

work as we've discovered. Occlumency is useless as we've also determined."

"I'll release you, Harry, to share your burden, but Professor Snape was well within his right to assign this punishment. It is in the Hogwarts guidelines for student punishment, even though rarely used."

"You're siding with him?" Harry spat out bitterly.

"It's not a matter of sides. I must enforce my staff's just and fair punishments, unless given a good reason to override their actions. You're not saying you are innocent of his charges, are you?"

"No, sir," Harry whined.

Then unless you are ill or have some other equal or better reason, I can only justify releasing you early if you agree to share the burden of the prophecy."

Harry sat staring at the rug-covered stone floor and slowly shook his head in the negative.

Dumbledore made his way ghost-like to the door and stood poised to close it before saying, "Then I suggest you take your punishment like a Gryffindor and leave our poor house-elves out of your misery."

A cruel statement by his mentor or not, these last word stung Harry greatly, and he lashed out in reply as the door closed, "Gryffindor! I wish I'd never been made a Gryffindor!"

His words finished echoing through the dungeon when Harry heard, "Humph," on the other side of the door. Harry stared at the door for minutes, hours, he knew not. However, when he turned he found a very generous dinner on his desk with Warming charms applied, and a Never-Emptying- Never-Cooling pot of tea on a hot pad.

At what was probably well past 7:00 he ate the food. At nearer to 10:00 he drank his last cuppa and visited the loo to off-load what he'd on-loaded.

He didn't have his wand, but the fire died to ashes as he lowered his head to his pillow. Unlike the previous night, his eyes closed and sleep arrived moments later.

~*~

Harry thought he heard the bell tower chime midnight, when he awoke to the fire flaring into life. Harry reached for his glasses and rose in his bed to see - - the very image of the seventeen-year-old Tom Riddle in his Slytherin Hogwarts robes and head boy badge. Despite the trauma his image had produced in past dreams, Harry felt this was different. He was awake.

"Tom? Tom Riddle?"

"No," the solid yet not quite solid apparition/student/memory said. "And not a memory either. I'm..." he grinned. "Think of me as a spirit."

"Oh, I get it," Harry said with a rueful smile. "Dumbledore conjured you and sent you down here to reenact Dickens' 'A Christmas Carol' in hopes of changing my mind. Well, you can't take me to good memories of Christmas too far in the past, I've only had a few, and they are all recent and here at Hogwarts." Harry hoped the shock of Mr. Weasley's brush with death the previous Christmas time would counteract the good times with Sirius last year.

"No, I don't think so. I don't feel conjured, and I'm taking you to see next Spring at your house common room, just aways down the dungeon from here."

"Here in the dungeon?" But I'm Gryffindor," Harry exclaimed.

Teen Riddle said, "Oh, you are?" And pointed at Harry's robes.

Harry was stunned to see that he no longer wore pajamas, but was dressed in Slytherin robes. He looked up to see Riddle leaving the cell/room, and Harry followed. Moments later Harry followed his 'host,' for lack of a better word, into the Slytherin common room door, which opened before them.

Harry followed the spirit/apparition/whatever into the room he'd seen for minutes in second-year. Riddle stood next to him. "No one can hear you or see you; that much is similar to Dickens. All I know is you're here to respond to your comment, 'I wish I'd never been made a Gryffindor.' Look."

Our Harry looked and saw a girl before the fire. She had luxuriously long, silky black hair almost to her waist. She stood gazing into the fire, humming a tuneless diddy from time to time, and brushing her hair aimlessly. She turned sideways.

"Cho!" our Harry exclaimed.

"Yes," mused the Riddle of the dream, vision, nightmare, whatever he was in. "She actually made her parents petition the Hogwarts School of Governors to allow a house change to Slytherin to be with you. She refused to take her O.W.L.s her fifth year, and waited for you."

Harry asked Riddle ghost, "I'm dating Cho?"

Specter Riddle smiled. "She's been very attentive to your *every need, every possible desire*. You've made Dumbledore make you both head boy and head girl."

"Made him?" Our Harry asked, "How did I?"

A sound from the door interrupted them. Vision Cho turned and called, "Harry!"

She ran to him. Slytherin Harry walked with a tired swagger into the common room. He had three fellow Slytherins with him but their hoods blocked their faces. The four smelled of sweat and smoke, and their robes were mussed and dirt stained to a degree.

Cho asked, "Oh my daring, are you all right?" Slytherin Harry nodded. She asked, "Voldemort?"

"Defeated. I killed him. He fought well, but was no match in the end." Harry exhaled tiredly after this short summary. "The death toll..."

Dreaming Harry looked to spirit Riddle with a smug look, but apparition-Riddle smiled. He said, "I'm not of the body, Tom Riddle." Then he pointed.

Slytherin Harry said, "Dumbledore, all the Weasleys, most of the Gryffindors, half of the Hufflepuffs and a third of the Ravenclaws - all dead."

Cho forced her hands into her mouth, gasping, and shedding a few tears. "They... all... died? But... but, I thought we discovered the link between Voldemort and his Death Eaters. Kill him and they all die. What happen?"

Slytherin Harry shrugged and said, "Oh, that worked well; just as we thought. I made my way to the front and challenged Riddle to a duel. His ego could not conceive defeat, but my extra 'insurance' shall we call it turned the tide. I killed him in a matter of minutes. The screams of his Death Eaters, particularly Lucius Malfoy and Bellatrix Lestrange were most satisfying."

Cho's face registered obvious disbelief and confusion. "Then all the deaths? Insurance?"

Slytherin Harry ran his hand through her hair. Of course, my dear. Voldemort is not a person, but an idea, a spirit, a presence perhaps. I contacted it through Legilimency with Riddle, and it, the spirit of Voldemort, left and joined me." Harry chuckled malevolently, and the three behind him joined in.

Then behind Harry Cho saw first, Blaise Zabini, then Theodore Nott, and finally Draco Malfoy lower their hoods with purposeful, evil smiles on their faces.

Slytherin Harry said, drawing Cho's gaze back to him, "I had to kill all of those others, Dumbledore and the lot. They refused to join me. Not enough clever, opportunistic Slytherin in the bunch."

But, Harry," Cho stuttered, "I... I thought..."

"I know dear," Harry spoke silkily with a tone to send shivers of fear down vision Cho and our Harry's back. "And you've been awfully accommodating of my every, desire, these last three years especially.

"I've told the lads here of your 'talents,' and they are most curious to, sample...? And now that I have a whole island of witches to subdue, you've become, redundant, shall we say?"

Cho faced portrayed equal parts disbelief, betrayal, and horror.

"But, dear," Slytherin Harry continued. "I want to watch and see how you perform while recovering from the Cruciatius."

When the curse connected three things occurred:

Vision Cho screamed as only the damned could scream.

Our Harry watching the vision/nightmare screamed with a desperation unknown in his past dreams.

And flesh and blood Harry in the small dungeon holding room awoke screaming himself nearly hoarse.

~*~*~

And yet, after that whatever it was, nightmare shall we say, Harry took several sips from a glass of water, replaced his glasses on the nightstand, and was back asleep in two quick winks.

~*~*~

His fireplace in the dungeon holding room flared again. Harry noticed his watch said 1:00 when he placed his glasses back on his face.

There stood Bartemius Crouch, Sr.

"Mr. Crouch? Er, that is, you're not Mr. Crouch are you?"

The lank, tall specter or whatever just shook his head. "I was a Ravenclaw, and I'm here to take you to your tower."

Our Harry, now in a dream/vision/nightmare once again in just over an hour, never suspected...

"Hey, Gryffindor Tower is that way. You're going to-"

Crouch simply smiled his thin, cold smile and pointed at our Harry's robes. And yet, Harry was surprised to see he wore Ravenclaw blue and silver trimming on his robes and a head boy badge. Up the tower they trudged, never ending steps it seemed, yet Harry found himself entering the

Ravenclaw common room in mere moments.

Crouch led the way into the room lined with bookshelves, maps, and chalkboards.

Harry looked around, playing the tourist until Crouch cleared his throat and pointed to a pair of well padded and occupied chairs near a table strewn neatly with books and parchments.

Dreaming or whatever, Harry's eyes lit up when he noticed Hermione sitting there, but frowned when he realized she was kissing someone. She opened her eyes and raised her wrist to her face while not breaking the lip lock.

In roughly twenty seconds she pulled back and said, "Okay, the ten minute snog break we scheduled is over. We have enough time to review everything before going to the Final Battle. Then we can execute phase two of our lives."

"Oh, all right, you studious little minx. You're quite the distraction, but a plan's a plan."

Our Harry's jaw swung down and should not have been surprised to see himself turn from his most education-oriented of friends.

Harry of the vision said, "Right. In first year I defeated Voldemort on Quirrell's head by the end of first term. The evidence was incontrovertible, and his attack on me confirmed my suspicions."

"And you had Hagrid removed from his duties for harboring a dragon. That was good for the school as well."

Harry nodded. "Much as I warmed to him for taking me to Diagon Alley, I had out smarted Uncle Vernon and forced him and my aunt, through the records I kept and threatened to send to Child Services, to do as I needed for school at Hogwarts."

"In second year," Hermione began, "You deduced who was opening the Chamber of Secrets, what the monster was, and almost intercepted her from going down into the Chamber."

"I took down a rooster and killed the Basilisk, then destroyed the diary with a Patronus charm. Clever, my little minx, finding out that spell's unknown properties and providing me with a happy enough memory to produce one."

"Oh, Harry, it was just my bra strap, and a training bra at that, but it was the event that revealed to us our feelings for each other."

They looked at each other longingly. Dream Hermione looked at her watch and said, "Thirty-three seconds ahead of schedule." They leaned in to kiss.

Dreaming Harry said to spirit Crouch, "Aren't they a little too..."

Crouch said, "Hormonal *and* anal retentive?"

"That will do for a description."

The two dream Ravenclaws parted lips and without skipping a beat Hermione said, "And in third-year you captured the killer Sirius Black and communicated well enough with the dementors to send them to that murderer to administer the Kiss."

Our Harry inhaled in shock.

Dream Harry stated, "I've always felt like I missed something on that, but the law is the law."

"Yes," Hermione said with a grin. "And receiving the Order of Merlin, Third Class at the age of thirteen will go along way towards ensuring your political aspirations."

Hermione continued, "In fourth-year you used the evidence that Dumbledore left you with your aunt and uncle against your parents wishes, to convince him to put your name in the Goblet of Fire."

Our hero said to Crouch, "Isn't that blackmail?"

Dream Hermione said, "Imagine his nerve calling it blackmail when you only wanted to assure the best qualified student would compete."

Ravenclaw Harry said, "And do you remember the cheek that Cedric Diggory displayed? Just imagine, a Hufflepuff champion of Hogwarts. What ~~was~~ he thinking?"

"Then, he refuses to take his N.E.W.T.s, and comes back for an eighth year to, of all things, play Quidditch! The quintessential display of brains subjugated to brawn."

The two paused and dreaming Harry looked at Crouch. The apparition's genuinely shrugging shoulders said it all.

Vision Harry then mentioned the DA.

Dreaming Harry said to Crouch, "There, I did something right and not selfishly."

Ravenclaw Hermione snorted. "Diggory's Army? A failed attempt to raise the grades of all students in Defense, being so poorly taught by that Umbridge woman."

"And then he goes and takes several students at the Ministry of Magic and they're all killed by Death Eaters. I ignored Voldemort's call through my scar connection. Why couldn't Cedric ignore Riddle's owl posts? And to think he actually said that the Sorting hat wanted to put him in Gryffindor."

"He has, er, *had* Gryffindor written all over him," Hermione admitted.

"I'm a jerk as a Ravenclaw," dreaming Harry stated. Crouch did not argue.

"So, the summer after fifth-year you had Fudge sacked, and replaced him with Arthur Weasleys."

"Hey, that's not too bad," our Harry said to Crouch.

"Yes," said Ravenclaw Harry. "Not pressing for his daughter to be expelled has Arthur doing as I want, when I want. No fights with Riddle in sixth-year or seventh-year so far."

"The Ministry sent us all the Aurors and Unspeakables we've requested to train us as we want," she said.

"Arthur has Dumbledore stripped almost of all power and Professor Snape has the school as we want it according to our plans," he said. "Funny how he stepped up after our years of hatred, and has supported and arranged things with Voldemort just as we want it, according to our plan."

Harry looked at his wristwatch and said, "Voldemort should be arriving for our duel in a few minutes. Can't I just send an orb down with my spell we designed to place him in eternal stasis? That way we can start now on the next step in our sex life you've promised in our plan as a reward for defeating Riddle."

Our Harry looked at specter Crouch. They both rolled their eyes.

Hermione of the dream blushed and said, "We can't divert from the plan now, remember the plan."

"Yes, dear, I cannot imagine what I was thinking."

They smiled warmly and intelligently at each other. Ravenclaw Harry looked again at his watch and stated, "Yes, well, we had Dumbledore lower the Apparation wards so we can both Disapparate in front of Riddle for the duel. Snape said it will disconcert him immeasurably. I'll use the Killing Curse Shield to divert his attempt to kill me."

Hermione said, "And then you'll cast your Stasis charm on him while he's confused as to how you could have blocked his Unforgivable."

"And I'll take him to the department of Mysteries and send him through that Veil we've read about. Then off to the awards ceremony we've scheduled for tonight, and on with our glorious careers - the two brightest and most powerful of our generation, or of any generation that is."

The two Ravenclaws of the dream or nightmare stood, straightened their robes, and then drew their wands. They grabbed hands and Disapparated to the front grounds of Hogwarts where Voldemort stood alone.

Our Harry and Crouch not so much Apparated as simply appeared there between Voldemort, and Ravenclaw Harry and Hermione, and off to the side of course. The dreaming Harry was amazed that Voldemort had arrived alone for the fight.

Riddle held his wand at his side and Ravenclaw Harry drew his. "As you see Tom," Harry of the vision sneered Voldemort's true name. Hermione smirked also, but Riddle remained unmoved. "I have had Ollivander make a new wand that will not produce the *Priori Incantatum* effect.

Riddle bowed and said, "How considerate of you."

"Shall we?"

They both raised their wands with confidence. Hermione smiled and stepped back and to the side for a better view.

Ravenclaw Harry shouted out, "*Protego Impervio!*"

Voldemort cast, "Avada Kedavra!"

A metallic tinged translucent shield over six and a half feet tall appeared before Harry.

The green flash of death hit Hermione in the chest.

The shield disappeared as Harry turned to his girlfriend in shocked horror. The fabric-ripping sound of dozens and dozens of Apparation cracks compressed into a second's time drew Ravenclaw Harry's stunned gaze back to his enemy.

Row after row of Death Eaters stood behind their master. Snape stood beside Voldemort, holding the collar of the dead Dumbledore in his hand, before he released the deceased headmaster's body to fall slack on the ground.

Ravenclaw Harry's words were cut off at, "You're not supposed to-" by the second Killing Curse hitting his chest.

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This time Harry did not scream, but he sat up in his bed and shouted, "Not only don't I want to be a Gryffindor, I don't want to be the bloody Boy-Who-Lived!"

He was asleep in the snug detaining room seconds later.

~*~*~

It became brighter in Harry's small room, and once again he reset his glasses before turning to see who might be present. He sat up before he could see more than only ears. Dobby stood there wordlessly, no joyous "Harry Potter, sir" or any other address.

"I follow you to the Hufflepuff common room, don't I?"

The elf-apparition shook its head in the negative. Harry arose from the bed and walked over to him. He looked down to see the badger's yellow and black cording around the edge of his robe. Harry opened his mouth to ask the obvious question when the Dobby-ganger reached out its hand and took hold of his robe.

They appeared in the Great Hall and there seemed to be a festive event going on, but the gaiety was forced to a degree. Harry realized he was standing in the back of the existing crowd, but that the Great Hall was only just less than half full, so he was near enough to the front to see clearly and yet behind all of the seated students.

Several of the teacher were also standing back here, and the dreaming Harry overheard Professor Sprout talking to an official looking lady he'd never seen before.

"I am glad to tell you, Madam Tarleton, all about the students as I know them from the different houses, but see here, looks like an official announcement's to be made."

Out on the stage popped Gilderoy Lockhart. He pointed his wand at his throat and loudly said, "Can everybody see me? Can everybody hear me? I'm Gilderoy Lockhart, press agent, mentor, and dare I say 'friend' of the Boy-Who-Lived."

Our Harry looked to Dobby to protest, but the elf-specter raised his hand in silence and pointed towards the stage.

Lockhart continued, "The battle rages even as we speak, but the reports are all good, just as I've hoped. We should see our champion arrive back soon, victorious!" With that, the scarlet clad dandy turned and pointed his wand above his head and to the wall. A huge banner unfurled and on it was captured, curse scar and all, the Boy-Who-Lived, Neville Longbottom.

Harry gulped and looked at the Dobby-looking creature before him. "Neville?" *He's the Boy-Who...?* Not finishing the question, Harry looked into the elf's eyes and finally took a breath. He closed his eyes, exhaled, inhaled, opened his eyes and said, "Very well. Neville did himself proud in the Department of Mysteries last spring, and since he has his new wand, he's a fine wizard. He'd have the advantage of his Gran's upbringing, and, er, what... Dobby, what about me?"

The elf pointed to Professor Sprout.

They overheard her saying, "Yes, Madam Tarleton, Neville was raised by his grandmother after his parent's died the night You-Know-Who was first defeated. He was a typical wizard child here in England, and came to Hogwarts full of promise. He defeated You-Know-Who in his first, year, the monster was attached to the back of a professor's head, heaven knows. Neville, Dean Thomas, and Hermione Granger went down under Hogwarts and Neville was victorious. The other two poor souls, though.... But this is war. People die."

The dreaming Harry grabbed Dobby by his collar and said, "Hermione! She's not...?" Dobby merely pointed back at the Herbology Professor.

"And then his second year Neville went down into the Chamber of Secrets with Ron Weasley and Gilderoy Lockhart. Neville defeated the Basilisk with the Sword of Gryffindor, and he and Professor Lockhart were fast friends from that day forward. Gilderoy even gave up his own career to be press agent and mentor to Neville. He's become so famous since, our Neville has." The woman asked a question our Harry could not hear.

"Humm? Oh, Young Mr. Weasley survived, but he's not been able to walk well since then. That's him over there with the cane. He doesn't really remember much about the Chamber." Sprout shivered.

The dreaming Harry looked to the back of the Gryffindor table. There sat Ron, a poor fraction of himself. His right leg was withered, and he looked stooped over even sitting down. His face held the sadness of a life much older than seventeen.

"Poor Ron," Sprout continued, "One of his twin brothers died helping Neville prepare for the third task of the Tri-Wizard tournament. They both insisted on helping him with his spell work. The explosion knocked them all into comas. Neville recovered quickly and still won the tournament, but the others took longer to recover.

"The other Weasley twin went with Neville to the Ministry two spring terms ago and died with the others. Eleven Death Eaters were defeated but Fred Weasley, Cho Chang, Steven Cornfoot, and my Hufflepuffs, Ernie Macmillan and Susan Bomes died there in the fight." Sprout brought a plaid hanky to her eyes and teared up.

"The three other, older Weasley boys have all died in this war over the last two years. Their mother and father, too. Oh, and I should tell you about the littlest Weasley, the first Weasley daughter in seventeen generations, and also the first Weasley in seventeen generations *not* to be sorted into Gryffindor house. To understand her tale, you have to know the story of the Other-Boy."

Harry looked to Dobby, but the elf's eyes had not left the professor.

Professor Sprout looked to her own table and pointed to a boy sitting by himself. "That's him, poor little Harry Potter." She tsk'ed.

"He's one of mine, and I'm proud of him. You've read the text of the prophecy in Gilderoy Lockhart's book on Neville, the second book, not the first

one. Well, Harry's parents and Harry fit the description as well. When Lord Thingy was defeated by Neville and disappeared, some Death Eaters went to Harry's home and tortured his parents to death for information. Harry was raised by mean-hearted Muggle relatives, but such is the life of one so unfortunate and with no one looking into his interests. The boy comes back each start of year depressed and has obviously lost a lot of weight. He works hard I fear because he's worked hard by his aunt and uncle.

"I've asked Professor Dumbledore, but Neville takes up all of his time. Harry is the smallest boy in his year, and smaller than most in the year behind him. He's a fair student but never has his summer homework done, so he starts the year behind everyone. He must garden for his relatives because he always does well in my class." Sprout beamed with love for her student.

"But back to little Ginny Weasley. Harry was sorted into Hufflepuff, and apparently young Ginny helped him at the train station make his way through the barrier the first time. They wrote during the year, but her brothers were all enamored with Neville, the Boy-Who-Lived, and never answered her questions about Harry.

"She was a year younger than Neville, Ron, and Harry, so the next year she put on the Sorting Hat." Professor Sprout blushed slightly. "We could hear her yelling under the Hat for several minutes. The Hat finally shouted in obvious exasperation, "Hufflepuff," and that's how the first Weasley seventeen generations did not enter Gryffindor."

Sprout sighed heavily. "But it's short sad tale. Harry and Ginny were obvious friends, but Ginny was unstable it appeared and would spend days away from him, and then days clinging to him. Finally we understood that she was the one possessed by the spirit of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, like Lockhart fully described in his first book on Neville. As she wrote on the wall, 'her skeleton lies in the Chamber forever.'"

The dreaming Harry gasped in horror, "Not Ginny!"

At this time Lockhart re-ascended the podium. "I have great news! The battle has ended and gone as I expected. You'll see soon... ah here he is!"

All looked to the back of the Great Hall as Neville strode in, waving to all present. Press cameras flashed all around at Neville, hair parted to prominently display the famous scar. The two conferred and Lockhart spoke again. Neville just stood there grinning a little out of character, the dreaming Harry thought.

Lockhart said, "It was last year that even I, Gilderoy Lockhart, wondered if Neville could truly defeat the Dark Lord." He laughed and so did all in the hall, including Neville. "So, I took the steps necessary to ensure survival."

He turned to Neville and asked so all could hear, "Is it time?"

Neville looked at his watch for several seconds, then nodded.

Lockhart turned back and said, "So I took the measures needed for survival, my survival." He then looked back at Neville who stooped and began to morph. Lockhart said, "Therefore I formed an alliance with the Dark Lord and sold out the Boy-Who-Lived."

Terse laughter was interrupted by the morphing Neville standing up straight again and revealing the horrid face of Voldemort himself. The Poyjuice Potion wore off. Lockhart shouted, "Bend your knee to us or die like your weak hero, Nevill-"

A Killing Curse struck him in the back. Voldemort stepped forward to the stunned crowd and said, "Like I'd share power with that fool. You have no choice of bowing or dying, just DIE!"

The doors of the Great Hall swept open. Death Eaters and dementors swept into the hall. Curses and spells flew around. Our Harry standing by Dobby was stunned and knew not where to look.

All of a sudden he and the specter Dobby were standing behind the Hufflepuff Harry Potter. This little Harry said out loud but to himself, "I'll be with you soon, Ginny. *Expecto Patronum!*" He followed that charm with a number of other battle charms hexes and jinxes.

He worked his way over to Ron Weasley, but Ron was struck down by a green light and limp on the floor. Soon the Hufflepuff Harry Potter seemed to be fighting on alone, but a Killing Curse from Voldemort ended his life, and our Harry woke up screaming again in his bed in the small detaining room in the dungeon.

He did not instantly go back to sleep as with the first two dreams, visions, nightmares, whatever they were. He lay there awake for several long minutes, weighing his life in light of what he'd seen this night since going to bed. This was *not* a Harry Potter version of Dickens' "A Christmas Carol" he realized. There was no happy ending, no good life remnants from the past to recover, no present day situation from his dream to fix, no future to head off that he saw this night.

Harry remembered that his relatives had only once invited him to view a movie on the telly. It was at Christmas time the winter before learning of magic and Hogwarts, and Harry, first wondered if his family were gaining a little of the holiday spirit inviting to watch a Christmas classic with them.

That would not be.

It was an old American film in black and white, called "It's a Wonderful Life." In it a very nice and helpful man came to his wits ends after a hard life trying to do right. In desperation the leading character wished that he'd never been born. He then saw how terrible off his family and his whole town would be without him there.

Uncle Vernon cruelly told Harry that the Dursleys' life would be immeasurable improved if he, Harry, had never been born. That was sole reason he had been invited to watch.

