministry. Not one, but two lethal curses batter the barrier.

"Crucio!" A third voice joins the fray. Fortunately, it's Bill. His Unforgiveable isn't nearly as powerful as Kwan's, but it drives the vile wizard back and buys you even more time to regroup. The bonus is he'll be able to tell Fleur that he managed to get the Dark Lord with an Unforgiveable ... assuming he lives.

Take a chance! You throw the Killing Curse. The hairs on your skin itch with the perverse energy. Just wide left, but Kwan's Piercing curse draws blood. Arrogant berk didn't bother wearing any armor. Riddle's anger fuelled Killing Curse bears down on Bill, but your Banisher tosses your friend roughly aside and out of the path. It's like chess with a five second timer. The only difference is when a piece leaves the board, it's usually because he is dead.

"Do you think you can possibly beat me? Suffer my wrath!" An impossibly thick cloud of darkness forms around him and explodes outward. Jagged swirls of fetid energy lash out. Kwan rolls behind you and raises an earthen shield. Whatever forces Voldemort is playing with saw through it like a knife through bread. For the second time, you find yourself dumping energy into a solid shield that barely holds. Five others including two of his Death Eaters are struck and cut down.

Shit! He's ticked off and he's finally taking you seriously. His display of power lasts for a full ten seconds. Your shield is cracked and pitted, but still in one piece. Riddle's close now. Less than thirty feet separate the two of you.

"Any ideas, Kwan?"

"Yes. Kill him!"

"That's all you got?" You don't bother to hide your disbelief.

He coughs and spits. "Fate made you his nemesis. Master your fate!"

Kwan has a way with words. You admire that. Exactly how you are supposed to execute this plan remains to be seen. Funneling your rage into your own powerful strike, you conjure the largest fire whip you've ever made. The color is the same deep emerald of your eyes. "Fine, let's end this!"

Leaping forward, you slash overhand. His gust of wind splits your whip momentarily, sending two streams of green fire around him. Maintaining your focus and bending the forces of magic to fit yours, the whip shortens and sprouts a third tendril. Instead of a bullwhip, you're wielding a cat o' nine tails. One of the strands of energy singes Riddle's leg as he rolls out of the way.

You keep up the pressure, but are forced to dodge an errant curse from one of the other fights. It buys the Dark Lord enough time to Transfigure the earthen ground into a huge sword which he surrounds with deadly black flames.

"Pay attention, Potter! This is how you play with fire."

He thrusts forward as you sidestep and swing. Your fire whip wraps around the lower portion of his massive weapon and a sharp pain sends you to your knees. It's like you're being slowly electrocuted. There's a piercing scream that fills the cavern with a deafening noise. Forcing an eye open, you at least want to see Riddle's final strike coming.

It isn't. Voldemort is as bad off as you are. Both of your energies are being siphoned into the swirling mass of green and black energy where the whip met the sword. The pain grows. It's like both of you are under the effects of the Cruciatus Curse, but you can't let go of the wand.

Riddle's sword starts to shudder and crack from the inside. There's a darkness that seems to be swallowing it. There's something coming out of there.

"Potter!" Riddle's barely audible scream reaches you. It pulls your attention away from whatever is happening.

There's a stab of pain, which is a pinprick compared to everything else. It's a weak thrust of Legilimency. Your barely-existent Occlumency shield tries and fails to stop it.

"The wand boy! What wand are you using?" Riddle doesn't even bother to hide his panic.

"Chilotha's."

"Fool! You've doomed us both! The whole world!"

You're about to ask why when the mental connection breaks and the cavern is filled with a terrifying, but familiar sound. This one you know all too well. You hoped you'd never hear it again.

"FREEDOM! At last! FREEDOM!"

-x-x-x-x-x-x

It's back! You try to deny what your eyes are seeing and pray that this is just some kind of mental torture Riddle is using, but the bone shivering wave of despair that crashes on the shore of your soul doesn't lie.

The rift splits wider as four arms tear reality asunder and the stuff of nightmares steps through.

"I told you we'd meet again, whelp," the Daemon bares its fangs at you, before turning to Riddle. *"And you, you've come so far on the path to immortality, following the breadcrumbs I kept leaving for you. How does it feel to be used? Tell me lesser being ... or not. You'll die soon enough. I just need you two fools to power my rift. This time, I've brought my army!"*

You'd always wondered what was in the core of Chloth's wand. Now you know. You convulse as each new horrible daemon emerges from the rift, but can't let go of the wand. The others, even the Death Eaters pit their magic against the new arrivals.

They don't stand a chance in hell.

"Kwan!" You scream. "Kill me!"

The Korean pauses for a moment and then swiftly nods. Energy streaks from his wand and you prepare to welcome the release, but the bulk of the greater Daemon shields you.

"That never works, child. In all the realities I've seen, he never manages to," it chides you. The foul breath makes you gasp.

Two other hideous monstrosities form a protective ring around Riddle, as the beast that's played the two of you for fools, pounces on Kwan. The light of spellfire silhouettes the daemon, for a second but then vanishes and you know your friend is gone.

Anger only fuels your magic and opens the breach in reality wider. It laughs. You can't see anyone else other than Riddle. The world is ending and the only thing you can see is that ugly bastard! At least he's in as much pain as you are. The only place that doesn't seem to be on fire is that scar Fawkes left on your shoulder.

Fawkes?

Fawkes!

Damn it! You struggle to raise the holly wand and catch Voldemort's eyes again. "Look at me!" You scream. The one time you need his help! It figures.

Finally, he sees you. He nods with his eyes and starts fishing for his yew wand. It takes everything you have to cast probably the feeblest banisher you've ever seen. It arcs toward a shield so pathetic, Voldemort would likely Obliviate it from the memories of any who'd seen it.

A faint light grows in front of the darkness and the song of the phoenix begins to build. You feel like you're being drawn and quartered. The sound grows and reaches a crescendo, forcing "four arms" to turn.

The new rift explodes in a geyser of dozens of fire birds. Their warbling screams fill the space and they descend on the daemons. It's the most beautiful and terrifying scene ever imagined.

"NO! I won't let you stop me." The mastermind howls, rising above the din. A very familiar creature flashes in front of it and screeches. Maybe the big nasty monster isn't the only one that is "all seeing."

It rounds on you and backhands you into the demonic rift. You fly through the air and crash off the body of a daemon. The tether binding you to Riddle yanks him through as well. There's a joke about telling him to "go to hell" that doesn't seem so funny now.

The connection finally breaks and you're free again ... in the middle of a horde of daemons. Instinctively, you cast a patronus and then another. The phantom jaguars force them back, but already the rift is beginning to close. A few of the phoenixes or is it phoenixi come through and assault the minions of evil. Whoever said their enemies are big serpents got it wrong.

"Potter! I need a wand."

"Fuck off!" You managed to keep hold of your wands, but Riddle did not. It sucks to be him right about now.

"If we can't get out of here, we both die!"

"I don't think even a horcrux can get you out of this, Tom."

"We're the only ones that can stop the daemons on the other side. Don't be a fool, Potter. There won't be a world left!" He steps toward you, but you level Chloth's wand at him.

Casting another patronus, you consider the options. If it wasn't for the prospect of the world being destroyed, you could live with that. You were

already prepared to die, but taking the rest of the planet with you doesn't seem worth it.

"An oath Riddle. You leave England and never return if we survive this and stay out of South America while you're at it." Let the rest of the world deal with his stupidity.

"Very well, Potter. I accept your terms."

You flip him Chlotho's wand and summon another protective patronus to circle around you. Riddle adds his own. Wondering what constitutes a happy memory for Voldemort disturbs you to no end. The "ground," if that's what you can call it, starts to shake and you know that something big is coming. It looks like another greater daemon.

Riddle is casting up a storm trying to reach the shrinking rift. You probably can't even fit through now.

"Potter! Go ahead and use the Killing Curse."

"It doesn't stop them. The patronus can keep them back."

"On me, idiot! Use it on me."

Ignoring the irony, you ask, "Why?"

"Because, my wraith form can make it through and I have your blood anchor on the other side. I can make a new body. It's the only way. Strike me down before the portal closes for good."

If you weren't about to die, you'd find this ludicrous. Prophecies are never cut and dry, are they?

"Remember your oath. *Avada Kedarva!*" His body drops to the ground, soul separated from his carcass.

Killing Voldemort. It should be the highlight of your day, but it's not. You're going to die. He's going to get resurrected again. How's that fair?

You cast another patronus, but the presence of the greater Daemon draws the ethereal jaguar like a moth to a flame. The creature has a serpent's head and two massive snakes for arms. The jaguar leaps at the thing and is ripped to shreds. That's not good. The others advance on you.

Riddle's ghost rises again and starts toward the small hole back to your reality, but one of the things head snaps out and catches his spirit with its mouth. His screams echo through your soul. It couldn't happen to a more deserving person. Prophecy fulfilled. Fat lot of good it seems to be doing you at the moment. You duck and dodge as the stuff of madness draws closer. The end is near.

You don't have much in the way of magic left and all your growth potions are back in Gringotts, but you cast one final patronus and shift into your jaguar form. Positive energy surrounds you. Sadly, the only thing you're positive about is that you're going to die.

But you'll go down swinging. Someone else will have to stop old "four arms." It's Fawkes and company's problem now. You've done as much as you can.

-x-x-x-x-x-x

Pain. Numbing pain, but only in the upper half of the body. You can't feel your back legs anymore. The serpent mouth on the thing's left arm tosses your body up in the air. The main mouth opens impossibly wide. It is going to swallow you whole! There's no chance your spirit will make it back through that tiny sliver separating the realms.

You hope it chokes on you as you try to come up with something appropriate to be your last living thought.

Several flashes of light appear. What was it again that you are supposed to do? Go in to the light? Stay away?

Doesn't matter.

You thud onto the ground. What happened to being swallowed? The one eye that can focus makes out a phoenix wreathed in blue flame. The other ones that swooped in are trying to drive the greater daemon back. The firebird looks at you and raises a clawed talon. With a quick motion that you can barely follow, it slashes your throat.

Death is difficult to describe. There's a rising sensation. You seem to have a wraith form ... just like Riddle. Is that a good or bad thing? The fact that he was ripped in two and devoured by that abomination over there a few seconds ago doesn't bode well. *Better get a move on!*

The phoenix that saved you, only to kill you, caws to get your attention. It gestures toward the tiny opening, no bigger than a teacup. Guess it was really doing you a favor.

Yeah, that beats being consumed in what passes for hell these days. You try and float in that direction and gather what speed you can.

The rest of the fire birds break off their attack and are making tracks for the exit. A couple of them have been reduced to their little "chickadee" form. They easily pop through the opening. Pink, Green, and Blue squeeze through leaving a slot open for you.

Just as you start through, something grabs your spectral foot and starts reeling you back. It's not the Greater Daemon, just something that looks like a dementor on steroids. Your fingers swipe at the rift in vain. You're not going to make it this time. *Shit!*

Writing off the last hope you have, you turn to face the creature and stare into the abyss and the thing's hood. It explodes in a burst of flames and you're free. You struggle for the opening and look back when your vision clears. Your savior is Fawkes.

What the hell? Or is that "what the hell?" It hates you.

Fawkes screeches at you. The meaning is clear. "Go!"

Squirming through the last bits of the rift, you escape with no time to spare. It finally all makes sense. If Fawkes and the others of its kind can see the future, it knew what it would have to do to allow your spirit to escape. No wonder it was so hostile to you! It's going to spend eternity fighting and dying in hell, just to save your sorry arse ... or at least your sorry ghost's arse.

The cavern looks a bit different than last you saw it, bodies are everywhere and not just humans either. Unlike the ones that followed you into the rift, the other phoenixes are employing a different strategy. They keep teleporting other things in to fight the five or so daemons that remain.

"Impossible!" Four arms bellows as it eviscerates a sword-wielding centaur. You've been spotted. It lumbers forward to finish off your immortal soul, but in a flash ten arcomantulas and a rather familiar-looking giant bar its way. The blue phoenix digs into your shoulder before you can see what fate has in store for Grawp and Aragog's children. The immortal avian tugs you further into the tunnels. You aren't certain what it's doing until you see a metal door from what looks like a large vault. It releases you. You drift through it and discover what is behind "door number one."

There's an unconscious Narcissa Malfoy on the ground, a very nervous Peter Pettigrew, eyeing a very angry troll named Hack. There are tables, bookshelves, and all sorts of items strewn about. Two things catch your eye. The first must be Helga Hufflepuff's cup ... Riddle's final horcrux. It's the final piece of his soul, floundering like a chicken with its head cut off. The second is the blood anchor bobbing in a cauldron. Both are calling out to you.

Obviously, fate isn't done with you yet.

Pettigrew dips the cup into the brine inside the cauldron while you fight the inexorable pull toward the founder's artifact. You stop trying to break free and are drawn into the vortex. Somehow you know that the cup is being pressed to that nasty thing you and Bill concocted. It was only meant to be a proxy for charging Hogwarts' wards.

The part of you and the remnants of whatever is left of Riddle slide down the thing's throat. The experience is surprisingly painless, but maxes out on the disgustingly creepy scale. Eyes open. Everything's a blur and you don't really have ears, but you can and do scream.

This idiotic plan hinges on a sycophant of an Animagus and a troll. Did Riddle actually think this one through? At least Pettigrew has done this before and probably still owes you a debt. The sleeping Narcissa is hauled up by Hack. Peter slices her arm open and collects the blood in the cup. You gag as the rim is pressed to your lips. Will that make you a closer relative to Draco than you already are? That's unnerving. The liquid with a significant magical chaser rushes down into your throat. The fleshy blob that is Peter gestures to the larger green blob who is Hack. The trolls saw a large finger off and drops it into the cauldron.

For a second, nothing happens and you think you're either going to die like this or be the "freak" Vernon always thought you'd be.

That passes and instead you get to experience sixteen and a half years of growth in the span of ten seconds. Strangely enough, it's not the most painful experience in the world ... definitely a distant second to the Cruciatus curse, but it's no stroll in the park either.

Hearing develops as the swirling frothing vortex roars around you. If Narcissa were awake, would she be praying for it to fail as you did back in the graveyard? Fate must also have an odd sense of humor. An arm you've never used steadies your convulsing body on the rim. Legs that have never stood touch the bottom and push upright.

Hack's arm wraps around you and gently pulls you out of the cauldron. He sets you on the ground and supports your weight for a moment, while you "find" your legs.

"Harry?" Peter asks. He seems uncertain. You're more than a bit confused as well.

Dry cracked lips part. You swallow a couple of times to try and get the taste of unsavory magic out of your mouth. It doesn't work. There's a certain symmetry in your words.

"Robe me, Wormtail."

Hack thwacks you on the back, almost sending you to the ground. "Hack miss puny Harry."

"Yeah, I missed you too buddy," you say when Peter helps you into some rather dull-looking black robes. Riddle has ... had no taste.

Looking at the cup, you say, "I thought it was glowing?"

"It was," Peter answers. He waves his wand over it. "Nothing. Nothing at all. It's just a cup now. That's not all Harry, your scar ... it's gone."

"Really?" Tracing your finger across your forehead, you find nothing, just smooth, impossibly soft skin. Hufflepuff's cup was rumored to have incredible healing abilities. Some say that Galahad found this rather than the Holy Grail.

"How do you feel?"

His question catches you by surprise. After everything you've been through, you should be ready to crawl under a rock and not emerge for a few weeks. You don't feel that way. It's not even close. No connection to the Dark Lord and no scar. All things considered, and that's saying a lot, you

feel pretty good. Of course, there's a chance that you're infused with part of Riddle's power and that of Hufflepuff's cup.

It makes you wonder if this is a permanent increase or something that's going to wear off, which brings you back to the reality of the situation. Between you and the exit are several pissed off lesser daemons and their big, bad boss. The grand invasion it had planned isn't quite as grand as foreseen. Somehow you doubt Fawkes' pals brought you down here to be resurrected just so they can give you a quick lift to the surface. You're just not that lucky.

"I need a wand."

Pettigrew coughs. The spasm lasts for several seconds. When it passes, he gestures to the table and says, "The master was prepared."

"You're being rather helpful now that Riddle is dead," you say. There's nothing like impending death to bring out the "best" in a person. The wand was probably a close match for Voldemort, so it's a passable fit for you.

"I doubt anything I do now will atone for my actions, but I'll at least be able to say I tried. The troll's club is in the trunk over there."

Hack grins and rips the lid off the magical container. At least twenty items spill out and fill the room. He pulls the large daemonbone club out of the mix.

"The creature that gave up that bone last time is out there, buddy."

"Hack can give this back to him then," the troll answers slowly tapping it against the palm of one hand. "Hack smash heads now."

"Sounds good to me. Pettigrew, you can stay here with Malfoy if you want." Honestly, he'd probably just get in the way.

The disheveled Animagus gathers himself and says, "She'll be fine here. I think I'd rather come with you and see this to the end."

In a day full of surprises, a rare Gryffindor streak rearing its head inside Peter Pettigrew is the latest.

"What the hell ... why not? A patronus is your best weapon against daemons. Cast it as many times as you can."

Peter shakes his head and says, "I never learned that spell."

"Oh," you reply. "Not much to do about it now. Just throw whatever you're comfortable with, but don't expect it to be that effective." Looking down at that crazy bint, Narcissa Malfoy, you truss her up.

Opening the metal door protecting the converted vault, you find the blue phoenix glaring at you. It caws as if to ask if you're done fooling around.

"Let's go send that Daemon back where it came from."

Turn Me Loose: A Harry Potter Adventure Turn Me Loose

Chapter 16 – Turn Me Loose

Amazingly enough you're alive, again. Kwan's Imperious Curse made it possible. Without it, Peter would have never overcome Narcissa and freed Hack. The troll recognized your spirit coming back out of the void and that allowed Wormtail to pay off his debt in a rather spectacular fashion.

If you read these events in a book, you'd never believe it.

Stepping out of the modified vault that Riddle was using as his command center, you take a brief moment to reflect on your situation. Riddle's finally gone, except for that little bit that's still inside you. If you had more time to think about things, you'd probably be worried. Coming back from the dead and the Daemons between you and the exit kind of trumps that.

It's not like you're going to go off on a killing spree and set yourself up as a Dark Lord surrounded by minions.

"Hack ready to crush skulls, puny Harry." Your troll says. The dying rat next to him nods in ascent. It's time to stop that hellspawn that masterminded all this. Kwan is dead. Bill likely is as well. Hell, you were too until a couple of minutes ago. Fawkes gets to spend the rest of eternity trapped in another dimension dying on a regular basis. That Daemon is going to go screaming back to where it came from!

Okay maybe you do have "minions" of a kind and there's a whole bunch of things needing to be killed. That's just a coincidence.

"Hello?" A faint voice cries. "Did someone say Harry? As in Harry Potter?"

You recognize that voice. In all the chaos and confusion, you'd forgotten that he might be here as well.

Walking around the corner you find him, floating in a metal cage, barely clothed, and with several parts of his body transfigured into things to degrade and humiliate him. Riddle's obviously ordered him kept alive, but didn't mind if his followers amused themselves. It's going to take awhile to reverse some of the transfigurations. The elephant ears are a nice touch. Most of his face is recognizable, but the rest isn't.

"Dudley." You almost call him "Dumbo," but choose not to.

"Harry," he replies. "Get me down!"

"You actually might be safer up there."

"Yeah right," he scoffs. "What do you want me to do, beg or something?"

"No. I'm serious. You know those wizards who did this to you. They're all dead and I've got to go fight the thing that killed them, before it destroys the world."

Dudley looks unimpressed. "You're the world's last hope. You're a tosser!"

You vanish the cage and cast a cushioning charm, while enjoying his terrified scream.

"Oi! Why'd you do that, you bloody freak? I hate you and all your effing, bloody magic!"

Considering what Dudders currently resembles, it is tempting to point out the obvious. You wonder if the impulse might be inspired by some of the Riddle fragments taking up residence inside this new body. The memory of the deformed Petunia begging you to save him overrules whatever you might want to do. In all likelihood, Vernon is dead as well and your cousin is an orphan. He's lashing out at you because he doesn't want to admit it.

"Just let it go, Dudley. Stay here. If I don't come back for you in one hour, I'm not coming back and you're on your own. C'mon guys, let's go."

"You can't just leave me here!"

Ignoring his protests, you gesture back at the way you came and say, "If you come with me, I guarantee that you will die. If you go inside that vault over there, you can hang out with the tied up, freaky bint with large breasts. She'll be out for awhile, so have a blast."

Maybe you do have a "new" cruel streak in you. Considering Narcissa probably had a hand in what happened to Dudders and was the one torturing Hack, you're probably cashing out her karma debt.

"You gotta fix me!"

"I will when I come back. If I don't, we're all going to die. For both our sakes, I hope I see you again."

-x-x-x-x-x-x

The stench of death and decay is the first thing you notice. It wafts down the passageway like a warning to flee while you still have a chance. Gripping the wand in your hand tightly, you press onward.

Clarity. Thundercloud preached that life was all about clarity. You always thought it was about making peace with the animal inside of you. Finally, you get it. He really wanted you to make peace with every aspect of your being.

You're not, but you've never been closer than this moment.

Self-reliance. It was always Kwan's mantra. He never expected life to care one iota about him. His lessons taught you that if you want something done you have to stand up and do it. Was he a good man? No, he was a great man. Not all legends hide behind facades like Dumbledore. Your friend was a hitwizard and never once apologized for who he was or the things he did. He didn't go out of his way to kill, but didn't shy away from it, either. Kwan deserved a better death than being mauled by a Greater Daemon.

You will either avenge him or die trying.

Courage. Bill Weasley showed you how to face adversity with a smile. Before the journey to Brazil, you didn't know him that well. He helped you when no one else could or would. And he did it with that grin on his face that said, "I love every second of my life." He knew he wasn't the best in a duel, yet he stood by your side in the face of unimaginable horror.

You will show no fear because of him.

The Daemon made the mistake of telling you in that pensieve memory that it didn't kill Bill or Kwan in the lost city because the anger would fuel your magic. It's time to make certain that prophecy comes true.

One of the lesser daemons stumbles out into the tunnel, chased by the screeches of a duo of phoenixes working in tandem with the giant spiders. One of the eight legged monstrosities is latched onto the creature's ape head like some oversized tick. The lesser daemon's thick hide is peppered with arrows and it is bleeding from multiple places.

Your blasting curse catches the lesser daemon in the gut. It causes only as much damage as a normal cutting curse would on a regular opponent, but it draws blood. The abomination screams and stumbles as it rips the spider from its neck and dashes it against the side of the cave.

The arachnid dies in a bloody smear. The monster starts toward you, but something large intercepts it.

"Hack kill now!" It's not the most original battle cry, but what it lacks in originality, it makes up for in execution. Your friend grows to his maximum size and he uses his free arm to stiff arm the daemon.

With an overhand smash, the club in your troll's hands delivers a crushing blow that sends the daemon reeling. Made from the bones of its overlord, the club isn't affected by the foul magic protecting the beast from regular damage.

Capitalizing on the opening, you summon your jaguar patronus. It burns so brightly that you have a hard time looking at it. The ethereal missile shoots through Hack's legs as the troll cocks his arm for another blow. It strikes the monster in the chest, causing the daemon to writhe in pain.

Hack's spiked club lands directly in that searing mass of energy and drives that force into the beast. Bones break and the enemy collapses. The club smashes into it twice more. Hack stops when the mangled simian face is twisted over the creature's right shoulder at an odd angle.

Four arms won't be this easy. The ape was already gravely injured by the allies of the phoenixes. You know that and fight off the feelings of overconfidence. Even so, it only required two spells from you.

To his credit, Pettigrew is still here. His wand dangles from a limp hand at the sight of the scene in front of him. "Pull it together, Wormtail. This is only the appetizer. The main course is just ahead."

You enter the cave from the same vantage point Voldemort used less than an hour ago. The pair of Death Eaters Kwan shot are the first of many bodies strewn about like a kicked over bucket of toy soldiers. There are centaurs, unicorns, giants, trolls, and countless others dead or dying. The scene is death and chaos personified. Three lesser daemons surround their master pushing their opponents back up the goblin ramp or to the walls of the cave. They're buying four arms space to wrestle with a medium-sized dragon. The fight rolls them across the carcass of the dead hydra.

Tiny puffs of flame appear for seconds at a time on the overlord's skin. The phoenixes are conducting hit and run attacks. Their best efforts are akin to stings from insects.

Swallowing hard, you recognize the species as a Norwegian Ridgeback and wonder if ...

"I was beginning to fear you wouldn't come," a voice breaks your momentary confusion and you're drawn to the source. Firenze nocks another arrow on his great bow and says, "Do you hear the universe crying out for champions?"

You can only nod, swinging your wand and gesturing to the battle in front of you. Magic flows from the core of your being, up and out the trembling wand. At first nothing happens and you fear that the charm you cast was too ambitious.

One of the dead hydra's heads rises. It clamps down on the leg of the Greater Daemon before falling limp a second later because of the accursed monster's magic resistance. A chunk of "flesh" dangles from the back of Four Arms' calf and the beast falters, losing the grip on the Ridgeback's

snout.

Instinctively, the dragon spews a jet of fire into the Daemon's face. To something that thrives in the pits of Hell, it's nothing more than warm wind and some bad breath. It throttles the dragon like a bad parent would a child and tosses it aside. Your first jaguar patronus pounces on the Daemon's back. Peter's killing curse hits as well and is no more than a shove, but it's something.

"Aim for where the jaguar strikes," you tell the centaur. "Hack, stick close to me. It'll be coming for us. We'll take it together."

A second time you try to charm one of the dead hydra's heads, but it must have seen it coming and smacks it aside.

Is it just your imagination or does it look uncertain? Good. It can join the club. You've been uncertain going on just a bit over sixteen years. You summon chunks of the goblin wall from behind the abomination pelting it with rocks. A flash of fire appears next to you and another centaur stumbles out of it. Firenze barks instructions to him, while you send additional patroni at Four Arms. It's the best form of direct magic you have at your disposal. There're some happy memories you intend to make when this damn thing is gone!

Your enemy breaks into a run. It leaps around the rest of the dead hydra, but is close enough to the carcass of the giant you killed during that battle. A quick charm on the dead giant's arm and the limb snaps out and grabs the leg, making the Daemon stumble.

Peter's spells continue to fizzle against it and your magic isn't doing nearly enough. *Stand and fight or run for it?*

If you only had a growth potion remaining, you could try to physically take the Daemon. Even then, things would be dicey. You need to be like the phoenixes, striking and then evading. Of course, all the anti-apparition wards the goblins had down here have been sucked dry. You can "stick and move."

"This won't work. Hack! Back into the corridor, shrink and stay out of its way! Wait for my signal. First we take out the other Daemons. Peter! Apparate to the wall over there."

You concentrate. With the magic dampening nature of your enemy, it's like squeezing yourself through mud, but you pop into existence a short distance from the injured Ridgeback. It's a numbers game. You can get reinforcements. It can't. Peter almost knocks you over. Propping him up, you gesture to the back of the nearest lesser Daemon. The monster wears a boar's head on top of a giant's body. You switch from happy thoughts to burning hatred and two killing curses slam into "Piggy's" back. The force drives it to the ground.

A trio of unicorns take that opportunity and charge the fallen monster. Their horns shine with a fearsome light. Centaur lancers join them, jumping onto the back and ramming long spears into the monster.

A second apparition and you land right next to the struggling abomination. Just like the giant in Russia, you jam your wand into the monster's ear and unleash a blasting curse.

The Daemon has some kind of seizure. It bucks the centaurs on its back and tries to rise, but it collapses and dies.

Four arms spots you and changes direction. Clawed hands scoop up rocks and dead bodies. It flings them in your direction. You disappear and put the injured Ridgeback between you and the Greater Daemon.

Slinging another patronus at your foe, you start to pat yourself on your back. It'll have to come through the angry dragon to get to you. That smugness disappears when the dragon raises its head and takes a big breath. Shit! Isn't it supposed to be on your side?

Peter, following you around like a lost puppy, appears just as you apparate away. The fire catches him head on. He doesn't even have time to scream. You drop to one knee where you and the assault team entered the cavern. Three apparitions in less than a minute and all the other lethal magic take their toll. There's another puff of smoke next to you and a figure appears.

It's Dumbledore! No! Yes. It is, but it's Aberforth. In the low light and the confusion you almost thought he was the bastard of Hogwarts. You'll settle for the bastard of Hogsmeade.

"Thanks for coming!"

"Bloody hell!" the old man exclaims. "I had a bad feeling about this."

"Yeah tell me about it," you answer. "I've already died once today."

That stops the old man in his tracks. "What?"

"Never mind, we need to take out the other two lessers before we tackle the Greater. The phoenixes are interfering with the Greater's foresight. Let's take the one on the right. Ready?"

You don't bother waiting for his answer and disappear. It's has a spider's head on a bull's body and is oblivious to the numerous wounds on it. Instead it uses a pair of mandibles to scoop up a centaur and crush it.

Strangely, the centaur doesn't scream. It crumbles like it's been turned to ... stone. You realize the rubble around you once formed living, breathing things. The Daemon takes notice of Aberforth, who is already cursing the beast and exhales.

With lightning fast wandwork, you vanish the cloud of death coming out of the horrific mouth. "Gorgon!" You scream. Dumbledore nods and drives an ice spear into the gaping maw while you follow it with a blinding curse aimed at all the eyes.

It grinds away on the rapidly disintegrating ice spear and flails about confused. You send all manner of curses into its flank trying to do as much damage as possible before it regains sight. Aberforth does something you hadn't even considered. He transfigures the floor of the cave under the daemon into mud. The beast sinks a few feet before the anti-magic field takes hold locking the two front legs in place. He apparates to the back and repeats the process, effectively imprisoning the Gorgon.

"We'll come back for this one later, boy!"

Yeah, the phoenixes brought the right Dumbledore.

A sharp sense of panic and pain crosses your mind. Four Arms has Hack cornered and your troll has no choice but to fight.

"Take the last lesser. I've got to help my friend."

Hack is holding his own, but the Daemon is larger and has a two arm advantage. They're wrestling over the Daemonbone club. Four Arms yanks with inhuman strength. Hack responds by letting go of the club. The move leaves the Daemon off balance and Hack plows into it. They both fall and the troll delivers three hard punches before he is tossed away. You pop in on the other side and try for the blasting curse to the ear canal, but it twists toward you. The curse slams into the side of the head leaving a mark.

You try to apparate away, but you can't. The beast's field locks you in place worse than the gorgon you just faced. The clawed hand reaches out for you, but something jerks you backward.

The overpowered summoning charm feels like it damn near popped your shoulder out of its socket. You turn to see your savior and find a grim faced Bill Weasley. He grabs you and side along apparates with you to the other side of the cave.

"You're alive!"

"You should talk, Harry! I just changed into a Niffler and hid. You got tossed into a dimensional portal. I thought you were a goner," he answers.

"Long story, mate. Let's finish this damn thing."

"Lead it over there," Bill says.

"What's there?"

"The goblin's fresh water supply. It's not exactly consecrated, but it'll do. The stuff Fleur dug up on Daemons says running water can injure them."

"Right then," you quip. "I always wanted to be a fireman." A portion of the cavern falls on the final active lesser and you wonder whether Aberforth got out alive.

You apparate again and hit the Daemon with a patronus to get Four Arm's attention and interrupt the beat down your troll is taking. The spectral jaguar clamps down on one of the things arms and then explodes in a searing eruption of white mist.

"Insect! I'll deal with you in a moment," the Daemon growls. You levitate a fallen Centaur's spear and banish it.

Bill's charmed water spray is about thirty feet short. You add your magic to his efforts and pull it the rest of the way giving your enemy the riot police treatment. The fresh water looks like it is at least hurting the damn thing. Hack manages to brace himself against the side of the cave and deliver a knee strike that pushes the Greater Daemon backwards and escapes.

A battered and bloodied Aberforth appears next to you. He's being supported by none other than Fleur Delacour. He slaps you on the shoulder and takes over the "fire hose."

The French witch's aura is flaring against the field of terror and despair the Greater produces. With a determined look on her face, she unleashes a raven patronus that attacks like a missile.

"Don't let it get too close," you caution her. "You might not be able to apparate away."

"I want to make certain it remembers me," Fleur says. That pensieve memory of the battle in Brazil must have really stuck with her.

She attacks it like a witch gone mad. You add to her fury.

Between the constant flow of water, intermingled with the raven and jaguar patroni, Four Arms is giving ground. You sense the tide turning and the corners of your lip start to twist into a smile. You should know better. If Kwan were still alive, he'd point out what happens when you get cocky.

In this case, the universe offers up a large black cloud entering the cavern from where you'd originally come in. It swallows the dim light present and you feel the unmistakable wave of cold.

The Dementors of Azkaban have come. The level of fear inside the cavern ticks up a notch. The fresh water supply is already starting to ice over.

"Yes," the Greater calls out using its upper left arm to block the fresh water attack. "You are too late. The army I left here now returns. Come to me, my warriors and vanquish my enemies!"

-x-x-x-x-x-x

The Dementors circle the cavern, driving Fleur back toward where Bill is standing. The centaurs are disarmed. Aberforth tries to fight them, but he

too is pushed aside and dragged away. Hack isn't, but at least two dozen bar his path. Strangely enough, they haven't even tried to lay a finger on you. The phoenixes continue to circle depriving your enemy of the ability to see the future. One lands in front of you and hisses at any Dementor that dares approach.

"What treachery is this?" Four Arms bellows. "Consume them!"

The Dementors herd everyone back except for you and the injured Greater Daemon. A lone Dementor remains. You think it might be Scribe from the cave. Between the freezing temperatures and the dust in the air, your lungs are practically on fire.

It gestures to Four Arms and then to you. The Daemon answers it with a hiss. "You will bow before your superior and obey!"

Folding its arms across its chest, the Dementor looks unimpressed ... perhaps even slightly angry.

"Maybe they didn't appreciate you leaving them here," you say trying to buy a little time for a rest. The Dementors know you killed it once before. Maybe some of them are even rooting for you.

Bill shouts and echoes what you are thinking, "They know you beat it and want to see if it is still worthy of their loyalty."

"Fine," the Daemon spits out the word. "I will kill you once and for all and then I will discipline my army."

It's not exactly a fair fight and you had it on the ropes - par for the course you guess. At least it looks injured, burnt from the patronus energy and the fresh running water. A random thought occurs to you, the course is almost over. There's an end in sight.

The Dementor drifts away leaving you facing the hellspawn. It points at your friends and then to you. The message conveyed is simple - you die, or run and they'll kill the others. Great! It'd be nice if they gave you a couple of minutes to come up with a decent strategy.

Ah, fuck it! You've been flying by the seat of your pants this long. Why screw with a good thing.

"Now you die, mortal." It mashes the two sets of clawed fists together.

"You first!" Wasting no time, you cast a jaguar patronus and say, "Come get some!"

As soon as it moves, you apparate over by the dead hydra fully intent on using the few remaining usable heads to your advantage, but you spot something more interesting, a discarded AK-47.

"Accio rifle!" The weapon flies to your outstretched hand. The Daemon is closing.

You levitate it and shout, *"Engorgio!"* The Russian made rifle swells to three times its size and looks like a bloody floating cannon. You can't exactly aim all that well, but it's an assault rifle and your enemy is close to being as big as the broadside of a barn. Manipulating the charm with a flick of the wand, you pull the trigger.

The swollen rounds exit the barrel as basically a burst of twenty millimeter rounds. Sure the magic dampening field will start shrinking them, but they'll still be large enough to do some damage. The rifle runs out after a half a clip, but those bullets penetrate the Daemon's flesh and rip open fresh wounds.

Using its lower right arm, it takes most of the hits there and that clawed fist is pretty mangled. A couple of rounds did catch it in the leg. It's limping slightly and that's a good thing. Limping means it isn't nearly as fast and you need all the time you can get. You wish you had one of those charmed M-60s Kwan gave the other wizards when you first arrived in the tunnels, but beggars can't be choosers.

You dodge things being tossed by the other arms. It's better than letting it get close.

Not wanting to overstay your welcome, you apparate to the other side of the cavern. Instead of following you, the Greater Daemon stops and begins destroying the hydra's body and stomping on anything you might be able to use. *Shit!* The beast is on to your strategy. It even stops to finish off the almost dead dragon. It spends the better part of two minutes crushing everything it can find on that side of the cavern.

What now Potter? Think damn it! Think!

Eventually, it turns and glares at you, lips curled in a fearsome display. It's going to do the same thing over here in a few lumbering strides. You summon a quiver of arrows from slain centaur and banish them at the charging Daemon. It's not nearly as inspired as the rifle ... or as effective. A minute later you're forced to retreat to the other side and there is precious little left.

Worse still, you are already starting to feel the first signs of Apparater's cramps. It's amazing you haven't splinched yourself already.

"All you are doing is prolonging your worthless existence. Your time grows short, Harry Potter. Do you feel the sands of time running out on you, human?"

Scanning the area, you look for anything useful. About the only thing remaining is Peter's metal arm attached to the charred remains of his body.

It's actually held up pretty well and is only partially disintegrating. You'd expected it to be a pile of goo by now. It is anything but. Before you learned about the metal poisoning downside to that spell, you'd spent several weeks trying to make Kwan a replacement for his lost leg back in the lost city.

You can make blades or arrows out of it. Will that be enough. No! You need something better. Those lesser Dementors were peppered with wounds. Same thing with the Hydra. Four arms can take more physical damage than three of you could throw at him.

Too bad you can't transfigure it into a RPG round or a missile.

Actually ...

A cutting curse detaches it from Peter's corpse and summons it. The fingers have started to slough away. Your wand work straightens the arm and makes a point. The Daemon's proximity forces you to apparate before you can go further.

The pain drives you to the ground, but even so, you continue to stretch and pull on the metal like it's made of clay or taffy. The point is made sharp but weak. You need it to penetrate and break. Boring a hole down the center, you make room for the missile's payload. Your patronus always manages to burn and explode on the surface of the Daemon.

It needs to get through the skin. The magical RPG will do that. Closing the end, you leave just enough room to stick your wand into it.

You insert the wand into the tight hole. There's probably some stupid sex joke in there, but you're too exhausted to make it. Casting the patronus, you pull the wand out and seal the end. The Daemon Killer Mark One is almost ready ... just a few more final touches.

Somehow you make it through the next apparition intact, but that's the last one. Quickly! You still need some form of propulsion. You trace a powerful, but temporary blasting curse to the back of the weapon. It'll make a crude booster. It needs a better name. You'll call it The Fawkes. It seems fitting.

Anything else?

How about?

No. That won't ...

What about?

Okay, that should work. You conjure a pair of bat wings for guidance and tie them to the blasting curse. You're sure Bill could come up with something better. Assuming this works, you can ask him

Four Arms is closing. There's a brief temptation to try one last apparition. You've got a few seconds to spare, so you pull yourself upright and look around. It's time to see if the universe was really calling for a champion or a chump. A glance to the flapping, silver bullet next to you tells you that whatever Destiny has, it has a sense of humor.

The Daemon is too close to apparate away now.

You try to think of something witty to say. There was a movie Vernon used to watch, even though Aunt Petunia was deathly afraid of sharks. What did the Yank cop say at the end?

Oh yeah! That's it. "Smile you son of a bitch!"

The weapon flies true. As the wings disintegrate, the blasting curse triggers. The magical rocket lodges in the Daemon's stomach. It crashes to the ground and gets back up to its knees.

"That was the best you could do? Pathetic and weak ..."

The monster doesn't finish the sentence. The reason - its left side explodes in a white and reddish mist. It roars in pain and falls over. A flood of ichor pours out of the gash. You cast another patronus, but it is barely coherent.

It lunges forward and claws at you. You shift into your jaguar form and try to leap aside. One of the claws catches you on your flank and spins you around. A second hand descends, but you roll away. It's got you pinned between the goblin wall and the dead dragon. The next thirty seconds is rolling, dodging, and leaping. Yet another "hand" reaches for you but you leap inside the wrist and start running up the arm, like some unholy tree trunk. Your claws grip the scales as though they were bark. Steel-plated bark.

You hope to get to the beast's neck and do some damage, but already the mouth is angling down! Changing direction, you bound off its ribs and scramble onto its back. An arm is already reaching behind for you; damn this thing is quick! Its flexibility is insane. This close it must be able to sense what you're doing. One of the hands closes around you.

Squirming you try to free yourself, but it wraps you up. It squeezes and begins crushing. The pressure intensifies and then slacks. It's struggling just as much as you are. The question is who is going to give out first.

The fist trembles and it looks at you. The goat face contorts in pain and it coughs up a small river of blood. You fall free.

Backing away, you shift back into human form. You're in a bad way, but for a change, your enemy is worse.

It's dying.

Now there's a patronus worthy memory. You'd cast it, but you're saving energy for closing the wound running down the side of your leg. Hopefully, a good healer can prevent it from leaving a scar. Otherwise, your brand new and "scar free" body only lasted a few minutes.

"Enjoy your victory, mortal," it says with a cackle. "One day, you'll die. There will be other opportunities for me."

You force a smile and say, "But you're forgetting something - I just made a weapon that can kill even a Greater Daemon. I'm going to tell the entire world how to make that weapon. If your kind ever manages to set foot on our world again, you'll be beaten. Maybe I'll come to rescue Fawkes one day. I'll bring hundreds of wizards all armed with these weapons. From what I'm told, if you die there, it's for good isn't it?"

"No. It's not possible." The protest is feeble and lacks conviction.

You smile and say, "I hope you can look into the future and see it coming, because you won't be able to stop it."

Seconds later, the Greater Daemon is dead. You wait for a solid minute before limping around the side. Wary of a double cross, you make a point of looking angry and powerful. It's all a big act. Ginny Weasley's pygmy puff could take you right now.

"You have your answer. Now let my friends go and return to Azkaban."

A sigh of relief escapes your lips when they comply. Fleur and Bill apparate to your side and wrap you up in their arms. Hack is lumbering his way in your direction.

It's over.

It's finally over.

"Are you okay, Harry?" Fleur asks.

"Freedom," you answer echoing the Daemon's words.

"What did you say, Harry?"

"I'm free."

-x-x-x-x-x-x

Epilogue

Nineteen Weeks Later

The mural in Gringotts is impressive. It shows the moment you arrived at Montanha Santuário through the goblin transit system and shifted out of your jaguar form. Finally, you can say the name of this place aloud. Your eyes linger on those departed; the "ugly as sin" 'breaker Sanchez, Collins – full of swagger and waving his AK-47, Lone Thundercloud – his weathered face full of determination, and even that troll you could never stand named Glurg.

There was some debate about editing out the group of goblins that were part of the assault, but in the end you requested that it be a true and factual account.

The lump in your throat grows as you watch Kwan move about. Only you Bill and Hack remain. To avoid tearing up, you look at the younger version of you, who is frantically emptying the Mossberg at the zombie horde. It's shocking how much can change in a year. The guns run empty and the spells start coming. Several of the onlookers gasp at the speed and power of your spells and the ripples of energy emanating from the holly wand. There's a murmur at the visible aura starting to surround the Harry Potter on the mural as he escorts Hack to close the doors to the bank.

You had a private screening of the artist's work based on the pensieve memories last night, but even so, it still sends a shiver down your spine.

After Hack closes the doors, you continue fighting. First it is from one knee and then from the ground as the others push forward to reach you. Then, the entire portrait resets as a jaguar, an eagle, and several other animals emerge and the fight begins anew. The crowd cheers the artist who points to you and Bill. The two of you do the "political thing" and politely wave to the packed lobby of the same bank where it happened.

Words are said by Minister Dimperio. Fortunately, you've picked up enough of the local tongue that you don't have to rely on the translation spell anymore. No longer an ambassador, you've been given the appointment as "Special Advisor to the Minister." The pay is decent and usually it means having lunch or dinner with the Minister or showing up to one of these dog and pony shows, but you know one of these days he'll want you to do something for him. You're an insurance policy for him – a war hero who has an impressive amount of clout on two or perhaps even three continents and very little clue how to use it.

After the ceremony, you mingle, shake hands, and pose for pictures.

"So did you ever find out if it is Animagus or Animagi?" A female asks you in English. The young woman is blonde and wearing formal robes in a light shade of blue with her press credentials displayed and camera in hand.

You're a bit surprised to see her. "Hello Luna. Shouldn't you be at the beginning of your sixth year right now?"

"No. The school has gotten positively dreadful after they put Snape in charge. Before, he was just hard on three out of the four houses. Now, to make up for it, he's just as much of an arse to the Slytherins as well. I'll self-study and pick up a few NEWTs, or maybe study abroad. Besides, I've heard nice things about Brazil's educational system. Someone I used to know did pretty well for himself down here."

It's hard not to smile at her. "So what brings you to this part of the world?"

"I convinced Daddy that we needed a foreign correspondent. So, I'm doing some traveling, looking for international news and all that. Combine the

words Harry Potter with helps dedicate rediscovered Brazilian capitol and you've got something that'll show that Prophet rag a thing or two about sales. Care to answer a few questions for the Quibbler?"

"Normally I'd make you go through my publicist, but what the heck? It's good to see you," you say. A quick check tells you there's still some feelings left, burning like the embers of a forgotten fire. "I read the article you wrote refuting my cousin's account of the events that the Prophet ran."

"He was such an ingrate," she replies with a sour look broken by a slight blush. "Honestly, I can't believe you're related to him."

You shrug it off. "Dudley is lashing out because his parents are dead. I chipped in for an accountant and lawyer to sort out their estate, but that's all he'll ever get from me. Better people than him have failed to take me down. If he's smart, he'll just let it go."

The mural was quite impressive," Luna says changing the subject. She seems very nervous.

"Thanks. The painter wants to do the battle in the city square with the Daemon next, but to be honest, I'm a bit reluctant to show anything that has to do with that monster. It's drawn a bit of criticism, but when you've seen the things I have, you know some of them shouldn't be celebrated." The world, for the most part, believes Voldemort summoned the Daemon and you somehow beat them both. Dudley and the muckrakers at the Daily Prophet tried to imply that you were behind summoning the Daemon. In a way, they're right, but you don't really give a crap.

She notices the people passing by patting you on the back and eager to exchange a handshake. "You've adjusted to the fame better than I'd have thought."

"Well it's not like the whole surviving the death curse thing. That was all my mum. Everything else, from that battle in England and here ... I did it. The goblin uprising was much larger here than in England. I returned to my adopted home and helped break the backs of the goblin nations here in South America."

"Do you plan on returning to England?"

"Only for an occasional visit. This is where I belong," you answer with conviction.

"So the mural over there," she gestures at the painting.

"A reminder to every goblin that walks through this lobby of who beat them and who will do it again if they happen to get any stupid ideas." There wasn't a Voldemort or a rift filled with Daemons here, just lots of killing and violence. Following your advice and experience, Minister Dimperio "borrowed" a division of Brazilian infantry and you helped lead the pivotal attack into their caverns. Wizards backed by the thunder of rifles proved to be too much for the goblin tribes of South America. Truth be told, the memory charms on the soldiers took longer than the actual campaign.

Chuckling, you say, "Professor Binns wrote me and asked for a detailed account of what happened down here. I'll be the stuff of boring lectures for the next century!"

"That makes me glad I left when I did," she says. "You seem happier, Harry. It's strange seeing you without the scar."

"I sometimes reach up there just to make sure it's still gone. As for being happier, it's amazing what a couple of months without a life and death situation can do for you." You make a command decision. "C'mon, let's step outside. I'll show you some of the sites."

Luna follows you out onto the main boulevard. The charmed ceiling of the cavern is magnificent. It mirrors the bright and sunny day outside. Some shops are already open and more will be soon. People wave at you and you smile and nod back. Sure the Minister is setting up shop here, but you've somehow become the unofficial mayor of this city. This is your town.

"There was a rumor that you came back to England last month, when Hermione Granger had her baby."

"I'm sure there are all kinds of rumors," you say dismissively. Britain is half a world away and you don't mind it at all.

Luna knows you slept with Hermione. The other rumor is that Hope is Snape's lovechild and that's why the three of them never leave the castle. The truth, of course, is that the mother and daughter's magic control the wards of the castle. Hermione provides most of the power, but Hope is the control. Unfortunately for Severus, a group of goblins got by the rearguard and destroyed the vanishing cabinet. He's stuck there.

Maybe in a few years they can teach little Hope how to lower the wards and let Uncle Snapey out for a walky. Strangely enough, Riddle's curse on the Defense position continues. Since Snape has far too much to do as Headmaster, he had to give up his dream job ... and is pretty surly about it. Small wonder that Luna decided to finish her studies abroad.

"If this is for the record, I won't be commenting on that. I'll simply say that Hope Granger is a very beautiful, little miracle. I'm just glad, she was born healthy and into a world currently at peace. I'd like to congratulate my dear friend on graduating early and becoming the new Hogwarts librarian. I think with Hermione's love of books, it is a perfect fit and the school is rather lucky to have her."

"But you didn't come back for Dumbledore's funeral."

"Seemed a long way to go to spit or dance, so I didn't bother. He wrote me a few letters and tried to justify his actions. In the end it was just the empty last words of a dying man who was looking for absolution. I understand he gave his whitewashed version in an interview defending his 'ends justifies the means' tripe, but the most audacious thing in the world he ever did was ask for my forgiveness. Please make certain to quote me on that."

You walk and show her the city square where you once led a zombie horde against the Daemon. At the renovated ministry building, the two of you sit on a bench and chat for what seems like hours. Eventually, an ethereal niffler patronus comes running up to you. It stands on its hind legs like a

Midwestern prairie dog and stares at you. A glance at the wristwatch shows you are running late.

"Drat! I'm late for a dinner party. Are you hungry? I'm a partner in a restaurant called De Soto's. The lamb recipe comes all the way from Russia. It's the talk of the town. Plus you'll get to meet the living statue of a conquistador. Hernado would make a great interview."

"Sounds great," she pauses and looks a little nervous, "So is this an impromptu date?"

You smile and lead her in the direction of the restaurant. "What about Looney?"

Luna draws herself up and it looks like she's summoning her courage. "I retired her when I left England. I was a rather daft fool who'd outgrown her, but wasn't ready to admit it to the one person I was crazy about before everything drove us apart. I do want to travel and write things for Daddy's paper, but more than anything else, I was hoping for a fresh start with you. Do I have a chance?"

"How do you know I'm not dating anyone?" You and Sheila Lopez went out a couple of times, but it wasn't working.

"A good reporter always has her sources," she says with a hint of a smile.

"Bill, I assume."

"Indirectly," the young witch concedes. "I went to Fleur. It took a considerable amount of groveling to get back into her good graces. She's rather protective of you. I assume she's your publicist."

"You'd be wrong. She's more of a social secretary and a meddler. It can be irritating at times. So, did you win Fleur's approval?"

"I'm still working on it, but she's warming up to me and has agreed in principle to let me see you if you agree."

"So you're rebelling by being here today?"

"Maybe a little, but everyone needs to be a rule breaker now and again. Plus, I wanted to catch up with you before the next crisis that endangers the world and requires your undivided attention. Anything like that on the horizon?"

Her candor makes you laugh. You like this side of her. She's being honest and humorous without all the foolishness. "No, other than a bunch of ribbon cutting ceremonies, my calendar is rather barren at the moment. Though things are subject to change at a moment's notice. Bill does have a few new leads on some ancient sites that need plunder ... err exploring. Getting out and adventuring helps when I feel like I'm getting trapped again. Besides, our breaking crew is a bit unusual."

Luna laughs and says, "Why am I not surprised? What else do you have besides your troll?"

"Did you ever meet Kreacher?"

"No, but Hermione told me about him."

"He's actually dead useful in the field, though a bit unstable. He's almost as handy to have around as Scribe."

"Scribe?"

"My Dementor publicist."

"Tell me you're joking," she says.

"No. It showed up one day. We'd worked together briefly in England. It likes to write," you say. "Rather bizarre poetry and haikus. Your dad might like it. You might be able to convince it to write a guest column or something."

"How exactly is a Dementor useful?"

"Mostly invulnerable to magic," you answer with a chuckle. "We take down all the wards we can find and then send it in first. Even if we missed something, it's probably not strong enough to hurt a minor daemon. Bill acts like it is cheating, but he's just acting like a git because it was my idea and not his. Also, what in its right mind attacks a camp with a Dementor standing guard?"

"I suppose it also makes getting ice cubes rather easy and makes the jungle heat less oppressive," she quips. "Don't you have to 'feed' it?"

"Brazil has jails. The Minister lets me send Scribe through them when it is hungry." Some of the prisoners might even deserve to be there.

"Sounds interesting. I guess I shouldn't have asked," she replies.

"We're leaving in a couple of days."

"Need someone to document your latest adventures?"

"You really want to try again?"

"More than anything," she answers. She puts her arms on your shoulders and kisses you. It's nice. There aren't fireworks or any kind of soul bond tripe you read about. Just two people trying to reconnect. It's refreshingly normal.

You return it for a few seconds and step back. Taking her hand, you change the tone from light-hearted to serious. "Okay, we'll give it a try, but we blew up rather famously a few months back. There are two people at that party across the street that I've been in previous relationships with. Karina Colastos has since remarried, but we are good friends and I personally recommended Lauren Thundercloud to be the professor of Astronomy when our school reopens next week. I'm fine with giving you a second chance. With everything that was happening, we were insane to even try in the first place. But I'm not interested in jealousy. So, are you up for this?"

"Yes, Harry. I really want to do this. Besides, it's not like you have any other lovechildren running about is it?"

You wince. Lauren's son, Michael "Strongfist" Thundercloud – aka "Cries All Damn Night" has some very distinctive green eyes. His mother seems to be biding her time, but Fleur thinks it is only a matter of time before the Sioux witch makes a move on you. Suffice to say, Fleur and Lauren do not get along ... at all. It probably explains why Fleur wants to see if Luna has what it takes to be your girlfriend before Thundercloud tries.

If the most complicated thing in your life is who you're dating, you can live with that.

Every once in awhile, you think about Baba Yaga and wonder if she might have a little surprise in store for you. Best not to even go there – ever.

You'll deal with Fleur later. She has far too much influence over your love life. As for Luna, it's best just to get this out in the open now.

"Funny you should ask that, Luna. It's kind of a long story."