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"Indifference and Neglect" (part 1)

*5th-year Boys Dormitory, Gryffindor Tower, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
Saturday, 22nd June, 1996*

Harry Potter, fifth-year student of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, was not looking forward to the upcoming conversation. He'd been back at school for a couple of days, since the disastrous mission to the Department of Mysteries, and the loss of his godfather. During the last few days, he'd been pondering life, love and the universe, and his place in said entities. He'd not come to any conclusions, but knew this conversation would certainly reveal something.

"So, what's up, Harry?" Hermione asked. She'd made her way up the stairs gingerly, knowing that she wasn't really supposed to be in the Boys' dorm. Ginny and Luna had followed, along with Neville and Ron.

Harry was sat on his bed, lotus position, looking calm and peaceful. "I thought that you should all hear this." He said quietly. "In the Department of Mysteries, we saw a prophecy that had my name on it. It smashed before we could hear it, but since it was made to APWBD, we have another way of finding out what it said."

Hermione was first. "A... P... W... B... D... Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore... It was made to Professor Dumbledore?"

"Yep." Harry nodded. "He kept a copy of it. This is it: 'The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches, born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies, and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not, and either must die at the hand of the other, for neither can live while the other survives...'"

Each of the five had different thoughts on the matter:

Hermione; Oh, poor Harry! This is like a Death Sentence hanging over his head... the lightning bolt scar is obviously 'marked as his equal'... but Harry has some kind of power that You-Know-Who doesn't knowabout... I wonder what that is... He'll need training, and I'll stand by his side... Well, I guess this answers the 'who do I go for?' question. No matter how I feel about Harry, Ron'll live longer, provided that I don't end up killing him...

Neville; It... it could have been me... thank Merlin it wasn't! We'd all be dead now... Harry's done so much to help me the last couple of years, I'll stand with him.

Luna; I wonder if they'll be pudding tonight... Harry needs a haircut... It smells like masturbating boy in here... I hope he wins...

Ginny; He truly is a hero... He'll need the love and support of a girlfriend... someone pretty, and sexy, who'll look great on his arm in the latest fashions on the pages of Witch Weekly... I know I'm perfect for that job! He needs the best.

Ron; Bloody Potter... he's rich, famous, popular, has the best broom in the world, and now he's got a prophecy named after him? It's not fair... It should be me. I'd be a better Boy-Who-Lived than Potter...

Harry watched his friends as they pondered the prophecy. He couldn't read minds, but he could read body language. It seemed that each of them was worried, and quite rightly so, really. He knew that a lot was riding on his shoulders... he only hoped that he could make the right move at the right time.

*#4 Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey
Tuesday, 25th June, 1996*

Harry's arrival at Privet Drive had gone quite smoothly. The last few years, upon his arrival, he'd been beaten to unconsciousness by Vernon and Dudley. This year, the threats from the Order at the train station seemed to have worked. Vernon had carried Harry's trunk upstairs, pushed Harry into the bedroom, and immediately engaged all six locks. He'd then left, and not uttered one word. Nothing about 'Boy', or 'Freak', or any threats of a beating. *That was scarier than a puce Vernon screaming an inch and a half in front of his face, giving him a shower of spit and vitriol.*

He'd gone to sleep, thankful that he'd had the forethought to plan ahead for this period of captivity. He'd arranged with Dobby to get a magical chamberpot, which banished the waste from inside every two minutes. Because it was a house-elf enchantment, it wouldn't register on the Ministry of Magic's underage sensors. He'd also stocked up on food, each meal miniaturised and held in a stasis charm. He had enough to last him for six weeks, and Dobby had demanded Harry's promise that if he was running low, he'd call on him. It was strange; basilisks, giants, Voldemort, Umbridge and Acromantulas all paled when compared to a 2-foot-tall House Elf with a desire to feed you.

There was also a magi-fiction book, that changed to one of 1,000 different titles upon completion. So, he wouldn't starve, he wouldn't have to hold in his secretions, and it was doubtful he'd die of boredom.

I wonder if the gang'll write to me this year, or if... Harry's thought was cut off as Fawkes flashed into his bedroom, carrying a creamy parchment envelope in his beak.

With a heavy heart, knowing that this missive simply could not be good, he took the envelope. As soon as he was released of his burden, Fawkes flamed away. *Hmph... for an ageless, immortal bird, he's a bloody coward.* He opened the letter, noticing the distinctive loopy script of Dumbledore.

Dear Harry,

I hope that your arrival at your family's house had proceeded smoothly. I asked Fawkes to deliver this letter to ensure that any owls are not tracked, and to ensure that your family's home remains secret.

It's not my bloody home. Harry thought to himself. It's my prison, and my 'family' are the guards and torturers.

As such, I have a number of requests to make of you during the holiday period. I must request that you send Hedwig to Hagrid for the holiday period, to ensure that she is not seen. She is a very distinctive owl, and could easily be traced. I will ask Fawkes to stop by every three days so that you can send your reports to the Order.

Send my familiar away? I don't bloody think so... Harry looked over at Hedwig, who eyed him for a moment, then nodded in agreement with his silent question. Good girl...

Writing to your friends, while enjoyable, should be stopped, to ensure that owls are not tracked. I have asked Miss Granger, Mr. and Miss Weasley, Mr. Longbottom and Miss Lovegood to not send you any mail while you are at Privet Drive. They have agreed to this stipulation.

Harry couldn't believe what he was reading. They're taking the piss... They just happily agreed to not write to me? For a whole month, I'm gonna be locked here, and they just said, 'Oh, we won't write to him. He's grieving, but he doesn't need his friends'. Bastards!

Also, while you are there, I must request that you remain in the house as much as possible. The wards on the property only extend as far as the pavement. In order to make sure you are undetected, please do not leave the house. This is an excellent time to practice your Occlumency skills. Unfortunately, it's not possible for the Order to give you any information without you being able to safeguard your mind.

Oh, this just gets better and better! Now, I can't even go to the park to relax. I have to stay in the house. Why not just tell the bloody Dursleys to lock me in my bedroom for the whole fucking summer? Harry felt the temperature in the room start to increase, and knew that if he didn't calm down, he'd have another massive burst of accidental magic.

Upon your return to Headquarters, I will arrange a time with Professor Snape so that you may restart your lessons. When you return to Hogwarts, we will continue to call them 'Remedial Potions Lessons'.

Considering I have no intention of continuing with Potions, irrespective of my OWL result, that could be a little difficult to pull off, Dumbledore. Harry shuddered at the thought of another two years with Snape. Greasy bastard... And that smell? You'd think that they could develop a decent anti-perspirant in the wizarding world, but oh no. Got to have Snape, with the grease and the smell. Urgh.

Even though you have now been proved correct about the return of Voldemort, I fear that Minister Fudge will use any magic performed at your home to expel you from Hogwarts. It would be better for everyone if you were to cast no spells while you are there.

I'm surprised you didn't take my wand off me while I was at school. You may be a great wizard, Dumbledore, but you're a lousy human being.

There will be Order guards around the property while you're there, however, I must insist that you do not attempt to speak to them. It may draw attention to them, and we do not want this.

Okay, this doesn't make sense. The Order guards could be used to pass letters to my friends, and from them to me... but he probably didn't think of that. Neither did any of them... Huh, good to know my place in things.

You will need to spend at least four weeks at Privet Drive this year, to ensure that the blood protections are recharged. Use this time to grieve, Harry, and prepare for what lies ahead.

Kind Regards,

Albus Dumbledore

"Oh, this is gonna be a great summer..." Harry groused to himself, picking up his magi-novel, and flicked to the first page.

*#4 Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey
Tuesday, 23rd July, 1996*

*During his exile in Durzkaban, Harry had managed to go through 563 books. He definitely wasn't a romance novel reader, but quite enjoyed the action novels. One of the stories, *The Legend of the Boy-Who-Lived* had made him chuckle for nearly an hour. The hero, Harold Porter, as a two-year old baby had soundly defeated the Dark Lord Mouldywart after an intense five-hour duel. The author name was anonymous, which didn't really surprise Harry. Any author that admitted to a story like that would have been killed immediately, then probably resurrected to be tortured, before being killed again. Still, it was a bloody funny story. *There's something wrong when I wish I'd engaged in a titanic five-hour battle. I'll definitely have to remember to banish my favourite blankie at Voldemort next time we duel.**

With a burst of song, Fawkes reappeared in Harry's room. He'd arrived every three days, as Dumbledore had said, each time wielding a small piece of parchment. Harry's reply of 'I'm fine' had not been commented on throughout the month he'd spent there.

This time, however, Fawkes was carrying a letter in his beak. Harry took it, and waited for Fawkes to flame out. He remained sitting on the headboard of Harry's bed, eyeing the letter.

"Are you waiting for a reply?" Harry asked in a rusty voice. He'd not actually spoken since Fawkes had delivered the original letter at the start of summer break. The Dursleys had opened his door once a week so Harry could shower, and put a tin of cold soup through the door once every two days. If he hadn't stocked up before leaving Hogwarts, he'd have near-starved during his incarceration.

With a throaty sigh, he opened the note.

Dear Harry,
You have now spent the required amount of time with your family for the Blood Wards to be effective for the next twelve months. This letter is a Portkey, which will activate at precisely noon on Wednesday, 24th July. It will take you to Headquarters. Please make sure that are sitting on your trunk and have a firm hold on Hedwig's cage, to ensure that they are transported with you. I may not be there when you arrive at Headquarters, however, there are things that we need to discuss.
Kind Regards,
Albus Dumbledore

At least the old bastard could have asked, 'how're you feeling, Harry? Have you recovered from your trauma?' But, no... Ah, well. I'll pack in the morning.

The Black Family Manor, #12 Grimmauld Place, London
Wednesday, 24th July, 1996 – 12:06

A chime sounded in the hall of Grimmauld Place. This was an alarm, signifying that there was an inbound Portkey, that would be materialising within the next sixty seconds. Discretely, Arthur Weasley and Remus Lupin made their way into the entrance hall, wands in hand.

Fifty seconds later, with a thump, a trunk and an owl cage landed in the entrance hall. Lupin turned to Arthur, his expression questioning. With a yell of fear, a body materialised at the top of the ceiling, only to drop the ground, fortunately missing both trunk and cage, but landing with an explosive *pah*, he breath leaving his body considerably faster than it went in.

"That was fun..." A soft voice muttered.

"Harry!" Remus exclaimed, helping the young man to his feet.

Harry tilted his head back, gasping some air into his lungs. He'd been winded quite badly on his landing. Before he could take a second breath, a bushy-haired brunette tackled him in an impossibly tight hug, robbing him of the little breath he'd managed to get.

"Harry!" Hermione squealed into his ear. She put every ounce of feeling she could into the hug. After a moment, she realised that Harry wasn't returning the hug. He wasn't pushing her away, but he wasn't hugging back. After a moment, she stepped back, an odd expression on her face.

Harry nodded to her, panting, before looking up at Remus. "I assume... I'm in the same room... as last year?" Remus nodded. "I'm gonna go and unpack, then." Without another word, Harry grabbed his trunk and vanished up the stairs.

Turning to Remus, Hermione raised an eyebrow. "Professor Lupin?"

Remus was watching his cub run up the stairs. "Something's wrong..."

The Black Family Manor, #12 Grimmauld Place, London
Wednesday, 24th July, 1996 – 12:31

Harry had headed to the bedroom he shared with Ron, noting the mess and curiously vile smell that permeated the air, and made a decision. *I'm so not staying in here.* Like any teenaged male, he instantly recognised the smell of excessive masturbation. Turning on his heel, he headed into the master bedroom, noting that it had been emptied of all personal possessions. *Home sweet home.* He dumped his trunk onto the bed, before opening it, and beginning to put his few clean clothes away.

The Dursleys hadn't let him do any washing or ironing while he was there, and his clothes certainly reflected that fact. With a sigh, he grabbed an empty pillowcase from the bed, using it as a laundry sack.

A knock on his door gathered his attention. Without breaking stride from his laundry, he waved his wand at the door, opening it soundlessly.

"Harry?"

"What's up, Hermione?" Harry asked, without turning around. He recoiled back slightly as he found the carrier bag full of dirty socks; a breath of fresh air it wasn't.

"Is everything okay, Harry?" Hermione asked, stepping into the master suite tentatively. "You seem... it's like there's something up."

"Do I?" Harry asked, still not turning round. He grabbed the pillowcase, and headed out of the door, going down the stairs. Hermione followed him, a bit put out that he'd walked away in the middle of their conversation.

He headed to the kitchen, where he found the ancient and noble washing machine of Black, White and mixed-coloureds at low temperatures, was stored. Fortunately, though, it was a Wizarding washing machine; it would only take a couple of minutes, and his clothes would be properly laundered, pressed and ironed.

Hermione followed him, growing ever more concerned with Harry's non-communication.

Inside the kitchen the rest of the Weasleys were gathered, enjoying a spot of lunch. Harry strode past, heading to the utility room located at the back of the kitchen.

"Hey, mate." Ron called out around a mouthful of food.

"Ron." Harry replied simply, not breaking stride. "Hello, Weasleys."

Before anyone could answer, Harry had gone into the utility room. He poured his dirty washing into the machine, flinching as the scent of unwashed socks drifted up to his nose, before slamming the lid down. He heard gurgling, presumably as the machine filled up, but it could've had indigestion as well; in this house, you couldn't be sure. Throwing the pillowcase to the floor next to the machine, he strolled back into the kitchen, flicking his wand at the teapot on the stove.

"How are you, Harry dear?" Molly asked, standing up to hug him. Harry subtly stepped back, keeping himself out of range.

"I'm fine, Mrs. Weasley. Thank you for asking." Harry replied politely.

Molly looked at her arms for a moment, before she allowed them to drop to her sides.

Hermione watched her best friend with eagle eyes. *Uh-oh... that's not good.* Her mind reran a section of a psychology book she'd read when she was younger. *People from abused backgrounds often reject physical touch... He certainly didn't hug me back earlier, and now he's refusing Molly's touch.*

Oblivious to the by-play and Hermione's thoughts, Ron spoke up. "So, mate, how's your summer been so far?"

Harry span round, staring at Ron. The worst part, the scariest part, was Harry's maddeningly expressionless eyes. After a moment, he snorted, before walking away, out of the kitchen and back up the stairs.

"What?" Ron asked.

Hermione headed out of the door, intent on getting some answers.

Harry was lying back on his bed, reading through his magi-novel. He was now on book 565, this one about the Founders of Hogwarts.

Again there was a knock on the door. Harry knew it was Hermione, since Weasleys were genetically incapable of knocking. "Come in, Hermione." He called calmly. The door opened slightly, just wide enough for the witch to enter.

"Hi, Harry." Hermione said, sitting on the edge of his bed. "Is anything wrong?"

Harry slowly raised an eyebrow. "Wrong, Hermione? What on earth could possibly be wrong?"

"You tell me, Harry." Hermione said, crossing her arms as she stared at him. "You've been... distant since you got here."

"Have I?" Harry replied casually, not looking up from his book. "I'll take your word for that."

"Is there... is there anything you want to talk about, Harry?"

"Nope." He replied instantly. "Not a thing, Hermione. Thank you for asking, though."

She raised her own eyebrow. "Harry, I've known you for five years. I can tell when you're lying."

"Can you? How nice for you." Harry muttered, turning the page in his book.

"What's bothering you, Harry?" She asked, leaning against the baseboard of the bed, and pulling her legs on. "I can tell something's up."

Harry looked up at her, almost making her gasp with the intensity in his gaze. "Nothing's bothering me, Hermione." *Not anymore.* He added mentally. "There's nothing I want to talk about." *With you, especially since you're part of the bloody problem.*

She shook her head slowly. "No, there's something bothering you."

"There really isn't." *Any more. Now, I just don't care.* "So, if you'll excuse me, I need to go and get my washing. It's undoubtedly finished by now." He stood, and headed out of the room.

Upon his return to the kitchen, he was stared at by the Weasleys. Ignoring them, he grabbed his laundry, bundling it back into the pillowcase. When he started to make his way back through the kitchen, he stopped when he saw a couple of unexpected people.

Mrs. Granger? Mr. Granger?" He extended a hand. "I'm sorry, I wasn't aware that you were here."

Emma Granger grasped the young man's hand firmly. "That's okay, Harry. Professor Dumbledore told us that there was a possibility that we'd be attacked this summer, so he invited us to stay here."

Harry nodded, before reaching out and shaking Dan Granger's hand. "Huh... I'm sorry about that. It's probably because of our action in the Ministry in June."

Dan shook his head. "Hermione told us all about that, Harry. You thought your godfather was in danger. I would have done the same thing."

Several people in the kitchen tensed as they heard someone mention anything in connection with the 'S'-word in front of Harry. They were expecting an explosion of temper, as was typical of Harry.

To their surprise, he just nodded, excused himself, and left the kitchen.

Emma looked up at Molly. "Well, he seems to be handling it well."

"Something's wrong..." Hermione muttered from the doorway, watching her best friend disappear up the stairs.

*The Black Family Manor, #12 Grimmauld Place, London
Friday, 26th July, 1996 – 22:18*

Harry crept around the Black Manor underneath his invisibility cloak. He was suffering from an intense case of boredom. After the initial probing by Hermione, he'd pretty much been left alone by his friends. Neville and Luna had turned up, Luna bunking with Ginny and Hermione, while Neville took the second bed in Ron's room.

They'd said 'hello', then vanished. Harry tried to care; really, he did, but failed miserably. Now, he was just ambling around. He didn't know that he was about to stagger into a conversational landmine.

"...sure about this, Hermione?" Emma's voice came through the crack in the door.

Harry, with nothing better to do, leaned against the wall next to the door. *It's sad I've got nothing better to do than listen to gossip.* He paused. *Well, I could always go and pair up those socks... Nah, eavesdropping. Although, I wonder if anyone has ever dropped an eave. I mean, I-*

"I'm sure, Mum." Hermione's melodic voice replied. "I mean... I know that I love Harry, with all of my heart, but..."

"Hermione, if you love him, why have you started dating Ronald? I thought that he annoyed you."

She's dating Ron? Why didn't she tell me... ah, yes... she agreed to Dumbledore's communications blackout. Harry leaned a little closer.

"He's... well, not *always*, Mum. We do argue a bit, but he's not necessarily a bad guy."

That's hardly a ringing endorsement, Hermione. Harry thought, suppressing a chuckle.

"Hermione, I would have thought you'd know better. If you like Harry, you should go for Harry. Not try and make him jealous with Ron."

There was a pause. "It's not that, Mum... there's something else."

Oh, this should be interesting. Harry thought, quietly rubbing his hands together under his invisibility cloak.

"Harry... has a prophecy about him. The basic gist is that it'll come down to him and You-Know-Who in the end."

"Oh..." Emma was quiet for a moment. "Didn't you say that Divination was a load of rubbish? You dropped out of that course, if I remember correctly."

"No, Divination's a... a woolly discipline, but genuine prophecy is real. Harry *has* to face You-Know-Who. It's not something he can avoid. You-Know-Who is immensely powerful; not even Professor Dumbledore can beat him, and he's the greatest wizard of the age."

There was another moment of silence. "So... that's why you decided that you want to date Ronald? Because you think that Harry has a death sentence hanging over him?"

"Something like that, Mum." Hermione whispered. "I mean... he's the one, and there's nothing I can do about it."

"Hermione..." Emma moaned. "Don't you think that he'd appreciate the support a girlfriend would provide? Why on earth would you date Ron?"

"Ron's safe. I don't love him, and I don't think I ever could love him..." Hermione whispered. "The way things are going, I just don't think that Harry can win. If he and I start dating, I'll just be distracting him. He'll need a miracle, and I don't think he'll get one. It'll be bad enough when he dies... but if I give myself to him totally, if I reveal my feelings to him and he reciprocates... when he dies, I'd die inside too."

Okay... that hurt. Harry thought, feeling a tear well up in one of his eyes. *I knowthat I can't beat him... but to hear my best friend, what I thought was my closest supporter, say that... Well, it's good to knowwhat she thinks.*

Emma tutted. "Hermione, I hope to hell that Harry never finds out about this. I think you're being a bloody idiot, but what do I know? I'm just your mother. Take my advice? Make damned sure you think about this. This sort of idiocy could destroy Harry."

Harry decided discretion was the better part of valour and walked away, causing one of the floorboards to creak alarmingly. Dashing forward, he hid in the darkness at the end of the landing, watching as the door to Emma and Dan's room be flung open, and an anxious bushy-haired brunette stick her head out.

So... I'm young, bad and dangerous to know. Great to have confirmation.

*The Black Family Manor, #12 Grimmauld Place, London
Monday, 29th July, 1996 – 12:41*

Harry had spent the last couple of days ambling round Grimmauld Place. He'd brushed off Ron's attempts to play chess, Hermione's attempts to talk about his feelings, Fred and George's pranks (he *was* the son of a Marauder, after all, and they'd surrendered barely thirty minutes in to the war) and Ginny's painfully obvious, and obviously painful, attempts at flirting.

Ever since hearing Hermione's conversation with her mother before the weekend, he'd pretty much lost interest in his 'friends', since they obviously considered him a 'dead man walking'. Strangely enough, hearing it from his 'best friend' had made the proclamation strangely real.

The homework he'd been given at the end of the last school year called to him. He was halfway through his summer holidays, and hadn't actually started it yet. Even though the previous school year was OWL year, he'd been given homework for the five core subjects; Potions, Transfiguration, Herbology, Charms and History of Magic.

He decided he'd start on Herbology, since he had an expert on plants in the house. Heading to the second floor, where Neville was bunking, he noticed the door was ajar, and simply walked in.

Harry heard gasps, pants, and the characteristic 'slapping' noise that could only be one activity. He glanced over at Ron's bed, seeing him and Hermione in a rather compromising position.

In her hand was Ron's tool, which she was furiously pumping, while he had one hand buried in her jeans, and looked like he was trying to furiously rub a stain out of silk. He turned away after a second, idly noting that he was *way* bigger than Ron. *I guess it's good to be short. Or long. Hell, who cares, it's bigger than Ron's.* "Oops." He muttered. "Sorry."

Without another word, he turned and headed out of the bedroom, ignoring the high-pitched squeal from Hermione, and Ron's 'bloody hell!'

Suppressing a grimace, he headed downstairs into the Library, where hopefully, he'd be able to find some appropriate reading material for his assignment. After locating several Herbology tomes, Harry headed back up to the third floor, where the master suite was located.

As he walked onto the second floor landing, he saw Ron and Hermione coming out of his bedroom, both blushing a beautiful bright red, ironically, lighting the house better than the current gas lamps.

"Look, mate," Ron said quickly, the tips of his ears nearly glowing in the gloomy house, "it's not what it looked like."

"Okay." Harry replied simply, stepping around Ron and Hermione, and heading up the stairs. *How the hell could it be anything other than what it looked like? When he got to the master suite, he sealed and silenced the door. Last thing I want is them two coming in here.* He grimaced and paled as another thought entered his mind. *Christ, I hope they wash their hands.*

*The Black Family Manor, #12 Grimmauld Place, London
Monday, 29th July, 1996 – 17:02*

"Harry?" A voice called through the door. Harry had lowered the silencing charm about an hour after he'd raised it, so that he could ignore their attempts at explanations/apologies, but still hear when dinner was.

With a sigh, Harry rolled up the scroll his nearly-completed essay was on, and pushed it into his trunk. He got up, stretched, and headed to the door.

Opening it, he saw Ron and Hermione stood outside the door, both of them looking embarrassed.

"Dinner ready?" Harry asked, not bothering to waste any time on hearing their explanations.

Ron nodded, but made no attempt to move out of Harry's way. "Harry, we need to talk about before."

"Do we?" Harry asked, enjoying Ron's discomfort. "Why?"

"Well... I mean... Shit, Hermione, can you explain it?" Ron asked, wringing his hands together.

Hermione looked up at Harry, her eyes pleading with him to understand. "Harry, about what you saw before, well-"

"Hermione," Harry interrupted, "with all due respect, it's none of my business. Nothing to do with me. I get it. You and Ron are dating. And exploring each other. Congratulations. Now, can we go eat?"

"It doesn't bother you?" Hermione asked in a small voice.

"Why should it?" Harry asked. *The fact that you chose Ron, not really. Your reason for choosing him? Abso-fucking-lutely.* "Now, I'm hungry. Excuse me." He gently pushed past his 'friends', heading for the stairs.

Ron shrugged and followed Harry downstairs, leaving Hermione leaning against the doorpost. *This isn't right. Harry hates things being kept from him, and that's just what we did... Of course, we couldn't write to him, but still... he should have gotten upset, shouted at us, even... He didn't even look bothered by it. Shouldn't it at least make him blink? This is not going to end well... I can feel it.* She shook her head, and walked downstairs.

*The Black Family Manor, #12 Grimmauld Place, London
Monday, 29th July, 1996 – 17:26*

Dinner, being served early due to an Order meeting later that night, was a quiet affair. It was rare for any meal to be quiet when there were Weasleys about, but this was. People seemed to be subdued by something, and it certainly appeared that Harry was out of the loop. Twelve months ago, this would have annoyed him to no end, but this year? He really didn't give a shit. If people wanted to leave him ignorant, then he'd happily be ignorant. *After all, it's bliss.*

As Harry glanced around the table, he noticed that no-one was willing to meet his eyes. *I wonder why... do they think I'm gonna blowup about Sirius? Do they feel guilty about ignoring me?* That last thought nearly made him laugh out loud. If there was one thing he'd learnt, it was that all of his 'friends' would rather be loyal to Dumbledore than to him. *The 'encounter' upstairs certainly accounts for Ron and Hermione. Although, Ron seems to just brush it off. Must be that whole 'emotional range of a teaspoon' thing.*

Harry had lost all respect for Dumbledore. After the revelations that had been uncovered in his office during the last week of term, he knew he couldn't trust the man. Granted, he was the greatest wizard in the world, but he would not see the little people. And that was the reason Harry wouldn't trust him.

"Harry?" A quiet voice interrupted Harry's musings. He looked up to see Remus looking at him, a vaguely hopeful expression on his face. A small klaxon began sounding in Harry's mind, prompting him to engage the filters he'd begun working on when he was three. At the Dursleys, emotions were a weakness, a liability punished with an energetic beating. So, he'd learned to not show them. He had a feeling that skill would be necessary in the upcoming conversation.

"Yes?" Harry replied simply, staring intently at the ragged werewolf.

"I... I was wondering..." Remus trailed off at the stare.

"About?" Harry asked patiently, rolling his hand in a 'get on with it!' gesture.

"Well... now that Sirius has... has gone..." Lupin's voice became high-pitched for a moment as he said that, but he managed to get himself under control after a moment. "I... I'd like to take over his role as your godfather."

Harry leaned back in his chair, chewing thoughtfully. *Hmm... Is he serious? I mean...* With an exaggerated swallow, Harry eyed the older man. "Take over as my godfather?"

Lupin nodded, a bit more sure of himself. "Y-Yes. It was something that me and Sirius discussed while he was here. He wanted to make sure that you had someone there for you, you know, to help you and support you when you need it most."

For a fraction of a second, Harry saw red, an inexplicable rage filling him. Using his feeble Occlumency skills to get his emotions under control, he let the sharp anger drain away, leaving him feeling tired and grouchy. He sat up straighter in his chair, deciding to get the answer to a question he'd been wanting answered for quite some time.

"Mr. Lupin, I'll tell you what... I'll accept your proposal if... *if*, you can answer two questions for me, okay?" Harry leaned back in his chair, projecting an air of quiet confidence. Moony nodded with a pathetically hopeful smile on his face.

"Sure, cub. Ask away." Lupin replied.

"When I was growing up with the Dursleys, being beaten, abused, starved and generally treated like a house elf... where the bloody hell were you?"

Lupin's face dropped sharply, before his jaw began to move silently.

"I mean, you said that you were one of my parents' best friends. Almost a brother to Dad. So, where were you? Sirius had a damned good excuse for not being around; he was in prison for trying to track down the traitorous rat-bastard, but where were you?"

"I..." Lupin stammered.

"Seriously, Mr. Lupin. I thought that all four Marauders made an oath to protect any and all children the other Marauders would have. Your cubs. Christ, even Wormtail agreed to it, although he was obviously lying. So, where were you?" Harry leaned back, eyeing the older man sharply.

"I..." Lupin quickly glanced around the room, almost as though looking for support, or divine intervention. "Well, Harry..."

"Yes?" Harry said sharply. "Come on, Mr. Lupin. I'm waiting for your answer. Where were you when *I needed* you? When I needed the support of a surrogate uncle, or a godfather, or even just a friend. Where were you?"

"I... I didn't think you'd want me around." Lupin said quietly. "I'm a werewolf... a dangerous Dark creature... why would you want to know me?"

Harry nodded thoughtfully. "I see... so, instead of giving me a choice in the matter, you unilaterally made the decision that I shouldn't be exposed to you."

Lupin nodded unconsciously.

"I see. Did it never occur to you that as a young Muggle-raised child, the prospect of knowing a werewolf would have been both cool *and* exciting? Far from not wanting to know you, I'd have been dead keen on you being available while growing up."

"I..." Lupin lowered his head in shame.

"No, you didn't, did you?" Harry shook his head sadly. "You decided that skulking in the shadows was what you wanted, Mr. Lupin."

"Wait, Harry." Tonks said from the other side of the table. "You said you had a second question?"

"I do." Harry nodded once at Tonks, then turned back to Remus. "Where were you during my fourth year?"

Lupin didn't bother to answer, just decided to wallow in misery.

"Fourth year, virtually everyone turned on me. Even Ron, my very first friend my age in the Wizarding world decided that I was lying to him, even though I've never lied to anyone in my life. I may have deflected questions, or not answered, but I have never lied to anyone. Ron's pathetic jealousy..." Harry stopped for a moment as he heard Ron's indignant sputtering, but carried on, spearing the redhead with a merciless glare. "As I was saying, Ron's jealousy meant that he ignored what I was saying. The other Gryffindors didn't like me because I was saying that I didn't put my name in. The Hufflepuffs decided that I was trying to steal Cedric's glory, the Ravenclaws decided that since I'd 'cheated' and put my name in, and more importantly, they couldn't work out *how* it was done, so they didn't like me, and the Slytherins... well, they were Slytherins.

"The only people who stood by me throughout the whole thing were Hermione and... Sirius. Where were *you*, Mr. Lupin, when I needed support and help?"

Lupin didn't even raise his head. Harry could see the tears splashing on the edge of the table, and squashed any feelings. "No, Mr. Lupin. You made your choice when I was a baby. You wanted distance. Congratulations... you have succeeded."

"Harry..." Molly spoke up. "Don't you think you're being a little harsh here? Remus is obviously sorry about this, and wants to make amends. I'm sure that you'll accept him as your Godfather, and allow him to make it up to you, won't you?" The subtle undertone in her voice indicated that, yes, he would accept Remus, or he'd have to answer to her.

Harry slowly turned his head to look at her, his face a perfect expressionless mask. "Mrs. Weasley... sometimes indifference and neglect often do more damage than outright dislike." He leaned back in his chair. "Severus Snape hates me, just because I'm my father's son... and you know what? I think it'd be easier to forgive him for his sins against me. Remus could have checked on me at *any* point during the ten years I was forced to remain at the Dursleys. And he did nothing."

Lupin choked out a sob, which was soundly ignored by Harry.

"That indifference... that neglect meant that I was beaten severely. Almost every day. If a wizard, or better, a werewolf, since Muggles know what they are, were watching over me, protecting me, I'd have grown up with a champion, and a hell of a lot less scars.

"During my fourth year would have been an excellent time to build some bridges... and he did *nothing*. Just up and vanished like a fart in the wind. No, Lupin made his choice... just as I have made mine." He turned to the sobbing werewolf. "Sooner or later... the day comes when you can't hide from the things that you've done anymore."

Without excusing himself, Harry stood, and left the kitchen, every person thinking about what had been done... bar one. The sobbing werewolf rested his head in his hands, and wept for everything he'd lost.

The Black Family Manor, #12 Grimmauld Place, London

Monday, 29th July, 1996 – 20:51

Harry had retreated to his bedroom upon the conclusion of his dinner. As much as he wanted to hang around the others and be gently berated for not giving Remus a third chance (his second chance had been blown during fourth year), he decided that trimming his toenails would have been a more enjoyable pastime, especially the big toe on his left foot; that toenail had been taunting him for days, and it was going to have to suffer for its impertinence. So, after the cuticle surgery, he'd gone to his room, opening up a package he'd received through the Britannia book club while staying at the Dursleys.

Have it! A collection of war novels. Choosing one at random (mainly due to the title; 'Clear and Present Danger' seemed to accurately describe his current situation) he began to read.

As he got to the tenth page, a knock on his door interrupted his reading.

Bloody hell! He thought, swallowing down several retorts that would undoubtedly send Mrs. Weasley into a screaming fit. "Yes?" He called out.

The doorknob rattled for a moment, and someone obviously tried to get into the room. When they noticed it was locked, a voice shouted through.

"Harry?"

Swallowing several insults, he cleared his throat. "Yes, Mrs. Weasley?"

There was a pause for a moment. "Harry, Professor Dumbledore's here for the Order meeting. He's asked that you and your friends attend."

Huh... that must have required some pretty fast talking on Dumbledore's part... getting Molly to agree to let the 'babies' attend the meeting. He chuckled to himself as he stood up. He had a pretty good idea of what Dumbledore was going to ask, and he'd been working on his response ever since he'd finished school.

Dropping the book onto his bedside table, Harry unlocked the door, seeing Mrs. Weasley stood staring suspiciously at him.

"What?" He asked as he started to walk past her.

"Why do you feel the need to lock your door, Harry?" Molly asked. "I don't like having locked doors in my house."

And this isn't your house. Harry thought. "Okay, Mrs. Weasley. I won't lock any doors in your house."

She nodded, satisfied with the response, and led the way downstairs.

Why is it that no wizard or witch, apart from Hermione, has an ounce of logic or common sense? I reckon that when they graduate, they forget it all... Huh, maybe I'll finance a study... I can see it now, 60 IQ points dropped when you physically touch your graduation certificate: True or False? He followed Molly dutifully down the stairs and into the kitchen, where the entire Order of the Phoenix was assembled, as well as the other members of the 'Ministry Six', as the papers were calling them.

Hmm... full complement. This is gonna be zzz... With a snort, Harry managed to avoid falling to sleep right there.

He took his seat at the far end of the table, directly opposite Dumbledore. Hermione was next to him on his left, while Luna had the same dubious honour on the right hand side.

"Good evening, everyone." Dumbledore said genially, bringing the meeting to order.

Huh... order for the Order. Jesus, I'm bored already, and the meeting's only seconds old. I should have brought my book with me... Harry leaned back in his chair, desperately hoping that if he did fall asleep, he wouldn't snore, or drool.

"I declare this meeting of the Order of the Phoenix open." Dumbledore leaned back into his chair. "We will hear the reports from our agents, then we will arrange for a vote to induct our new members. Severus?"

Snape, the greasy-haired bane of Harry's existence, stepped forward from the shadows near the fireplace.

Should have known he'd stay in the dark... appropriate, really. Harry felt his eyelids begin to sink lower, and opened them again quickly.

"The Dark Lord is still weakened since his battle at the Department of Mysteries. Whatever happened there hurt him greatly. He constantly has a migraine, leaving him... irritable." Snape reported. "At the moment, he has no specific orders for his people. They're to continue with their assigned tasks, mainly Muggle-baiting and small random attacks against small Wizarding targets."

Dumbledore leaned forward. "Has he gained any further information about the prophecy, Severus?"

Snape shook his head. "Not yet, Headmaster. He still searches for the Seer who gave the prophecy, so that he may get it directly from the source, since he's now aware that the prophecy orb in the Ministry has been destroyed." Snape looked up at Neville, sneering at his second-favourite Gryffindor target, after Harry himself.

To Snape's disgust, Neville looked back at him blankly, not letting the greasy bastard have the pleasure of scaring him.

"Yes." Dumbledore said, interrupting the impromptu staring contest. "Fortunately, like all Seers, Professor Trelawney doesn't remember the prophecy, so that avenue is safe."

Snape looked up. "He will continue to search for the person who heard the prophecy, Headmaster. That person will need protection."

Dumbledore chuckled. "That was me, Severus. Professor Trelawney made the prophecy to me. I daresay that I will take the secret to the grave before I reveal it to Tom."

"Very good, sir." Snape replied, before stepping back into the shadows.

Kingsley spoke up. "There's no new news from the Ministry. The no-confidence vote against Fudge seems to be gaining support and momentum throughout the Wizengamot and Ministry employees. At this rate, he'll be removed from office before the school term starts."

Are my eyes open? Harry suddenly sat straighter in his chair. *No. Huh... better open them quickly before someone realises...*

Dumbledore nodded. "Do we know who his likely successor is, Kingsley?"

There are three candidates, Professor.” Kingsley replied. “Rufus Scrimgeour seems to be the leader at the moment. Madam Bones is second, and Amos Diggory is a distant third.”

Christ, this is boring. Harry thought, listening to the talk of political infighting with immense boredom. *Why the hell did I want to be in the Order if this is all they talk about?*

“Good.” Dumbledore replied. “Although Scrimgeour is not a part of the Order, his Auror background will be necessary if we are to fight a war.” He nodded to Kingsley, prompting the man to sit back down.

“Alastor, have you made the training arrangements I requested?” Dumbledore asked, turning to the aged ex-Auror.

“Aye, I have.” Moody growled. “Everything’s set up, and protected by a *Fidelius*. ‘Tis almost as secure as Headquarters.”

“Excellent.” Dumbledore turned his attention to the students at the far end of the table. “Then I propose our final order of business for this evening is to induct six new members into the Order of the Phoenix. They have done more to prevent Voldemort’s rise than almost anyone else.”

Every eye turned to Harry and his friends. Ron puffed up with pride as he felt the stares. Neville tried to remain stoic, but could help a smile forming on his face. The young ladies blushed and looked down, leaving Harry to return each stare, an air of impassivity projecting outwards.

“Does anyone have a valid reason why these six cannot be inducted into the Order?” Dumbledore asked, looking around.

“Yes.” Two voices replied. Molly Weasley and Severus Snape.

I should have known. Harry snorted quietly. Hermione glanced over at him, before returning her attention to the Order.

“Very well.” Dumbledore said with a sigh. “Severus, if you would care to go first?”

Snape stepped out of the shadows again, sneering at the students. “They should not be allowed to be inducted. They are a menace to all of us. They nearly got themselves killed due to their stupidity, and put Order members and resources in jeopardy. And they got the mutt killed.”

There was a general intake of breath, as every eye turned to Harry, expecting a detonation of abuse and insults.

Harry’s response, however, shocked everyone. He yawned. Widely. Lots of teeth. He stared at Snape with an expressionless look on his face, almost daring the man to try something.

Dumbledore watched, feeling a moment of pride as one of his favourite students retained control over his emotions in the face of almost overwhelming provocation. What he didn’t know was the truth of Harry’s feelings.

“Do any others feel this way about Severus’ comments?” The old man asked, glancing around the room. There was mumbling as people replied ‘No’, ‘Not really’ and ‘He did damned good’.

“I’m sorry, Severus,” Dumbledore replied with a twinkle in his eye, “but it seems that your objection has been overridden.”

Severus sulked back into the shadows, his eyes glaring daggers at Harry, who just stared back.

“Molly, I believe you had an objection?” Dumbledore said, turning back to the Weasley matriarch.

“Yes, Albus.” Molly said, standing up, and, to Harry’s intense amusement, being barely any taller standing than when she was sitting. “My objection is simple: they are children. They shouldn’t have to fight. They should leave it up to the adults to fight, the Order and the Aurors. It’s not their place.”

Had this happened last year, Harry would have jumped to his feet and loudly proclaimed that he wanted to fight, and that he wasn’t a child. Now, though, he really didn’t care. Again, the members of the Order, and especially his fellow students, waited for the inevitable pyroclastic explosion of temper. Again, Harry disappointed them all by sitting stoically.

Ron was the first to speak. “Mum, I know that you think we’re just kids, but that’s not true anymore. We’ve been fighting You-Know-Who ever since we were eleven. We’ve faced Dementors, Basilisks, possessed teachers, dragons, Death Eaters... I know you don’t want us in this fight, but it’s too late. We’re already in it, and I have no intention of letting others fight for me.”

Hmm, good speech. I’d give it six out of ten. Harry thought, watching the faces of the Order members carefully. What Ron had said was partially true. *Harry* had faced those things, and his friends had been there for some of it, but *he’d* faced the Dragon, *he’d* faced the Basilisk, *he’d* faced the Dementors... Ron’s only real contribution to the battle, apart from a flying partner and Quidditch plays, had been the defeat of the Chess set during the Philosopher’s Stone adventure, and that was a full four years ago.

Hermione spoke up next. “I know you don’t want to hear it, Mrs. Weasley, but none of us are children anymore. We’ve had to grow up quickly. I’ll be of age in September, and Ron will next March. As much as you want to keep us out of this war, we don’t really have a choice.”

Molly looked abashed that anyone had dared speak against her. To be honest, she’d expected Harry would have an outburst that she could use as evidence of his immaturity, but he’d remained silent.

Dumbledore cleared his throat. “Harry, do you have anything to say to Molly’s statement?”

Harry looked up at the aged Headmaster, mentally screaming out a position for the Headmaster to engage in that was anatomically impossible, but rather entertaining in thought. “No.” He said simply.

"I'm sorry?" Dumbledore looked taken aback.

"No, I have nothing to say to Mrs. Weasley's statement." Harry replied, ignoring the looks he was getting. "If she's convinced I'm a child, then nothing I can say will change her mind, since she'll just try and use any outburst as evidence of my childishness. So... no."

The Weasley clan looked at Harry with increased attention; he'd completely taken the wind out of Molly's sails with that statement, and earned their respect. He'd destroyed Molly's argument maturely, and without shouting. Bill and Charlie silently made notes about this; it would come in useful the next time their Mum went off on a rant.

Dumbledore smiled at his favourite pupil, and looked at the Order. "Does anyone else agree with Molly's statement that the students are children, and should not join the Order on that basis?"

Again, the mumbles of 'no' filled the room, causing Molly to sit down in a huff, and Dumbledore to smile widely. "Excellent. If there are no further objections, I would like to take the vote. All those who feel that the 'Ministry Six' should become members of the Order, please raise your hand now."

Only four people in the room didn't raise their hands; Dumbledore, since he was taking the vote, Snape, Molly... and Harry. Deciding to leave his question of 'Why not?' for the moment, Dumbledore nodded. "Then the motion is carried. Harry, Ronald, Hermione, Ginevra, Luna and Neville, I would like to welcome you to the Order of the Phoenix."

Apart from Harry, the other students smiled. This was their chance to make a difference in the war, to *finally* get to fight, to show the Order what they could do.

"Now that that has been sorted, I would like to discuss your training." He leaned back in his chair. "I have arranged with Alastor for a secret training facility to be set up. You will undergo a strict regime of exercise, Potions training, Transfiguration, Charms and Defence Against the Dark Arts. We will begin training on Monday, 5th August. This is so that you may complete any summer homework that you have, and you may take a few days to rest. We will be working you hard, to ensure that you get up to the standards of an Order member quickly." He looked around, noting the pride on the children's faces... except Harry.

"Harry, you don't seem to be as happy about the situation as your friends. Is there a problem?"

Harry folded his arms across his chest, and stared at the old man. "I believe you're proceeding under a false assumption, Headmaster."

Dumbledore's eyebrows shot up. "Oh? Would you care to explain?"

"Not really." Harry replied dismissively. "However, in the interest of clarity, I shall do so. I do not wish to be a member of your little group. You haven't actually asked me if I'd like to join. You just told me that I was."

Predictably, Snape was the first to speak. Or *rant*, as the case may be. "Potter! Your arrogance just grows by leaps and bounds, doesn't it?" He stepped out of the shadows. "We are giving you an opportunity to join in the fight against the man who killed your parents, and you tell us that you 'do not wish' to be a member? You are simply unbelievable! Just like your father, convinced that everyone should drop to their knees and worship the great Potters! I have tried for five years to break you of this arrogance, and obviously, I have failed."

Unlike previous encounters, Harry just started at Dumbledore throughout the whole thing. If Dumbledore was honest with himself, and he made it a point to always be honest with himself, a calm, collected Harry Potter was actually rather intimidating.

After Snape had finished his rant, Harry cleared his throat. "I'll ask you this, Headmaster; why should I want to join your parochial little band?"

Dumbledore sat up straighter, noticing the strange looks Harry was getting from virtually the entire Order. "Are you saying that you do not wish to join the Order, Harry?"

Harry raised an eyebrow slightly. "Don't you know it's rude to answer a question with a question, Headmaster?"

Dumbledore suppressed a small smile. "Why do you not wish to join, Harry?"

"Why should I?" Harry had to suppress his own smile. The game 'Questions Only' had been on some television show he'd seen while locked at Durzkaban, and had proved quite entertaining.

"Stop it, Harry." Hermione said, leaning in closer to him. "I thought you wanted this..."

"I have no interest in joining the Order of the Phoenix, Headmaster." Harry replied. "To be perfectly frank, I really don't see the point."

Several people began to speak loudly, before Dumbledore shushed them. "Why, Harry?"

"Tell me why I should, Headmaster." Harry retorted. "Give me a reason."

Dumbledore wielded the strongest card he could; "Your parents, Harry, were members of the Order. Sirius was a member of the Order. They would want you to carry on their work as a member."

Ooh, lowblow! Harry thought viciously. "And with respect, Headmaster, they're all dead. Not exactly a shining motivational tool, is it? The only reason I can think of joining the Order is so I can be reunited with my family."

"Are... Why, Harry?"

Harry leaned back, sighing heavily. "What reason do I have to fight, sir? The Wizarding world either hates me or loves me. One day, I'm the second coming of Merlin, the next, I'm the reincarnation of Satan. The sheeple of this world turn on me whenever the *Daily Prophet* needs to boost its sales."

Harry got into his stride. "The people at school are the same. The Gryffindors love me for winning Quidditch, then they hate me for losing points. Half of them think I'm the Heir of Slytherin, then decide I'm a hero when I killed the Basilisk. Third year, I've got everyone's pity, because the notorious murderer Sirius Black's after me. Then, I'm a cheat for putting my name into the Goblet of Fire, even though I told everyone I didn't.

"Then fifth year, I warn everyone that Voldemort's back, only to be called a delusional lunatic in the paper. People like Seamus, who's known me for four years, thinks I'm a psychopath who's planning to kill him. Umbridge gives me detentions with a blood quill, as often as she can. Then, when it's proved that I'm not lying, the *Prophet* tells me how I 'was the lone voice of truth, putting up with lies, ridicule and slander'... and they were the ones bloody doing it!"

"Harry, I understand that you've had a difficult-" Dumbledore began.

"Then," Harry interrupted, ignoring the Headmaster for the moment, "we come to the Muggle world. Did you know that according to the Dursleys, I attend St. Brutus' Centre for Incurably Criminal Boys? I had no friends while I was growing up, because my cousin would beat anyone who tried. My bedroom for ten years was a bloody cupboard under the stairs, and it was only the fear of Hagrid that got me Dudley's second bedroom. Every year, I have to go back to those animals, who despise me for simply being a wizard."

Harry sat forward, resting his clenched fists on the table. Throughout his entire monologue, his voice had been calm and collected. Considering what he was saying, it only made the speech more damning. "So, you'll forgive me, Headmaster, if I decide that I don't want to fight for the people, because I don't think they deserve it. It was Muggles and Wizards that created the problem of Lord Voldemort, so they should reap what they sow." He stood up, turning to his friends. "You guys are welcome to do what you want, but I want *nothing* to do with this. Good night."

And without another word, Harry left the kitchen, heading up for his bedroom.

It was Neville who adequately summed up everyone's thoughts. "Huh... that could've gone better..."

*The Black Family Manor, #12 Grimmauld Place, London
Wednesday, 31st July, 1996 – 07:49*

Harry woke up on Wednesday, 31st July, 1996, and got out of bed. Even though it was his birthday, his 16th and a milestone in the Muggle world, to him, it was just a Wednesday. He headed into the bathroom, looking at the windowsill of his bedroom. Nothing. No owls, no well-wishers... nothing.

With a shrug, he clambered into the shower.

As soon as he got downstairs, he used his wand to light the stove, grabbing a skillet and a pound of bacon, and a half-pound of sausages. *Ah, a fry-up. What better way to start the day?* He quickly poured a little olive oil into the pan, slicing the sausages lengthways before gently dropping them into the boiling oil.

While the sausages were spitting all over the hob, Harry quickly dropped the bacon in, grabbing some bread and butter.

As expected, the smell of cooking breakfast quickly woke the walking stomachs that were the Weasley family. Ron entered the kitchen, his hair a glorious mess of tangles, wearing worn sweatpants and a t-shirt with more holes than cloth. "Mornin'." He yawned.

"Ron." Harry replied, using a spatula to flick the sausages onto a plate, while he waited for the bacon to finish. He turned back to the plate... only to notice his six sausages were missing. Glancing up, he saw that Ron had helped himself and made several sausage sandwiches, which he was happily demolishing.

Huh... that's bloody rude. He could have asked. I don't steal his food. Harry muffled a growl, placing his bacon onto the plate while he went into the coolbox to grab some more sausages. When he turned back to the cooker, he noticed that his bacon was gone; George had appeared in the kitchen, and was calmly eating a bacon sandwich.

Why do I get the feeling that each time I finish cooking something, someone else is going to eat it? Harry thought, while putting the new sausages into the pan. He grabbed more bacon from the cooler, and placed it into the pan. He flipped the sausages over, and heading into the coolbox, grabbed eggs, milk and cheese. As before, when he got back to the frying pan, his sausages had gone, and Fred had turned up in the kitchen, also eating.

I'm going to get annoyed at this rate. Harry beat the eggs, adding milk, and grabbed a second frying pan from under the cooker. As he stood up again, his bacon was gone, and Ginny had arrived.

Deciding to abandon the bacon and sausages, he poured the omelette into the pan, quickly adding the cheese. After a minute, he flicked his wrist, neatly flipping the omelette over. Deciding that it would be okay for a moment, he headed into the cooler, grabbing the milk so that he could have a glass of that with breakfast.

His return to the cooker revealed an empty frying pan, and Remus was happily tucking into the cheese omelette. With a sigh, Harry turned off the cooker, and started to walk out of the kitchen.

As he got to the door, he noticed Hermione about to enter, her hair a huge bushy mound. She glanced around the kitchen, seeing everyone else eating. "Morning, Harry." She muttered through a yawn. "You could have made me some, you know."

Harry bit back several scathing comments along the lines of 'I was trying to make *me* some', and just walked out.

"What's up with him?" Hermione asked Ron.

"Dunno." Ron replied, eating the last of his sandwiches.

Harry returned to his bedroom, grabbing his small pile of homework, and made his way into the library. Even though the Black family were unequivocally Dark, potions were potions, regardless of who was using them.

After a few minutes, his stomach rumbled loudly. *Bastards... not one of them could be arsed to speak to me, yet they'll happily steal my food? Twats.* He ignored the growling. He'd had a decade of experience of being hungry, one morning without breakfast wouldn't kill him.

He started to work on his assignment '134 Uses of Ant's Knees in Potion-Making'. He'd just started to research, when a shrill cry assaulted him.

"Harry Potter!"

Oh bloody hell... what now?

"Get in here this instant and clean up this mess!" Molly Weasley shouted.

Ah... the mess that I made, yet got none of the benefit. He stood up, and ambled back into the kitchen. Molly was stood near the cooker, an immense scowl on her face. The rest of the Weasleys were sat around the table, watching the confrontation with glee.

"Yes, Mrs. Weasley?"

The irate redhead pointed to the collection of plates, cutlery, pots and pans around the kitchen. "Clean this mess up!"

Harry slowly folded his arms across his chest. "Why should I do it?"

"You made the mess, Harry, you can clean it up!" Molly exclaimed, jamming her hands on her hips.

"Really?" Harry drawled. "I used six plates, four knives and a fork, did I? No, your children are the ones who stole my food, so they can damn well clean up their own mess." Harry turned his back in preparation of leaving the kitchen.

"I beg your pardon?" Molly whispered dangerously.

Harry turned back. "I was cooking breakfast. For *me*. Ron came in, and stole my sausages. When I got more out of the fridge, George had nicked my bacon. When I put more in, Fred and Ginny turned up, and stole those. I decided to abandon those, and made an omelette... which Remus stole." Harry stood up to his full height. "I've not eaten this morning, so you'll excuse me if I don't feel like tidying up after thieves." He turned in preparation of leaving the kitchen.

"Don't you walk away from me, young man!" Molly near-shouted. "I don't care who ate the food. You were the one who cooked it, so you can clean it up."

Harry turned back, his face back to the expressionless mask. After staring at her for a moment, which made her squirm, he started forward, collecting the plates and cutlery from the table. He put them into the sink, and started the tap.

Molly smiled; she'd gotten her own way, while the rest of the Weasleys grinned. While it was scary as hell having Mount Molly erupt at you, it was damned entertaining watching her go after someone else.

Hermione, sipping from a cup of coffee, watched the confrontation. Again, she knew something was wrong. Harry was *never* this submissive. She still hadn't realised the truth.

This sucks. Harry was washing the dishes by hand, since officially, he wasn't allowed to use magic. The frying pans needed scrubbing, but Harry was used to excessive amounts of menial labour, thanks to his time with the Dursleys. *Well, I think this clinches it. I'm sick of this. Of all of them. Hypocrites.* Harry put the pans onto the draining board, and wiped his hands on the tea-towel.

"Are there any other menial chores you want me to complete, Mrs. Weasley, or may I go back to my homework now?"

Molly's face dropped. "Don't cheek me, Harry. I won't stand for it in my house."

And again, we're not in your house! Harry screamed mentally, but kept his face neutral. "Right. Is there anything else, Mrs. Weasley?"

"Not right now, Harry." Molly replied smugly. "Now, off you go."

Clearing her throat, Hermione asked, "Er... what about Harry's breakfast?"

Molly glanced into the fridge. "He cooked enough for everyone. It's not my fault that he didn't eat."

Hermione's jaw dropped. "But, Mrs. Weasley, that's not fair!"

Looking over at Hermione, Harry just shook his head. *Just leave it...* His eyes seemed to be saying to her. Without another word, Harry turned and left the kitchen. *Happy fucking birthday, Harry. Isn't it great to be sixteen?*

After another hour or so, Harry had managed to find all 134 uses of Ant's Knees. *I can't believe there's actually 134 uses. I wonder which sad bastard sat there and thought, 'I know! I'll dissect an ant, and see what bits of it I can use in a potion!'. Poor guy.*

The door to the library opened, and a head of now-tamed bushy hair popped round.

Hermione watched Harry calmly read through one of the many books on the table, and scribble some chicken-scratch onto the parchment in front of him. After a minute, she entered the library, and tentatively sat down opposite Harry. He looked up at her for a moment, before getting back to work.

"H-How's it going, Harry?" She asked after a few moments.

He carried on scratching away at the parchment. "Fine, thank you." He replied in a monotone.

"Is... is that the potions homework?"

Harry nodded without looking up. "Just about finished, too."

"Do you want me to check it for you?"

Without a word, Harry placed his quill back in the inkpot, and passed the parchment over. Hermione read through it quickly, noting that it was well-researched and well-written. The only things she could find wrong with it were a couple of spelling mistakes, which she pointed out to him.

Harry picked up his quill and corrected them, before writing his conclusion. He waited for the ink to dry, before pulling out a fresh sheet of parchment.

Hermione watched him for almost ten minutes, trying to decide how to broach the immense chasm that seemed to have sprung up between them. *Howdo I do this? He's been so distant... So standoffish... I... I don't know!* Without another word, she got up and raced out of the library, intent on heading to her bedroom to have a good, if thoroughly useless, cry.

Harry watched her go, and knew where and why she'd run out of the library. *You've made your choice, Hermione. You chose Dumbledore over me. You chose Ron over me. Like I said to Lupin... the time comes when you can't hide from the things you've done.*

After completing his Transfiguration homework, 'The Animagus Transformation is cool. Discuss.' Harry had returned to his bedroom, and grabbed the next book from his Tom Clancy novels. He leaned against the headboard, and began to read.

*The Black Family Manor, #12 Grimmauld Place, London
Wednesday, 31st July, 1996 – 19:02*

Harry hadn't seen his 'friends' or any of the other occupants of the house all day. He'd missed lunch, simply because he didn't want to see Molly again. The odds of him smacking her in the mouth if she started talking was great, and he didn't really want to get into a big fight. *Yet.*

He shut the book, wondering why the hell the Russians wouldn't notice one of their submarines just disappearing, before deciding that it was fiction, and it didn't really matter anyway.

Standing up, he stretched and headed into the bathroom. Two minutes and ten pounds lighter, he felt much better. *Ah, well... suppose I should head downstairs, see when dinner'll be ready.*

As he entered the kitchen, he saw the Weasleys, the Grangers, Neville, Luna and Remus already eating. *Huh... guess I'm not important enough to be invited to dinner. Ironic, considering this is my fucking house! Bunch of bastards.*

He stood in the doorway, waiting for an invitation to join them.

"Something I can do for you, Harry?" Molly asked sharply.

I wonder why... ah, that's it! Ever since she was overruled about the others joining the Order, she's been a bitch to me. Petty cow.

Emma and Dan glanced at Molly, wondering where the hell the attitude had come from.

"Apparently not, Mrs. Weasley." Harry replied, turning on his heel and heading back to his bedroom.

"Molly, is there something wrong?" Emma asked.

"Hmm? No, nothing, Emma dear." Molly replied.

Hermione looked up. "Mrs. Weasley, he's not eaten all day."

"He should have been here on time, then." Molly replied brusquely. "It's not my fault if he can't be bothered to come downstairs."

"Why hasn't he eaten?" Dan asked, leaning forward.

"He obviously isn't hungry." Molly replied, looking down at her own dinner.

Emma glanced at Dan, clearly detecting some kind of undertone. "I'll make him a tray, and take it up to him."

"No." Molly replied, glaring at the younger woman. "If he can't be at the table on time, he doesn't eat. It's very simple."

Ron just forced another forkful of potatoes into his mouth, ignoring the rest of the people at the table as he ate enough for three.

Harry lay on his bed, the door to the master suite locked, sealed and silenced. *Well, Molly, you bitch... you've clearly demonstrated that I'm not one of your family. You've been acting like the Dursleys, intent on stamping your authority on me. You've denied me food, and made sure I was unwelcome.*

Happy Birthday to me... Happy Birthday to me... Happy Birthday, 'dear' Harry... Happy Birthday to me. This time last year, I'd have been crying. Now? I really don't care anymore. With that cheerful thought in mind, Harry drifted off to sleep.

*The Black Family Manor, #12 Grimmauld Place, London
Thursday, 1st August, 1996 – 09:16*

Harry woke up, feeling very refreshed. It was rare that he'd been able to sleep through the night without the terrifying images that came from Voldemort, or his own battered psyche. Last night, though, he'd slept for a good twelve hours, surely a record for him.

He clambered out of bed and stretched, moaning in pleasure as almost every joint cracked. *It's grim, true, but god, it feels good!* He ambled into the shower, and turned the water as high as it would go. With near-boiling water, Harry scrubbed the debris from a long sleep and a long day. Turning off the water, and hitting himself with a drying charm, he strolled back into his bedroom, dressing in his best-fitting cast-offs.

Unsealing the bedroom door, he strolled out, and headed down the stairs.

Molly was in the kitchen, cooking up a storm as she fed the bottomless pits that were known as teenagers. The four younger Weasley children, Neville, Luna and Hermione were all present, eating large breakfasts.

"Morning, Harry." Hermione said, smiling weakly at him.

Harry nodded to her, and was about to sit down, when Molly spoke up. "Are you going to apologise for your dreadful attitude yesterday? To me *and* the children? Calling them thieves?" She scowled at him. "If you do, I'll let you have some breakfast."

Looking up sharply, Hermione had her own scowl. *Damn it, Molly, he's not eaten in two days! Don't be such a bitch!* She cleared her throat. "Mrs. Weasley, don't you think?"

"No." Harry interrupted, staring at Molly. "I have no intention of apologising to the thieves who stole my food, and I have no intention of apologising to you, considering that *you* are in the wrong."

Molly was about to wind up for another rant, when the chime in the hallway sounded, alerting the residents to an incoming Portkey. Harry heard a pair of footsteps, which he quickly identified as Lupin, stomp down the stairs and into the hall.

A gigantic thud announced the arrival; either a herd of elephants, or Hagrid. The 'clomp' of a pair of size 31 boots quickly confirmed that it was Hagrid.

"Hello!" The half-giant boomed as he stomped into the kitchen. He stalked over to the table, and put three chairs together, half-hoping that they'd be able to handle his bulk. "How're you doing, Harry?"

Harry looked up into the face of his very first magical friend, and smiled. "I'm not too bad, Hagrid. Thanks for asking. How're you? You've not been around for a while."

"Aye, sorry about that." Hagrid apologised. "Was on a mission in France with Dumbledore. Only got back this morning. Here, I've got something for you." Reaching into an immense pocket, he pulled out a small wrapped package. "It's shrunk, but I think it'll come in handy for your classes."

Harry tapped the package with his wand, growing it back to full size, before carefully unwrapping it. He looked up and smiled. "Thanks, Hagrid." Glancing down at *Fantastically Dangerous Beasts and Where to Find Them*, the NEWT-level edition of *Fantastic Beasts*, he glanced through. Getting to the section on Basilisks, he smiled as he saw a picture of himself.

"I'm sorry I missed the party, Harry, but as I said, I only got back this morning." Hagrid apologised, resting a huge hand on Harry's shoulder.

Everyone looked up at the word 'party', immediately wondering what party.

"Don't worry about it, Hagrid." Harry replied casually. "I seem to recall missing it, too."

At the cooker, there was a clatter as the wooden spoon Molly was holding dropped to the floor. Everyone glanced over at the Weasley matriarch, who'd gone almost instantly pale. "Mum?" Ginny asked. "What's up?"

"His birthday..." she whispered. "Oh, Merlin, it was his birthday yesterday..."

Hermione's eyes widened dramatically. *Oh my god... His sixteenth birthday... and we all forgot it!* She glanced around, noting the looks of horror on most of the Weasleys' faces, apart from Ron, who was too busy eating. *Oh, god...*

"What?" Hagrid roared from the end of the table. "You all just forgot? What kinds of friends are you supposed to be?"

He turned to speak to Harry, only to notice that the young man in question had vanished. Lupin came into the kitchen, looking at the horrified expressions curiously. "What's wrong?"

Hermione looked up. "Professor, what's the date today?"

"August 1st." Lupin replied, not catching on.

"And what was yesterday?" Hermione asked.

"July 31st... why?"

Hermione couldn't believe that the 'smart' one of the Marauders was quite this dense. "I thought you wanted to take over Sirius' role as godfather to Harry?"

"I do." Lupin replied slowly.

"So... why didn't you remember that it was Harry's 16th birthday yesterday?"

Predictably, Remus' eyes shot open comically wide, as he glanced over his shoulder at the stairs. "What... how... did anyone else remember?"

"No..." Hermione whispered bitterly. "None of us... damn us all, none of us remembered."

"Oh, lord..." Remus muttered. "I can only imagine how Harry feels..."

"...imagine how Harry feels..." Harry leaned against his headboard, listening in through judicious use of a modified extendible ear.

"Can you? I really don't think so, Remus..." Harry muttered. He raised the receiver to his ear.

"*Quickly, everyone, we'll head to Diagon Alley, to pick up some gifts and a cake, and we'll have a party today.*"

Huh, Molly... a guilt-party. Sounds like fun. So sorry I can't be arsed attending. Harry mused. Making up his mind, he grabbed his trainers, and headed for the kitchen.

Passing through, he ignored everyone's attempts to apologise until he came to Ron, who stood up suddenly, blocking Harry's way to the fireplace.

"Something I can do for you, Ron?" Harry asked.

Ron looked down on Harry, pleased to note that he was a good six inches taller than his best mate. "Why are you being so rude, Potter?" He snapped angrily. "We're trying to apologise for forgetting your stupid birthday, and you're being arrogant by not accepting it."

"Is that so?" Harry asked, stepping round Ron, dodging suddenly to one side to avoid Hermione's hug attempt and continued forward. Molly stepped in front of him, scowl on face, hands on hips.

"And just where do you think you're going, young man?" She snapped.

Harry stopped, and stared at her for a moment. "What concern is that of yours, Mrs. Weasley?"

"Don't talk back to me, Harry! While you're in my house, you will tell me when you're leaving, where you're going, and when you'll be back."

"Okay." Harry said agreeably, before stepping round her, and climbing into the fireplace. "The Leaky Cauldron, Diagon Alley!"

Upon flying out of the fireplace in the Leaky Cauldron, Harry coughed and pulled himself to his feet. "I hate Floo..."

Tom the barman came rushing over with a clothes brush, knocking the soot from Harry's clothes.

"Thanks, Tom." Harry tipped the man a sickle, and darted out of the door before the Weasleys could catch him. Making his way down the Alley, he stopped in at Dewey, Robbem and Howe Solicitors, the group who had a copy of Sirius' will.

An hour later, he left the office, his emancipation filed with the Ministry and confirmation of now owning Headquarters, and headed for Gringotts. It only took a few minutes for them to combine all his funds into one vault, before issuing him a Wizarding Debit card that he could use in the Muggle world. *This* was his reason for heading into the alley on this day. He had some things to buy, and a sack full of Wizarding gold wouldn't be of any use to him.

The Black Family Manor, #12 Grimmauld Place, London
Thursday, 1st August, 1996 – 14:29

Harry stumbled out of the Floo, cursing viciously at the inanities of Wizarding transport methods. *Who the bloody hell decided that walking into a bloody fireplace was a good idea? I mean, seriously, couldn't they have come up with transporter pads or something?* He brushed the ash from his clothes and straightened up. In the kitchen was a banner, loudly proclaiming 'Happy 16th Birthday!'.
Who the bloody hell decided that walking into a bloody fireplace was a good idea? I mean, seriously, couldn't they have come up with transporter pads or something?

Underneath the banner were the Weasley family, the Grangers, Tonks, Neville, Luna and Remus, each of them holding hastily wrapped packages.

With a snort of amusement, Harry walked out of the kitchen without another word. In his pocket were three sheets of A4 paper, which was his real birthday present to himself. Up in his bedroom, he removed the three sheets of paper, which were print-outs of receipts. He'd gone to a plain Muggle library, and used the computers inside to go on the Internet. He'd slowly taught himself how to use a search engine, and online ticket purchasing, and made his selections.

Come September 1st, when he got to King's Cross, he'd be attending a slightly different platform.

The Black Family Manor, #12 Grimmauld Place, London
Thursday, 1st August, 1996 – 15:01

Fantastically Dangerous Beasts and Where to Find Them was far more interesting than its OWL-level counterpart. The section on Basilisks had been updated with a rather... *inaccurate* version of what had happened in the Chamber of Secrets. According to the book, Harry had engaged in a fierce battle with the Basilisk, eventually climbing up onto its back and stabbing it in the brain. There was no mention of him getting bitten, no mention of Fawkes, nothing.

A knock on his door interrupted his reading. With a sigh, he jabbed a sock into the book to mark his page, and stood up. "Come in." He called.

The door opened, revealing a head of bushy-brown hair and a pair of almond-brown eyes, crinkled with worry. "H-Harry... can I come in?"

"Sure." Harry replied tonelessly. "What can I do for you?"

Hermione stepped into the bedroom exactly one pace, and started to wring her hands together. "A-Are you... are you not coming downstairs, Harry?"

Harry just looked at her. "Wasn't planning on it. Why?"

"W-Well, we're having your birthday party, Harry." Hermione stammered, feeling her cheeks light up like a Christmas tree.

"It was my birthday *yesterday*, Hermione." Harry replied casually. "So, I don't see the point of having a party today. Thank you for the offer, though." He turned and sat back down on the bed, pulling out his book.

"But... we're all here, now. We've got presents for you, and cake... Come on down, Harry, please." She stared at him, her eyes wide and innocent.

He shook his head. "Not interested."

Hermione took another step into the room. "Harry, please... we know we forgot, and we want to make it up to you."

"No, you don't... not really. You just want to make yourselves feel better. That's why you decided to throw this little pity-party. To be honest, I'm surprised Molly's there. Considering she's blocked me from having food since Tuesday evening, simply because she's pissed that you five have joined the Order, I'm not really in the mood to talk to her."

"Harry, there's food in the kitchen. Cake and presents, too. Please, come downstairs."

"No." Harry replied. "Why don't you just go downstairs and spend time with your little boyfriend, hmm? I don't particularly want to talk to or hang around with any of you." He waved absently at the door. "Go on... off you go."

He heard her turn round, the sound of a soft sob emanating as she walked away.

Why don't I feel guilty? Harry pondered as he shut the door behind her. *Shouldn't I feel guilty for making her cry? I hate it when Ron does it...* Another voice, this one permeated with an infinite sadness, replied. ***We didn't make her cry, though. She's now beginning to realise that indifference and neglect often do more damage than outright dislike. This knowledge is obviously painful to her. But... we care about her. Yeah, her blind faith in authority is bloody irritating, but we don't want to see her hurt. She's dealing with pain of her own making. There's nothing we can do about that without compromising ourself. And we've done that far too much.***

Harry shrugged, and went back to his book.

Stopping on her way downstairs, Hermione slumped to the step, and wrapped her arms around her knees. *What have I done? He's never forgotten my birthday... every year, a present and a card in my dorm room. Every Christmas, he's given me a gift. And I just... forget...*

She knew it would be very easy to go and throw herself at him, confess her love for him, even strip off and shag him, but she'd made a decision that the prophecy was too strong... she couldn't risk the chance of truly being with him, and him then being mercilessly ripped away from her. *I'm scared... and it's costing me far too much... I don't like this... What can I do?*

Unfortunately, the revelation that would answer all her problems... didn't appear.

*The Black Family Manor, #12 Grimmauld Place, London
Thursday, 1st August, 1996 – 20:27*

Harry had spent the day reading in his room, ignoring the muffled knocks on the door. He'd heard Molly Weasley ranting about locked doors, and soundly ignored her. Really, how dense could the woman actually be?

He closed his book, making a mental note to thank Hagrid again, before clambering to his feet. He was thirsty, and rather hungry, considering it was over forty-eight hours without food.

I hope they've all got out of the bloody kitchen. Really don't wanna 'play' with them all again, was his thought as he unlocked the door. Fortunately, there was no-one waiting outside for him.

Upon entering the kitchen, he nearly turned on his heel and walked away. They were all still there, sitting around the table, looking despondent. Upon seeing him, almost every face lit up with pleasure.

"I'm only here to get myself a drink." Harry said in a flat voice. "Don't bother getting up."

Molly cleared her throat, at the head of the table. "Harry, I would like a word with you." She said primly. "What did I tell you about locking doors?"

Harry continued on his way to the coldbox. "You told me that you don't like locked doors in your house, Mrs. Weasley." He answered politely.

"Then why was your door locked, Harry?" Molly asked archly.

"So I could have some privacy." Harry replied, reaching into the coldbox and pulling out three Butterbeers for himself. "Why else would I lock my door?"

"I have told you that I don't like locked doors, and you locked your door. Please explain yourself." Molly ordered.

"No." Harry replied, unscrewing the first bottle. "I don't need to explain myself to you or anyone."

Before Molly could react, the fireplace flared up, and Dumbledore stepped out, clutching his Pensieve. "Hello, everyone." He said, before looking up at the banner in the kitchen. "Ah, a birthday party!"

Harry just snorted as he trudged back to the door.

"Harry, I need to speak to you about training." Dumbledore called out. "Please, sit down."

Without bothering to turn round, Harry answered. "What *school-related* training do we need to discuss, Headmaster?"

Dumbledore peered over his spectacles at Harry. "It is not school-related training, my boy. It is regarding your joining the Order. As I told you several nights ago, your training, along with that of your friends, will begin on Monday. We need to sit down and discuss this."

He's not gonna listen to me... and I doubt he'll let me just walk away. Maybe it's time to get some proper answers... Harry turned and stared at Dumbledore for nearly a minute, before he sat at the far end of the table. "Okay. Let's talk."

"Excellent, Harry, now-" Dumbledore started, but was cut off by Harry.

"First, you can answer me a few questions. If I like your answers, we can carry on with the discussion. If not, well... I'll go back to my book."

Dumbledore leaned back in his chair, watching Harry. *I don't want you to be hurt, my boy, but this needs to be done. You will need every scrap of training and knowledge I can pass to you in order to survive. Your friends will not abandon you, which is why they will need training as well...*
"Very well, Harry."

Harry took another swig of his Butterbeer, and gently placed the bottle on the table. "My first question, Headmaster, is 'why now'? Why choose this particular moment to begin my training to kill Voldemort?" He ignored the flinches from virtually everyone round the table, bar the Grangers. "You knew, from the instant that I got this bloody cut on my forehead, that I would be the one to fight him. You've known for fifteen years. Why wait all that time to begin?"

Dumbledore sat up slightly straighter. "As I told you in my office at the end of term, Harry, I wanted you to grow up as a normal boy, without airs or graces. I wanted you to have a perfectly normal childhood."

Harry nodded slowly. "I see... You are aware that you failed, yeah?"

"Oh?" Dumbledore asked. "How so?"

"You left me with child-abusing monsters, who cared nothing for me. You left me with people who, if I had died in a childhood accident, would have happily danced on my grave. A 'perfectly normal' childhood involves a child having books, toys, games and love growing up. At the very least, it involves them having a bedroom. You dropped me off with people who hated my very existence before we even met, and then left me there. Explain." Harry was calm and collected throughout the entire speech, sending chills down everyone's spines, especially the Grangers who, as medical professionals, were trained to remove children from abusive environments.

Dumbledore took a moment to gather his thoughts. "The blood protection on your family's house—"

"Relatives." Harry interrupted. "They're not my family. I have no family. They are my relatives, nothing more."

"Relatives." Dumbledore acquiesced. "The protection wards there ensured that you could not be harmed while you can call that place your home."

"Hmm..." Harry was pondering. *Do I show him my back? The scars from the whippings and the beatings? Do I tell him to check my medical records from first year, where it shows how dreadfully malnourished I was growing up? No, fuck it. He's too blind to see.* "Your wards have never worked, Headmaster, because I have never called Privet Drive home. To me, it was my jail cell, even more so after I learned of the magical world and came to Hogwarts."

Emma Granger cleared her throat. "Could... could someone explain these wards to me?"

Harry looked at her and smiled. "You've seen Star Trek, yeah?" She nodded. "Well, wards are like deflector shields. They can be general purpose, like preventing a fire or flood damage, or they can be specific, like not letting certain people in."

Emma nodded. "Okay... so, there were shields around your house, only as long as you called it home?"

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes. And they have been in place ever since Harry was left with his relatives in 1981."

"However," Harry continued, "these particular shields have been useless all the time they were there. Since I have never considered Privet Drive home, they became permeable. *Anyone*, even Voldemort himself, could just walk through them."

"The wards are there, Harry." Dumbledore corrected. "I have a monitor in my office that shows their level and efficiency."

Harry ignored him. "Then we come to the best part." He turned to the elder Grangers. "Has Hermione told you what happened at the end of my fourth year?"

Looking up, Dan nodded slowly. "According to the letter, you were kidnapped at the end of some competition, taken by... well, sticking with the Star Trek analogy, you were beamed away to a graveyard, where you were held hostage during some weird kind of ritual."

"Near enough." Harry replied. "It was necromancy, using components from others and a hefty dose of truly black magic to create a metamorphic potion. Voldemort was in a homunculus form..." He trailed off as he saw their confusion. "Er... how to describe it... Imagine that your body is a house, okay?" They nodded. "Well, Voldemort's body was the framework of a garden shed. Enough to live in, but dreadfully weak and small."

They nodded again. "Well, they used three components for this ritual. Using the bone of his father, to create a shiny new skeleton, flesh of a servant, which would be replicated by magic and used to create his own organs, muscles and skin, and the blood of an enemy to complete the restoration... me. Now, can you see the problem?"

Emma nodded. "He had your blood. Which means that he could share your blood protection."

Dumbledore's face paled instantly, closely followed by Hermione and Dan.

"Now, this is the interesting part. Had Voldemort gone to Privet Drive, and decided to live there, *he* would have had the ultimate defensive wards in the world. If he killed Vernon and Petunia, and kept Dudley under the Imperius, he could have lived there with impunity. All he'd have to do is consider Privet Drive to be his home, and he'd be set."

"That's... that's not possible, Harry." Dumbledore replied slowly, almost painfully.

"So you say." Harry replied casually. "Anyway, let's leave this for the moment. Get back to what we were talking about. You said that you left me at the Dursleys so I would have a normal childhood?"

Dumbledore nodded.

"Then why, in your office when we had this conversation originally, did you say, 'you had suffered. I knew you would when I left you on your Aunt and Uncle's doorstep. I knew I was condemning you to ten dark and difficult years'."

There was no answer to that question.

"So, how can you tell me in one sentence that you wanted me to have a normal childhood, and then tell me that you knew you were condemning me to a decade of slavery and abuse? Because frankly, I don't understand. Please, Headmaster, explain it to me."

"I understand, Harry, but it was for the best. While Voldemort had been defeated, his Death Eaters were still at large. They would have come for

you, to kill you as revenge for their fallen master. By placing you with the Dursleys, you were safe.”

“Not from *them*. I was safe from the *Death Eaters*. Not my relatives.” Harry corrected. “But, that didn’t matter, did it? As long as I was living at the Dursleys during those ‘dark and difficult years’, you knew that I would do almost anything to gain my freedom. And then in swoops the wizards, offering me freedom, fame and glory. Heady stuff to an eleven-year old slave.”

“I know, my boy, I know.” Dumbledore replied wearily. “At the time, there really wasn’t any other option.”

“Really?” Harry asked, again sounding calm and collected, intimidating Dumbledore thoroughly. “Tell me something, then; why is this house safe? Why can we sit here, drinking Butterbeer and eating cake without fear of reprisals?”

“The *Fidelius* charm protects this house, Harry.” Dumbledore replied. “As long as the secret-keeper remains alive, the house cannot be found.”

“So... why couldn’t he have lived in a house protected by a *Fidelius*?” Emma asked. “If you knew that he was the one who would be facing Voldemort, why not have him living in a protected house with a mentor, a trainer, who would teach him what he needed to know?”

Dumbledore glanced over at Emma. “As I said, I wanted him to enjoy his childhood before beginning his training.”

“But you’ve already said that you knew he’d suffer.” Emma said. “So which is it? Enjoyable childhood or decade of abuse?”

Sighing, Dumbledore took off his glasses, and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “I know that I have made mistakes with you, Harry. And for that, I am truly sorry. But, there is nothing that I can do about that now. The real issue that lies before us is helping you to defeat Voldemort.” Dumbledore’s expression didn’t change as he casually shrugged off the agonies of over a decade of physical and psychological abuse as if it were simply a stubbed toe; acknowledge it for a moment, then dismiss it as irrelevant. “I have taken the liberty of drawing up a schedule for you.” He reached into his robes, pulling out a roll of parchment, which he slid down the table to Harry. It stopped against his Butterbeer, but Harry made no attempt to pick it up.

“One of the first things to discuss is restarting your Occlumency lessons with Professor Snape. I know that you and he do not get on well, but it’s important that you learn to protect your mind.” Dumbledore placed his glasses back on the bridge of his nose, and stared at Harry.

Harry, on the other hand, decided to finish off his Butterbeer, and begin the next. After almost two minutes of staring, he asked a simple question. “Why?”

“As I told you previously, Harry, it is imperative that your mind be safe. You have information regarding the Order of the Phoenix, and the Prophecy. This information *must* be kept safe. Also, when you begin your training, we must keep knowledge of your abilities and skills confidential.”

“And I ask again, Headmaster; why?”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand, my boy. ‘Why’ what?” Dumbledore asked, confused.

“I’ve told you that I don’t want to join the Order. I have no intention of subjecting myself to Snape’s presence ever again. Irrespective of my OWL score in Potions, I will not be continuing that class. So, that kinda ends your plan to calls Occlumency lessons ‘remedial potions’ lessons.”

“Harry, without training, and without Occlumency, you will be susceptible to Voldemort’s influence, and would not be able to defend yourself if attacked. You need this.”

“I really don’t.” Harry corrected, taking the final sip of Butterbeer from his second bottle, and starting on the third.

“Harry, I’m sorry, truly I am, but I must insist. The parchment in front of you details your new training schedule.”

I’m oddly curious as to what he’s come up with. Harry mused as he opened the scroll. *Let’s see...*

04:00-05:00 Physical Exercise
05:00-07:00 Spell-Knowledge
07:00-07:30 Breakfast
07:30-08:00 Shower/Ablutions
08:00-12:00 DADA
12:00-12:30 Lunch
12:30-16:00 Transfiguration
16:00-20:00 Charms
20:00-20:30 Dinner
20:30-00:00 Potions
00:00-04:00 Rest Period

Harry read through, and resisted the urge to burst out laughing. The schedule was a joke! He looked up at Dumbledore. “This is an... interesting document, Headmaster. You come up with this yourself?”

Dumbledore nodded. “I did, Harry. Your skills are adequate when compared to a normal student, but you are not a normal student. As the ‘Boy-Who-Lived’, you will be held to a higher standard.”

Harry slowly, while keeping his eyes on Dumbledore, began to screw up the parchment. “I told you that I’m not interested in your training. Telling me that I will be training for eighteen hours a day, and sleeping for four is simply unrealistic. I won’t do it.”

"I'm afraid you have no choice, Harry." Dumbledore replied quietly. "Without this training, you will not be able to defeat Voldemort."

"Then I'll die." Harry replied calmly, swigging his drink. "And you'll all be doomed. So sad... but, there you go. Now, is there anything else?"

Hermione's head shot up at hear Harry's calm proclamation of his death. "Harry?"

"Yes, Hermione?" Harry slowly turned to look at his once-best friend.

"You... you want to die?" There were tears in her eyes.

"No, not really." He replied with a shrug.

"Then... what?"

"I don't particularly want to live, either. When I die, I'll be reunited with Mum, Dad and Sirius. I'll have family and friends. *True* friends. Not the pale relationships that exist at the moment." He turned to Dumbledore. "Besides, I'll be too weak to complete your schedule."

"Why?" Dumbledore asked with a shaky voice.

"Mrs. Weasley has generously decided that I don't need food. Because of her, I've not eaten in the last two days."

Dumbledore turned to Molly. "What? Why?"

"My 'attitude', apparently." Harry replied, not bothering to look at Molly. "She's proven just how much I don't mean to her family. Like everyone here, apart from Mr. and Mrs. Granger."

Hermione muffled a sob, before swallowing. "Harry... that's not true..."

He turned to her, a small smile on his face. "When I first got here, you told me that you thought something was up with me. Would you like to know the answer?"

She nodded vigorously.

"The answer to that question is in the letters we exchanged earlier this summer. All you'll need to do is read back through them." He stood up, stretching and cracking his back. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm sure I can find something more interesting to do with my time than listen to guilt trips and play with your little pity-party. Excuse me." Without another word, Harry departed the kitchen.

Emma turned to her daughter. "You keep all your letters, honey. Off the top of your head, do you know what he means?"

"No..." Hermione muttered, before she blanched, and dropped her head to the table with a 'thud'.

"What? What is it?" Dan asked, leaning closer.

"We didn't write to him." Hermione mumbled into the table. "We didn't send him a letter throughout the month he was at the Dursleys."

Dan glanced at Emma, before he closed his eyes and shook his head slowly. "Why?"

"That would be my doing, Mr. Granger." Dumbledore interjected. "When the students left Hogwarts, I instructed them not to write to Harry. The Death Eaters may have been able to track the owls as they were going to Privet Drive."

Emma chuckled mirthlessly. "Hang on... there's a post box less than a hundred yards from this house. Why not simply send him a letter that way?" There was no answer. "Let me see if I understand; after witnessing his godfather be killed by his cousin, and dropping a heavy weight like a prophecy on him, you sent him back to his family, and instructed his friends to not write to him at all. You just left him alone to cope with all of that? What kind of human being are you?"

"A bad one." Harry replied, re-entering the kitchen. "Sorry, run out of Butterbeer." He opened the coldbox, and got out another three bottles. "You wouldn't know this, Mrs. Granger, but the Death Eaters don't play Quidditch, or Chess, or Exploding snap. They don't enjoy a quiet evening in the pub, or the theatre. No, their idea of a great evening it is to spend it ambushing Muggle Postmen and stealing their mailbags, which is why they couldn't use regular mail to write to me. Gotta feel for Royal Mail, they have such a hard life."

"Harry, wait!" Hermione called out. "Please, don't go. Stay. Talk to me."

"Why?" Harry asked, pushing one of the cold bottles into each of his pants pockets, and holding the third. "You made it clear that you chose Dumbledore over me, Hermione. Obviously, talking to me can just be ignored at will. Since I want nothing to do with Dumbledore or his little bird club, it follows that I don't really want anything to do with you. So, you can draw your own conclusions."

He turned, and was about to walk away, when the question he'd thought of while reading Dumbledore's original note reappeared in his mind. "Actually, there was one thing, Headmaster; since you obviously don't think that Muggles are capable of delivering letters, (which is true with regards to Royal Bloody Mail) why didn't you give them to the Order guards that were outside my house? They could have passed them along without anyone being any the wiser."

Every eye turned to Dumbledore, who was watching Harry carefully. "As I stated in my letter, Harry, the Order guards needed to be out of sight. If they were passing along letters, it's possible the Death Eaters could have found you."

"And just dropping them on the ground, behind the bushes, where nobody would see because of their invisibility cloaks? No, of course, the Death Eaters have a secret Headquarters in the Azalea bush in the front garden of 4 Privet Drive." Harry nodded. "Okay. Just think about what you've caused, though." He winked and started to walk away.

"What have I caused, Harry?" Dumbledore called out loudly, stopping Harry in his tracks. "Please, tell me."

Without turning, Harry grinned. "I'm the only one who can defeat Voldemort... and you've lost me. The brainless little champion's no more. He died of indifference and neglect." He chuckled. "I do believe that you're all pretty much screwed." He walked away, whistling a jaunty tune.

"Albus?" Molly asked plaintively. "What do we do now?"

Emma cleared her throat. "I think the first thing you should do is get your head out of your arse, Molly! You've not allowed that boy to eat in two days, why?"

"I was wondering that too, Molly." Dumbledore replied archly. "You, of all people, are aware that his family denies him food. Why have you done the same?"

"I... I..." Molly stammered. "He's been... rude, Albus. He accused my children of stealing. Sending him to bed without any supper is a normal punishment."

"You fool!" Emma snapped, making Molly and the rest of the Weasleys jump. "You treated a boy who was routinely starved as a child by doing the exact same damned thing? All the while, your youngest son sits there stuffing anything he can down his throat. You make me sick!"

Remus suddenly stood, and headed for the door.

Harry was lying on his bed, still reading through Tom Clancy novels. He was really getting into them, following the career of Jack Ryan. *Soon to be Vice President. Not bad for a retired marine.* A knock on the door interrupted his reading. *Bloody hell. Why can't they all sod off and die?*

"Come in." He called out half-heartedly.

The door opened, revealing a head of sandy-hair. "Harry, may I come in?"

Why would I have said 'come in' if I didn't mean it? "Sure, Mr. Lupin. What's up?"

Remus stepped inside the room, and allowed the door to close. "Harry, I'd really prefer it if you call me 'Remus' or preferably, 'Moony'."

"I'm sure you would." Harry replied. "So, what can I do for you?"

"I... I'd like to talk about what was said downstairs, Harry." Remus said, sitting gingerly on the chair near the bed.

"Oh?"

"Yes... do you really want to die, Harry?" Remus asked, showing genuine concern and distress at the prospect.

It's a shame you didn't show this before, Lupin. Harry thought, while leaning back against the head of his bed. *It would have served you much better.* "Mr. Lupin, I—"

"'Remus', Harry." Lupin interrupted. "Or 'Moony'. There's no need to call me 'Mr. Lupin'."

"Mr. Lupin," Harry continued as though never interrupted, "I appreciate your concern, sir, but it's not something I feel comfortable discussing with an ex-Professor of my school. It's the sort of thing I'd discuss with my friends and family, but since those seem to be pretty thin on the ground, I'll have to keep my own counsel."

"Harry, you have friends and family." Remus said emphatically. "We all care about you. You're the nearest thing to a son I could have. Please, don't shut us out. I know that you're grieving. I know you're in pain. But, pushing us all away is not the answer!"

He thinks I'm pushing... what? "I'm... not sure what you mean, Mr. Lupin."

"Harry, you're worried about your friends and family being hurt. I understand that. But, pushing people away so that they aren't in danger isn't the answer. You need your friends, Harry. You need the people who you love and who love you nearby."

Oh... he thinks I'm separating myself from my 'friends' because I'm worried about them getting hurt... Muppet. I'm pushing them away because they're not true friends. After a moment of staring at Lupin, he cleared his throat. "You shouldn't go fishing today, Mr. Lupin. You won't catch anything." With that, he turned his attention back to his book, intent on ignoring the werewolf irritant.

After a moment of staring pitifully at Harry, Remus stood up and headed for the door. He gave a last look before he walked out.

Back in the kitchen, Remus slumped into a chair, his head in his hands. "He... he hates me. I know he does. He wouldn't talk to me."

Dumbledore rested a hand on the werewolf's shoulder. "It will take time, Remus. He's still grieving." The old man turned to Tonks. "Nymphadora, will

you try?"

Another knock on the door interrupted Harry's reading. *For fuck's sake, has this room become King's Cross station?* "Who is it?" He called out.

"It's Tonks."

Bugger. What does she want? "Come in, Nymphadora."

The door opened. "Wotcher, Harry. Don't call me Nymphadora."

"I'll keep that in mind." Harry replied dryly. "Something I can do for you?"

"I... I want to discuss what you said in the kitchen, Harry." She sat on his bed, leaning back on her hands and subtly morphing her bust into something bigger.

Why am I not surprised? Harry asked himself. *I bet every bugger in that kitchen's gonna come up and want to talk about my feelings. Joy.* "Oh? And what's your opinion, Nym? Am I childish and petty? Arrogant and spoiled? Pathetic and angsty? Do share."

Tonks looked at him, a small smile on her face. "I should hope, Harry, being sixteen, you're all of those things. You wouldn't be normal otherwise."

And the Metamorph comes out swinging! Her comment raised his respect of her a notch, but she still wasn't a friend. After all, he respected Madam Bones, but he wouldn't sit and spill his guts to her. "I think it's been adequately proven that I ain't normal, Tonks. But, come on. Tell me how I've disappointed you. Let you down. Got your favourite cousin killed."

Tonks looked at him strangely. "You didn't get Sirius killed, Harry. Trixie LeStrange did. My only concern is your lack of worry about dying. Yeah, you're typically melodramatic and moody, as all sixteen year olds should be, but you do seem... *eager* for death." Again, she leaned back, letting her bust get a little bigger.

Harry could see her body changing, and smirked inwardly. "Tonks, put your tits away, for god's sake. I'm not interested. And I'm not eager for death. I'm not eager for life either. What will come will come. I see no point in delaying the inevitable."

Tonks sat up, slimming down her waist, and letting her legs grow longer. "You've got lots to live for, Harry. You're young, good-looking, rich as all get out, and you have a... a presence. I can think of several females in this house right now who'd happily pounce on you."

Harry raised an eyebrow slowly. "Are you one of them, Tonks?" She nodded slowly. "You're here to jump my bones and let me know that it's okay, 'life goes on' and all that bollocks?"

She stared at him for a moment, as though making up her mind. *Please don't let her leave a damp patch on the bed.*

"Let me save you the trouble, *Nymphadora*. Not interested. I appreciate the attention, but I couldn't possibly do anything like that with you."

"Eh?" Tonks asked. "Why not?"

"Because you've been lying to me since the day I met you." Harry replied, picking up his book. "Now, feel free to toddle off. You can console Lupin. He's looking rather miserable lately, and a good shag might distract him long enough to stop deciding to start caring after 14 years."

She stood up, jabbing her clenched fists onto her hips. "And how have I been lying to you?"

He looked up. "You're a metamorph, yet you've never shown me your true appearance. You actually look a bit like Bellatrix in your base form. So, wearing a different face and body, like you do normally, is lying. There you go, that's how. Feel free to leave."

Her jaw flapped for a moment, before she realised that he was serious about her leaving his room. "O-Okay, Harry."

As the door shut, Harry smirked. *I wonder who'll be next...*

Tonks slumped at the table next to Remus, and leaned back in her chair. "No go. Says I've been lying to him because I change my appearance. He's not interested in speaking to me."

Molly stood up quickly, huffing to herself. "Enough of this foolishness. I'll bring him down here, we'll have his birthday party, and then we can talk about his training."

Harry heard someone coming up the stairs, stomping loudly. *Molly or Ron... either way, they won't knock.* His prediction was correct as the door to his bedroom was flung open, revealing a short, irate redhead.

"Harry James Potter, enough!" She shrieked. "You will get out of that bed, you will straighten up your clothes, and you will go downstairs, where we will have your birthday party, you will apologise to everyone for this disgusting behaviour and then we will discuss your training with Professor Dumbledore." She watched him for a moment.

Harry turned the page in his book, ignoring the irate matriarch.

"Don't ignore me, Harry! I will not stand for it!" Molly shouted. "Get up!"

Harry continued reading.

"I don't understand why you're being so childish, Harry dear." Molly said, in a slightly quieter voice. "You've got lots to live for. This wish to die only goes to show why you shouldn't be in the Order."

He looked up at her slowly. "I'm not in the Order." He replied quietly, before going back to his book.

"Professor Dumbledore has already inducted you, Harry." Molly said, stalking forward and snatching the book out of his hands. "Now, get up and go downstairs, immediately."

Harry kept staring at his hands, as though the book was still there.

"I told you to get up, Harry." Molly said in a dangerous whisper. "Do as you are told."

Harry looked up at her, an expression of pure loathing on his face. "Are you my mother?"

"No..."

"Are you any relation to me, at all?" He let out a part of his power, the raw magic buffeting her slightly, nibbling on the edges of her confidence.

Molly stammered for a moment. "Not that I know of..."

"Are you a friend?"

"I would like to think so, Harry."

"Well, you certainly haven't been acting like one, have you?" He didn't stop to let her answer. "In fact, in the last few days, you've been a bitch of biblical proportions. So, tell me, why the hell should I do a single thing you say? You have no right to order me around, and I will not stand for it. Leave... *now*."

"In my house, Harry, I am in charge." Molly replied heatedly. "As such, when I give you an order, you *will* follow it!"

Climbing off the bed, Harry leaned over her, letting his face rest mere inches from hers. "And I'll reveal a secret, Molly... this is not *your* house. This is *my* house. So, by your convoluted logic, *I* am in charge. As such, I'm telling you to get out of my room, now. Or I will not be held responsible for my actions."

The monologue had been delivered in a chillingly quiet voice, making Molly shudder in fear. Without another word, she dropped the book on the floor, and stumbled quickly out of the room.

Harry picked up his book, and shut the door. "Bunch of nosy bastards..."

Molly joined Remus and Tonks at the kitchen table. "Didn't work..." She sniffled, before deciding to make herself a nice soothing cup of tea.

"I'll go." Ron said bravely, getting to his feet. "I'm his best mate. He'll listen to me."

Hermione watched her 'boyfriend' walk out of the kitchen, and felt a sinking feeling. *An ambivalent Harry, and an angry Ron. This will not end well.*

The door was once again flung open as Ron stormed in. "Right, Harry, what the bloody hell's going on?"

"Evening, Ron." Harry replied sarcastically, not looking up from his book. "Please, don't tiptoe about out there. Come on in."

Ron stopped and looked at him. "What? I am in."

Why the hell was I friends with him again? "I know that, Ron. What do you want?"

"What's wrong with you, Harry? Why are you being so rude to people?"

Harry didn't look up. "Excuse me? Who's the one who just barged into my room without knocking or waiting for permission? Who's the one who stole my breakfast foods? Er... that would be you, *mate*, being rude. So, be quiet about things that you don't understand. Since you don't seem to understand *anything* except food, we should all be grateful for a bit of peace."

Ron took a moment to work through what Harry had said. When realisation was achieved, he retorted in a slightly different fashion. Instead of ranting and raving, he stalked over to the bed, grabbing Harry and pulling him to the floor. The instant Harry hit the ground, Ron launched a solid roundhouse right, smashing into Harry's cheek.

Another punch impacted Harry's stomach, knocking the wind out of him. More blows rained on him, cracking a rib and his cheekbone, and seriously bending his nose. Harry made no attempt to defend himself from his 'best mate'.

Ron took a step back, getting his temper under control. "I don't know who you think you are, but I've had enough of you! You think your life's so bad... you don't know anything! How do you think I feel? I grew up with *nothing*! Second hand clothes, an old broom... and what did you have? You're one of the richest wizards in the world! You disgust me!" Ron was about to walk away, when another thought entered his mind. "How the hell did a coward like you end up in Gryffindor? You don't deserve to be in the house of the brave. You should be down with the snakes." Without another word, Ron stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

Harry let out a wheezy laugh, before clutching his ribs in pain. *You're really are a knob, Ron... And you know nothing. Dickhead...* Using Herculean effort, Harry pulled himself onto the bed, before allowing himself to slump backwards. *Oh, that hurts... Typical Ron, though; if he doesn't understand it, he attacks it. Or eats it. Guess that explains Hermione; he doesn't understand her, so he 'attacks' her with his finger and then 'eats' her.* He laughed, and his bruised ribs immediately punished him for it. Harry thought about picking up his book, but the broken finger he'd just received would make that rather difficult. *Looks like it's a trip to St. Mungo's in the morning.*

Using his left hand, he flicked his wand at the door, sealing it with an overpowered *Colloportus*.

Ron stormed into the kitchen, saying nothing to anybody. No longer caring, he grabbed a knife and mangled a huge chunk of Harry's birthday cake, which he slammed onto a plate, and grabbed a fork. *Bloody Potter... thinks he's so hard done to... he doesn't understand what it's like to grow up with nothing... See if he'd turn out as good as me if he had my upbringing...*

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "Mr. Weasley?"

"What?" Ron snapped around a mouthful of cake, before he realised he was speaking to the greatest wizard in the world. He swallowed quickly. "Sorry, Professor."

"What happened with Harry, Mr. Weasley?"

"He was being a total git, sir!" Ron replied heatedly. "He was rude and argumentative. Didn't say anything worth listening to." The sad part was, Ron really believed that.

With a sigh, Dumbledore hauled himself to his feet. "I shall go and speak to Mr. Potter myself, then."

Harry heard a knock on the door, and winced as he tried to sit up. *Fuck this! I've had enough. You can all bugger off.* "Sorry, Harry's not here right now." He called out. "Please leave a message after the beep." He waited a moment. "Beep."

"Harry, it's Professor Dumbledore. May I come in and speak to you?"

"Sorry, Harry's not here right now." He called out again, wincing as he took a deep breath to shout.

Harry heard Dumbledore mumble the unlocking charm at the door, which remained shut. "Harry, please let me in. I need to speak to you."

"No. Bugger off, Dumbledore. Not interested."

He heard the doorknob rattle one last time, before the faint sounds of footsteps were heard. *Now, maybe I can get some sleep. I'll sort out my injuries in the morning.*

*The Black Family Manor, #12 Grimmauld Place, London
Friday, 2nd August, 1996 – 08:51*

Harry woke up in near-agony. The blood from his damaged nose had clotted during the night, making it difficult for him to breathe. As a result, he'd been breathing through his mouth, resulting in a dry, sore throat, with the bitter taste of iron in his mouth.

He sat up without thinking, resulting in a strangled groan, that hurt his throat, as his ribs protested. He slumped back down, allowing the pain to wash over him before dissipating. *Ah, the joys of being friends with a Weasley...*

A knock on his door gained his attention. "Harry? It's Hermione. Can I come in?"

Can I stop you? He thought, chuckling mirthlessly. Waving his wand, he removed the sealing charm from the door, which opened immediately. Hermione stepped in, then froze when she saw him.

"Oh, my god!" She squealed, rushing forward. "Harry, what happened?"

Harry raised a bloody eyebrow. "I had a fight with an extremely tough and powerful pot plant, the Dark Lord Yucca." He said sarcastically, prompting her to frown. "What the bloody hell do you think happened, Hermione? Your bloody boyfriend, that's what. He didn't like me ignoring him, so he made sure that he had my attention."

Hermione grabbed his hand, the one with the broken finger, and tried to pull him to his feet. With a hiss of pain, Harry yanked his hand back. The hurt look on Hermione's face would normally have made him feel guilty, but this time, he did have a legitimate reason.

"H-Harry?"

He held up the damaged hand. "Broken finger." He replied, taking a deep breath, before snapping the bone back into place. He instantly paled as another wave of pain washed over him. "Ugh... I hate that..."

"Come on, Harry. Let's get you downstairs and cleaned up." She took his left hand, and slowly pulled him to the door.

"I'll go to St. Mungo's." Harry said brusquely, pulling his hand free from hers. "I'm also contemplating calling the Aurors for an unprovoked assault by Weasley."

Most of the house was up, awake and in the kitchen, partaking of breakfast. Molly had, under glares from Remus and Emma, made an extra-large plate for Harry, since he hadn't eaten since Tuesday. When Harry and Hermione entered the kitchen, all conversation and motion stopped, apart from Ron, who was tucking into an oversized plateful of his own.

"What the hell happened to you?" Dan asked immediately.

"Ron." Harry replied, getting the redhead's attention.

"Huh? What?" Ron asked. "Are you gonna apologise for being a dick, Potter?"

Harry snorted as he walked to the other end of the kitchen, where the large fireplace was located. Using his left-hand, he grabbed a pinch of Floo powder. "St. Mungo's!" He called, disappearing in a green vortex of magical flame.

Hermione watched her best friend disappear through the flames, before turning to her boyfriend. "Explain. Now." She said in an ice-cold voice.

Ron just carried on with his breakfast.

Hermione reached over, tipping his plate onto his lap, before slapping him across the face. When he looked up at her, rage on his face, he was cowed by the look on hers. "Do not ignore me, Ronald. The consequences for you would be... *unpleasant*. Explain what happened to Harry."

"What? He was being rude to me!" Ron sputtered. "I couldn't let him get away with disrespecting me!"

Hermione sat down opposite Ron, folding her hands on the table, and staring at him impassively. "What... *exactly* did he say, Ronald?"

Ron searched through the gaping expanse he called his mind, trying to remember what Harry had said to him the previous evening. It was difficult, however, with hot baked-bean juice soaking through the crotch of his trousers. "I... I asked him why he was being so rude to people, and acting like a total prat."

"And Harry's response?" Hermione asked in a deceptively quiet voice.

"He said something about going into other people's rooms." Ron replied, his face squinting in concentration as he tried to remember. He looked like he was about to soil himself.

Hermione stifled a groan. She'd known Ron Weasley for five years, and had actually spent a great deal of time with him. "You just walked in, didn't you? You didn't knock?"

Ron looked at her strangely. "Harry's my best mate... why would I need to knock?"

Emma glanced at her daughter, who was focussing solely on Ron. "It's called 'manners', Ronald. Something that most people learn at a young age."

"Well, he came into my room without knocking." Ron tried to defend himself.

"The door was open, Ron." Hermione replied instantly. "An oversight on our part, and not to be confused with a lack of manners. Never mind, though. So, you barged into Harry's room, and demanded to know why he was being rude to people. Knowing you, this was not a politely phrased question, but a petulant demand. Would that be a correct assessment?"

"What's 'petulant'?" Ron asked.

Sweet Merlin... Hermione thought, not letting Ron's ignorance dissuade her from her task. "Never mind now. What happened then?"

"I replied, sarcastically, I should add, that Ron shouldn't just tiptoe outside the room, but should come in." Harry's voice called from the fireplace. He'd stepped through during the interrogation, clutching a brown envelope, and still wearing the bloody clothes from the previous evening.

Hermione's head span round so fast, she nearly gave herself whiplash. "Are you okay?"

Harry nodded. "I'm fine. Got the photos here as evidence."

"Evidence?" Molly called up from the rear of the kitchen. "Evidence of what?"

With an arched eyebrow on an otherwise neutral face, Harry stared at Molly. "The unprovoked attack on the Lord of an Ancient and Noble house, of course." He replied. "Last time I checked, such an attack, brawling like a *Muggle*, would result in heavy fines, and possible prison time."

Molly's jaw dropped. "He's your best friend... you wouldn't do that to him!"

"My best friend, Madam? How did you come to that conclusion?" Harry asked, slowly folding his arms across his chest. "Please, tell me."

"In a minute." Hermione interjected, raising her hand up to forestall Molly's inevitable protests. "What else happened last night? Ron stormed upstairs and burst into your room without knocking, you made a comment about him just barging in... then what?"

Harry looked at Hermione. "I told him that *he* was the rude one, stealing my food, barging into my house, I told him that he should keep quiet about things he doesn't understand."

"That's not what you said, Potter!" Ron snapped angrily. "You said I was thick!"

While the statement is true, that's not the way I put it. "No, I did not, *Weasley* ." Harry replied neutrally. "What I said was; 'keep quiet about things you don't understand. Since you only understand food, we'd have a quiet life.' Or, at least, that's near enough."

Hermione turned back to Ron. "And what happened next?"

"I hit him!" Ron said. "I won't allow him to show me such disrespect!"

Molly looked up, hoping for an outburst from Harry. His recent attitude had really annoyed her. As an emotionally passionate woman, she didn't understand someone as passive as Harry had become. She was disappointed.

"And, after you'd assaulted me, Ron, what did you say? How you'd had such a bad life compared to me. How you grew up with nothing... second hand robes and an ancient broomstick. And then, you told me that I was too cowardly to be a Gryffindor. I believe that you made that statement so that I'd be as reckless as you, and attempt to assault you. But, I'm not. It's all a question of mind over matter, *Weasley*... I really don't mind, because you really don't *matter* ."

"Harry James Potter! How dare you say such things about my son! I won't have it!" Molly shrieked loudly.

Ignoring the woman, Harry stalked out of the kitchen, closing the door behind him, into the entry hall, where the portrait of Walburga Black hung.

"Lady Black, may I have a moment of your time, please?" He asked the painting politely.

The portrait was stunned into silence by the polite request. She nodded shakily.

"My lady, I have been named the new Head of the Black Family by Sirius' will." Harry said, awaiting an outburst.

"I see... My Lord." Walburga replied carefully.

"My lady, your portrait serves the House of Black, as do I. I would like it if you would assist me in those who do not aid the House of Black."

The portrait nodded slowly. "That would most certainly depend on your request, My Lord."

"I would like it if you were to seal the wards around the property, so that only you or I have control of them. I would also like to activate *all* internal defences, so that I am the only person who can use any of the house's facilities.

"All rooms are to be sealed, except for the bedrooms of the people currently in residence. All of the bathrooms, bar the small one on the ground floor, are to be sealed. The library is to be off-limits to all personnel except for me. The kitchen can be accessed by anyone, however, access to cupboard and appliances will be restricted to me. And no-one will be able to bring in food or drink."

Walburga grinned at her new lord. "I shall do as you command, My Lord."

"Excellent. Thank you, Lady Black." Deciding to push his luck, he asked another question. "My lady, your previous behaviour has been radically different. May I ask why you're assisting me?"

The portrait leaned back in her chair. "Lord Black, you are polite, something that no-one else in this house has been. You are the true Lord of the Blacks, even Sirius was not, since he never claimed his Lordship. Also, the magic of the house reflects it's Lord. The previous Lord, Orion, my husband, was a dark wizard and the house's magic reflected that. Since you appear to be a lighter wizard, the house will change."

Harry nodded. "Excellent. I thank you for your assistance, Lady Black."

"By your command, My Lord."

Smirking, Harry walked back into the kitchen. The occupants were going to be in for a shock...

"Harry?" Hermione asked. He turned to face her.

"Something I can do for you, Hermione?" He asked politely.

"Yes..." Hermione replied slowly. "Do you mind if I ask you some questions?"

Since you'll inevitably ask me whether I mind or not... "Go ahead." He acquiesced.

"You've been... withdrawn, ever since you got here. I'd almost think you were depressed, but you don't display any of the characteristics. How are you doing, really?"

Harry ambled over to the fridge, pulling out the container of milk. *Huh... need to do some shopping at some point.* "Am I coping with Sirius' death, you mean?"

She nodded uncertainly.

"Why do you care?"

"Excuse me?" Hermione squeaked, shocked. "You're my best friend, Harry... why do you think I don't care?"

As he was about to answer, Harry heard the flames in the fireplace roar up, as someone tried to enter the house via Floo. In his mind, an image of Dumbledore appeared. Without batting an eye, Harry allowed the aged Headmaster through. It really was perfect timing...

"If you truly cared, Hermione, you would have written to me during that first month, while I was locked into my room at Durzkaban."

Harry heard Dumbledore clear his throat. "As I said previously, Harry, that was at my request. It was solely to keep you safe."

"I see." Harry replied, looking at Hermione. "And you agreed to this?"

She nodded slowly.

"Then we have nothing further to discuss. You made your choice. You chose Dumbledore, not me. Same with Ron, Luna, Neville and Ginny. At the moment, I don't consider you friends, I consider you 'acquaintances', at best. I also consider you all interlopers in my house, considering that you've been helping yourselves to any damned thing you please, while denying me, the house owner, basic amenities, such as food."

Dumbledore stepped forward. "I have discussed that with Molly, Harry. She will make sure that you are fed from now on."

Harry slowly turned round. "And the fact that someone has to be *told* to feed a sixteen year male doesn't bear thinking about?" He nodded slowly. "Right... you know, I can't wait until I go back to the Muggle world. With the exception of the Dursleys, people there don't generally mistreat their children, such as Molly was doing with me."

"Harry, I understand that you're angry, but you must learn to forgive people." Dumbledore said wisely. "If you allow anger and hatred to fester in your heart, you run the risk of turning to the Dark. Your parents wouldn't want that. Molly was just showing the same kind of loving discipline to you that she shows her own family. You shouldn't have to think about forgiving her for loving you."

Harry just snorted at Dumbledore, before turning back to Hermione. "You said you had questions, Hermione. As in plural. You've asked about Sirius' death and my reaction to it. Do you have any other questions?"

She nodded. "Why didn't you tell anyone that it was your birthday? Had you told us, we'd have made sure that we got everything ready on time."

"You've never had to be reminded of my birthday before. It hasn't changed dates this year. I should be the one surprised *on* my birthday, not you surprised *by* it. And what kind of friends need to be reminded? Piss-poor ones, to be honest." Harry replied casually. "Besides, I hate people who come up to me and go 'it's my birthday!'."

Harry's responses, far from giving her the answers she wanted, made her feel even worse. Because he was utterly and completely right. She had been a poor friend.

"You... you haven't spent much time with us while we've been here, Harry." Hermione said slowly, not sure if this was a good point to bring up or not.

"You've not spent much time with me. To be frank, you seemed to be more interested in Ron's dick than your supposed 'best friend'." Harry replied casually, immediately detecting the concerned looks from Molly and Emma, and a look that could drill holes from Dan to Ron.

"Surely you don't begrudge your best friends a relationship, Harry?" Dumbledore said, sitting down at the table next to Harry.

"Not at all." Harry replied. "However, I find it hypocrisy of the highest level that Hermione is accusing me of not being around, while she is too busy trying to clean Ron's spunk off her clothes."

Harry could feel the glare from Dan to Ron amp up in intensity, now about ready to boil oceans.

"And, Ron? When Hermione aims to please, you really should try aiming your pleasure elsewhere. Semen's such a persistent stain." Harry gestured to the utility room off the kitchen. "That's the ancient and noble washing machine of Black, not sticky whites." He turned to Dumbledore. "I don't 'begrudge' them having a relationship, Headmaster. Begrudging means that it bothers me, or I give a crap; I really don't." Harry replied. "Now, are we through with the guilt trips? I've got a porn mag and a box of Kleenex in my bedroom just screaming out for my attention."

Emma glanced over at him sharply, seeing the glint in his eye, and knew he was kidding. She winked at him, before allowing her face to fall back into its stern countenance.

"There... there is one more thing, Harry." Dumbledore said, not quite knowing how to deal with a Harry who'd just said he was about to go and masturbate.

"Hurry it up, Headmaster." Harry replied calmly. "I'm in kind of a rush to get upstairs." *God, it's funny seeing the old bugger look so shocked.*

"I wanted to ask you about your death wish. Why do you wish to die? Don't you know that your parents would want you to live? To train, become the best wizard that you can be, and save the Wizarding world?"

"No, I don't know that, Headmaster, because my parents were brutally murdered before they could tell me that. The people who knew my parents were either kept away from me 'for my own good', or decided to stay away. I know next to nothing about my folks. So, attempting to play on my sympathies for my parents or Sirius won't work. Next point?"

"Harry, can't you see this is wrong?" Dumbledore asked, badly shaken by Harry's rebelliousness.

"Why?" He didn't let Dumbledore answer. "Besides, I don't have a death wish. I just don't have a strong desire to survive. You said, at the end of first year, that 'to the well organised mind, death is the next great adventure'. Well, I have another saying for you, which is equally valid; 'to the slave who has nothing, death is but a release from the cycle of pain'."

"You are not a slave, Harry dear." Molly said. "You're a rich wizard. Your life can be whatever you make of it."

Harry looked at her sharply. "Do not call me 'Harry dear', Molly. You lost that right when you became petulant and sulky, as did the rest of your family of thieves. My life could be whatever I want to make of it, true... and that's the problem. I don't want to make anything of it. You all seem to think that I'm depressed, or angry... I'm not. I just don't give a shit anymore. I've been used, chewed up and spit out too many times. When Riddle comes for me, and he *will* come for me, I'll be able to move on." He stood up. "Now, I'm gonna go and play with my little soldier. I'd appreciate not being disturbed for at least thirty minutes." He thought for a moment. "Maybe less, though; it's an excellent magazine."

Harry got upstairs, chuckling to himself. *They really are a bunch of silly buggers, apart from Dan and Emma. I think they're the only ones who get it.* Harry really didn't have a death wish. He wasn't emo, or angsty. He was just pissed off with the hypocrisy and double standards of the Wizarding world. So, he was making plans to do what *he* wanted, when *he* wanted. It really was for the best; for *his* Greater Good.

Upon arriving in his bedroom, he pulled off his shoes, and decided that a quick shower would benefit him, since he still had caked blood on his clothes and skin. He was about to seal the door, when a knock interrupted him. *Bloody hell...* He strode forward and yanked the door open to reveal... Emma Granger.

"Hi..." He said, confused.

"May I come in?" Emma asked, stood patiently with her hands behind her back.

"Er... sure." Harry replied stepping back and letting her past. He closed the door, and looked at Emma.

"Can I ask you something, Harry?"

He nodded. "You just did."

Predictably, she rolled her eyes at him. "Okay, then... can I ask you something after I ask you this?"

He grinned at her. "Of course, Mrs. Granger."

"Call me 'Emma', Harry." She took a step back, and sat on the bed. "You've been rather distant to Hermione, Harry. I was wondering if you could tell me why."

Harry looked at her for a moment, before going over at sitting next to her on the bed. "She didn't write to me, obeyed Dumbledore's orders without question. When I get here, I overheard you two talking about why she dated Ron. Because I've got a death sentence hanging over me, and she thinks I'll lose."

Emma nodded slowly. "Somehow, I'm not surprised you overheard that. Did you hear all of it?"

"The fact you think she's being a bloody idiot? Yeah. Then, a couple of days later, I go to speak to Neville, and find Ron and Hermione lying on his bed in a... compromising position."

"Oh?"

"How blunt would you like me to be?" Harry asked politely.

"Harry, I may be Hermione's mother, but I deal with people of all ages. Hit me with it."

Harry just shrugged. "Okay; he was pleasuring her manually while she returned to favour to him. All the while, it looked like they were trying to swallow each others tonsils." *Yeah, that sounds better than 'he was fingering her while she wanked him off. Definitely better.*

Emma pulled a face. "Lovely... it's nice to see that my daughter has such impeccable taste in men. For all her intelligence, she's sadly lacking in certain things."

Harry shrugged again. "Her life. Her choice. She wants the ginger whinger, she's welcome to him. After ignoring me for a month, I've moved on."

She was watching him closely. "Yes... you have, haven't you?" She wrapped an arm around his shoulder. "You're stronger than anyone I've ever met, Harry. You're a good man."

He blushed. "Thanks... Emma."

She squeezed him a little tighter, before letting her hand slowly slide up and down his back. "Now, Harry, you said when you came upstairs that you were going to be using a porn mag and some Kleenex."

He chuckled. "Yeah, I only said that to make Dumbledore sputter. It's fun seeing him with his jaw flapping in the breeze."

Emma's hand came back up to his shoulder. "I can't help you with Hermione, Harry. She's quite stubborn, and needs to make her own mistakes. It's the only way she'll learn and grow. As shocking as her choices are, and me and Dan agree that this one is shocking, it's got to be *her* choice." She squeezed him tighter. "I'm not your Mum, Harry, and I wouldn't try to be. From all I've heard, Lily was a strong, brave woman. I wouldn't want to tarnish her memory that way. But, Dan and I can be here for you. An older brother and sister, friends, acquaintances... whatever you need."

Harry looked at her. "I'm so glad you didn't say 'Aunt and Uncle'. I might have been tempted to shoot the pair of you on sight."

Emma nodded. "I appreciate your restraint." She said, mock-seriously, before giggling. "Seriously, though... we, Dan and I, have no motives to befriend you, no plots, no blind loyalty to Dumbledore, no desire to starve you for two days just to make a bloody point." She scowled at that last one. "You're a good guy who's been dealt a shitty hand. We both feel a desire to help you. Not because of pity, not because you saved Hermione in first year, but because it's the right thing to do."

She pulled herself off the bed, and knelt in front of him. "Please, let us help you, Harry. You shouldn't have to go through this alone. If you want someone to hold Voldemort down while you punch the crap out of him, tell us. Alternatively, you can hold him down, and I'll demonstrate just why people are afraid of dentists' drills." She grinned evilly at him, making him shudder. A mass-murderer, bent on world domination? *Far* less scary than an enraged dentist. Factor in the Granger genes? Serious bad news. He briefly wondered if, in a few years time, some poor kid would have a prophecy, asking them to defeat the 'Dark Lord Dentist'.

"We'll... we'll just be there for you, Harry. If you need something. Someone to talk to. Someone to ask questions... we'll be there."

"Thank you." Harry replied quietly. "I appreciate that." He was cut off from saying anything else as the bedroom door flew open, revealing Hermione. She had a look on her face that slowly morphed into some kind of surprised anger.

"W-What's... what's going on here? Mum?"

Emma pulled herself to her feet, pressing a brief kiss on Harry's lips on the way up. Since she was side-on to the door, Hermione never saw Emma's small wink to Harry. She did, however, see Emma's hand rub up Harry's calf on her way up.

"I was just proving to Harry that not all the Granger women have piss-poor taste in men, dear." Emma replied sweetly, smiling and winking at Harry, before heading for the door. Hermione glared at her as she walked past, before turning back to Harry.

"What the hell was that?" She demanded.

Harry looked up at her innocently. "That was your mother, Hermione."

"I know that!" Hermione snapped angrily. "Why was she on her knees in front of you, and why did she kiss you?"

"Both good questions." Harry said, leaning back against the bed. "And they both have good answers. However, I don't feel the need to explain myself to casual acquaintances."

Hermione's anger instantly vanished. "Harry..."

"If there's nothing else, Hermione, I'd really like a shower. I'm still covered in blood, and I managed to work a sweat up with Emma, there. Excuse me." He got up, and headed for the en-suite.

The Black Family Manor, #12 Grimmauld Place, London

Friday, 2nd August, 1996 – 14:02

Harry had carried on with his novels, reading until lunchtime. When his stomach gave an alarming rumble, he decided it was time for him to go and get something to eat. Besides, he was eager to see the results of Walburga's wards. *Oh, that reminds me; need to let Emma and Dan have full access to all rooms.*

His arrival at the kitchen showed an angry Ron, a vaguely amused Dan and Emma, and a confused Hermione and Molly.

Oh, this is gonna be priceless! "Is something wrong?" Harry asked politely. "I would have thought that lunch would be ready."

Molly looked up at him sharply, her eyes narrowing to slits. "We haven't been able to get into the coldbox, Harry. And I can't turn the range on."

Walburga, you're hideously ugly, but damn! You rock! "Huh... why?"

"I don't know!" Molly snapped. Harry immediately realised that Ron had been asking this question. A lot. Probably explained why he was angry. Although, it was always easy to tell when Ron was angry: he was awake.

"You mind if I try?" Harry asked, laughing inside. Without waiting for clarification, he shuffled over to the coldbox, casually opening the door. "Seems okay to me."

Molly pushed him out of the way, intent on getting to the contents of the fridge, but the door slammed shut before she could touch anything.

"I don't understand!" Molly wailed. "Why is it doing this?"

"I'm hungry, Mum!" Ron whined.

"I'll contact Albus. It's possible that we have a poltergeist in the house." Molly concluded. "Maybe Remus could investigate for us as well..."

More proof that the Wizarding world really doesn't have an ounce of logic. Harry waited until Molly had moved away, before opening the coldbox, pulling out bread, butter and a platter of cold cuts. Without looking at anyone else, he began to make a sandwich.

"Dan, Emma? You guys hungry?" Harry asked over his shoulder.

Both made affirmative noises, and were rewarded with a sandwich a few moments later.

"Where's mine?" Ron demanded petulantly.

"What?"

"Where's my sandwich, Potter?"

"I have no idea, *Weasley*." Harry replied. "Why don't you ask your Mum to make you one? I refuse to let you steal my food again." Remembering the incident on his birthday, Harry kept hold of the plate with his sandwich on as he returned the items to the fridge.

Sitting down at the table, Harry was about to bite into his sandwich, when Hermione cleared her throat daintily. "Harry?"

Bloody hell! Not eaten in two and a half days here! "Yes, Hermione?"

"Could I have a sandwich, please?" She batted her eyes at him cheekily.

Ah, could not have asked for a better opening. Thank you, Hermione. "Are you sure, Hermione? I mean... a sandwich? Do you really think I have the power to make a sandwich?"

Hermione stared at him. *What the hell?* Unlike her daughter, Emma immediately caught the reference.

"It'd take a miracle for me to be able to make that sandwich, and I just don't think I'll get one. You should have an apple. Apples don't have a death sentence hanging over them... or something like that. Apples are safe. No, you'd just distract a sandwich, and when it failed... well..."

Hermione blanched as she realised what Harry was actually saying. "Y-You... you heard?"

He nodded slowly. "Oh, yes... the joys of an invisibility cloak."

"Ah... a-and... oh, bugger..."

"Not right now, Hermione. I'm hungry. I'm sure you could ask Ron, though." Harry suppressed a smirk. His new image was all about stoicism. It wouldn't do to smirk and sneer like Snape, fun though it would be. "You want to know something?"

Hermione began to shake her head, before sighing and turning it into a nod.

"Your mum was right."

"What about?" She was almost afraid to ask.

"Your brand of idiocy." Harry took a bite of his sandwich, and chewed slowly, never breaking eye-contact with Hermione, whose eyes began to fill with tears. To her credit, though, she didn't deny it, and didn't break out into useless crying.

"Hand over the food, Potter." Ron interjected, pointing his wand at Harry.

Harry's head slowly swivelled round to look at his 'best mate'. "I'm sorry?"

"Give it to me." Ron flicked his wand at the sandwich.

Placing the sandwich down onto his plate, slowly, Harry wiped his hands on a dishrag. "And why, exactly, would I do that?"

Ron sneered. "I'm a pureblood wizard, Potter, while you're just a pathetic half-blood. I'm a Weasley, not some pathetic Potter. I'm simply better than you. As such, my welfare is far more important than yours. My needs supersede yours. Hand it over."

Where the hell did that come from? Harry wondered. He's never shown a hint of being a bloodhead before... and now he's telling me that he's more important than me?

Hermione was equally disturbed. *He thinks that he has more right to food than Harry, just because he's a pureblood? No... no, this is wrong! If he cares this much about blood, why the hell would he want to date a Muggleborn? A 'filthy Mudblood'?* "Ron?"

"Shut up, Hermione, I'm speaking!" Ron spat out, before turning back to Harry, raising the wand. "Hand it over, Potter."

Harry stood up, and took a step back. "No."

Ignoring Harry, Ron grabbed the sandwich, and crammed as much of it as he could into his mouth. He was chewing, before he glanced up at Harry, who was smiling faintly at him. "What?" He gurgled around the mouthful of sandwich.

"Let me tell you about wards, Weasley." Harry rested his hands on the back of his chair, looking for all the like a carefree man, giving an explanation to his friends. "In the Noble and Ancient House of Black, there are enchantments throughout the house. I've activated them all, and they respond to me only."

Molly stomped forward. "Is that why I can't get into the coldbox?"

Harry nodded, without looking at her. He kept his gaze on Ron. "Because of your pettiness in denying me food in my own house, I have taken steps to ensure that I am properly fed. No-one, apart from me or those I give permission to, can use any appliance in this house. That includes the washing machine, the cooker, the fridge... even some of the toilets and showers."

"So?" Ron mouthed as he took another bite of sandwich.

"The wards regarding consumption are quite... vicious." Harry replied, watching Ron instantly stop chewing and swallowing the contents of his mouth. "If the food is not given freely, as that was not, there are consequences."

Ron moaned piteously, dropping the sandwich back onto the plate, and clutching his stomach.

"In this case, if food is stolen, the wards will force the consumer to expel the entire contents of his..." He trailed over as Ron collapsed to the floor, vomiting heavily. "His digestive tract." A vile smell reached the noses of Dan and Emma, who moaned in unison, pushing their food away.

"However, it doesn't just induce vomiting. Since the bowels are part of the digestive system, they're purged as well." Harry nodded at Ron, who was still clutching his stomach and groaning weakly, the back of his trousers swollen with 'purged matter'.

Emma covered her nose. With Harry's explanation, the vile smell was certainly explained. She was glad she hadn't actually started her sandwich yet.

"The wards will work on *any* food brought into the house. If I'm not the one to bring it in, or I don't give permission, it will instantly disintegrate."

"How dare you!" Molly snapped. "You're denying us food? How dare you?"

Harry turned to face her, stunned at her hypocrisy. He guessed she was still spoiling for a rumble, and shrugged. "Sooner or later, Molly... the day comes when you can't hide from the things that you've done."

The Black Family Manor, #12 Grimmauld Place, London

Saturday, 3rd August, 1996 – 09:54

Harry was bored. All of his 'friends' were busy doing their Order training, while the adults, bar Dan and Emma, were busy engaged on 'missions'. He'd found out that the vast majority of the Order's missions were little more than busy work.

Remus Lupin, a werewolf and therefore a powerful fighter, had been reduced to collecting potions ingredients from Diagon Alley in broad daylight. Mad-Eye Moody, the grizzled ex-Auror, had been spying at the Ministry, watching the intense political battle like a hawk.

Seel'vor
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"Indifference and Neglect" (part 2)

Shortly after the meeting in the kitchen, where Ron had loudly and proudly proclaimed his superiority for being a pureblood, Hermione had dropped him like a bad habit, wondering to herself how she could have made such a stupid mistake as choosing the idiotic redhead.

In the meantime, Harry had read, drank Butterbeer and learned how to flirt from Emma, who was surprisingly good at it for a woman who'd been happily married for at least seventeen years.

It was Saturday morning when things came to a head with Dumbledore. Harry, while sitting in the kitchen reading the *Daily Prophet*, idly noting that once again he was a hero to the people of the Wizarding world (a fact which made him laugh), had been surprised by Dumbledore's arrival through the Floo. With a sigh, he let the Headmaster in.

Wasting no time, Dumbledore stalked forward, sitting at the table next to Harry. "Harry, have you thought anymore about training?" He asked hopefully. "We will need to get started soon. There is a great deal to be done before our return to Hogwarts."

Harry didn't even look up from his paper. "Haven't we already had the conversation, Dumbledore? Several times, if I recall."

Dumbledore cleared his throat sternly. "That's 'Professor', 'Headmaster' or 'Sir', Harry. You must learn to show respect to your teachers. We have had this conversation, but we have yet to reach a suitable conclusion."

"Yeah, we did reach a 'suitable conclusion'. I told you that I'd play *if* you could answer my questions to my satisfaction. You couldn't, ergo the conversation's over. You lost, I won, and I rule all. Was there anything else?"

"You did not answer my questions, Harry; why are you choosing this moment to become rebellious? You are not acting like a mature young adult. You are behaving like a child who has not gotten his own way."

Harry grinned. "Am I? Cool. I didn't think I knew how, considering I was a slave to the Dursleys for ten years."

"I have apologised for that, Harry, more than once. This is not the time to indulge in petty grievances. We must all pull together for the greater good." Dumbledore gazed at Harry, looking vaguely disappointed.

"Have you told Snivellus that?" Harry asked, waiting for the inevitable correction.

"That's 'Professor Snape', Harry. During class the next two years, I must insist that you show him the proper respect."

Harry just shrugged. "Since I won't be in the greasy bastard's class, and I refuse to allow him access to my mind, I won't have need to call him anything."

Dumbledore took that moment to pull out a handful of parchment envelopes, which he passed to Harry. "These are the OWL results for yourself, Miss Granger, Mr. Weasley and Mr. Longbottom, plus the standard fifth-year letters for Miss Weasley and Miss Lovegood. Will you see that they get them?"

Taking the parchment envelopes, Harry looked up impishly at the Headmaster, before fondling each one. Five of the envelopes were lumpy, with suspicious bulges. Harry put the other one aside and looked at the names on them; everyone had a badge in their envelope... bar Harry. He looked at Dumbledore.

"Let me guess... Ron's grades weren't high enough to continue being a prefect, so that's gone to Neville. Ron's now Quidditch captain, which explains the badge in his. Hermione keeps her badge, since she was a damned good prefect, and Ginny and Luna are the new fifth-year girl's prefects, yeah?"

Dumbledore nodded slowly, impressed with Harry's deductive reasoning. "Indeed. May I ask how you know that?"

Harry snorted derisively at the old man. "You can ask, but I'll let you work it out. Logic puzzles are good for the brain." Harry stood up, scrunching up his own letter into his pocket, before picking up the other five.

"I'll pass these along to the others." He started to walk out of the room.

"Wait, Harry. We have not finished our conversation. You have still not adequately explained why you are refusing the training that you will need in order to defeat Voldemort."

Harry didn't turn from his spot near the door. "I have given you reasons. You just don't like them. However, I will say this: you don't seem to learn from your mistakes." With that parting shot, Harry was gone, leaving a perplexed Dumbledore behind.

The five Junior Order members had gathered in Ron and Neville's bedroom, working on a comparative analysis of shield charms. Normally, such an assignment would have taken place in the library, using the ancient books of the Black family, but Harry activating the house's defences had scuppered that.

Hermione was particularly put out by her expulsion from the library, but knew that Harry's faith and trust had been beaten to shit, and he was taking steps to protect what was left.

A quiet knock on the door provided a convenient excuse for all five to stop working. With a sigh of relief, Ron looked up. "It's open."

The door opened, revealing Harry's expressionless face. "Dumbledore's just dropped off the Hogwarts letters." Without a word, he entered the room, passing each of the letters to the correct person, before turning to walk out of the room.

"Harry?" Hermione's soft voice called back. "What did you get on your OWLs?"

He turned back to face her. "I dunno. Haven't opened it yet."

"Nervous, Harry?" Neville asked, the half-smile on his face confirming that he was. "I'm bloody terrified."

"Probably not as scared as Hermione." Ron said snidely.

"Why didn't you open it?" Hermione asked, not bothering to grace her ex-boyfriend with a reply. "I'm sure you did fine."

I really don't care how I did. Harry thought to himself. "Probably. But, I can tell you all the important things; Weasley, you got Quidditch captain, while everyone else is Prefect. Presumably for your sterling efforts at the Ministry in June."

Luna looked up after opening hers, the blue and bronze badge falling out. "What about you?"

Harry shrugged. "Don't know. Don't care."

Neville had just finished opening his letter, the shiny prefect badge glinting in his hand. "This... Why've I got this? It shouldn't be mine... it should be yours, Harry."

Ron opened his letter, tearing the envelope in his eagerness to get to the badge inside. "Yes!" he yelled, his dream of Quidditch Captain finally being fulfilled. "This is great! And I may even be Head Boy next year, even though I'm not prefect this year!"

Hermione was watching Harry during this speech, looking for signs of disappointment or anger over this revelation. Unfortunately for her, Harry's poker face was utterly unreadable.

Ginny squealed as she uncovered her own Prefect badge, and began to dream what punishments she could hand out to the Slytherins. For the moment, her dreams regarding Harry were put on hold. She turned to her brother. "So, what were your OWL results, Ron?"

After a moment, Ron answered, sounding noticeably less enthused. "I got an 'E' in DADA, an 'A' in Charms and Divination, a 'P' in Transfiguration, Care and Herbology, and 'D' in Potions, History of Magic and Astronomy."

There was silence as his results were processed, and Hermione, predictably, was the first to react. "Those are dreadful, Ron! Most NEWT courses need at least Exceeds Expectations to carry on... You'll never be an Auror with those grades!"

Ron engaged 'foot-in-mouth' mode, speaking before thinking. "Well, when I get a Firebolt, I can concentrate on Quidditch, and become a professional! Harry's banned from Quidditch, so I can use his, and show everyone that I'm the best keeper in Hogwarts. You're just jealous you can't play!"

Ah, yes, that must be it. Harry thought quietly. *It's not that she hates the game, but she's just jealous over Ron's 'skill'. Never thought about that bloody ban. Sure as hell not letting Ron use the only thing I have to remind me of Sirius.* Harry didn't have time to think anything else, as Hermione added her two pence in.

"Why on earth would I be jealous as the prospect of hurtling round a giant sandbox on a 200 mile per hour toothpick? And what, if by some miniscule chance you actually get accepted onto a team, are you gonna do at the end of it? Quidditch players have a ten year career, on average. What happens after?" Hermione ranted, not even bothering to stop for breath.

I wish I knew how she did that. Perhaps a partial transfiguration on her lungs, allowing osmosis...

Hermione carried on. "And besides, I'm sure Harry's ban has been overturned, which means that he can play again, so he'll need his Firebolt. Which means that you'll need to use your old Cleansweep." Hermione could see the cogs in Ron's head turning. *I bet the sneaky git plans to keep Harry off the team, just so he won't need his broom.*

"Well, Ginny can be the Seeker, leaving me with the Firebolt."

"Ron! You insensitive shit!"

Harry ignored the byplay, turning to Neville. "What did you get, Nev?"

Scooting down his bed slightly, putting a little more distance between him and Hermione, he turned to Harry. "Er..." He quickly read his results. "An 'O' in DADA and Herbology, an 'E' in Transfiguration, Care of Magical Creatures and Charms, an 'A' on Potions and Astronomy, and a 'D' on History and Divination."

Harry nodded. "That's a good result. You can't carry on with History or Divination, but who the hell wants to? You can do Potions as a private study, and have the results graded by a Ministry examiner, if you want."

He turned to Hermione, holding his hand out for the results. As usual, she couldn't bear to look at them. Privately, Harry found it vaguely amusing that such a bossy, assertive girl couldn't look at exam results. Wordlessly, she passed the piece of parchment over.

Quickly reading through, he decided against teasing her, for two reasons; one, exam results were *extremely* important to her, and two, she knew loads more hexes than he did, and was ruthless enough to use them.

"You got 'O' on Arithmancy, Ancient Runes, Muggle Studies, Transfiguration, Defence, Potions, Charms, CoMC, History and Herbology. An 'E' on Astronomy." He looked up at her, seeing her biting on her bottom lip. "According to this, you're the top student in our year."

She smiled, happy with the results. "What about you, Harry?"

With a sigh, he passed her results back, and fished his own out of his pocket. He opened the parchment. Not unsurprising. "I got an 'O+' in Defence, 'O' in Charms, Transfiguration, CoMC, Herbology, Potions and Muggle Studies. An 'E' in Astronomy, History and Divination."

"Muggle Studies?" Hermione asked. "When did you sign up for Muggle Studies?"

He shrugged. "I'm Muggle-raised. Figured it'd be an easy way to boost my results." He glanced down at the parchment. "Third in the class." He noticed an extra note at the bottom, in the distinctive loopy script of the Headmaster.

Interfering old bastard. He really doesn't get it, does he? "And according to this, Dumbledore's decided that DA should become an officially sanctioned school organisation, open to all students, and it'll run four nights a week."

Hermione grinned. "That's excellent, Harry! Just goes to show how useful the DA was, and how you can handle the responsibility of leadership."

Is she tripping? I wasn't made a prefect, even though I deserved it for saving the bloody school, because Dumbledore thought I had enough to be going on with, then he dumps this on my lap, without asking! "Hermione..."

"Yeah?"

"Don't you think it would have been better for him to have asked me before volunteering four nights of my week to teaching everyone? This includes, naturally, 1st years and the Slytherins, who'll use the opportunity to try and assassinate me." He looked at her sharply.

Hermione missed the underlying message. "I'm sure he knew that you'd be willing, Harry. Everyone needs to learn proper defence."

Nope, she doesn't get it. It's not my job to teach DADA. It's the fucking DADA Teacher's job. That's what they're paid for! "Is Dumbledore hiring a Defence teacher, do you think?"

"I'm sure he is." Hermione said after a moment of thought.

"Then they can damn well teach kids to defend themselves. It's what he or she is paid for." Harry replied coolly. "I won't do it. Why the hell should I help teach people, who 12 months ago, were calling me an attention seeking psychopath?"

"It's your duty, Harry. You are the 'Boy-Who-Lived'." Ron said.

"I'll ignore that, Weasley. I'll let you work out why." Harry tuned Ron out. "There's a second note here. According to Dumbledore, he's already made my course selection for me. Potions, DADA, Transfiguration and Charms, Remedial Potions, presumably Occlumency training, and 'Special Studies' with Dumbledore himself. Ooh, that'll be fun." He added the last sarcastically.

"Well... I'm sure he has his reasons." Hermione said diplomatically.

"I'm sure he does..." Harry muttered, as he turned and walked out of the room.

*The Black Family Manor, #12 Grimmauld Place, London
Saturday, 3rd August, 1996 – 17:26*

Harry had served himself, Dan and Emma some early dinner, while the Junior Order members carried on with their homework. Molly had, thankfully, spent most of the day at the Burrow; he didn't really care what she was doing.

Shortly after the Juniors had turned up, demanding dinner, Dumbledore had reappeared in the kitchen, presumably after loitering around Grimmauld Place all day.

"Good evening, everyone." He greeted the room jovially. "Have you all read your letters?"

The Juniors nodded, each of the pleased with the contents. "What about you, Harry?"

Slowly, Harry looked up. "I've read it." He said shortly.

"And?" Dumbledore asked after a pregnant pause.

"And' what, Headmaster?" Harry replied, pulling out the offensive document. "Would you like my honest opinion about this piece of Hippogriff shit?"

"Language, Harry." Dumbledore said. "I did not see a problem with it, myself. It was as we discussed earlier."

"No, it bloody wasn't!" Harry snapped. "At no point did I say you could make my course decisions for me, at no point did I say that I would continue

with the Defence group, and I sure as hell didn't agree to doing Potions. So, explain."

Dumbledore took his glasses off, rubbing his nose warily. "Harry, the members of your defence group got some of the highest DADA marks in the last ten years. The students need that kind of expert training to ensure that they will be able to defend themselves in the event of a Death Eater attack."

Harry stared at him for a moment. "Well, then, I can give you a tip that will enable all of us to be happy... Hire a decent bloody Defence teacher!" He retorted hotly. "Why the hell should I give up my time to a bunch of sheeple who this time last year thought I was an attention-seeking psychopath? Also, I do have one small issue regarding the continuing of the DA."

"Oh?" Dumbledore asked slowly.

"Don't you think it would have been appropriate to ask before signing me up for four nights a week?"

"If there's a problem with the scheduling, Harry, I'm sure I could make alterations-" Dumbledore began, before Harry interrupted.

"It's got nothing to do with the scheduling! It's the bloody principle! You decided that I would be giving up four nights of my week. You didn't ask before you made the assumption." He leaned back, taking a drink of his coffee. "Also, you decided that it would be open to all houses, all years."

"It's not fair if you restrict the membership, Harry." Dumbledore said disapprovingly. "All students deserve an equal chance to benefit from your leadership."

"So, you expect me to train first years, who don't even know which end of their wand to use, how to defend themselves against Death Eaters?" Harry snorted. "And you expect me to teach the Death Eaters in Training how to fight?"

"I expect you to be fair, Harry." Dumbledore replied. "Everyone deserves a second chance."

Rolling his eyes, Harry snorted/blew a raspberry into his cup. "Utter shite." He said after a moment. "People like Draco Malfoy don't *want* a second chance. Unless they failed to kill you on the first chance." He shook his head. "Doesn't matter, anyway. I refuse to participate. Hire a proper DADA teacher, and you won't need the DA."

"Harry, I really must insist." Dumbledore said. "The students react better to you than they do to a Professor."

"You're well within your rights to insist, Headmaster," Harry replied casually, "just as I'm well within my rights to refuse."

Luna looked up at Harry, her huge silver eyes boring into his soul. "Don't you care about the others anymore, Harry?" She asked in her ethereal voice.

"No." Harry replied simply. "They've proven that they're fickle, so fuck 'em all, far as I'm concerned." He turned back to Dumbledore, who gazed at him sadly.

"I'm sorry to hear you say that, Harry. You must learn to get over this animosity that you feel. You let anger and hatred poison you, just like you do with Professor Snape."

Harry choked down a laugh. "Why is it always *me* that has to play nice with Snape, even when he's being an utter bastard? Why do I have to let go of my anger? It's him that's the problem. He can't let a grudge go against a man that's been dead for fifteen years, not me."

"Professor Snape is willing to work for the greater good, Harry. Due to his work as a spy, he faces a unique set of pressures. We must allow him more latitude." Dumbledore replied reprovingly.

"So, Snape's allowed to be bitter, petty, vicious and cruel, while I have to get on my knees and let him bugger me over?" Harry asked, grimacing at the horrific mental image. "Sorry, not gonna happen."

"You are greatly exaggerating, Harry." Dumbledore replied. "Professor Snape works hard for us, bringing us information at great personal cost. We must accommodate him."

"You do that, then." Harry replied. "Doesn't mean I have to." He leaned forward and took another bite of his dinner. "So, we've established that I *won't* be carrying on with the DA, since I've lost faith in all students and staff, which is partly the same reason I won't be continuing with Potions or Occlumency. What else would you like to discuss?"

"Harry, we still have not come to a satisfactory decision regarding the Defence group or your Occlumency lessons." Dumbledore said.

"Is it your plan to harp on at me about this until I capitulate and do what you want? Because that ain't gonna happen, you know. I've lost faith in you. So, I will state, categorically, here and now, that I will not have anything to do with DA or Snape. What's your next point?" Harry waited for Dumbledore's next outburst of 'I must insist'.

"Very well, Harry." Dumbledore said quietly. "I can see that you're not ready to discuss this yet, so we can come back to this later."

Four foot snake, this man isn't listening to me! Harry thought, inwardly chuckling. *Can't wait until I unleash the surprise on him. Won't he be shocked?*

"The next topic are the 'Special Studies' that I have marked on your schedule. These lessons will be with me, where I will teach you Voldemort's history, and the magicks necessary to defeat him. This will require a great deal of dedication on your part, as they are very advanced spells."

Dumbledore smiled warmly at his favourite student. "With this training, you and Voldemort will be on a more even footing."

Harry's head thunked onto the table. *He's not listened to a fucking word I've said. Why do I bother speaking?* "Didn't I say I wasn't interested?" He looked at Emma. "I did say that, didn't I?"

Emma nodded, smiling warmly at him. "You did. Several times, if memory serves." She glanced up at Dumbledore. "I think it's become a case of 'too little, too late', Headmaster."

"Nonsense!" Dumbledore replied jovially.

"No, it really is." Harry mumbled into the table, before looking up. "None of you seem to get it. The best part is, you're all making the same mistakes you made last year. And none of you even realise it."

"Mistakes, Harry?"

"Yes..." Harry replied. "Dumbledore, last year, you deprived me of the prefect position that was mine by right, for extremely dubious reasons. You've done it again this year. I've been on the Quidditch team the same time as Katie Bell, and we're both senior members of the team. Either she or I should be Quidditch captain, not Ron." He took another bite of his food. "And, not learning from last year, you cut off communication with me, so that I'm left to cope alone. Last year, it was a school mate who died in front of me. This year, it was my godfather who died in front of me."

He turned to Hermione. "Last year, you didn't write to me, at all, all because that dozy old fart said so. You, of all people, remember how... irritable that made me last year. Then, not learning from your mistake, you did it again this year. When I get here, you either demand I talk about my feelings, or you're trying to get Ron off. Forgive me for thinking you're a piss-poor friend."

Ron was next on his list. "Weasley, I don't think I even need to tell you about your transgressions. Demanding food at wand point from me, simply because you're a pureblood and I'm a half-blood. As far as I'm concerned, you're just as bad as Malfoy."

Neville and Luna were next. "You two... you fought alongside me, witnessed my godfather dying, then thought 'oh, he'll be fine!'. I've lost any respect I had for you two. However, since we weren't as close as the infamous 'Trio', it's not as bad. But, apart from being grateful that you came with me to the Ministry, I don't really have anything in common with you."

Finally turning to Ginny, who was waiting patiently for her turn. "And you, Ginny... I know that you're very eager to find out what I've bought you for your birthday. You know that I'm one of the richest wizards on the planet, and you're probably expecting something extremely expensive. Well, I'm sorry to tell you, but I've got you the same thing you gave me on my birthday. Absolutely sweet F.A."

Ginny's face dropped, before becoming red. "Harry, don't you think it's necessary to purchase your girlfriend a present?"

Girlfriend? When the hell did she become my girlfriend? "I am not Oedipus, Ginny." He said simply, letting her work it out from there.

Hermione and Emma were the first to work it out, and paled as one. "Ew..." Hermione muttered. "She does a bit, doesn't she?"

"What?" Ginny demanded petulantly.

"You look entirely too much like my Mum, Ginny. I couldn't possibly date you, for that reason alone. Plus, Reds don't do anything for me."

"Harry," Ginny began demurely, "Professor Dumbledore said that the Power the Dark Lord knows not is love. I love you, and I know that you could love me. Why deny yourself this pleasure?"

"Because you look like my Mum. And you're a redhead. Put simply, Ginny, you don't really do anything for me."

"But... the Potter love of red-haired girls is famous!" Ginny near-wailed. "I'm an attractive pureblood witch, from an old light-side family. Why not?"

Harry looked at her sharply. "Ginny, I do not want you. I have no romantic feelings towards you. At all. I doubt I ever will, unless I decide to want to start having wet dreams about my mother. It's nothing personal, but it'll never happen." *I'm not gonna apologise, because I'm not really sorry.*

"Harry, you should reconsider." Dumbledore said. "Miss Weasley is correct; the love and support of a life-partner will only enhance your abilities."

His head spinning round quickly, Harry glared at Dumbledore. "How dare you presume to offer me advice!" He hissed. "You've bugged my life up royally so far! Why is no-one listening? I do not want to shag someone who looks like my *Mum*! I'm not into incest! Plus, I'm not particularly attracted to redheads! Blondes? Fine. Brunettes? Works for me. Black-haired girls? Party on. But not Reds!

"And more to the point, I've only just turned sixteen, and she's still fourteen! How the bloody hell can you say that she's my 'life partner'? Neither of us are old enough for a life partner!"

Dumbledore sighed heavily, still projecting that disappointed air. "What will it take, Harry?"

"Excuse me?" Harry asked, completely thrown by Dumbledore's seemingly random question.

"What will it take for you to agree to the training? I can't offer you a prefectship, as that has now been granted to Mr. Longbottom. I am unable to remove Mr. Weasley as Quidditch captain, so I cannot offer that to you. What do you want?"

Harry stared at him for a moment. "Are you trying to bribe me?"

"In a word... yes." Dumbledore replied.

"So... I can name anything, and you'll consider giving it to me?" Harry asked, his eyebrows shooting up, and a devilish grin on his face.

This is going to be both painful and embarrassing. Dumbledore thought. *I remember those grins from the Marauders.* "If it is within my power to grant it, Harry, I will certainly look into the possibility."

"Hmm..." Harry leaned back, folding his arms across his chest, and closing his eyes. The manic grin never left his face, though. "Tell me exactly what you want me to do." He instructed.

"I want you to continue with the Defence Association, four nights a week, teaching everyone who wants to learn. I want you to undertake Occlumency training with Professor Snape, until your mind is fully protected. I want you to attend lessons with me so that you may learn about Voldemort and how to defeat him. I want you to join the Order of the Phoenix, and attend the training sessions here until school resumes. And I want you to continue with your career path towards being an Auror."

"And what about dating the little Weasley?" Harry asked, still keeping his eyes closed.

"That is up to you, however, I would strongly recommend it, as that will give you love and support."

"And her access to the largest fortune in the Wizarding world." Harry replied, still keeping his eyes shut. He could tell Ginny was huffing, though. "I suppose that might have something to do with that birthday list she 'accidentally' left in the kitchen. Seven new Firebolts for the Gryffindor team, a personalised one for her, an unlimited line of credit at Gucci Wizarding Wear, Madam Malkin's, the Three Broomsticks, the Leaky Cauldron and Honeydukes, yeah?"

Ginny's face paled as she realised that the list she'd written had been seen. "Er... Harry, that... I was just thinking... you know, if I was rich, what would I buy..." She laughed nervously.

"Well, you ain't, so it's not a problem. I know I won't be buying you those things." Still keeping his eyes shut, the side of Harry's mouth raised in a smirk. "Anyway, Dumbledore... you said that you can't offer me prefect or Quidditch captain, what's left?"

"I... I could make you Head Boy next year." Dumbledore offered pathetically.

"So, I work my arse off this year, I could be *dead* by next year, and you'll make me Head Boy... when you know that non-Prefects *cannot* be named Head Boy. Hogwarts herself would deny the appointment. And you are well aware of that little fact. Besides, Weasley wants to be Head Boy, and I know how much you'd hate to deprive him of his dream."

"Then what, Harry... what can I offer you?" Dumbledore asked.

"There's nothing, old man." Harry replied casually, finally opening his eyes. "You've made too many cock-ups to be fixed by throwing me some little bones. I should have been prefect last year, as well as this year and Quidditch captain. You can't offer me those. You've allowed the students in your school to slander and ridicule me, and you've lied to me. As far as I'm concerned, our 'relationship' is over. This is the last time I will discuss this with you. Accept it gracefully, Dumbledore... you've lost."

Harry turned to Dan and Emma. "Did Hermione ever tell you about focussed silencing charms? They're brilliant. If I key it to Dumbledore, I won't be able to hear him... it's a brilliant idea. Guaranteed peace. Of course, I'll need another one for Snivellus, Lupin and Molly Weasley... the rest I don't mind too much..."

"That will not be necessary, Harry." Dumbledore said. "I have things I must discuss with you, and-"

"No, you don't. Not anymore. Accept the fact that you've lost, Headmaster. You fucked up, and now you have to deal with the consequences. And this is the *last time* I'm going to speak about this. You seem far too eager to keep harping on, probably hoping that you'll bore me to death. Newsflash; not gonna happen."

Dan cleared his throat. "Harry, I don't understand why you don't just transfer to another school. I mean... you've had a pretty shitty hand dealt to you at that school. Why not just try another one?"

Harry chuckled. "I've thought about that, to be honest. I've got some pretty good OWL scores, so I could probably get in to another school."

"That will not be necessary, Harry." Dumbledore said quickly, panicked. "We are able to adequately meet your needs at Hogwarts, as we have for the last five years."

Harry snorted. "Utter bollocks. A Muggle Studies professor who thinks that Muggles still drive horse and buggies, and that an MP3 is a type of drill bit. A history teacher who didn't notice when he *died*. A Divination professor who has predicted my death on a weekly basis for three *years*, and a biased grease monkey of a Potions teacher who can't tell the difference between me and my dead Dad."

"That's the 'adequate' teaching you provide." Harry chuckled mirthlessly. "I've been thinking about changing schools ever since you told me the prophecy."

"Harry, you must attend Hogwarts. It's the only place you will be safe!" Dumbledore blurted out.

"Don't you mean it's the only place where you can play your little games, making me jump through your little hoops for some weird, indefinable 'Greater Good'?"

Harry?" Hermione asked softly. "You've really thought about leaving?" She sounded oddly hurt by the prospect.

Harry just shrugged. "Of course I have. Tell me, if I'd gone to Durmstrang, or Beauxbatons, or Salem, would I have really faced death all those times? Let's see... First year, the troll, the forest and Quirrell, not counting meeting Fluffy... That was my own fault.

"Second year, at the Duelling Club when Malfoy set that snake on me, Dobby setting the Bludger on me, going to Aragog's lair, and I still owe Hagrid a smack for that one, and when I went into the Chamber itself.

"Third year, facing the Dementors in the Quidditch match, the Dementors on the shore of the lake, and Moony.

"Fourth year... Let me count the ways! The dragon, the merpeople, another Acromantula, blast-ended Skrewts, an Imperius'd Viktor Krum, Mad-Eye Moody's doppelganger, meeting Voldemort in the cemetery... And that was one year!

"Dementors, Death Eaters, Voldemort, Umbridge... And you ignored me all year. Then, when I lose the closest thing I'll ever have to family, you decide to say, 'I know... Let's dump the weight of the whole Wizarding world on his shoulders... It's not been a bad enough day!' Frankly, the prospect of leaving is very appealing; I can't think of a single reason why I'd want to stay."

"Harry, that's really not necessary. We can give you everything you need at Hogwarts." Dumbledore said soothingly.

"You're only looking at the bad here, mate!" Ron said. "I mean, you're rich, famous... Got the birds lining up!"

"Tell me, Weasley, when did we go back to being mates?" Harry faced his ex-friend, noting the jaw flapping in the breeze, clearly unable to answer.

"Harry..." Hermione began in a trembling voice. He didn't even bother to look at her.

"You have all sown the wind. Now, you may reap the whirlwind." His eyes swivelled to her. "You decided not to write to me, on Dumbledore's orders. You chose him. You decided to date Ron, simply because of the prophecy, again, you chose someone else over me. Why the hell should I listen to any of you?" Harry folded his arms across his chest, leaned back in his chair, and waited.

Predictably, Dumbledore was the first to speak. "If you must blame anyone for your isolation at Privet Drive, Harry, blame me. It was under my instructions that your friends did not write to you."

"I know it was your orders, but they could have disobeyed. A true friend would have contacted me while I was grieving, showing their support. The fact that they ignored me for a month? Something each of them will have to take responsibility for." Harry glanced over at Dumbledore, noting the disappointed look the wizard was wearing.

"Do you really expect us to defy the Headmaster?" Ron asked incredulously. "He's the greatest wizard who ever lived!"

"Tell you what, then, Weasley; he can go and fight Voldemort, the greatest Dark Lord in the last ten centuries. I'll toddle off and do my own thing. How's that?"

"It doesn't work that way, Harry." Dumbledore said heavily. "Don't you think I wish I could take this burden from your shoulders and carry it myself?"

Harry looked at him. "No, I don't. I think you enjoy letting me be the little martyr for your cause. But, it doesn't matter. I've stopped caring." He leaned back, sighing heavily. "I think it's ironic that you're so eager to spend time with me, though. This time last year, you did all you could to avoid me. You wouldn't even look me in the eye. Then, after you drop that bombshell on me, you suddenly decide to be all chummy with me again."

"I have apologised, Harry." Dumbledore said. "I admit I've made mistakes with you... why do you insist of bringing them up again and again?"

"Because you don't *learn* from your mistakes!" Harry roared. "And as soon as I finish speaking, I'm going to get up, and I'm going to walk out of this room. I see no further need for us to speak. At all. About anything. Are we perfectly clear?"

Dumbledore shook his head sadly. "Harry, you must learn! You will not survive without training!"

Harry glanced at Emma. "He's not listening, is he? I told you that I want nothing to do with you, or your group. If I face Voldemort, I'll die. End of. Now, please, shut up and leave me alone." Harry stood, and started to walk out of the kitchen.

With a casual wave of his wand, Dumbledore slammed the kitchen door shut, then sealed it. "I'm sorry, Harry, but I cannot let you leave. It is your destiny to defeat Voldemort. I will not let you out until you agree to my terms."

Harry didn't bother to turn round. "Open it, Dumbledore, or there will be... trouble."

"I cannot, Harry. Not until you agree."

Quicker than Dumbledore's eyes could track, Harry span round, grabbing Dumbledore's wand and cleanly snapping it in half. He dropped the two pieces to the floor, and dusted off his hands. "Do not test me, Dumbledore... you will not like the consequences."

Leaping to his feet, Dumbledore let his aura flare. "How dare you?" He roared. "Do you know what you've done?"

"I snapped your wand." Harry replied casually, buffing his fingernails on his t-shirt. "Now, I'm leaving this room. You have gone too far. You are no longer welcome at this house, Dumbledore. When you next leave, the wards will not allow you to return." Harry turned towards the door. "Now, get out."

Harry waved his wand at the door, neatly spelling the *Colloportus*, and opened the door. "TTFN, folks."

As he walked away, he heard Ron ask, "What's 'TTFN' mean?"

*The Black Family Manor, #12 Grimmauld Place, London
Sunday, 1st September, 1996 – 09:15*

The remainder of August had flown by. Harry had spent most of the time ignoring Dumbledore, chatting with Walburga's portrait (true, the woman was a powerful-ugly creature, but she knew a hell of a lot), ignoring Dumbledore, learning to flirt from Emma, ignoring Dumbledore, provoking Snape, ignoring Dumbledore, avoiding Hermione's piteous glances, ignoring Dumbledore, sniggering at Ron every time his bowels exploded and ignoring Dumbledore.

If Harry was honest with himself, and he made it a point to always be honest with himself, watching Dumbledore mime at him every time he got near was endlessly amusing. Somehow, Dumbledore had mastered the disapproving/piteous looks that he was famous for, and was sending them at Harry whenever he could.

Ron's bowels had been the recipient to several more violent expulsions, one of which had been caused by Dan Granger. Emma had told him all about the 'confrontation' afterwards.

"You're smirking."

"Yes, dear."

"You've done something you shouldn't have, haven't you?"

"Yes, dear."

"Daniel Granger, you will explain yourself right now, or I shall go downstairs in to the dungeon, get the testicle handcuffs, and you will be begging me to spill your secrets." Emma's face was implacable.

"I may have accidentally left a sandwich on the table."

"Accidentally?"

"And I may have accidentally left a note saying 'I'm full, but will be coming back to this later. Dan.'"

Just as Emma was about to launch a verbal spear at Dan, there was the sound of groaning, vomiting and the bathroom door slamming shut.

"And Ron may have accidentally found it and stuffed it in that black hole he calls a mouth."

Emma was smirking by this point. "Still not happy with our daughter's choice, then?"

"Emma, I'd be happier if she chose Beaster as a mate."

"Beaster?"

"You know the House Elf heads in the hallway?" She nodded. "Third one from the left? Has a squint and no teeth? Smells a bit like mothballs and something you stepped in? That one. So, maybe I like the idea of Weasley getting to know the inside of that bathroom a little better."

Emma laughed, hugging her husband, as they both climbed in to bed for the night.

"Oh, and by the way? Harry owns a house with testicle handcuffs?"

Dan's smile fell off his face as he heard, in the darkness, the soft chink of metal chain. Uh-oh.

Harry had laughed out loud when Emma reported the conversation, and Dan limping in the following morning, clearly in pain but with a grin wide enough to split his face in half. Emma looked innocently at Harry, before winking and smirking.

Harry had winced as the full realisation sunk in. *Ah... she used the testicle handcuffs. Amazingly, that doesn't do a thing for me.*

The five 'Junior Order' members, or as Harry called them, the 'Kids Playing Grownup' had continued with their training during the month. By now, Hermione (as the most advanced and powerful) had about a quarter of the ability and strength of Harry, and would last almost five seconds in a fight against him. Of course, Harry had made bloody sure not to tell her this; he liked his bollocks intact, thank you. The truly sad part was that she was at least at match for most of the Order. The only reason she would lose was that she wasn't aggressive enough, although prolonged exposure to the youngest Weasleys would be able to cure that.

Hermione had tried, a lot, to talk to Harry, but she didn't really have a clue how to deal with this apparently apathetic version of her best friend. She was used to sullen, quiet, and ferociously angry Harry, but a Harry who just didn't give a shit about anything threw her. Her parents seemed to be getting along fine with him, better than she did, and even better than they were getting along with her. Both Dan and Emma had expressed... strong

disapproval of her choices over the last few weeks, and Hermione couldn't blame them one bit.

She'd pretty much ignored Ron apart from when they had to work together for the Order training. Since a good portion of their training included theoretical research about how their powers worked, and how to control new spells, Ron had tried to be extra-friendly, so he could copy her homework.

Naturally, she'd refused, ever since his blood purist snit in the kitchen at the beginning of August. Ron's truly thick nature didn't realise this, and he was talking about taking her back as his girlfriend, once she'd apologised for her disgraceful conduct.

She controlled her reaction, which comprised of a hefty slap and an outraged laugh, and left the idiot rambling to himself.

How do I make this up to Harry? Was the only thing she really thought about, for that was now her life focus. Her studies, her NEWT results... none of it mattered worth a damn without Harry being there to enjoy it with her. She'd been hoping that when they all returned to Hogwarts, she'd be able to sit down with Harry, and thrash out the arguments.

King's Cross Station, London
Sunday, 1st September, 1996 – 10:51

Harry, along with the Weasleys, Neville, Luna and the Grangers, had arrived rather late at King's Cross. As usual, it was the fault of the Weasleys. Ron hadn't bothered to start packing until half-nine, spending a huge amount of time grabbing his clothes, hunting for his socks (craftily stolen by Crookshanks) and looking for his wand (Hedwig was bored one afternoon).

He had a plan. Since he wasn't taking the Hogwarts Express this year, he had to get to Platform Six for his train to Manchester. Before leaving the house, he'd reduced his trunk down to the size of a pack of cigarettes, throwing it casually into his backpack, along with a twelve inch broomstick. His invisibility cloak was also on hand.

As he passed through the portal onto Platform 9¾, he threw the cloak over himself, before stepping to the side. As soon as his visible signature had been eliminated, he cast a cooling charm over himself, masking his body heat, and a silencing charm on his shoes. His final act was to make sure Moody's creepy eyeball wouldn't be able to see him, by casting a special illusion spell on the inside of the cloak, which projected whatever was behind Harry on the inside. If Moody looked, all he'd see is the illusion, rendering Harry truly invisible.

Without another word to anyone, Harry stepped back through the portal, breathing in as an excitable first year dashed through, giggling madly. *Muggleborn. Undoubtedly a Hufflepuff.* He thought casually.

Stepping through the bustle of commuters, he made his way to the correct platform, watching as Molly, Arthur, Dan and Emma stepped back through the portal, casually walking towards the exit.

This is too easy... Harry thought, glancing round shiftily. *I'm never this lucky...* Deciding not to focus on his apparent good luck, Harry boarded the Virgin train, setting his backpack onto a chair, before vanishing into the toilets to cancel his spells.

Fully visible, Harry returned to his seat, pulling out his pack of complimentary headphones, and plugged into the radio. *I hope that letter gets there on time.*

The Great Hall, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
Sunday, 1st September, 1996 – 19:08

Dumbledore was worried. It was official: Harry Potter was missing. As soon as the Express arrived, Tonks had sent a Patronus, advising that no one had seen Harry on the train throughout the entire ride, and they now considered him either missing or kidnapped.

Immediately alerting the Order, Dumbledore had set his agents into action. Remus Lupin was despatched to Diagon Alley, to check the Leaky Cauldron and Gringotts, while Mad-Eye Moody had gone to Privet Drive, just to check he hadn't returned to the waste of blood and organs, otherwise called the Dursleys.

Finally, Severus Snape had been sent to Headquarters, to see if the brat had gone there, or if the Grangers knew anything. Reading them with Legilimency, he discovered that they didn't know anything about his destination, but that they'd strongly suspected he'd do something.

"When I call out your name," McGonagall called out the nervous little first years, "please place the hat... on..." She trailed off as a haunting bark grabbed her attention.

As everyone looked up, they saw a white owl streaking across the hall, moving far quicker than possible. With a loud snuffle, the snowy white owl folded its wings up, and drifted to a halt on the Staff table.

With trembling hands, Dumbledore pulled the envelope from the owl's leg. Before he could open it, the owl flapped its powerful wings, lifting into the air, before heading for the door. The instant she turned the corner, there was a flash of light as she vanished.

Instead of opening the letter, Dumbledore placed it on the table-top, suspecting that it was a howler. It was.

"Ladies and Gentlemen! Boys and Girls! Children of all ages!" The envelope ripped itself open, hovering in the air in front of Dumbledore. The voice was magnified, far beyond that of a conventional howler. Privately, Dumbledore wouldn't be surprised if the people in Hogsmeade heard this.

"That's not right..." The howler continued. "I missed a few people out there... Hmm... let's see... ah, yes! Not forgetting Greasy Bat Bastard Potions Masters, and Manipulative old goat-shaggers! In case you're not sure, that's Snape and Dumbledore! This is Harry Potter! Yes, *that* one. By now, you're all probably wondering where I am."

Hermione sat at the Gryffindor table, casually chewing her fingernails to tatty stumps. She didn't care about her nails. Her best friend, and the person she was not-so-secretly in love with, had gone missing, causing her to worry.

She'd gone to McGonagall as soon as they arrived, telling her that Harry was missing, and they needed to find him. McGonagall had simply said that Dumbledore had already despatched Order agents, and that they were tirelessly searching for the missing young man at that very moment.

Hermione had stumbled into the Great Hall, taking her seat and waiting impatiently. Ron had come and sat down next to her, only to be ignored. Neville took the seat on the other side of her, while Ginny sat across from her.

When the howler had arrived, it had taken every ounce of Hermione's self-control not to leap up and grab the letter. She listened, with amusement and outraged pride at Harry's definitions for Snape and Dumbledore, before settling in for the next part.

"...now, you're all probably wondering where I am. Well, I'll tell you. I'm not there! Yes, I know this will come as a major surprise to all of you. I have decided that I didn't want to return to Hogwarts, 'cause the vast majority of the Wizarding world are incompetent morons with delusions of adequacy. So, I've decided to take a holiday until Voldemort brutally kills me, and condemns everyone in the world to a horrible painful death.

"If you want to know where I am physically... well, California's nice this time of year. I'd suggest starting to search there. It's been utterly shit knowing you all. Oh, by the way... Malfoy? Your plan to kill the Headmaster won't work. Using the vanishing cabinet in the Room of Requirement to sneak Death Eaters in from Borgin and Burkes... how dumb do you think I am?"

Every eye locked on Draco, who had lost all colour, and was rocking himself slightly.

"Some of you are probably wondering why I've upped and vanished like a fart in the wind. I'll tell you this; Sooner or later... the day comes when you can't hide from the things that you've done anymore. And sometimes indifference and neglect often do more damage than outright dislike. People like Seamus Finnegan should know what that means."

The focus of everyone's attention slid from Malfoy to Seamus, who squirmed uncomfortably in his chair, keeping his gaze on the plate in front of him.

"So long, farewell, goodbye, Ciao and all that bollocks." With a final raspberry, the letter exploded into confetti, which dropped slowly over the Headmaster.

Hermione pondered everything she'd been told, everything she'd watched over the last two months, and began to cry over her foolishness. Ron tried to wrap an arm around her shoulders to comfort her, but a swift elbow into his gut disabused him of the notion.

Inside, she made herself an oath. *I will never put anyone before Harry James Potter, Emma Jane Granger or Daniel Edward Granger ever again.* She glowed with light as her oath was accepted by her magic. *I'll find you, Harry, and when I do, I'll stand by your side.*

*Clearwater Beach, Pinellas County, Florida
Monday, 23rd September, 1996 – 14:18 EDT*

Harry was sitting on the beach, the sun shining brightly, the burning heat reduced to a pleasant warming sensation, thanks to the sunscreen potion he'd consumed earlier.

"Ah, Harry, I'm surprised to see you here."

Harry nearly choked on his drink. After some coughing, spluttering, and a few obscenities I daren't type, he sat up, and gazed at his 'guest' with a look of surprise.

"What the bloody hell are *you* doing here?"

"The same as you, I suppose. I'm tired."

Harry's hand strayed underneath his sun lounger, grasping his wand subtly. "I rather doubt you came out here to get a tan, Tom."

Tom Riddle shook his head, laughing. It wasn't a Voldemort laugh, all cold and cruel. It was the laugh of somebody terribly amused.

"Come now, Harry. Of all the people you have met, don't I strike you as the person who needs a tan?"

Harry snorted, but he couldn't deny the truth of the statement. "Why are you here? Are we going to duel?"

"If you want to, I won't stop you. However, if you want to order me a drink, I *really* won't stop you."

He caught the eye of the waiter at the bar, pointed to his glass, and then held up two fingers. The waiter nodded, and started preparing the drinks.

Harry James Potter had seen a great deal in his short life, but Lord Voldemort, the Darkest Lord of the Millennium, wearing a pair of lime green shorts and a pair of sunglasses, sipping a drink out of a plastic coconut, was by far the strangest thing he'd seen.

"So..." Harry fished around for something to say. "If we're not going to fight, then why are you here?"

Tom slumped onto a hastily conjured towel, leaning back onto his elbows. "Like you, Harry, I'm tired of it all. The fighting, the politicking, the 'keeping an eye on your enemy but a closer eye on your followers'. I'm 67 years old, Harry. What have I achieved in my life? I've spent 13 years as a spirit, I've killed for my cause, and in the end, the world is as it was. I've changed nothing." Riddle looked at Harry slyly. "What have you achieved, Harry?"

The younger man shrugged. "Honestly? Not a lot. I thought that I'd managed to assemble a family, a group of friends. Instead? Not nary a bloody thing. They don't notice my birthday, Hermione wanted to date me but decided that Ron was the better option, since me and you are at war. She loves me, but since I've got a price on my head? Ah, well, 'I'll go for the Ginger Whinger, he'll last longer'." He snorted with disgust. "What a pair we make."

"I, too, once sought the companionship of a woman, Harry. She was a third year when I started at Hogwarts. She teaches there now. She was a beautiful woman, Scottish, with a fire that I felt only I could contain and quench."

"Oh, Merlin! You fancied McGonagall!" Harry ruthlessly suppressed his reaction at working out this little nugget of knowledge. It was something he could really have done without.

"I did." Tom nodded. "To tell you the truth, I still do. You've only ever seen her as a stern professor. Trust me, she has a side to her that could ignite your soul, and you'd be lost to her forever." Tom's eyes became wistful for a moment, before he focused on the here and now. "I blame Dumbledore."

"Oh? How so?"

"Think about it, Harry. When I was younger, I wanted to stay in the castle over the summer, rather than go to the Orphanage, where I'd be bullied. He said no. I ended up becoming the bully. You know me, Harry, probably better than anyone; when I put my mind to do something, I do it to the best of my ability. I became *the* bully. At Hogwarts, I wanted to learn about my heritage, so I opened the Chamber of Secrets. I didn't know Myrtle was there, and so when Blink killed her, I panicked. I blamed Hagrid, because I didn't want to leave Hogwarts; if I did, I'd have nothing." He shrugged. "I created the first Horcrux by accident. It was such a rush, the power, the control. Imagine it like a Muggle drug. You take the hit, you have the high, and in the low that follows, you'd do anything, *anything*, it takes to get that high again. My own ignorance fooled me."

Harry, who'd finally lowered his wand, looked surprised at this confession.

"I began to believe that I was better than everyone else. I had power that they didn't, therefore, I was superior. Dark Magic is a slippery slope, Harry. You either enjoy the rush, or it sickens you. The Cruciatu you cast on Bella in the Ministry... you felt sick for days afterwards, didn't you?" Harry nodded. "Like a drug, I needed that rush. The feeling of absolute power. Power corrupts, Harry."

"But absolute power is kinda neat?"

Riddle laughed, a long, deep belly laugh. "Indeed, it would've been. I sought to destroy all those that I did not feel were worthy, because I had the power to do so. And it all came to a head when I heard that some whelp would be able to kill me. I sought out the whelp, intent on killing him before he had the chance to kill me. I sought out your parents, and removed them from my way."

"You killed them!" Harry accused, his wand flicking up, a bright red glow on the tip.

"I did." Tom agreed affably. "At the time, they were in my way, and so they had to die." He looked downbeat. "I killed them both. Then I aimed at you, intending to destroy you, annihilate you to save myself. Your mother, showing a love I had never known, and could therefore not even comprehend, protected you. My curse rebounded, destroying my body and shattering what remained of my soul in two. I fled, and the loose soul fragment bonded to the only thing it could; you. You've felt its influence over the years, haven't you? And something seems different."

Harry nodded. Ever since Voldemort had possessed him at the Ministry, he'd felt different, lighter, *free*.

"At the Ministry, when I possessed you, my soul and the Horcrux reintegrated, restoring a little piece of my humanity. It also brought something new to the mix, something that I have never experienced; your compassion, your feelings, your love. It was agony." He trailed off for a few moments, shuddering slightly in remembrance of the pain.

"Suddenly, I cared. I worried about people. Me, the most evil man in the last thousand years, actually gave a shit about the people under hm." He shook his head softly in disbelief, before giving a wry chuckle. "Since then, I, like you, feel freer, more alive. It's ironic, after achieving so much power, I crave what I sacrificed; love and acceptance."

Riddle stood, heading towards the distant apparition point. "From this point on, Harry Potter, you need not fear me. I have no more fight left in me. Your influence has changed me, far more than my influence has affected you. I intend to take back my humanity, and live out the rest of my life. I shall contact Minerva. Perhaps with her help, I can start to atone. I know that I never can, but I shall try." He began to walk away.

Harry did not understand why he did it. Years later, it would still baffle him... Until he realised that Voldemort was the one who killed his parents. Tom Riddle was an idiot, on the same order as Ron Weasley, but this was not the same man. "Tom, wait!" Riddle turned and looked at Harry. "Before you go, you might want to practice how to talk to women."

"How, Harry?" Tom looked intrigued.

Harry Potter, Boy-Who-Lived and now Beach-Bum-Who's-Confused, looked at his arch-nemesis, and smiled. "There's a foam party tonight at 8. I propose we get you into some proper glad rags, a little education, and we'll see how you do in a really tough environment; pulling!"

Headmaster's Office, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
Monday, 23rd September, 1996 – 09:21 GMT

Dumbledore had decided, after three weeks of putting it off, he simply had no choice but to buckle down, and begin working on clearing the backlog of administrivia, the pointless paperwork that came with all of his positions.

Two hours into his tedious workload, he was interrupted by the arrival of his favourite portable grease generator.

"Albus! The Dark Lord is missing, and... well..."

Sighing to himself, and enjoying a particularly sour lemon drop, Dumbledore raised his hands. "Calm yourself, Severus, and tell me everything."

Snape took a few deep breaths, getting his ragged breathing back under some semblance of control, before dropping into one of the hard wooden chairs in front of the Headmaster's desk. "He told all of the Death Eaters that he had a very important mission to attend to. He pulled me in to his private chamber, and told me to 'return to my true master', and sent me on my way."

"He knows of your spying?" Dumbledore was alarmed, and tremendously surprised by the revelation.

"Albus, he let me go *without killing me*. He's disappeared, somewhere in America."

"America?" Albus looked up in fear. "Harry Potter's run to America. If Voldemort finds him, he'll be tortured and then killed. We must gather up the Order, and find Harry. He must be trained, whether he wants it or not."

Harry's Apartment, Clearwater Beach, Pinellas County, Florida
Tuesday, 24th September, 1996 – 10:56 – EDT

Harry woke up, his eyes stinging from the bright light flooding in to his apartment windows. Sitting up, he grabbed the glass of water from his bedside table, gulping it down quickly. While Muggle lager and cocktails wasn't quite up to the standards of the rocket fuel that masqueraded as FireWhiskey, they were still pretty potent in their own right. Luckily, Harry's hangovers consisted only of cotton-wool-mouth and the ability to drink 18 pints of water without needing to pee. Of course, his bladder would get its own revenge, by forcing him to spend about 20 minutes peeing in the bathroom. *Still, that'll not happen until about 7pm, so I'll be okay.*

As he ambled out of his bedroom, he saw the door to the guest room open, and watched as one... two... and finally a third beautiful woman wandered out, one of them limping, but all of them with smiles on their faces that made them look like they'd slept with a clothes hanger in their mouths. *The man's a machine.*

As the girls left, Riddle wandered out of the door, looking thoroughly shagged. Physically and metaphorically. To Harry's initial alarm, the man's eyes were a dark red. Still, he was smiling, and his eyes weren't the red of Voldemort, they were the red of a man who hadn't gotten much sleep, as he'd been doing something much more fun.

"Good morning, Harry." Tom said tiredly, slumping into his chair at the dining table.

"Not as good as yours, it seems." Harry smirked. "I see that, while you're no longer using Dark magic, you're still pretty handy with *Incarcerous*."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, the blond had rope burns on her wrists."

"She was naughty, Harry, and had to be punished." Tom had his own smirk, looking far more evil than Harry's.

"By injection?"

Riddle laughed again, and then gestured at the table, conjuring a full breakfast for them both. "In all seriousness, Harry, we need to talk."

"The prophecy?"

"Indeed. With my possession of you, I have the full prophecy. Since neither of us really want to kill each other..." He trailed off, looking at Harry for confirmation. Despite going on the pull together, the possibility of fighting still existed, due to the damned prophecy. "Then you will need to kill Voldemort."

Harry froze for a moment. "I thought Voldemort was gone, and Tom Riddle returned."

Tom looked up, his eyes flaring red, and his voice dropping to the cold depths of full Dark Lord. "Voldemort still exists while my soul is fractured." Riddle returned, his eyes back to their usual pale grey/blue. "To kill Voldemort, we will need to gather the remaining Horcruxes, and you will need to reintegrate the soul fragments with my active soul. That action will 'kill' the Dark Lord, and fulfil the prophecy. Both of us can 'live', because you would've 'won'."

"I'll win. Wow! I bet my friends would be so... oh, hang on..." The sarcasm rang heavy in his voice.

"I know, Harry." Tom sighed. "Believe me, I know how you feel; what friends do I have? I've had people around me, hanging on to my coattails, wanting a bit of the power and wealth I had, or rather, they perceived I had. Rather like your friend Weasley, don't you think?"

"At least the Death Eaters were prepared to put a bit of effort in. All Ron wanted was everything handed to him on a plate. And he got it. His Prefect badge? Should've been mine. Her..." He winced. "Hermione. He got Hermione." Harry looked down, a single tear in his eye.

Although he felt betrayed by her for choosing Ron, he was still unsure of his feelings for her. Did he love her? Did he care for her? Was the possibility there? He'd never really considered it. When he first started Hogwarts, he was fully prepared for his life to continue on as it had beforehand; unloved and alone. Damn her! She'd wormed her way in, inside the dark places of his mind, and shown him friendship and devotion.

"Well, I don't think anyone will need to worry about the Death Eaters any more." Tom's evil smirk returned to his face, malevolent and cruel. In a good way, of course. "I may have made a *slight* modification to the Dark Mark.

"They are now unable to harm anyone, except in self-defence, they physically cannot say the word 'Mudblood'. Lucius will find himself giving away 95% of his fortune to charity, and Bellatrix is back in Azkaban. The Dark Mark pledges their obedience to me, no matter the order." Riddle smiled, imaging the arrogant Malfoy giving away all his money for no reason. "Come, Harry. We shall vanquish the Dark Lord, and then I shall go find Minerva, see if she can still tie a cherry stalk in to a knot with her tongue."

Harry looked up with a look of pure disgust on his face. "Too Much Information!"

The two men showered, dressed, and drank enough water to bathe themselves in. Gathering evil soul objects from around the world was guaranteed to be even less fun with a hangover. The two packed a few necessities, grabbed a Portkey, and headed for the first location, a natural cave formation just off the coast of Brighton. After a swim, which was far less satisfying than Clearwater, they entered the cave. Tom flicked a small quantity of blood at the wall, which ground open to reveal a set of roughly hewn steps.

The pair crossed a small indoor lake in a rickety rowboat to a small island, only a few metres across.

"Is this a potion?" Harry asked, looking into the glowing green liquid.

Tom nodded. "It is. A rather potent hallucinogen. I would strongly recommend not drinking it. Has a secondary effect of completely draining a wizard's magical core for a short time. Fortunately, since it's my Horcrux, I can just bypass it." He put his hand into the potion, grimacing slightly.

"What?" Harry asked, suddenly alert. "Does it hurt?"

"No." Tom replied through clenched teeth. "It's bloody cold, though." With an almost-cheer of victory, he pulled out a heavy gold locket. "Okay... this isn't good."

"What's up?"

"This isn't the locket I used to make the Horcrux." Tom replied absently. He opened up the locket, pulling out a scrap of parchment. "Oh, bollocks!"

Harry took the note, reading it through quickly. "Okay, bad point; someone else has your Horcrux. Plus side, we don't know if it's been destroyed." He looked at the signature. "Do you have any Death Eaters who's names begin with 'R'?"

Tom looked up. "What makes you think it was a Death Eater?"

"Look, here." Harry pointed to something at the top of the note. "The writer calls you 'the Dark Lord'. I've found only Death Eaters do that. Everyone else uses that 'You-Know-Who' bollocks."

Tom nodded. "Yes... the only one I can think of is Regulus. He was... killed, back in the late seventies."

Harry groaned. "Was he by any chance Regulus Black, Sirius' brother?" He glanced at the fake locket. "And was your Horcrux a rather gaudy gold locket, with a big 'S' on it?"

Riddle held up the fake, nodding. "Yes. This is similar, but the locket I used actually belonged to Slytherin."

"It was in Order Headquarters a year ago. None of us could open it, so we just chucked it in the bin." Harry leaned against the small outcropping of rock. "We're humped. Damned thing could be... oh, you delightful, evil little shit! Kreacher!"

With an agonised yell, the tiny elf appeared over the indoor lake, dropping like a pebble into the cold water. After a moment, the sputtering creature hauled himself onto the island. "Filthy half-blood master calls Kreacher?"

Harry took the locket from Tom, holding it up to Kreacher. "Last year, we found an old locket, Kreacher. Master Regulus wanted to destroy it, didn't he?"

The elf looked up, seeing the fake locket, and the note. "Yes." He replied, far more respectful.

"Kreacher, do you know where that locket is now?" Tom asked politely.

Kreacher looked at the other man. "Who's is you?"

"My name's Tom." The older man replied casually. "Like your Master Regulus, I want to kill the Dark Lord. By destroying the locket, we'll be one step closer. We'd really appreciate your help, Kreacher."

The elf looked taken aback by both the kind words and the forceful sentiment behind them. "Kreacher has the locket. Kreacher unable to destroy it."

"We can." Tom and Harry said together. "If you can bring it here," Harry continued, "me and Tom can make sure it's destroyed."

Tom looked at the evil little elf, who's eyes hadn't left the fake locket. "This belonged to Regulus, didn't it?"

Kreacher nodded.

"Well, once we have the other locket, you can have this. Something to properly remember your favourite master by, and you'll have completed his mission for him. He won't have died for nothing."

The elf vanished. Harry looked up at Tom, and remembered something that he'd heard at Hogwarts, ages ago. "You know, I heard that the real you was actually very charming. Having only ever met your evil side, I could never see it."

Tom just shrugged.

"At least it explains how you got those three witches into bed last night."

Giving a cheeky grin, Tom shrugged again. "You've either got it or you haven't, young Harry. I seem to have 'it' in abundance."

"Really? I thought it'd all been drained out and injected last night." Harry retorted. "I don't know how you're even walking today."

"Age and experience will always beat youthful vigour, Harry." Tom replied wisely, his eyes twinkling like a certain annoying ex-headmaster. "And the ability to combine Parseltongue and cunnilingus will have even the most stubborn witches lining up to bed you."

Harry was saved from answering by Kreacher's reappearance. He held out the Horcrux, while keeping his eyes locked on the fake. Tom passed it over straight away, Kreacher snatching it and clutching it to his chest.

"We'll be going now, Kreacher." Tom said. "Thank you for all of your help." Turning the locket into a Portkey with a casual flick of his wand, Tom held it out to Harry. "Shall we move on, young Harry?"

Their next destination was just outside the wards of a very opulent manor house, located in the countryside.

"Where are we?"

Tom looked round, making sure he was in the right place. "This? It's Malfoy Manor. I had Lucius keep hold of one of my Horcruxes."

"The Diary?" Harry asked, a sense of regret in his soul. "That was destroyed three years ago. Lucius passed it on to Ginny Weasley, who used it to get the basilisk out of the Chamber of Secrets and attacking people. If I wanted to save Ginny, I had to destroy the diary."

Tom rocked backwards. "Bugger!" He paced for a few moments. "How did you do it?"

"Eh?"

"How did you destroy the diary?" Tom asked. "There were a *lot* of protections on that thing. You couldn't just burn it, or rip it apart."

Harry thought back. "I destroyed it with a basilisk fang. Stabbed it right through." He looked up as he saw Tom sigh with relief. "What?"

"The fragment of my soul would have passed into the basilisk fang, since it would have been a far more powerful magical object. Basilisk venom wouldn't be able to destroy it, since the venom is physical, while the fragment was magical. As long as the fang is intact, the Horcrux should be safe."

Harry nodded. "The fang's still in the Chamber. Shite... we'll have to go to Hogwarts."

"We'd have had to do that anyway." Tom replied nonchalantly. "I hid a Horcrux there in 1967, when I went to see Dumbledore for a job. There's a room on the seventh floor, which reshapes itself as needed. One of the House Elves called it the 'Come and Go' Room."

"The Room of Requirement?" Harry asked, bursting into laughter. "Oh, the irony!"

"What's ironic about that?"

"We used that room to train how to fight. The 'Defence Association'. We were learning how to fight you and the Death Eaters."

"Yes." Tom replied drolly. "Very amusing. We'll leave Hogwarts 'til last, I feel. I don't particularly want to encounter Dumbledore until we have the rest."

"Where next, then?"

"Little Hangleton."

As the two rematerialised, Harry felt a cold shiver run down his spine. Tom was watching him carefully. "I'm sorry..." He whispered.

Harry, in a move that shocked even him, startled the older man by wrapping him in a manly hug. "It wasn't you. I know that. It's just... well, you were a bit of a bastard back then."

"I... I know. I don't know how to make it better." Tom admitted, relishing the first physical contact he'd had (not counting a hot threesome) in almost five decades.

"Have you ever watched telly?" Harry asked, after stepping back.

Tom nodded slowly, confused by the apparent segue. "I was Muggle-raised, Harry. I watched television up until the 70's."

"Well, there's a show on TV at the moment called 'Buffy the Vampire Slayer'. One of the characters in it is a vampire, who's regained his soul. You kinda remind me of him. The souled vampire fights to redeem himself for his non-souled actions. At one point, he loses his soul, and becomes a monster again. Even though he has the same face, he's a completely different person. That's how I see you."

Tom nodded. "I think I understand. Voldemort is a part of me, but it is not me. That does answer how you managed to accept me so easily. I was wondering about that."

"Come on, Angel." Harry said with a grin. "Let's get this done, and box Angelus up, shall we?"

"I shall have to watch more television." Tom concluded.

Picking through the remains of the Gaunt shack was not a pleasant encounter. An abundance of snakes, easily chased off by the two Parselmouths, a collapsing floor, which prompted Harry to snort, "Indiana Jones, much?" and a brief encounter with a Manticore, they had recovered Marvolo Gaunt's ring.

"This is disgusting." Harry said, sneering at the gaudy jewellery. "Could you have picked something... I don't know... classier?"

Tom looked offended. "Don't you know what it is?"

"An anthropomorphic manifestation of 'ugly'?"

"This is one of the last relics of Salazar Slytherin himself! It's priceless beyond measure! It's-"

"An eyesore." Harry interrupted. "It's pretentious beyond belief. Man... the Middle Ages had no idea about accessorising, did they?"

Tom just huffed. "Fine. That's three physical, the one from you, and the chunk in me. That leaves two. Time to go to Hogwarts?"

Harry nodded slowly. "Time to go to Hogwarts."

While on route, the two engaged in a brief but surprising discussion. "How could you not know?"

"Dumbledore didn't bloody tell me! Ooh, the meddling old bastard!"

"You are the Heir of Gryffindor, just as I am the Heir to Slytherin. Why the hell did you think I picked you over Longbottom?"

"I thought it was 'cause I'm a half-blood, just like you. Neville's a pureblood."

"Well... that may have been part of it, but it was mainly the Gryffindor aspect."

"As interesting as this is, why tell me now?"

"As Founders' Heirs, we can Portkey straight through the wards around the school, provided we do not mean harm to the school or its students. That's why I could never just Portkey through the wards and kill everyone. Hogwarts herself wouldn't let me."

"Can't blame her."

"Indeed. But, we can just materialise in the Chamber. Oh, I hope that basilisk hasn't rotted too far."

"It's dead. What use is it now?"

"Think, Harry. Potent magical poison... that's been rotting for three years. It will absolutely stink in there. Bubblehead charms all round, I believe."

The two appeared in the Chamber of Secrets, and as one, bent over and vomited from the vile stench. After raising a shaky hand and casting Bubblehead charm, Tom helped Harry to his feet.

"We should definitely bring Dumbledore down here." Harry gasped. "My god, that's vile... smells like Ron ate too many Brussels Sprouts."

Tom managed to avoid heaving. “Really? I’ll have to take your word for that. To me, it smells like Bella overdosed on pickled eggs. Even Nagini feared her then.”

Harry stopped in his tracks. “That reminds me; where is she? I wouldn’t have thought you’d leave her behind.”

“I didn’t.” Tom replied, holding up his wrist. Harry hadn’t noticed it before, but when he looked closer, he saw Tom appeared to be wearing a friendship band. As Harry watched, it moved slightly.

“You’re kidding me...” Harry gasped, swallowing down a peal of laughter. “That’s Nagini? Did you shrink her down or something?”

“No.” Tom replied in a small voice. “This is her actual size. I just hit her with a couple of *Engorgio* charms. People don’t generally fear a six inch snake.”

Harry swallowed down several smutty retorts, and looked closer. The tiny snake’s head looked up at him. “Oh, she’s so cute! Way better than the last time I saw her. She was what? Fifteen feet then?”

“About that.” Tom agreed, letting his arm and tiny familiar drop to his side. “Anyway, if you’re done laughing at my familiar, what say we find that tooth?”

Harry, chuckling slightly, turned and headed to the base of the immense statue. “You know, Tom... looking at this statue, I can see why Slytherin wore such ugly jewellery.”

“He was an immensely powerful and capable wizard, Harry.” Tom replied patiently. “He was one of the foremost scholars in history.”

“He was an ugly bastard.” Harry replied, looking at Tom, who nodded slightly.

“Perhaps...”

Grabbing the loose fang, Harry felt the presence of Tom’s soul in it, and casually tossed it over to Tom. “Five down, one to go...” He said. “Now, how the hell do we get up to the Room of Requirement without being seen? I have no desire to run into any of my ‘friends’.”

Tom nodded. “Yes, I don’t particularly want to run into them, either.” The two started towards the door. “It’s a damn shame we can’t just apparate up there. Glamours?”

“Dumbledore can see through them.”

“Invisibility?”

“Dumbledore and Moody can see through my cloak, and I’ve always been able to spot people under disillusionment charms.”

“Really? How?”

“While it makes the body invisible, it distorts the outline slightly. You can always spot it.”

“What about combining a glamour and disillusionment?”

Harry paused to consider it. “That’d probably work if you weren’t wearing that disgusting Hawaiian shirt. Tourist.”

With a casual flick of his wand, Tom was in his customary black robes, all traces of Tom gone. “If I were to create a distraction at the front of the school, could you sneak up to the seventh floor and grab the Horcrux?”

“If I knew what the hell I was looking for, probably.”

“It’s Ravenclaw’s Diadem. If you summon the Come and Go room by telling it ‘I need a place to hide my Horcrux’, then when you’re inside, say ‘*Accio* Ravenclaw’s Diadem’. Make sure you move quickly when you grab it. There’s a rather large fire spell on it. If you stand near the door and then run like hell, you should be okay.”

“I ‘should’ be okay?” Harry asked. “Not exactly comforting.”

“What’s life worth if it’s not worth living dangerously?”

“I’ll tell you: Longer.”

“Get up there!”

After agreeing to a pass phrase with Harry and leaving the bathroom, Tom headed straight for the Great Hall. To his endless good luck, it was lunch time, meaning the vast majority of the students were in one place. Had Tom still been Voldemort, he’d have been salivating at the chance to kill all these people. Now, he just wanted to sit and have lunch with them, and apologise for all the pain and misery he’d caused.

Regardless of being good or evil, Tom was a showman at heart. With a flourish, he slammed the doors to the Great Hall shut, and dropped the disillusionment charm, prompting a group of first years to scream.

Voldemort!" Hermione Granger shouted, drawing her wand.

"Ah, yes... Potter's little friends..." Tom hissed evilly, enjoying himself immensely.

"What are you doing here?" Dumbledore demanded at the Head Table, drawing his wand and stalking forward.

"Is that any way to greet a guest?" Tom asked, brandishing his wand.

"You are no guest, Tom!" Dumbledore spat. "What do you want?"

Tom grinned. "I just thought I'd come here and cause a little chaos. I've been so bored, recently." With that, he raised his wand. "*Avada Kedavra!*" A bolt of green erupted from his wand, slamming into a fourth year Hufflepuff. The girl dropped to the ground, lifeless.

"*Avada Kedavra! Avada Kedavra! Avada Kedavra!*" Three more bolts of green erupted, dropping two Ravenclaw second years, and a Gryffindor fifth year.

"Fire!" Hermione shouted, prompting a barrage of spells.

Tom nearly panicked, until he realised that Voldemort, still a part of him, was nearly invulnerable to most spells. Batting away bludgeoning curses and a particularly nasty *Diffindo*, he shielded dozens of stunners.

After the barrage failed, he grinned wickedly. "My turn! *Avada Kedavra! Avada Kedavra! Avada Kedavra!*" Three more of the green curses hit random students.

Before anyone else could fire, an amplified voice rang through the school. "Action stations! Action stations! Set condition one throughout the school! Action stations! Action stations! Set condition one throughout the school! This is not a drill!"

Tom grinned. "I do believe that's my cue to leave." He gripped his Portkey and vanished.

As soon as he reappeared on Clearwater beach, Tom changed his robes back to his gaudy shirt and lime green shorts. Harry was stood near one of the guard stations, looking impatient.

"What the hell did you do?" Harry demanded angrily, his wand in hand.

"I stunned seven people." Tom replied casually.

"I heard AKs, Tom, not stunners." Harry replied, not dropping his wand.

"No, you heard 'Avada Kedabra'. Emphasis on 'bra', not 'vra'. I made my own stunning spell. It lasts for exactly twenty-four hours, unless you managed to cast the correct counter-curse, which is '*Finite*' instead of *Evervate*. Being a Dark Lord, I need a way to stun people which doesn't detract from my image. They'll all be fine."

"It was a stunt?" Harry asked, allowing the tip of his wand to drop slightly. "They'll all be okay?"

"Well... they might have a bit of a headache when they wake up. But they'll all wake up." Tom corrected gently.

"Oh, good... I'd have hated to have to kill you now." Harry replied.

"Actually..." Tom began slowly, "you still have to. Integrating the Horcruxes is one thing... but if you just tell people that you killed Voldemort, without having a body to show for it, at best, they won't believe you. At worst, they'll think you've become a Dark Lord yourself."

"So... we need to think of a way to say that I've defeated the Dark Lord, something that would withstand Veritaserum questioning..." The corners of Harry's mouth began to rise in a perfectly evil smirk. "Oh... I do have an absolutely twisted idea..."

The ritual to reintegrate Tom's Horcruxes was actually rather anti-climatic. Since the Horcruxes were pieces of his soul, sheared off and contained in an inanimate object, their first priority was to return to the whole. Breaking the protections and allow the fragment to go free was easy.

As each piece hit the air, they immediately dived into Tom's body, reintegrating with his partially restored soul. The basilisk fang was crushed with a *Reducto*, the Diadem was simply placed on Tom's head, the fragment racing through his skull to get back to its larger piece, Hufflepuff's cup, retrieved by Bella from her Gringotts vault before her return to Azkaban, provided Tom with a refreshing beverage while returning another piece of his soul.

The two artefacts of Slytherin were put on, prompting Harry to burst out laughing. Tom really did look ridiculous, wearing a tiara, a revolting ring and a gaudy locket, while drinking from a gold chalice.

Harry quickly grabbed a camera and snapped a couple of pictures, just for future blackmail usage.

When the ritual was complete, Tom looked surprisingly normal. He had a full head of hair, a reasonable tan (like all Brits, he was still incredibly pale when compared to residents of Florida) and, as far as he was concerned the best part; he now had eyebrows. This made him jump up and down in excitement, rather like Hermione when she just *had* to answer a question in class.

"It is done." Tom intoned, now truly Tom, and Voldemort no longer.

"You look better." Harry replied casually, discretely putting the camera away. "Since you look perfectly human, you shouldn't be recognised by anyone. I mean, Dumbledore hasn't seen Tom Riddle since he was a teenager, has he? You'd already mutated by the time Voldemort emerged."

"True." Tom replied, his voice even more silky and smooth than before. "And now... I wish to go and find an old friend."

"Good luck, Tom." Harry said, holding out his hand. "May you find the peace you desire."

Clearwater Beach, Pinellas County, Florida

Monday, 30th September, 1996

Harry looked up from his book to see an owl winging its way towards him, landing on the beech with a loud hoot as its talons sunk in to the sand. Pulling the letter from the bird's leg, he read the precise script of Tom.

Dear Harry,

Well, I never thought I would write that. Anyway, I just thought I would let you know what's going on. I arrived in Hogsmeade on the 25th of September, and headed up to the school. Not one person recognised me, nobody ran from me in fear, and nobody tried to duel me. I truly understand how you feel about fame or, in my case, notoriety. Here, I'm just Tom, a middle-aged wizard heading through town.

I arrived at the school, luckily, to find Albus not in attendance. I found Minerva in her office, and explained what had happened. All of it. I fell to my knees, pledged an oath on my magic and my life that I would never again embrace the dark, and that I would spend the rest of my days trying to atone for my crimes. I begged her for her help, and for her friendship and love. She looked shocked. She slapped me with every ounce of strength in her body.

And then she kissed me. Let me tell you, Harry, while she may be a tabby animagus, she's a wildcat when she's passionate. We ended up making love on her desk, for hours, before she returned to being Professor McGonagall, and we went to the Great Hall for dinner. It's been 50 years since I ate a Hogwarts feast, and it was magnificent. I sat there, surrounded by students, and nobody knew me, not even Severus.

It is now after midnight, and Minerva is asleep from exhaustion (I won't try and shatter your mind with the image of your Transfiguration Professor and a riding crop... oh, it's too late? Ah well...), and as I look down on her, in the moonlight, I have finally, after nearly 70 years of searching, found peace.

I truly hope you find it too.

Your friend.

Tom.

Harry's face was blank; his mind was desperately trying to block out the image of McGonagall riding Riddle like a pony, hitting his flanks with a riding crop and telling him, "Faster, stallion, faster!" The image, seared into his brain, would take a miracle to shift.

It was at that point that a mixed blessing occurred. Something arrived at the beach, landing sloppily on the ground, before looking around wildly. Hermione Jane Granger had arrived in Florida.

As soon as she spotted him, she let out a very girly 'squee!' and charged over, wrapping him in the tightest hug she'd ever given. "Harry!"

He didn't bother to hug her back. "Miss Granger. How... *surprising* to see you."

She looked up at him, and realised that forgiveness was not going to be forthcoming. "You need to go, now! Dumbledore and the Order are on their way. They were right behind me. They're coming to take you back!"

Before she'd finished speaking, a gust of wind began to shift the sand, as a large group of individuals appeared on the beach, wands out, Dumbledore in the lead. As soon as he spotted Harry, he let out a broad grin. "Ah, Harry! It's jolly good to see you, my boy. You're looking well."

"Dumbledore." Harry replied in an expressionless voice. "What do you want?"

"Ah, straight to business, then. Very well. It's time to return home, Harry. I've allowed you this time off, but you will be returning to Hogwarts."

"Will I?" It was not a question.

"Yes. Lord Voldemort informed Severus that he was coming to America. I'm glad to say that we got here first. You will need training, Harry, in order to defeat Voldemort. You'll be coming back to school with us." Dumbledore turned to Hermione. "I don't believe that you should be here, Miss Granger. Mr. Weasley will be escorting you back to Hogwarts immediately."

Ron stepped forward, smiling soppily at Hermione. "Come on, Herms. I'll take you back. We can talk about our next date."

Hermione's response was short, to the point, and an anatomical impossibility without a powerful burst of magic. Despite his rather mixed feelings towards her, Harry was rather impressed.

"Miss Granger, what would your parents say to hear you use such language?" Dumbledore asked quietly. "Now, Harry, come with me. You *will* be carrying out the training I deem necessary, submitting to my guidance. I have made arrangements with your new godfather, so that you may stay with him while at Hogwarts. Remus is most eager to assume his new responsibilities."

Harry sniggered quietly. "Not a chance in hell."

The old man looked at him, disappointedly. "I've given you plenty of chances to see reason, Harry, and you have abused my generous nature. You've had your fun, it's time to live up to your responsibilities. Come with me."

"I have an alternate scenario for you; I'm going to go back to my apartment, which is craftily hidden from meddling old men, and I'm gonna wash some of this sand off my feet. I have a busy evening of shagging planned, and you're not invited." He wrapped an arm around Hermione. "I'll be taking Miss Granger with me, since you obviously don't want her here." In his other hand, he drew out the emergency Portkey he carried with him at all time. "Oh, FYI? Voldemort's dead." He activated the Portkey, the pair of teenagers vanishing into thin air.

Ron rushed forward, before spinning round to face Dumbledore. "Professor, are you just gonna take that? Potter's just kidnapped my girlfriend!"

Dumbledore said nothing, just contemplating how much Harry had changed. Just running away, turning his back on the Wizarding World, who had given him so much. *And now he's lying to us about Voldemort. There is no chance that he could've defeated Tom without my guidance and tutelage, and now he is lying about it, while doing his best to split up Hermione and young Mr. Weasley.* The fact that Hermione and Ron had split up a month earlier because of Ron's stupidity didn't occur to him. *I must make sure he grows up, and quickly; the Wizarding World needs a mature, sensible saviour, not a spoilt child throwing a tantrum.* Clearly, this problem would require thought.

As soon as the portkey dropped them in Harry's apartment, he stepped away from her, putting a large gap between them. To Hermione, those few paces indicated the chasm that had come between her and her best friend.

"Thanks, Hermione. You can go now."

"Harry, please, listen to me."

"Why? So you can try and hurt me again? I did what was necessary. Voldemort's gone. You can go back to school, now, and enjoy yourself with your boyfriend. I'm done with you all."

"Harry, I'm not with Ron anymore. You were there when I broke up with him."

"How sad for you. My heart bleeds." This was delivered in a dismissive tone that infuriated Hermione.

She stomped up to him, and slapped him, *hard*. "Just listen to me for one minute. I found out that Dumbledore was assembling the Order to come and collect you, and force you to 'live up to your responsibilities'. Dumbledore offered to ensure that you would accept Remus as your Godfather if he helped come and 'collect' you. As soon as I found out, I bought an emergency portkey out here. Ron found out I was coming to you, and he nearly attacked me, telling me that I was 'his woman', and therefore subject to his orders."

"Did he hurt you?" Harry asked in a breathy whisper, but Hermione could see the rage that was building up in him.

"No. I managed to get away from him." She leaned back into the plush couch, gathering her thoughts. Harry took the time to head into the kitchen, grabbing the pair a drink, before returning and passing it over. "Harry?" Hermione asked, her voice oddly quiet. "What happens now?"

Looking up at his best friend, even though there wasn't anyone he could really consider as such a thing, he shrugged. "I have no idea, Hermione. What do you want to happen?"

"I... I don't know." She said in a small voice. "I mean... you know I love you..."

He nodded slowly. "Yes... I remember overhearing that conversation at Grimmauld."

"Do... do you think we could work?" She asked.

Sucking air through his teeth, he leaned back in his chair. "I... I don't know, Hermione. I mean, I care for you, but to be perfectly honest, I never thought about you in a romantic way. You fancied Ron... you never showed me a hint of interest, so you got shoved into that section of my brain marked 'Best Friend – Do Not Touch'. I always knew you were female, but kinda... asexual. Just never crossed my mind."

Hermione stared at him, a bit offended at being described that way. "I'm not 'asexual', Harry!"

"I know that." He replied patiently. "I never said you were, I just said that since you were never interested, you got relegated to the other section."

"So... can you take me out of that section?" She asked, pathetically hopeful. "I mean... I'm not expecting you to suddenly declare that you love me, or that you want to marry me and have babies, or even that you strip off and shag me senseless right here, but... I'd like to try."

Harry took off his glasses, and began to rub the bridge of his nose. "Hermione... there's lots of things that we need to talk about. I must admit, if I were going to begin dating people I knew at Hogwarts, you'd be at the top of the list. You don't give a crap about all that 'Boy-Who-Lived' bollocks. You liked me for me. The only other person who really qualifies is Luna... and she's blonde."

"What does that have to do with it?"

Harry looked a little sheepish. "I.. er... I kinda lied back at Grimmauld Place when telling Ginny off. Reds don't do anything for me, but neither do blondes. Also, Luna's too thin. Same with Ginny."

"What about Cho?" Hermione asked. "She was thin, too."

"She was slender." Harry corrected. "Like you. Ginny and Luna look like they'd break if I sneezed near them."

"Are you saying I'm chunky?" Hermione asked, offended again.

"No. I'm saying that you're slender." He corrected again. "You've got a great figure." He shook his head. "But, that's not the point. Before I left Grimmauld, I was pissed at you. Quite justifiably, I thought. If we were to go on a date, we'd need to clear the air a bit, first."

She stood up, grabbing both glasses. "Let me refill these, then we can talk, Harry."

It took two minutes for her to return with two tall hi-ball glasses, filled with ice-cold Pepsi. "Okay, Harry. You have questions... hit me with them." She demanded.

"Before we broke up at the end of term, why did you agree to Dumbledore's request not to write to me?" He asked immediately. "You knew how much that decision hurt me after fourth year, and yet you did it again. This time, though, it was worse. It wasn't just seeing a classmate die, it was seeing the closest thing I've ever had to a father be brutally killed by his own cousin."

Hermione took a moment to ponder her response. "The answer to that isn't very good, Harry... I'm sorry. Dumbledore told us that while Privet Drive was safe, if we wrote to you, there was a chance that Voldemort or his followers could track you down. The way I figured it, I'd make it up to you when you got to Headquarters."

"Hmm..." Harry nodded slowly. "So, after a month of depression, you figured that you'd start to help me with my problems... That's remarkably stupid for the 'brightest witch of the age', isn't it? I mean, people have been known to commit suicide *hours* after such a traumatic event, and you decided that leaving me alone for a *month* wouldn't hurt?"

"You... you've always been so *strong*, Harry..." Hermione said after a moment. "All though the year, with Umbridge torturing you, you've never let it break you... I... I thought that you'd be okay..." She trailed off, a tear forming in her eye. She took a moment to gather herself, and carry on. "Professor Dumbledore's request made sense from a practical point of view, but I know it was wrong to follow it. All I can do is apologise."

Harry stared at her, *hard*, for a moment. "Actually, you coming out here to warn me has earned you a few points against that issue. Don't know if it's enough to balance out, but you're on the right track." He leaned back, softening his expression. "The next point is your abject lunacy regarding the Weasel. You told your Mum that you love me, then start dating *him*. A guy who, for five years, has picked on you mercilessly, totally disregarded your feelings, shouted at you, and pretty much ignored you when he didn't need you for anything. He's been copying your homework ever since Halloween first year, and disregards you the rest of the time.

"I really don't see how the two of you could agree long enough to actually start dating." He concluded softly.

The tear in Hermione's eye multiplied, and left a silver track down her cheek as it fell. "I... I do love you, Harry... but... I was afraid... I didn't think that you could beat Voldemort... and if I told you how I felt and you d-died..."

"I see." Harry replied, his voice emotionless. "I understand your feelings, Hermione, I do... but choosing Ron over me? Well, that hurts. You appear to not have any faith in me."

"No!" She replied quickly. "It's not that, Harry, it's not, I swear! It's just... Dumbledore's the most powerful wizard in the world, and if he couldn't defeat Voldemort..."

"What chance could I have?" Harry completed smoothly. "I understand that part, but it's the whole 'well, I'll start dating Ron, straight away' bit that beggars my mind. Why not wait until the final battle was completed, and then make your choice?"

"I... I didn't want to be alone, Harry..." She whispered. "The prospect of being with someone, even Ron, to take away the pain if you lost... it was very appealing to me. And I let my head override my heart."

"Yes, you did." Harry shook his head sadly. "I don't know, Hermione... I mean... you've done things with Ron... given yourself to him, and I"

"I haven't." She interrupted. "The only... encounter we had, you walked in on. After that, I couldn't do it again. I was too nervous. Besides, it didn't feel right. Ron seemed... selfish."

"So, your only intimate interlude was that rather grim scene I walked in on?" Harry asked, a little mollified. Had Hermione gone all the way with Ron... he didn't know what he'd have done.

"Yeah... it wasn't all that intimate, either." Hermione replied with a grimace. "Anyway, I know enough now to categorically state that he's *not* the one. I'd like it to be you." She added the last six words in a quiet whisper.

"I don't know about that, Hermione." Harry said slowly. "But, I will admit, you're not the only one who made a silly decision with regards to dating. Cho Chang leaps to mind."

"Why?" She asked.

"Well... what I had with Cho was an infantile crush, and she saw me as a link to Cedric. I don't blame her for dumping me, really. It would never have worked. I'm not really bothered by it, really." Harry shrugged casually. It was true.

After a moment of silence, Hermione spoke again. "Any other questions?"

"Why did you keep your prefect position?" He replied after a moment. "I mean, you saw how unfairly it was given, first to Ron, then to Neville. I would

Have thought that you, as a champion of the underdogs, would have done something about it.”

Her mouth opened a couple of times, before she managed to answer. “It wouldn’t have made a difference, Harry. If I handed my badge in, who’d have stopped Ron and Ginny from abusing their positions? Malfoy would have danced all over us. If I thought it’d change anything, I’d have shoved the badge so far up Dumbledore’s arse, it would have been picking his nose.”

Harry grimaced. “Grim image, Hermione. Cheers for that.” He sighed in acceptance. It was true; it wouldn’t have made a difference... Dumbledore was too set in his ways, and no sixteen/seventeen year old neophyte witch would be able to change him.

“I understand. The gesture would have been nice, though.” He added, a bit wistfully. “So, Ginny been picking on the Slytherins?”

Hermione snorted and rolled her eyes. “Yeah... She had Crabbe and Goyle doing lines. ‘The Machiavellian responsibilities of the scions of civilisations are antiquated, customisable and programmable’.”

Harry stared at her. “That sentence doesn’t actually make sense... ‘The politically expedient responsibilities of the youth of today are ancient, customisable and programmable’... Did she just pick big words to confuse the fuckwits?”

“Pretty much.” Hermione admitted. “And please don’t swear, Harry.”

“Sorry.”

“Neville’s not a bad prefect, but he’s too damned soft. First years can walk all over him. It’s not a lack of confidence, he just... he’s got a big heart, and the first years are all so homesick and sad... It’s a bit pathetic, really.”

“And let me guess... Ron put up a notice on the board about ten seconds after feast ended, announcing trials for Quidditch positions. Then he started bitching about how I wasn’t there and/or he couldn’t use my Firebolt. Ginny then complained that I hadn’t bought her or the rest of the team new brooms.”

“Yeah.” Hermione confirmed. “You know... I remember first year, when we were just friends with each other. No Ginny trying to snag you. Ron hadn’t discovered his hormones, and the plots to kill you were easier to deal with.”

“Ah, yes.” Harry replied dryly. “‘Good times’. Only things like Devil’s Snare and twelve foot trolls to deal with. Ah, the foibles of youth.” Finishing his glass, Harry stood up. “Refill?”

Two minutes, and a quick trip to the loo later, Harry returned, wielding two fresh glass of pop.

“Right, so, we’ve covered why you didn’t write to me, and you’re on the road to redemption regarding that by coming here to warn me. Dating Ron... well, I’ll chalk that up to adolescent hormones and you being incredibly naïve.”

Hermione bristled at the comment, but said nothing. It was a fact.

“That you’ve never boinked him is also a point in your favour. And as much as I’d like to ask you to take a bath in bleach to get the taint off your hands, I know that’s not practical. Actually, I’ve had a thought. You’re a member of the Order, now. Won’t you have to tell Dumbledore about all this?”

“Nah.” Hermione replied nonchalantly. “I quit, September 1st. When you disappeared from Kings Cross, I was worried. Then your howler turned up, and I knew. I knew that we, the whole Wizarding world, had betrayed you. Condemned you with indifference and neglect. I told Dumbledore he could shove the Order up his arse, and sent out feelers to every magical retailer I could find. Then I started hitting the travel agencies. It was actually Mum who found out about your flight, and using my mobile, I rang around the area, looking for any trace of you. When Dumbledore found you, I got the Portkey, and rushed out here.”

“Devious.” Harry replied approvingly. “You could have been a Slytherin, my dear.”

“Hey, I may be stupid and naïve, Harry, but there’s no need to be insulting!”

“Sorry. I meant it in the nicest possible way.”

“Hmph.”

“I’ll be honest, Hermione, and lay it all on the table. I was hurt by what you said to your Mum at Grimmauld. I was hurt by your actions in not writing to me. I was hurt by you picking the ginger whinger. But, I can forgive some of these transgressions, because I know you didn’t do them maliciously. So, the not writing to me? I’ll forgive you. You got suckered into Dumbledore’s all-knowing grandfather act. You aren’t the first, and you won’t be the last. Picking Ron... well, that’ll take some time to work through. The ‘I don’t think he can do it’ speech to your Mum... wiped clean. You were afraid. After all that shit at the Ministry, I was doubting whether I could win.”

“So... where does that leave us, Harry?” Hermione asked after a few moments of silence.

“Well, I was thinking that we could go out to dinner. Start things slowly. Maybe a day at the beach tomorrow. No long term plans. Let’s just take each day as it comes.”

Hermione, predictably, burst into tears, rushing to Harry and hugging him tightly. “Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!” She said over and over, sobbing into his shirt.

The restaurant was gorgeous. Gold columns supported a clear glass roof, the sunset clearly visible through the ceiling. Harry and Hermione, after donning a rather crafty focussed Parseltongue glamour charm, so that witches and wizards would only see a non-distinctive couple, had sat down, to discuss the future.

"Harry..." Hermione began, after taking a hefty bite of her steak. Trans-continental Portkeys took a hell of a lot of energy, "you said on the beach that you'd killed Voldemort."

Harry nodded. "I did."

"How? I mean... he's one of the most powerful wizards in the world..."

"He was. But, I did defeat him. He is no more. The prophecy has been fulfilled, and amazingly, I won!"

"How?" Hermione repeated.

"One day, I'll tell you, Hermione, I promise. But at the moment, it's still a bit fresh in my mind. I need some time to come to terms with it." *I am going straight to hell for that lie.*

"H-He came to Hogwarts, you know..." Hermione began. "He just... waltzed into the Great Hall, and began firing spells. It was terrifying."

"I know." Harry replied casually.

"How?"

"I've almost always known what he's up to, Hermione." He replied casually. "For five years, I've seen his darker deeds, his vile acts. He killed seven people, didn't he?"

"No." Hermione said. "That's what's weird. He fired seven Killing Curses, but none of the kids hit were killed. They were just stunned. Madam Pomfrey had them all awake within an hour. Said it was some kind of modified stunner. Scared the crap out of Dumbledore when he came into the hospital wing, and saw them all sitting up. He thought Pomfrey had turned them all into Inferi. It was quite funny."

Harry snorted a small laugh. "Yeah, I could see that being amusing." He sobered up. "How're your parents?"

She leaned back slightly. "They're okay. Dad was walking a bit funny for a while, but said that he was feeling better."

"And your Mum?"

"She's... she's okay, Harry." Hermione bit on her lip for a bit. "What happened back at Headquarters, Harry? I mean, when I came into your room, and Mum was on her knees in front of you..."

Harry marshalled his face into neutrality. "What do you think happened, Hermione?"

"Well... it looked like she'd... she'd been pleasing you with her mouth..." Privately, Harry was amused she couldn't say 'blowjob'. "But, Dad was in the house, and she wouldn't cheat on him."

"So, it looked like your Mum swallowed my baby gravy," Hermione flinched, "while your dad was in the house."

"And she kissed you afterwards." Hermione concluded.

"Hermione, me and your Mum talked. Just talked. She was telling me that she and your Dad would stand with me. And that your Dad thinks you have really shitty taste in blokes. You Mum kissed me like that, just so she could wind you up."

"So, nothing happened?" Hermione asked again, wanting Harry to spell it out for her.

"No, Hermione, nothing happened. She was a kind, supportive person, offering me moral comfort. Nothing more."

"Oh, good..." She breathed a sigh of relief.

"However, had she been single, I'd have been all over her like a rash. She's definitely a MILF."

"Harry!"

"What?" He replied defensively. "She's a babe. I can't help it that you have a good-looking Mum, can I?"

Hermione pouted. "You don't have to announce it, though."

The two retreated into safer topics of conversation for the rest of dinner.

Monday, 30th September, 1996 – 22:26 EDT

After a short walk on the beach, Harry and Hermione had returned to Harry's *Fidelius* protected apartment. They'd shared a bottle of Butterbeer in companionable silence, until Hermione decided she wanted to turn in.

Harry, like a true gentleman, escorted her to her door, before pressing a featherlight chaste kiss on her lips.

Oh, god... Do I invite him in? Offer to shag his brains out? Go down on him? What do I do? I want him so badly... I'll just ask him-

"Good night, Hermione." Harry said firmly. He had absolutely no talent in Legilimency, and only the haziest grip of Occlumency, but he could read Hermione's face like a book, and knew she was deliberating something pretty intense.

With a slight mew of disappointment, Hermione took a small step back. He'd mentioned earlier that he wanted to take it slow, and grow together, but that did nothing for the itch between her legs that only a 'Boy-Who-Lived' could scratch. "Good night, Harry. I'll see you in the morning."

Harry nodded respectfully, and headed for his own room. Once inside, he quickly stripped, and lay in his bed. ***You're a fucking disgrace to your sex, do you know that?*** A small, angry voice in his mind snapped.

Howso?

An attractive witch just offered to gobble your knob, and you're sitting in a dark room alone. What the hell's wrong with you?

It... it would have been too soon.

You're a teenager, for god's sake. Shagging random people is part of your genetic make-up!

I don't do 'shagging random people'.

You are such a wimp.

Hey, she went with Ron!

And this is your chance to stake your claim!

What, should I go and piss on her? Mark my territory?

Probably not. Some women like that. Personally, we think it's rather grim.

Besides, like I said to her; she got relegated to the 'asexual best friend' category.

She's not asexual. Did you not notice that rather cracking rack she has? Not to mention an arse that could crack walnuts. Let's be honest; we'd like her to crack our nuts.

I'm a pervert!

No, you're not. If you were, you'd be in there making Hermione moan and writhe and squeal like a banshee. Not sat in the dark with a hard-on.

Harry looked down to see an unwelcome visitor in his bedding. *Great...* With a groan, he rolled over.

Harry's Apartment, Clearwater Beach, Pinellas County, Florida
Tuesday, 1st October, 1996 – 09:06 EDT

Harry woke up, only to glance down and grimace. *Great... not content with lusting after Hermione last night, has to do it again now* With a slight shuffle, he clambered out of bed, going to relieve the bladder, hoping that it would stop the pressure on his prostate, and allow his tool to soften.

Twenty minutes, a long piss and a cold shower had done nothing to aid his condition. With a sigh, he locked the door, before grabbing the toilet roll.

Hermione woke up, feeling tremendously frustrated. Unlike Harry, her morning arousal was not nearly so prominent... unless you took a deep breath.

Jesus... I must have soaked the bed through. Thank god for cleaning charms... After cleaning up her room, Hermione grabbed a light bath robe, and headed for the bathroom.

For Harry's continued sanity, he'd completed his self-manipulation before Hermione got to the door. Passing by her, he retreated to his bedroom and dressed for the day.

In the kitchen, he started on breakfast. Bacon, sausages, a tin of baked beans, a half-dozen scrambled eggs, potato cakes and toast, all quickly prepared.

“Hermione?” He called out.

“Yeah?” She shouted back.

“Tea or coffee for breakfast?”

“Tea!”

Grimacing slightly, he boiled up the kettle, throwing a couple of teabags into the pot.

Hermione ambled into the kitchen, immediately spotting the fry-up. She stared at it for a moment, dithering on whether or not it would ruin her figure, before shrugging and digging in. After a few mouthfuls, she swallowed, and reached for her drink.

“Gah!” She spat the offensive tea onto the floor. “I asked for tea!”

Harry sniggered. “That *is* tea. Or rather, what Americans think tea should be. Personally, I think it tastes like someone’s put some ashes into a tea bag.” He sighed. “Ah, well... can’t get a decent cup of coffee in England, can’t get a decent cup of tea in America.”

Hermione glared at her cup. “Can I have a coffee, then?”

Quickly preparing the drink, Harry returned to breakfast. “So, what do you want to do today?” He asked her.

Shag. “Er... I could think of several things.” Hermione said slowly.

“That don’t involve us having sex?”

Hermione pouted. “Okay... I’m stumped.” She drank some coffee. “You said yesterday about going to the beach. Why don’t we do that? Some sunbathing, swimming... could be fun.”

“I’m not gonna pounce you in the ocean, you know.” Harry replied casually, ignoring the rude little voice in his mind that told him, again, that he was a disgrace to his gender.

“Damn you, Harry.” Hermione moaned in the sexiest voice he’d ever heard. “Why do you have to be so bloody sexy...”

“Good genes.” Harry replied, deadpan. “Be patient, Hermione. I don’t just wanna end up falling into bed, and hoping that it all works out. Please.”

She pouted again. “Fine...” She sighed. “But, if I end up messing up your bed, it’s your fault.”

“I’ll... I’ll keep that in mind.” Harry replied slowly.

Clearwater Beach, Pinellas County, Florida
Tuesday, 1st October, 1996 – 14:09 EDT

The two had packed a quick picnic lunch, and headed out for the beach, intent on just enjoying the day. Well, Harry was intent on enjoying the day, Hermione was going to engage in an intense session of Potterwatch, hoping those firm, luscious buttocks would be visible.

After spending time talking about the current state of England, and the goings on in Hogwarts, the pair decided to lie down and top up their tans.

“Harry James Potter, you are under arrest for leaving England without permission of the Ministry of Magic. You will be coming with us.”

Harry looked up to spot a squad of Aurors stood over him and Hermione, wands aimed squarely at him.

“You really shouldn’t be pointing that wand at me, Auror.” Harry said calmly. “There are consequences to this action.”

Auror Dawlish sneered at Harry. “I’m in charge here, Potter. You’re coming with us. Surrender your wand, or I’ll be forced to stun you and take it from you.”

Without a word, Harry handed over his wand. With a flourish, Dawlish pocketed his own wand, and casually snapped Harry’s faithful phoenix feather wand. He dropped the pieces, dusting his hands together. “Oh, dear... my hands slipped.”

Harry shrugged. “‘Tis a shame, Auror.” He stood up, followed by Hermione, who had her hand firmly on the handle of her wand. “Well, I assume you’re here to drag me into court. Shall we go?”

Courtroom Six, Ministry of Magic, London
Tuesday, 1st October, 1996 – 09:41 GMT

The full Wizengamot had been assembled at 9am, waiting for the Aurors to bring Harry Potter, the ‘Chosen One’, back to Britain, so that he could be trained and fight Voldemort. Minister Fudge was presiding, with Delores Umbridge in her capacity as Senior Undersecretary, Rufus Scrimgeour, as head of the Auror office and Dumbledore, as Head of the Wizengamot supporting him.

The Portkey dropped the small party directly in front of the defendant's chair. One of the Aurors dragged Hermione to the gallery, near-throwing her into her chair, before giving a final glare.

Dawlish slammed Harry into the defendant's chair, before waving his wand, causing the chains on the chair to tie Harry up.

There was silence for a few moments, as the Wizengamot waited an outburst from Harry. They'd all heard about how unstable and angry the young man was, and were hoping to use that against him. He disappointed them by sitting there, looking politely bored by the proceedings.

"Harry Potter, you have been brought before the Wizengamot to answer charges of abandoning your country in a time of war, of being absent without leave from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and leaving England without the authorisation of the Ministry of Magic. How do you plead to these charges?"

Harry looked up at Fudge. "As far as I'm aware, Minister, those actions are not illegal. So, I refuse to answer your 'charges'."

A low hum of murmuring permeated the Wizengamot.

"You will show respect to this panel, boy, or you will be sent to Azkaban!" Fudge hissed. "Now, answer to the charges!"

"No." Harry replied simply.

"Cornelius," Dumbledore said, placing a hand on Fudge's arm, "allow me." He turned back to Harry. "Harry, leaving Hogwarts without permission, with an incomplete education, is against our educational decrees. By heading to America without gaining the permission of the school's headmaster, me, you have broken Ministry Law."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Education Decree 6 does state that all students, once enrolled at a magical school, need to complete their education."

Fudge, Umbridge and Dumbledore smiled. Scrimgeour looked bored with the proceedings. He was a man of action, not of words, and persecuting sixteen year old children was a waste of his time.

"However, Educational Decree 13 states that any emancipated Lord of an Ancient and Noble House may end their schooling at the conclusion of their Ordinary Wizarding Level examinations, provided their scores are acceptable for employment purposes. Since I passed with 7 'Outstandings' and 3 'Exceeds Expectations', I certainly qualify. I am not required by law to complete the full seven years at Hogwarts."

Dumbledore shook his head. "In order for that to be true, Mr. Potter, you would need to have been emancipated. The goblins have not emancipated you, and as such, you are still a minor."

"Partially correct, Chief Warlock." Harry replied stoically. "However, the Goblins are only bankers, not solicitors. I was emancipated in Sirius Black's will in August, and became the new Lord Black. Since I am now a legal adult, I could read the Potter will, gaining me the title of Lord Potter. I have not been a minor for two months now."

Fudge shook his head. "We will overturn your emancipation, boy. You are clearly too childish to be granted adult status."

"You can't." Harry replied, now bored with the proceedings. "And if you refer to me as 'boy' again, Fudge, we will have a problem."

Umbridge sneered. "You would do well to respect your betters, boy, or we'll have no choice but to... *educate* you."

"I do respect my betters. I just don't respect *you*. Department Head Scrimgeour I respect, 'cause that man's actually doing something about the threat of Death Eaters in this country. The rest of you... well, you're all pissing in the wind."

Scrimgeour looked up at Harry, and nodded respectfully. He respected Potter for pretty much the same reason. The boy had done more to stop Dark Wizards in the last five years than all of his Auror squads combined, and he deserved the respect.

Fudge cleared his throat, his face turning an attractive puce colour. "Mr. Potter, the Head—"

"I am *Lord* Potter, Fudge. I will not tell you again." Harry's voice was still calm, but there was a thread of steel underlying it.

Swallowing his pride, Fudge nodded jerkily. "Very well then, *Lord* Potter. The headmaster has informed us that, because of a Prophecy, you are the only person who can kill You-Know-Who, but you have declined his training. Why is that?"

Harry glanced over at Dumbledore, his eyebrow near his hair line. "You told them the Prophecy? What happened to 'let's keep it quiet'?"

Dumbledore didn't back down. "It was necessary for me to provide a brief outline to the Ministry so that they could assist with your return to Britain."

"Ah..." Harry nodded. "In that case, I'll tell you all the whole thing. After all, it really wouldn't do to proceed without full disclosure, would it?" Ignoring Dumbledore's look of panic, Harry pressed on. "The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches, born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies, and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not, and either must die at the hand of the other, for neither can live while the other survives..."

Several members of the Wizengamot put it together, and secretly patted themselves on the back. They could all put the whole thing on Potter's shoulders, and let him do all the fighting.

Dumbledore leaned forward, angry with Harry for revealing confidential information, but satisfied that this would help with convincing the Wizengamot to make sure Harry received his training. "You understand the prophecy, Harry. You are the only one who can defeat Lord Voldemort."

“Yet you have still not given us a valid reason for refusing my training.”

“Yes, I have.” Harry replied. “I told you that I have no interest in your pathetic attempts at training. Now that we’ve cleared this up, can I go? I was enjoying a particularly relaxing day at the beach, and I’d like to get back to that.”

Fudge smiled toothily. “I’m afraid not, Lord Potter. The Wizengamot, in co-operation with the Ministry of Magic, have drafted a new law, concerning the named people in a prophecy. Until such time as you and You-Know-Who can duel, you will become a ward of the Ministry, where we will train you, and train you hard.”

Harry glanced over at Hermione, who nodded supportively.

“Well, I hate to burst your little bubble, but as I told Dumbledore, it will not be necessary. I destroyed Lord Voldemort last Thursday. He’s gone, forever.”

The low humming suddenly increased to a dull roar.

Dumbledore chuckled quietly. “Yes, you did tell me that, Mr. Potter. However, we all know that without my training, you would not have been able to defeat the most powerful Dark Lord in the last ten centuries. Besides, he was at Hogwarts last Thursday.”

“I know.” Harry replied. “But, he is gone. We duelled, and then engaged in Mortal Kombat. He lost. Your pathetic little prophecy act won’t work, since the Prophecy has been fulfilled.” The dull roar escalated to a shouting free-for-all.

“Order!” Fudge shouted, banging his gavel on the desk. “Order! Silence, or this court will be emptied!” Fudge waited until order had been restored, before turning back to Harry. “Would you care to explain, Lord Potter?”

“No.”

“You *will* explain, or you will be arrested and sentenced to Azkaban!” Fudge shrieked.

“Very well.” Harry acquiesced. “What would you like to know.”

“Explain how you defeated Lord Voldemort.” Dumbledore commanded, his face looking sullen.

Harry leaned back in his chair. “I was on the beach, and he appeared there.” *And joined me for a drink. “We duelled.” Even though we were using colour-changing spells, and playing paintball. “After a short time, we switched to Mortal Kombat.” And I was Liu Kang, while he played as Sub-Zero. Man, old people shouldn’t be allowed on games consoles. “He lost, and I killed him. Fatality.” And that needed a hell of a lot of buttons pressing. Why can’t they make it easier? “His body vanished.” As he apparated to Scotland to see Wildcat McGonagall. “I decided to stay in America, to recover from my experiences.” At the hands of the Wizarding world. Bunch of sheeple.*

“Good lord...” Scrimgeour said. “Can you back this statement up, Lord Potter?”

“Yes.” Harry managed to look vaguely offended at Rufus’ question.

“I mean no disrespect, my Lord.” Scrimgeour hastily apologised. “It’s just... we were told that without the Headmaster’s training, you would have been killed in minutes.”

“Minutes?” Harry asked. “I lasted for ages against him. But, in the end, I won. Didn’t even get a scratch.”

“I see.”

Umbridge leaned up, whispering in Fudge’s ear. The tubby Minister broke out into a wide grin. “Lord Potter, you are to be charged with murder, for killing You-Know-Who. You do not have authorisation to take the life of a Wizard. Since you have admitted your crime, you will be sentenced to life in Azkaban prison, without the possibility for reprieve or parole.”

Harry snickered. “Actually, I won’t.”

Dumbledore looked over at Fudge. “Cornelius, the country is in a state of war against Voldemort.”

“Not anymore. I will cancel our war declaration against You-Know-Who, retroactive to last Wednesday. Which means that Potter is guilty of murdering a wizard, and will be sent to Azkaban.” Fudge looked like he had a hard-on at the proclamation, and Umbridge looked like she’d more than happily relieve him of it.

Scrimgeour stood up. “I will not be a party to a railroad job. Potter here defeated the worst wizard in the last ten centuries.” He turned to Harry. “My apologies. *Lord* Potter defeated You-Know-Who. I will not allow you to send him to prison, just to save your career.”

“I am the Minister for Magic!” Fudge bellowed. “My word is law!”

Harry stood up, the chains around him dispelling at a casual wave from Scrimgeour’s wand. “Then, Fudge... I think it’s time to remove you as Minister. I, Harry James Potter, Lord of the houses of Potter and Black, and the Heir of Gryffindor, propose that Cornelius Fudge be removed as Minister of Magic immediately. Charges of corruption, extortion, bribery, and withholding critical information during war-time should be brought against him.

“Delores Umbridge, I, Harry James Potter, hereby challenge you to a duel to the death. The reason is that you tortured me from September 1995

through June 1996 by giving me detentions, where I had to write lines using a Blood Quill. The second charge is that you ordered my execution, by sending Dementors after me and my cousin in Little Whinging in July 1995. The final charge is that you attempted to cast the Cruciatus curse against me in your office at Hogwarts school in June 1996. The duel will happen at a time and place of my choosing.”

“You’re nothing by a liar, boy!” Delores shrieked. “Rufus, as Senior Undersecretary to the Minister, I order you to arrest him immediately!”

Rufus glanced at Harry, then nodded. “I can’t, Madam Undersecretary. A formal challenge has been made. I cannot interfere.”

“I will, however, need a wand.” Harry said. “Auror Dawlish decided that snapping mine the instant I was arrested was justified. He’ll be my next challenge.”

Rufus turned to Dawlish. “You destroyed Lord Potter’s wand, Dawlish?”

The Auror in question began to sweat heavily. “Er... he resisted arrest, Chief. Had to snap his wand to stop him escaping!”

“Liar!” Hermione shouted from the gallery. “Mr. Scrimgeour, I was a witness to the event. That thug held Harry at wandpoint, and took Harry’s. Then he snapped it, smirking. He then said ‘Oh dear... my hand slipped’, before dropping the pieces on the ground.”

“Is this true, Dawlish?” Rufus asked, glaring at the younger man.

“Silence!” Dumbledore bellowed, taking charge of the proceedings. “Mr. Potter, I’m afraid I cannot let you go around challenging senior Ministry officials to duels, nor can I allow you to simply call for Minister Fudge’s removal.”

“Your forget yourself, Dumbledore.” Harry replied, drawing himself up to his full height. Even though he was wearing a plain linen shirt, a pair of Bermuda shorts and sandals, he cut an impressive figure. “I am the Head of two Ancient and Noble Houses. As Chief Warlock, you cannot dismiss my claims.” He turned to the Wizengamot. “Fudge is directly responsible for all the lives lost over the last year. I told him, the night of the Third Task of the Tri-Wizard Tournament that Voldemort had returned, and he did nothing. He didn’t increase the Auror ranks, nor warn the public. I want him out of office, to protect us all.”

“Seconded!” Scrimgeour bellowed.

“I third your motion!” Madam Bones called out. “Members of the Wizengamot, how do you say?”

With a resounding roar, they agreed that Fudge should be removed.

“Who should lead us?” One voice called out, prompting silence.

“Lord Potter!” One of the sheeple called out. “He should lead us. He defeated You-Know-Who! He should be the one.”

“Fuck, no!” Harry cried out, silencing the room again. “There was a reason I pissed off to America. The people in this country are sheep. Until you can bring yourselves up to date, and develop an ounce of common sense, I want nothing more to do with you.”

Harry calmly walked over to the gallery, taking Hermione’s hand, and leading her to the door. “Now, I’m going to go shopping, getting a new wand from Ollivander. Then I’m coming back here, and I’m gonna finish this. Dawlish, Umbridge... don’t be going anywhere. I have a score to settle.”

Courtroom Six, Ministry of Magic, London

Tuesday, 1st October, 1996 – 11:01 GMT

Harry returned to the courtroom, a new wand in hand. This one was dual-core, a phoenix feather and hippogriff hair inside a ten inch shaft of oak. The wand was nearly as good as his Fawkes-core wand, and Ollivander would be able to create him a new one of those when he could get another feather.

Nobody had bothered to leave the Wizengamot while Harry was out. The chance to stay and see such a hated figure as Umbridge be humiliated was far too appealing to just walk away.

“Are you ready, Umbridge?” Harry asked, sneering at the toad.

“I am the Senior Undersecretary to the Minister of Magic, boy!” Umbridge sneered right back, not bothering to get up. “Since Minister Fudge has been removed, I am the acting Minister of Magic. You are threatening a Ministry official, enough to get you put in Azkaban. Surrender to me, boy.”

Harry didn’t move. “I have called you out, Delores. If you don’t get off your fat arse and duel me, you’ll lose your magic. Then, you’ll be something far more terrifying than dead... you’ll be a *Muggle* .”

“As the acting-Minister, I override your duel.” Umbridge blustered.

“You can’t. You have until the count of five. One... two...”

Umbridge leapt to her feet, pulling her wand from her sleeve. “*Crucio!*”

Not bothering to move, Harry let the spell hit him, dropping to his knees, while biting his bottom lip, to ensure he didn’t cry out. After a moment, he stood up, raising his wand. A bright silver spell shot out, neatly cutting off Umbridge’s wand hand, ending the spell.

taking a moment to gather his strength, Harry waved weakly at the Wizengamot. "S-She's used an... an Unforgiveable curse on me... in front of witnesses."

Dumbledore stood up. "I declare the duelling victory to Mr. Potter. Madam Umbridge will be arrested."

"No." Harry replied, raising his wand. "As the victor, I claim the right to sentence her." Without waiting for another word, another silver spell erupted from his wand, neatly slicing through her neck.

Umbridge stood perfectly still for a moment, before her head rolled backwards, while her body slumped forwards.

"The sentence is death." Harry concluded softly. He turned and faced Dawlish. "Auror Dawlish, I—"

"Ex-Auror." Scrimgeour interrupted. "My apologies, My Lord. Dawlish, you're fired."

Harry grinned at the leonine man. "Cheers, Rufus." He turned back to Dawlish. "Ex-Auror Aaron Dawlish, I, Harry James Potter, call you out for a duel to the death. The charges are destroying the wand of the Head of an Ancient and Noble House, verbal assault, and attacking a woman under my protection, namely Minerva McGonagall at Hogwarts last June. I give you leave to defend yourself."

Dawlish didn't waste a second as he drew his wand... only to watch the end drop off, the victim of another cutting curse from Harry. With a destroyed wand, Dawlish had no chance. "I yield, Potter."

Harry, deciding that killing an Auror, or even an Ex-Auror, would not really do him any favours. "*Furunculous!*" A series of itchy and painful boils broke out on the man's face.

"Your sentence is that you are never allowed to lift that spell, Dawlish. For the rest of your life, you will suffer from those boils."

Dumbledore looked at Harry disappointedly. "Harry, you should not do this. Forgiveness is the mark of a truly great man. You are sentencing him to suffer needlessly."

"Do you think I could give a long garlic fart what you think, Dumbledore?" Harry turned round. "It's because of people like you that this country's in such a shitty mess. Your priorities are completely wrong. That's why I'm not sticking around."

Harry took Hermione's hand again, and headed for the door. "Have fun, folks. I'm going home."

"Harry!" Dumbledore stood up, wand in hand. "I'm afraid I can't let you leave. If Voldemort has truly been defeated, then you are a hero. The people deserve the opportunity to thank you for your efforts. Also, you will need to complete your education at Hogwarts. Even though the danger of Voldemort has passed, there are still the Death Eaters to consider. You will not be safe anywhere except Hogwarts."

Harry turned round, snickering at Dumbledore. "You know, I heard that Voldemort attacked Hogwarts just last week. Doesn't exactly sound safe, does it? Besides, I've told you; I want nothing more to do with you, Dumbledore. You claim you work for the light, but you don't. You just work for yourself."

"Everything I have done, Harry, has been for the greater good. Even though you are a legal adult, you are still a child. I don't expect you to understand such things." Dumbledore said patronisingly.

"As I've said before, and I'll no doubt say again, I will have nothing to do with you, Dumbledore."

"Leave him alone!" Hermione spat, squeezing Harry's hand in support. "He's done what you wanted; destroyed Voldemort. Why can't you let him have some bloody peace?"

"Mr. Potter has a duty to the Wizarding world." Dumbledore replied. "He cannot simply turn his back on us." The old man stared into Harry's eyes, his Legilimency ability scanning Harry's mind. What he found disturbed him. *Those defences... I've only ever seen them in one other person... Oh, Harry, that explains it... Voldemort is still possessing you.*

"No, he's not." Harry replied, still staring into Dumbledore's eyes. "I am not being possessed by Voldemort, for the simple fact that Voldemort is dead. His Horcruxes destroyed, his power broken. And never attempt to enter my mind again, or you'll see just why I'm the 'Chosen One'." At this point, Harry was bluffing. He'd only managed to 'defeat' Voldemort because the man himself wanted to be defeated. Against Dumbledore? He'd get his arse handed to him. Very quickly.

Harry turned away. "Come on, Hermione. Let's go back to the beach."

*Clearwater Beach, Pinellas County, Florida
Tuesday, 1st October, 1996 – 23:51 EDT*

The two had spent several hours on the beach, pondering what had happened during the day.

"Harry?" Hermione began. "How do you feel?"

The 'Chosen One' took a few moments to think. "Free."

"Not stressed?" Hermione asked, soundly oddly-disappointed. "Not frustrated, or tense?"

No... should I be?"

"Well, I think it would be nice, yes."

"Why?"

"Cause then I could help you relax." Hermione smiled seductively at him. "A horny Hermione makes for a cranky Hermione, you know... you could help me while I help you."

"Patience isn't exactly one of your strong points, is it?" Harry asked. "Come on, Hermione, please... don't rush this. Believe me, the prospect of a good shag is appealing, but... it's weird. What happened to dating properly?"

"I'm horny!" Hermione hissed, near-sobbing. "Come on, Harry, even if it's just me doing you, let me do something!"

Harry leaned in close to her, and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "Hermione, you know you're my best friend. Probably because right now, you're my only friend. I'm asking you to respect my wishes here. I don't wanna fuck up my only friendship, and pressuring me for sex will do that. I'm sorry if this upsets you, but I refuse to push it. If it's destined to happen, it'll happen in time."

She sighed heavily, resting her head on his shoulder. "Fine..." She grouched.

"Besides, I still owe you a spanking for being naughty." Harry quipped.

Hermione's head shot up. "Okay!"

"Behave." She slumped against him again. "Never figured you for a bottom, Hermione."

"I'm not. I'm just horny. If getting my arse slapped will put you in the mood, I'm up for it. Besides..." She hesitated. "You never know... I might like it."

"And one day, we may find that out. Until then, let's just enjoy the beach, listening to the waves crash onto the shore... the romance of the moonlight..."

Clearwater Beach, Pinellas County, Florida
Wednesday, 2nd October, 1996 – 12:15 EDT

Harry woke up late the following day. After showering and dressing, he ambled into the kitchen, idly grabbing bacon from the fridge. A tired owl appeared, carrying a copy of the *Daily Prophet*. Harry flipped his bacon, while paying the delivery owl 8 Knuts, before sending it on its way.

While watching his bacon, he heard Hermione enter the kitchen. "Morning, Hermione."

"Mornin', Harry." Hermione yawned. "Any chance of a coffee?"

He turned round... and stopped in his tracks. "Hermione?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"You appear to be naked."

She looked down. "Yes, I do, don't I? Hmm..."

"Any reason?"

"Yes."

"Other than trying to get me into bed?"

"No."

"Oh..." Harry, with a great deal of difficulty, (she was, after all, a very well-bodied young lady), turned back to his cooker. After making up the bacon sandwiches, and a large pot of coffee, he headed to the table. "You gonna get dressed before we eat?"

"Does my being naked bother you?"

"Little bit."

"Enough to want me to stop?"

Harry thought for a moment. "Probably not."

She sat down, grabbing a sandwich and a cup of coffee. "Feel free to look all you want, then. If you feel an urge to join me in a similar state of undress, please don't let me stop you."

"I'll keep that in mind." Harry mumbled around his sandwich, before picking up the paper. He began to chuckle as he read the headline.

Ex-Minister Fudge Dismissed From Position By Overwhelming Wizengamot Vote!

By: Phil Macrevice

Yesterday, Ex-Minister Fudge ordered the capture and return to Britain of Lord Harry James Potter, the 'Boy-Who-Lived'. He sent an Auror squad to America, where Potter was staying, and forcibly brought him back. The lead Auror, Aaron Dawlish, immediately snapped Lord Potter's wand, before forcing him directly into Courtroom Six at the Ministry.

Ex-Minister Fudge then advised Lord Potter that unless he agreed to become a puppet of the Ministry, he would be sent to Azkaban prison, without the possibility of reprieve or parole. Lord Potter advised, correctly, that the Ministry of Magic does not have the authorisation to send a person to Azkaban on baseless charges.

Fudge had proposed a newlaw, which would make anyone mentioned in a prophecy would become a ward of the Ministry, to be trained until a duel could be set up. This law, clearly aimed at Lord Potter, would mean that the Ministry would have sole control over him, until a duel could be arranged with You-Know-Who.

Thanks to Lord Potter's revelations, we nowknowthat Ex-Minister Fudge knewabout You-Know-Who's return for a year before he announced it to the public, meaning that a year of preparation time was lost.

Lord Potter also revealed that Ex-Minister Fudge is guilty of corruption, bribery and several other minor offenses. We here at the Daily Prophet have long been aware of Lucius Malfoy passing 'campaign contributions' to Fudge, but have been threatened in order to prevent us revealing them. Shortly after revealing this information, Lord Potter called on the Wizengamot to have Fudge immediately removed from office. Almost every member agreed, and Minister Fudge became Ex-Minister Fudge.

"Huh..." Harry said casually. "Fudge is definitely gone." He looked up, to see Hermione staring at him with dark, lust-filled eyes. "What?"

She shook her head slightly. "Hmm? Sorry, was just imagining licking chocolate sauce off your nipples. Did you say something?"

"Haven't got any chocolate sauce..." Harry mumbled, as he went on to the next article.

You-Know-Who Defeated!

By: Allotta G. Arbage

In a surprise revelation, Lord Harry Potter yesterday announced that the wizard known as Lord Voldemort had been defeated. Potter's statement to the Wizengamot was as follows: "I was on the beach, and he appeared there. We duelled. After a short time, we switched to mortal combat. He lost, and I killed him. Fatality. His body vanished. I decided to stay in America, to recover from my experiences."

Lord Potter has earned the gratitude of the entire country, indeed, the whole Wizarding world. We approached several people for comments on the situation.

Rufus Scrimgeour: "That kid deserves a break. He's saved us all, so why don't you bloody well leave him alone? Seriously, leave him alone, or you can spend some time in a holding cell. And get that damned quill out of my face! And yes, you can quote me on that, you mongrel!"

Ronald Weasley: "Yeah, I knewHarry could do it, once I came up with the strategy for him. I've been his best mate for over five years, and without me making his plans for him, he'd have been killed long ago. I should be the one getting the Order of Merlin, not him."

Severus Snape: "Potter... I suppose you'll be reading this. Well done. Gah, it's painful to say that to you. This almost, almost makes up for you being spawn of James Potter."

Albus Dumbledore: "Thanks to my training Harry, he was able to defeat Voldemort. He'll shortly be returning to Hogwarts, where he will be able to take his place as my apprentice."

We encountered one unknown gentleman in Hogsmeade, walking with Professor Minerva McGonagall, who said this. "Thank you, Harry Potter, for doing what needed to be done. You destroyed the Dark Lord, not for fame, glory or power... simply because it was necessary. You are a true hero, Harry, and you deserve your reward; peace. I strongly urge the whole Wizarding world to give young Harry exactly what he wants; freedom. Freedom from your expectations, freedom from your foolishness, freedom from your greed. People like the Dark Lord gain power because the whole Wizarding world is rampant with corruption, apathy and abject stupidity. Once these flaws are fixed, it will no longer be necessary to pin all your hopes on a child."

We here at the Daily Prophet agree with this sentiment. Ever since his reappearance in the Wizarding world in July of 1991, Lord Potter has been alternately hated, reviled and praised. Now, we should listen to his example, and fix the problems in our society.

Harry was fairly certain the 'gentleman who refused to reveal his name' was Tom Riddle. And, as usual, made his point quite well. "Thanks, Tom..." He murmured.

"Harry?" Hermione asked. "Anything good in there?"

"Depends on your definition."

"I'm sure we could find something better to do..."

"Hermione!"

"What? I'm talking about going shopping, or going to the beach. Or even, going back to Headquarters, and grabbing my parents. I'm sure they'd enjoy a holiday."

"You'd have to get dressed, though."

She sighed dramatically. "I'm sure I could do that."

"This is only a two bedroom apartment."

She smiled slyly at him.

"You're not gonna leave me alone until we shag like bunnies, are you?"

"Maybe..."

"I suppose I could sleep on the couch, and let you take my room, while your parents bunk in the guest room."

"Or... we could share a bed... *room*, while my parents bunk in the guest room. I promise not to molest you... too much, anyway."

"Fine..."

Clearwater Beach, Pinellas County, Florida
Monday, 11th November, 1996

Getting the Grangers had proven surprisingly simple. Harry had portkeyed to Grimmauld Place, asked them if they wanted to come to Florida with him for a while, and Portkey back.

They'd spent the last six weeks sunbathing, flirting, eating, flirting, swimming, flirting, shopping and flirting. Thanks to Emma's coaching back in August, he was able to hold his own against Hermione's increasingly unsubtle attempts.

Thanks to Harry being obscenely rich, the quartet were able eat out every night, turning a simple meal into romantic double dates.

"Well, kids, we're off to bed, now." Dan said, grabbing Emma's hand and pulling her towards the guest bedroom. "Love to stay and chat, but... well, you know." The door slammed. A moment later, a pair of silencing charms hit the door, one from each teenager's wand. It was one thing to know that your parents are having sex, another to have to listen to it.

"So... what do you want to do, Harry?" Hermione asked, sitting on the couch next to him. "Scrabble? Exploding Snap?"

Harry leaned over, reached up to cup her face, and gently pressed his lips against hers. She squeaked in surprise, before melting into the chaste kiss. For a few moments, they kissed, Hermione falling in love with him all over against at his gentleness.

They pulled apart, leaving barely an inch between them. "Not that I'm complaining," Hermione said breathily, "but where did that come from?"

Harry shrugged. "I said I wanted to date, and get to see if we could have something. I think we could. You've earned my trust again, Hermione. I'd prefer it if you didn't break it again, 'cause it'll be gone forever if you do."

"I won't, Harry." Hermione promised solemnly. "Back in September, I swore an oath that you and my parents will come first, in everything I do. I will not break that oath."

The pair heard a shuddering moan, even through the silencing charms. "Actually, I think your Mum comes first..." Harry muttered, sharing a revolted look with Hermione.

"Well... I'm sure we could do something about that." Hermione replied softly, staring into his eyes.

"I don't think I can just leap into bed with you, Hermione." He said quietly. "I'm... I'm not sure what to do. And it just seems a bit... a bit rushed, is all."

She pushed him back, and stood up. "Harry, do you trust me?"

He nodded slowly.

"Then trust me now." She knelt in front of him, her hands slowly going to the top of his shorts. "Now, I've never done this, but the books say as long as I don't use teeth, I can't really go wrong..."

Times Square, New York City, New York
Friday, 31st December, 1999

Harry and Hermione married in a very private ceremony in 1998. Nine months and a day later, their first child, Alexander James Potter, was born, a frizzy black mop of hair on his head, and a pair of startlingly green eyes emerged shortly after.

Neither teen had stepped foot in England after that fateful day in the Wizengamot; they hadn't needed to. Thanks to Harry's incredible wealth, they'd been able to hire tutors to take their NEWT examinations, and proceed with any other studies. Now, the pair of them held masteries in Transfiguration, Charms, Defence Against the Dark Arts and Potions. They could have their pick of almost any job in the Wizarding world, but the simple life of relaxation and study was enough for them... for now.

They'd travelled all over the world, giving Harry the experiences he should have had growing up. Visiting landmarks, sight-seeing, eating out... all things he'd never done.

Several people attempted to contact them over the years. Dumbledore had kept insisting that the pair return to Hogwarts to complete their studies, but the prospect of returning to the bigotry of Britain repelled them both. Dumbledore had been removed as Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, citing that his actions over recent decades left a lot to be desired. He'd managed to hang on to his Headmaster position only by the slimmest of

margins, and had to submit to weekly inspections by Professors McGonagall, Flitwick and Sprout.

Severus Snape retired from Hogwarts, happy to be forgotten at the most hated teacher of the century. He returned to his first love, that of Potions research. His discovery of a possible cure for Lycanthropy had garnered the attention of several large research companies.

Ronald Weasley dropped out of Hogwarts upon the end of his sixth year, due to failing his end-of-year examinations. Instead of returning to retake the year, he tried out for several Quidditch teams. He secured a contract as reserve keeper for the Appleby Arrows, who'd replaced the Chudley Cannons as league losers. He became the only thing worse than a has-been: a never will be.

Ginny Weasley dated several young men at Hogwarts. Shortly after her graduation, she married Seamus Finnegan, and the pair were expecting their first child. Seamus had set up a small bar in his native Ireland, which became *the* Wizarding drinking establishment on the Emerald Isle.

Molly Weasley remained as she had been; fickle, and prone to leap to conclusions. Shortly after one loud encounter, William, Charles, Percival, Frederick and George each vowed that they would never return to the Burrow while she was alive.

Neville Longbottom became engaged to Luna Lovegood in early 1999. The pair had become business partners, providing rare Herbology supplies and mythical creature parts to Apothecaries throughout Wizarding Britain.

Remus Lupin became a borderline alcoholic, spending his days in inebriated confusion, before Nymphadora Tonks slapped the crap out of him, and put him in detox. He spent his days working in Muggle orphanages, making sure that the children there always had someone to read them stories, or deal with any problems. He made no attempts to contact Harry or Hermione; the realisation of his mistakes washing over him. He was a broken man, but he still gave his all for the children. Marauder honour would let him do no less.

Rufus Scrimgeour became the next Minister for Magic, and used Harry Potter as an engine for change. His goal was to create a Wizarding Britain that Harry would be proud to call home. He enacted reforms, abolishing the pureblood dogma that had plagued the country for centuries. It no longer mattered what your blood was. Only ability and merit had any value under the new regime. The werewolf regulations, the goblin suppression laws... all were banished. He still had a way to go, but the country had slowly moved from the 18th century into the 19th. A few more years, and he'd have the place up to the present.

Tom Riddle married Minerva McGonagall in 1997. The pair remained childless so far, but rumours of their... encounters, abounded throughout Hogwarts. Tom Riddle, using a false name, took over the position of Defence Against the Dark Arts instructor, finally breaking a curse he himself had placed on the position thirty years ago.

Dan and Emma were watching over young Alex, while the young couple celebrated the birth of the new Millennium, along with thousands of others in New York. None of them knew what the future would bring, but they knew that together, they'd be able to face it.