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In the Eye of the Beholder

Chapter One - The Odyssey Begins - Emphasis on Odd

*My gratitude goes to my two writing coaches, kokopelli and ebdarcy.
Thanks also go to Jberm, who helped me think through several concepts.*

Chapter One - The Odyssey Begins - Emphasis on Odd

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It's Monday late morning and it's weird to think I'm actually relieved to be back at Privet Drive. But then a lot has happened that's hard to believe this summer. There's a Muggle expression, 'It's all right to be paranoid if the whole world *is* out to get you.' That's what I'm feeling today.

Mondays. Weird things seem to be happening to me on Mondays this summer. It's hard to believe I left here only last Monday - just seven event-filled and very painful days ago.

The summer started off so smoothly. I actually thought it might be an easy time for me - but if I've learned anything in the last few years, it's that my life can change quickly. I also know that if there's trouble around, it will find me somehow.

After a week of taking the Paladin Program growth accelerating potions, starting on a *Monday*, I'd already outgrown my Dudley cast-off clothing, in terms of length anyway, and my trainers were falling apart from the strain. I used duct tape to hold the sole onto my right trainer and was a day away from needing to tape the other one, too. Yeah, I definitely needed some new clothes.

No one who really knew my aunt and uncle would be surprised that they are confirmed discount shoppers. They want only fine label products but delight in not paying full price for them - can't blame them on that. However, most people would be surprised at their silliness in hiding it. The Dursleys actually keep shopping bags from a number of prestigious big name stores in the boot of the auto. They actually transfer their purchases into the fancy store bags before taking them out of their car. As if the neighbors would really care!

Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon's favorite places to shop are Clark Village and Pluckey Thorne. Both are sort of a manufactured high street with everything on sale, of course, but without the town center or the actual high street. It's also important that both outlets are several hours drive from Little Whinging. We wouldn't want to be recognized while out bargain hunting, would we?

Of course, I'd never been to either place myself since my relatives never take me anywhere unless they absolutely must. I had my first chance to go last Monday - I guess weird things really do happen on Mondays, but I said that already, didn't I?

Dudley doesn't realize that his parents shop at these discount outlets. They hide it from him, too, something about protecting his sensibilities, I believe. Little Dudders, idiot that he is, has never caught on. He was conveniently visiting his Aunt Marge last Monday. I happened to overhear Aunt Petunia asking Uncle Vernon if they could take advantage of his trip to Aunt Marge's and sneak off for a day of shopping. Figuring I had little to lose, I asked to go along. I told them I needed new clothes and quickly added that the Paladin Program had given me limited funds that must be used to buy what I needed in the way of clothing, and an accounting was needed.

Okay, that was a lie, but I wasn't about to tell them I have money of my own. I had just over a hundred pounds in Muggle money on me and Hermione told me that it should be enough if I was frugal. The outlet shopping center, as I understood it on that day, would allow me to stretch the buying power of my funds.

After a moment discussing it among themselves, like I wasn't there, the two agreed that I could go. They would never have agreed just to be nice. This time, though, it actually suited them. Uncle Vernon *had* to go into the office and was reluctant to let Aunt Petunia drive to Clark Village alone. Although they had made the trip together many times, Aunt Petunia had never driven as far as Somerset by herself. Of course, a second vehicle was a recent addition for the Dursleys so Aunt Petunia hadn't really had the opportunity to venture off on her own before. Uncle Vernon had just taken delivery of a new Range Rover, thanks to acquiring a new client for Grunnings - a new customer run by a magically connected company chairman happy to buy industrial drills from Harry Potter's family. Now that the Rover sits on the parking pad, the old sedan belongs to my aunt. Having me along would give her someone else to read road signs and to carry her purchases.

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Before I get too deep into the shopping expedition, I guess I have to explain just a few more things. Ten nights ago before the shopping Monday Professor Dumbledore had a "chat" with my uncle. My aunt was there, but this conversation was for Vernon's benefit.

It seems my uncle's success in business isn't based solely on his own merits as he thought. Oh, apparently he is a whiz at customer support and keeping clients well supplied with drills, but his biggest clients have had 'additional incentives' to work with him at the outset. The owners of his four biggest accounts all have magical connections. They have taken him on as their drill supplier at Dumbledore's request on my behalf. Only *after* his first big client signed a long-term drill contract did it become apparent that Uncle Vernon is terrific at customer satisfaction after the sale - his ability

to suck-up comes through.

Dumbledore had to have my uncle's signature on the papers allowing me to join the Paladin Program - you'll hear more about that program in a minute. The headmaster informed my uncle that the next big client Vernon hoped to sign was also from a magical family and would ink the contract for drills if Vernon would sign my participation papers, allow my room to be enlarged and permit a house-elf to assist me for the summer.

Okay, so the headmaster stooped to blackmail, but I wasn't going to complain if it made my life in any way easier. I prefer to think Dumbledore was making perfectly clear my long time contributions to the family funds.

Two days later Dumbledore sat with my aunt and explained everything that was done to my room to make it morph at my request between a potions laboratory, a Wizarding fitness and fighting dojo, and my combination bedroom/kitchen/research library. Since then my Aunt Petunia has been a different person to a noticeable degree.

She has actually been civil for the most part, and occasionally she's been considerate, even attempting a real conversation now and then. She's obviously trying, sort of. These improvements are a humanitarian award leap forward in her treatment of me. More startling is her obvious understanding of many simple magical things. Possibly she remembered things my mother might have told her or showed her roughly two decades ago. Of course we do not discuss this directly or any other of her actions - past or present.

Aunt Petunia even asks the occasional question now and accepts my saying the magic related words to answer the question. Of course, her questions all relate to fulfilling the Dursleys' part of the bargain with Dumbledore regarding my summer's training. However, the new industrial drills client delivered by Dumbledore this summer has increased Uncle Vernon's income by nearly forty percent. Suddenly cooperating with my needs became less painful for my so-called family than it's been all these years.

I wonder if I've gone mad from time to time.

Now about the Paladin Program. It's Professor Dumbledore's grand scheme to prepare a number of us rising sixth year students for a pre-Auror training curriculum to start this September second. The goal is that by September we will be physically, mentally, and magically as strong as we would normally be at the end of our seventh year at Hogwarts. That's almost two years of development over the course of one summer. So, each of the Paladin volunteers must take a series of potions five days out of six for roughly fifty-five days. A special diet and strenuous exercise regime are also required to facilitate the physical growth. Various courses of study over the summer are designed to stimulate our intellects. Practicing different types of magic in our special training rooms is also prescribed to stretch our magical powers. And I don't want to talk about the addle-brained cavortings we go through to improve our emotional maturity.

On the day of the shopping trip, I took my acceleration potion with breakfast. I had exercised for two hours before that and nothing was required of me on a precise timetable until late tonight. Our plan was to be home by supper.

As I finished my shower, Dobby announced that he had finished preparing my Dudley cast-offs. I did not know at that point that Monday morning that I would be going to Clark Village. As I dried off, I reflected on the fact that I now was master to a house-elf.

When Umbridge and the Inquisitorial Squad came after the DA this past spring, I *ordered* Dobby not to allow himself to be harmed or interrogated. When he obeyed me, that action of obedience under life-threatening circumstances brought about two effects: Dobby was protected from Professor Umbridge and anyone who might ever try to hurt him by ordering him into harm's way. That act of obedience also bonded Dobby to me as MY house-elf until he dies, I die, or I give him clothes. It was a life and death situation for him; that made the bond occur.

I'll never be able to give him clothes. Dumbledore said that it would kill him since he idolizes me, and in a few short days I have come to believe that it would. Also in those few days I've become very glad for his company, even though I can do magic this summer with a few restrictions, and I am seeing some of my friends on a regular basis.

I have to make sure Hermione doesn't find out about Dobby and me; it would upset her so. She almost did one day. Her father had come with her to show me how to use all of the exercise equipment.

Turns out mild-mannered dentist, Steph Granger is a former SAS captain. He was highly decorated though in secret, because the SAS was not known to be fighting in the jungles of Viet Nam during the war there. He had left the service and met his wife, Sylvia, in dental school. While they dated, and while married but not yet finished with school, they lived in a pretty dangerous part of the city. Mr. Granger had to kill several street thugs to defend her one terrible night, so she asked him to teach her to protect herself. Later, but before they had finished dental school, she killed a thug bent of beating Mr. Granger to death with a lead pipe.

Just over a week ago Death Eaters came knocking - two at their home where Mrs. Granger and Hermione were, and two at the dental practice just when Mr. Granger was leaving for the day.

I had a Voldemort dream of him sending the Death Eaters, and I ran to make a Floo call at Arabella Figg's house. Mad-Eye Moody, Bill Weasley, Remus Lupin, and Kingsley Shacklebolt Apparated to the rescue, only to find Mr. Granger had killed his two with his great bloody big fighting knife, and Mrs. Granger had killed her attackers as well.

Grangers - 4; Death Eaters - 0.

While I'm mentioning of courses, of course I couldn't just tell the Order of the Phoenix about the Death Eater attacks on the Grangers. I *had* to be in the battle somehow. So, I just concentrated very hard and ended up Apparating into the Granger's living room and nearly embedding my bum into a wall. I *did* leave the bottoms of my old trousers in the wall.

I arrived too late to help. Mrs. Granger had used a MAC 10 machine pistol - illegal in Great Britain I might add - to kill one Death Eater, and used a karate move or something like that to kill the other. Mr. Granger turns out to be a champion knife fighter, even by SAS standards, and he killed his

two Death Eater attackers with a Fairbairn - a famous knife designed for killing in the 1930's by the British Chief Inspector of Detectives in Hong Kong.

The three Grangers are all now installed at number twelve, Grimmauld Place. Fudge succeeded in getting the Grangers accused in the Muggle press of having a Methamphetamine lab in their destroyed office. Now the Grangers are working for the Order of the Phoenix and Hogwarts I guess. Sylvia Granger is doing psychological analysis, or something like that, working with us students in the Paladin Program, seeing how we are progressing emotionally. I'm not too clear on it. Although Mr. Granger was a top student in school, apparently Hermione received her hyperactive study habits from her mother, who has nearly earned a doctorate in Adolescent Psychology while Hermione's been at Hogwarts and while Mrs. Granger has been working full time in their dental practice.

Steph Granger has been teaching most of us in the Paladin Program how to use our fitness equipment. I have a treadmill that doesn't just let me run, it turns at a moment's notice into a swamp, desert, boulder-strewn ground, or loose sand to run in. It even casts small spells at me on occasions to dodge while running. My stationary bicycle changes size and difficulty levels, and has a number of rope and binder spells that shoot up from time to time for me to avoid. The weight machine is standard Muggle issue apparently. Either that or it's very sneaky, lulling me into a false sense of safety.

Mr. Granger also hinted at giving me some additional training during the summer at some time. I've decided I want to learn anything and everything I can to help me be prepared, and the two Granger parents have proven Muggle fighting effective against the Death Munchers. Did I mention that fight occurred on a Monday?

I miss Sirius something fierce, but I have come to grips with the fact that he is gone and it is only partly my fault. I had long talks with Dumbledore, Remus, Mad-Eye, and Mr. Granger about different things. The headmaster helped me realize I have to put my grieving not away, but to the side during much of the day to prepare myself for what *has* to be done, readying myself to kill Riddle. Kill, not murder.

Lupin, Moody, and Granger told me of a lot of experiences from their lives and I learned three things that are essential. First, I will always mourn the deaths of Cedric and Sirius. And since this is war, there will most assuredly be more deaths to mourn before it's over. Second, murderers kill maliciously. Killers end lives when they have to when they save lives or in self-defense.

I don't like it one bit, but I can be a killer if I must.

Third, and I still find this tough to believe - I am evidently a leader. I never would've imagined it, but they tell me the evidence of a leader is that people follow. To save the Sorcerer's Stone, people followed me. People followed me to the Chamber of Secrets. When Cedric and I Portkeyed into the cemetery in Little Hangleston, he asked *me* if we should have our wands out. And five very brave good friends followed me to the Department of Mysteries several weeks ago, and fought twelve Death Eaters to a standstill. And they all suffered for it to various degrees.

I may be a leader, but I can also be a fool.

So, I have to kill Riddle, and I am going to lead those I can't convince not to follow me. It appears to be inevitable. So, I am asking everyone I can for help, and I am buckling down to read as much as I can from the small Defense oriented library Dumbledore has assembled for me. I am even reading this Muggle book on speed-reading to increase my ability to get through as many books on fighting as I can, and to improve my comprehension. It's working.

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We left in a blur and in less than twenty minutes we had made it onto the M4 from Little Whinging. From that moment the fast traffic frayed my aunt's nerves something terrible. She missed the M5 cut off, and we had to circle back. We did make it to Clark Village Outlet Shopping Centre in time for a late lunch, but we should have been nearly two hours earlier.

Aunt Petunia, of course, wanted to buy only the best name products. Benneton, Elle, Jaeger, Monsoon, Reebok, Henri Lloyd, Calvin Klein, Ecco, and the Designer Room shops were all on our list. It grated on my nerves how she'd deliberate and waver over each purchase. I so wanted to use a Shrinking charm on the packages, but I didn't want to wear out my new permission to use magic by doing so in front of Muggles. I made several trips to the car to drop off loads of bags and boxes. The Denby stoneware was heavy and the Le Creuset cookware was almost as heavy. With Uncle Vernon's new client and increased commissions and bonuses, my aunt unleashed a blizzard of pent up shopping lust.

I, of course, was not allowed to buy from the famous name designer wear shops; not that I had a powerful desire to pay too much for things, given my limited budget. I bought several pairs of Wrangler denims, and the Clark factory stores had clothing and trainers that were a vast improvement over anything I'd ever worn. I didn't complain about not wearing the best of Muggle labels; frankly I didn't care. After my first purchases I changed into new clothes and left what I'd been wearing in the rubbish bin.

Because this trip came about in several quick minutes I never thought to tell my minders where I was going. It just so happened that Dung Fletcher had the watch this day, and since this is the same day of the week when my aunt usually goes grocery shopping, he assumed I was to be the lift-and-tote boy for the foodstuffs. I, of course, found this out nearly a week later, when Dumbledore told me Dung was permanently relieved from minder duty.

The Clark Village in Somerset had an information booth where you could find directions to local places of interest, famous tourist haunts in southwest England, and locations of other Clark Villages, naturally. Aunt Petunia asked the nice lady behind the counter to show her how to drive back to Little Whinging *without* going back on one of the M or major A motorways. The woman wrote down the turns and road names, and my Shilling-pinching aunt refused to pay for a map. I did look closely at the road map under the glass countertop, noticing where we were currently located, and where Little Whinging and London were. For no good reason I also traced in my mind where I might fly my broom if I needed to go to Hogwarts in Scotland.

Funny how the craziest, casual actions can be so crucial.

Six days ago Remus Lupin, Mr. Weasley, and a solicitor came to my aunt's house to read Sirius' will. I asked Remus to be my guardian at that time. Three days ago Remus brought me my Firebolt and taught me how to shrink it and enlarge it without damaging it. He also brought me a book entitled, *Battlefield First Aid and Survival Charms and Potions*. Since then I've made a few simple potions and practiced a few of the simpler healing charms.

Even though both Dudley and Uncle Vernon laughed at it and called it sissy, Remus also brought me a fanny pack. The pack was made of high quality rip-stop nylon, and was jet black in color. I'd noticed several good-looking, manly guys wearing similar bags as they went jogging around the estate with beautiful women, so I decided to go with my own fashion sense, ignoring my male relatives.

My aunt wanted me to leave the fanny pack in the sedan while shopping. Aunt Petunia just knew store personnel would think I'd use it for shoplifting. Despite our slightly improving relationship, she'd begun to believe the family lies about my criminality. I assured her that there was a Notice-Me-Not charm on the pack, and that I had no intention of going anywhere without my wand, my cloak, and my broom - all of which were packed away in the bag.

I'd changed into a black tee shirt and dark blue denim pants in the store where I purchased them. I pulled on my new black trainers. I also had a new lightweight black jacket at the top of one of my few bags.

While I'm going through my list of "of courses," let me add, of course my aunt became hopelessly lost within less than an hour of leaving Somerset as we cut across farmland on a back country road. She did basically keep driving with the setting sun at her back, so we were generally heading towards Little Whinging. This was where my fairly easy summer took a sudden turn - like a freight train taking a dirt road.

We were at a crossroad with no signs; two hundred yards in the distance there stood a large house. It was across a field; no road or path seemed to head towards it, so I bid my aunt to wait while I hiked over for directions.

I'd gone no more than ten paces when I saw the Dark Mark fly up over the house and a fiery explosion in one of the out buildings.

I ran back to my aunt who'd started the car, shouting for me to get in.

"No! That's a Death Eater attack." I pointed to the sun setting. "That's west." I pointed to the road heading south. "That's south. Drive south with the sun to your right until you hit the M4. I know you hate it but get on it and drive to the house. When you get there, call out for my minders. Someone will appear. Tell them about this and tell them to come help me fight them."

I *Accio'ed* the black jacket from the bag and turned to run to the house. My aunt wasted no time in leaving me. In retrospect, I questioned, not for the first time, my mental stability. What was I thinking? She'd be home in two hours if all the luck on earth assisted her this day. Death Eaters battles lasted mere minutes if they were long and drawn out. Whatever my sanity at the time, I reckoned that she was one more person I didn't have to worry about.

I considered, and then immediately rejected grabbing my broom to fly to the house. I'd be an obvious flying target without proper reconnaissance or camouflage. I placed a Silencing charm on my feet and took out my Invisibility Cloak while I ran. With two hundred yards to go I was basically approaching unnoticed, unless some sort of warning wards have been hastily raised around the perimeter of the house by the attackers. The flashing colors of spells and occasional exploding sounds indicated that all of the action was taking place on the other side of the dwelling from my approach. I reached the house and slowed to go around to the side of the fight. I paused at each corner and squatted to look around the corner, even though I was for all purposes invisible. For some reason I looked at the cheap cast off wrist watch Dudley had broken several years ago and I had *Reparo-ed* a few days before.

I looked around the corner of the house to survey the battlefield before attacking. There was an old barn in need of painting about seventy or eighty feet from the house. Three items were situated in the sparse farmyard roughly between the house and the barn. There was a stone well about four feet high with a shattered rig to draw water, a boulder about three and a half feet high and roughly thirty feet away from the well, and an old dilapidated wagon nearer the barn. On the back porch of the house an old woman with the lifeless look in her eyes signifying the Killing Curse. My eyes were instantly drawn to that same curse hitting a woman I guessed to be somewhere in her mid forties. She'd been tending a young man in the center of the yard who was in a Death Eater's robe without a mask. The sickly green spell laid out the woman at the head of the downed, mask-less Death Eater.

A man of similar age to the woman just killed, howled in rage and stood from behind the well. By rising he insanely drew fire away from someone huddled behind the boulder. The man used the Killing Curse on one Death Eater, and a Cutting Curse that nearly decapitated another. He turned his wand towards the three who were still attacking the person behind the boulder.

I now glanced at that person squatting there behind the large stone - a girl, probably near my age. She had tightly braided hair arranged around her head, and looked heavy set. I could also see her shuddering while she was staring at the newly dead bodies. It never occurred to me that she could be a classmate of mine.

The enraged man, head of this household I assumed, had been winged by some spell and held his left arm limply at his side, dripping blood. He kept firing curse after curse. The three remaining Death Eaters turned their wrath on him and away from the plump young woman. I decided I needed to try to keep him alive.

My first spell was a *Reducto* and it hit the forward most Death Eater square in the chest with much more power than I had assumed. I didn't pause to think about the results of that spell, even though I knew the man's internal organs had been damaged and he was dead, or very close to dying. The nearest Death Eater looked my way in curiosity, not to return fire. My Cutting Curse took off his right arm and wand. He screamed and somehow summoned the presence of mind to Disapparate.

Unfortunately the man I was helping turned to see who I was instead of continuing his attack. Even more unfortunately the last Death Eater *did not* turn my way. Instead he sent a Killing Curse right into the man. The young woman howled in pain and sent a curse I did not at first recognize into that Death Eater; it was a narrow purple beam of light that cleaved the attacker six or eight inches into his upper chest, just below his raised wand arm. The Death Eater fell unconscious, rapidly bleeding to death. That purple spell looked very different in daylight than in a barely lit room.

The young woman rapidly moved to the dead defender of his family. I guessed he was her father. I ignored her to check the woman and younger man, and look for additional attacks.

I briefly examined the woman I first saw die. I turned to the young man she'd been huddled over. I confirmed he was wearing a Death Eater's robe, but his mask was over eight feet away, and not where it would be if he'd been hit and it was thrown off. He lay dead, facing another dead Death Eater with his back to the farm house. The woman had obviously been concerned about him.

What the heck? They had the same face, that is, that woman in her mid-forties and the young man, about twenty years her junior, looked alike. It was an obvious family resemblance and sort of familiar. The family must have done something to incur Voldemort's displeasure. I reckoned that he'd sent a team of his minions to kill them, even though one of the family members was on the kill team. I cursed Voldemort when it hit me what he'd done.

As I ran towards the house, I'd thought little about these people who I had come to help. My initial assumption would have been a Muggle or Muggle-born family, or some family of half-bloods. That assumption was wrong if one of the family members had been a Death Eater. This was probably an old pure-blood family that had somehow done something to warrant punishment in Tom Riddle's sick mind.

I quickly stood, drawing back the hood on my black jacket, and turned to face....

Her wand was drawn, but she lowered it. All she said was, "Potter."

It was Millicent Bulstrode.

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She lowered her wand as she said, "Potter."

Apparently my name and presence explained everything to her, or maybe she was just going into shock. She looked down to the woman at my feet, whimpered, and then whispered, "Mum."

I can be thick at times - often actually. This was one of them. The family resemblance between the dead mother and son was familiar; they were all Millicent's kin.

Millicent fell to her knees between the two, pulled her mother's head into her lap and began silently crying. I stood there, useless, what could I do? For some bizarre reason I looked at my watch - only eight minutes had passed since I turned from my aunt's car and started running for this farmhouse. I didn't have to worry about feeling useless too long.

Several cracks in a row gave me something to do. Four more Death Eaters Apparated into the farmyard. I rolled towards the boulder and sent a *Reducto* r towards the nearest one. He caught it in the upper torso. His head snapped back and his neck could be heard breaking from over twenty feet away as his body went flying back in a spinning arc. The other three scattered. I sent a Cutting curse at one, nipping his leg, causing him to yelp in pain and fall behind the dilapidated wagon. I leapt to my feet, ran three paces and rolled again, falling forward and feeling a *Crucio* skim past my back. If my jacket had nerve endings it would have been screaming just then.

My maneuverings were designed to draw the attackers away from Millicent. If you'd asked me before that Monday, I'd have said that she'd be next in line after Malfoy to take Riddle's mark, but now she was an ally of sorts. When I looked back to her location, my blood ran cold.

Just like the man I assumed was her father, Millicent stood up, disregarding cover or dodging, and starting sending curses at the three attackers.

Dolor *Bifidus* was the purple curse she sent after the last Death Eater from the first group, and I learned it was her curse of choice when she wanted to hurt someone badly, maybe even kill them. It was familiar because it was the same curse Dolohov sent at Hermione in the Department of Mysteries, and I am so glad he didn't know how to cast it well wordlessly.

A tall skinny Death Eater gurgled a high-pitched yelp as Millicent's purple curse hacked six inches or so down into his clavicle, bringing forth a life draining flow of blood. The Death Eater I nicked in the leg sent a *Cruciatus* at her and Millicent went down, roaring in unimaginable pain. Except, I didn't need to imagine it. I'd known it before.

In my reading I'd discovered that if I took my time to cast a *Reducto* r curse and sent it a bit, I don't know, *fuzzy* I guess, then the *Reducto* r would go out in a broadening pattern and hit more than just a concentrated point of contact. This expanding bit of magic reduced it's power quickly, but in the current battle where the attackers were so close, it created a better chance of hitting an assailant somewhere on his body, and doing enough damage to put the attacker out of action due to the shock of its impact. However, if this broadening *Reducto* r hit someone straight on and nearby, it did a lot of general damage to everything it touched.

I sent a 'fuzzy' *Reducto* r at the Death Eater holding Millicent under the *Cruciatus*. His chest cavity caved in, his wand arm crushed in on itself as his wand shattered, his head snapped back at a grotesque angle, and he dropped backwards in a mangled heap. I'd thought I'd noticed a substantial increase in my spell power since the Department of Mysteries, and even more since starting the Paladin potions. Casting my *Reducto* r in this fuzzy mode produced a lot more damage than I expected. I had little time to consider this as I turned and fired a Cutting curse at the female Death Eater running to distance herself from the other attacker. She cracked off to who-knows-where before my spell hit her.

The sole Death Eater left no had to contend with my spell fire and Millicent's. I saw my schoolmate stand on wobbly legs and start hitting the wagon he hid behind with *Reducto* rs. He Disapparated, reappearing right behind me and I fell forward as his Killing Curse missed me by inches. I rolled as I went down and shot out with a Stunner, which missed. I wanted a prisoner to explain all of this.

"Potter!" Millicent shouted as I rolled, warning me of the attacker behind me that I'd already sensed. Her purple curse hit him in the chest and he stumbled backwards and soundlessly tumbled down the well as I scurried around it for cover because of additional cracking sounds.

Five more Death Eaters Apparated into the farmyard and it seemed that the female Death Eater who had earlier popped off led them in the attack. I now had the well to squat behind but Millicent had no cover at all. However, these Death Lemmings were after me. Millicent used her purple spell to hack into the woman who'd left for reinforcements, and this Death Eater leader fell bleeding badly from her abdomen. This divided the survivors' attention between her and my Slytherin year-mate. I later learned how it hurt her as she pragmatically levitated her brother's body before her to give her cover to run to the boulder.

I had never thought Death Eaters were too stupid or too bright. I'd always *hoped* for the dimmer ones to fight. They did give me the hope I yearned for by standing close by each other without seeking cover while firing spells and curses. The woman first downed by Millicent was apparently the brains of this operation.

I looked over the boulder and ducked a Cutting Curse after noticing their direction. Without looking I held only my wand arm over the well top and sent a narrow spread five *Incendios* in their direction. The screams caused me to look and see fireballs engulfing two Death Eaters while one rolled in the dirt putting out the fire on his robe.

The fourth Death Eater took a page from my spell book and sent a *Reducto* r towards Millicent. She was looking my way with a reaper's grin and a thumbs-up for setting the three on fire. She turned back and fell backwards to dodge the *Reducto*.

I didn't have time to see if it connected with her or not. I just attacked her assailant to keep him from going after her again. This guy was a duelist, or at least fancied himself one. He had skills and even took the time to taunt me as I ran from the well to the debris of the wagon.

"Potter, don't you want to fight like a real wizard?" I could hear the sneer in his voice, not unlike Snape's, but it wasn't Snape.

I shouted, "No!" and sent "*Augument*" his way.

He sent a *Reducto* r at the debris I hid behind and several pieces of the splintering wood shot into my back even though I dodged the bulk of it. He said, "I'm wet. Now what?" He then made a fatal error; he took his eyes off of me and started to perform a Drying spell on his robes.

I sent *Conglacio* his way and the Ice Ball spell increased its effects from the water already covering his clothing. He took on the look I'd later come to associate with someone trying to Apparate under difficult circumstances. He never made it away.

I then ran to Millicent. She'd not stirred since the spell he'd sent towards her and my hope that she'd gone unscathed disappeared. Her face was a mess, but as bloody as things were, none of it was life-threatening. Her chin was broken in the front and her right jaw seemed out of joint slightly. Several of her teeth were missing and her mouth was bloody. She was stirring, though not awake yet, and she spat out blood and teeth bits. Her nose was badly broken and she bled freely from both nostrils. Her eyes were already blackening and I later learned she had a broken right cheekbone.

I did not know how, but her tongue was damaged, a part of it had been bitten through, but not cut off cleanly. She tried to talk, which hurt so much she gave a guttural scream. The pain of this caused her to pass out.

Frightened but glad she was not experiencing pain at the moment; I drew my fanny pack around and pulled out a pain potion. I opened her mouth and pushed the vial past her mangled tongue and poured the horrible tasting liquid down her throat. She remained out and I thought of the few healing spells I knew.

The Bone Mending spell would probably work on her chin and jaw, but I was afraid to try because of the damage inside her mouth and I was afraid to use that spell in general. Using the Wound Closing charm on her tongue might end her ability to speak. I'd experimented on a whole dead chicken one day that Dobby acquired for me and I didn't have the control needed to do either of those spells precisely. I was able to close a cut on my arm from the wood splinters, but Millicent's tongue was much more precision work. I finally decided to try the one spell I'd read but not had an opportunity to try.

"*Defigio Immotum Anguste!*" I shouted. It was the Localized Stasis spell, used to immobilize a part of the body without stopping the whole body, or even part of the body near the part you want frozen in place. The knack to the spell is to concentrate hard on *just* the parts you want incapacitated. I was thinking about the mouth, chin, jaw, tongue, and cheek muscles. After the fact I realized I was playing fast and loose with her ability to breath and swallow, as well as her eyesight and maybe even her brain functions.

Spells are very different in their execution sometimes, and we differ in how we interact with them based on how we learn, how we think, or even how we believe in our abilities to use magic. Our personal cognitive abilities aid or hinder our learning of certain types of spellwork. I'd studied this a bit this summer. I'm not very good at leaps-of-faith spell learning. 'Just say these words and a match becomes a sewing needle' is not how I learn - it's too close the command "just-do-it-because-I-said-so." That's how my aunt and uncle gave me orders most of my life. This Localized Stasis spell worked perfectly for me because I am very visual and experiential in my learning. I had no problems precisely 'seeing' only the parts of her face placed in stasis that I wanted, and no more.

"Crucio!" The Death Eater I'd ignited but failed to burn to a crisp wanted revenge. I rolled away from Millicent knowing full well that if a Cruciatus hit her in her condition it could tear her head apart.

Over the eternity of the next thirty seconds or so that I was under that torturing Unforgivable, I bit the inside of my cheek, sprained my left wrist slightly, and wet myself. No one ever mentions soiling their clothes when they discuss that Unforgivable, but many more lose bladder control than not, and one in eight or so lose bowel control as well. The curse stopped and I gathered myself to listen to this evil minion's obligatory rant before further torture.

It didn't come.

I rolled over in time to discover what was causing the thumping sound, something like a gourd bursting. Millicent had regained consciousness and picked up a board from the shattered wagon. She had evidently knocked out the Death Eater and was now methodically crushing his skull. I stopped her with a shout. She dropped it and staggered towards me.

I wandlessly *Accio'ed* my wand to me, causing her to use what little facial expression wasn't in stasis to give me a surprised look. Neither of us heard the crack of the next two Death Eaters.

I didn't even hear the spells but in a quick moment Millicent's left arm opened up to the bone from a Cutting curse, several of her ribs deformed from a grazing hit by a *Reducto* r, and I heard her right leg break. She fell soundlessly, trying to yell through her closed off mouth.

I popped to my feet and decapitated the two Death Eaters running our way with Cutting curses. Where was the power in my spells coming from? I'd hoped at best to cut them somewhere on their bodies enough for them to leave for medical assistance.

Millicent was in a bad way. I hoped she'd be unconscious, but no such luck. Her horrible pain screamed at me through her eyes. I spoke meaningless soothing words to her as I quickly used the Wound Closing charm on her arm and the Localized Stasis spell on her leg. I noticed the bone in her arm was cracked or broken when closing the wound. I used the Bone Mending spell on her arm because it was a simple break and the bone pieces were in place for healing. Her leg held more complex breaks so I placed it in stasis. I couldn't risk any spell I knew on her ribs because I didn't trust my control, even with the Localized Stasis spell. I didn't want to shut down any of her internal organs. Her pain subsided to a degree as I ministered to her needs in my limited way.

Her gaze was fixed on me and I just knew she wanted to tell me something. I tried to ask a few questions but her limited eye movement told me I was off in my guessing.

I looked into her eyes. At times like this some things stand out with perfect clarity. As ridiculous as it might seem that was when I noticed that she had the clearest, most lovely dark blue eyes of a shade I'd never seen before. Their beauty was even more obvious since the rest of her face below her eyes was a horrible mess and her eye sockets were already black from serious bruising.

"Millicent, I'm going to try Legilimency to speak to you. Professor Snape was teaching it to me. Can you understand me?" I hoped to calm any potential shock before it occurred to my mental invasion. Mentioning her head of house was the only thing that popped to mind. Shaking my head I stared as deeply into her blue orbs as I could, searching for her mind, and whispered, "*Legilimens*." I saw rudimentary mind shields that she let fall. I found a swirl of memories but no way to communicate. I pulled back on my Legilimency.

I closed my eyes and thought desperately for any solution. Legilimency had been a hopeless gambit, there was nothing I'd read or heard of in my studies of the two mind magics that even hinted at two-way communication. I had to invent something on the spot.

~*~

There is one more point you need to know to catch up with what I've been doing since school ended. When Dobby came into my service, he gave me a book that was apparently his family heirloom, saved for many generations to give to me. I haven't made my way through even half of it yet because I've been doing my assigned reading first, believe it or not, but Dobby's book was written by the first master of the house-elves, Telemachus Grind. Apparently Grind saved the elves living in barns at the time that were being hunted and killed by wizards. He befriended one Dobbert, the first house-elf, and Dobby's many times great-grandfather.

Telemachus Grind was a Spell Monger. A Spell Monger hammers, bangs, and otherwise forces new spells, charms, jinxes and such into shape and can pass them along to others only by selling them. The Arithmantic Spell Crafters at the Ministry of Magic can create spells and such that all can use, but they haven't released any new incantations since an improved window cleaning charm in 1974.

I was able to Monger a small spell modification in less than an hour that first day I received the old journal. Now I can pop an owl treat from the bag to Hedwig's cage without getting out of bed. It's a fascinating subject, Spell Mongery, and even with the little reading I've done it seems like I now have a unique, yet better understanding about how all magic works. I also have a feeling that magic is being taught in a more complicated manner than it has to be.

Harry Potter - heretic.

The book was illegible at first, but as Dobby handed it to me, the characters morphed into English I could read. There seems to be a prophecy among house-elves that applies to Dobby and me. The heir of Dobbert (Dobby) would be friends with the heir (me) of the First Master (Grind). Grind's mother was a Potter. He had no offspring, so I am the last relative of his around I guess. Anyway, when the inscrutable characters transfigured so I could read them, it proved that Dobby and I were the heirs the prophecy spoke of.

At least this prophecy has no revealed obligations. I just get the book. Why do I feel there's something more? There's always something more. Oh, and to prove my earlier point Dobby gave me that book on a Monday.

~*~

When you Monger a spell, you always start by pulling up a base slug of raw magic from your inner core, following the analogy of an early ironmonger

who fashioned several metal products, as well as sold metal and metal goods much like a blacksmith did. An early smith or monger started with a slug of iron or other metal sized to what he wanted to create. I pulled up a tiny slug of raw magic into my forethoughts, and concentrated on mangling it to my will. I broke all the Spell Monger's safety rule but I was in a desperate hurry. I concentrated on what I wanted, skipped the steps of creating an incantation, and finished the spell for use - all in about ten seconds. In its current form it would never work for anyone else and I didn't know how long it would work for me, if it did all.

I looked back down into her bluest eyes, and with no incantation to use I just willed the spell to occur. *"Millicent, I modified this so we can speak with our minds. Just think like you're speaking to me."*

"Potter, am I dying?" It was faint, but I could hear her in my head. That question would have never occurred to me, so I wasn't imagining it.

I'm not sure why I didn't answer back out loud. There was nothing wrong with her ears, but I responded using my mongered Legilimency, or whatever we were doing. *"No, you're really messed up, but you're not dying. I've put your face and your leg in Localized Stasis spells to protect them from further damage. It shouldn't hurt much though you may feel they are either petrified or numb."*

"You also have several broken ribs, and I am afraid to use any spell on them for fear of shutting down your heart or lungs. Does it just hurt to inhale, or does it feel all squishy and liquid inside you when you breathe?" I knew that if her lungs had been punctured by a rib, there was little I could do to help her. I hoped and prayed that the Aurors would arrive momentarily because of the Dark Mark.

Her eyes looked off for the space of two deep breaths. She looked back into my eyes and said, er, thought at me, *"I don't detect punctured lungs, so I should live, unless more Death Eaters attack that is. I can't believe Potter's helping me. And your hopes that the Aurors will come soon are in vain. My father had the magic detectors for underage magic removed from the house and my wand. While he was at it, the man he hired for the job removed the regional magical receptors that were erected on our property - placed there by the Ministry without our permission by the way. No magic within twenty or thirty miles will be detected. So the hero of Gryffindor even helps Slytherins in need, and he likes my eyes."*

"Er, Millicent," I said out loud without closing the eye-speak link. *"I didn't speak to you about the Aurors coming or about your eyes."* My shock that she heard these other random thoughts overcame my embarrassment of her knowing I thought she had nice eyes. In eye-speak as I just decided to call it I said, *"And you shouldn't be surprised that I'd come to the aid of anyone who Death Eaters were attacking."*

Her forehead pinked as if blushing and her damaged cheeks changed their gruesome coloring as well. She thought to me, *"I guess whatever we are thinking while linked like this goes to the other, as well as what we intend to say to each other. We need to leave, but could you retrieve several items for me just in case Death Eaters decide to burn my house down?"*

I looked at my watch and was once again amazed at how time flows so slowly a fight for your life. Only twelve minutes had passed since I last looked, twenty minutes since I left my aunt's car. Millicent closed her eyes for a moment, reopened them, and my head was flooded with a rapid view of someone walking into the house, running up to a room on the second floor, and retrieving a personal journal, the book it sat on, a photo album also on the desk, and a small pendant resting on the book shelf just above it.

I stood up and threw my Invisibility Cloak over her. I actually spoke out loud this time that I'd be right back. Moments later I returned just in time to see three Death Eaters Apparate into the farmyard. It occurred to me then that I was tired of killing people. I determined to just incapacitate and bind these three and leave them bound for the Aurors.

Once again I demonstrated that the road to Hell is paved with good intentions.

I sent out three quick and nearly silent Stunners with all the intent I could muster to incapacitate them for a long, long time. I sent them in the order of those I thought could be hit without alerting the others. The first two went down, but the third Death Eater heard something and turned. He moved at the last moment but the spell grazed his arm and he too went down. I walked over to the first two and bound them with *Incarerous*. I heard Millicent groan and I turned to check on her before going to the third one. When will I learn?

His *Reducto* r hit my left side a glancing blow. I've broken enough ribs in Quidditch games and practices to know that several were now in that state again. I heard the start of the Killing Curse behind me, and struggled on the ground to roll over to defend myself.

I made it around enough to see the Death Eater's mask fly off and the left side of his neck open in a small wound. Millicent's wordless Cutting curse had been weak, but it hit right on his jugular vein. His blood sprayed in a macabre arch and he fell, pulsing his life away.

I'd lost count of how many life debts we owed each other at that point. It also dawned on me at that moment that I had no room for mercy in this fight, as my screaming ribs told me, so I'd only turn my back on dead or completely incapacitated Death Eaters from now on out.

I stood shakily and almost passed out from the pain in my side. I staggered to Millicent, who I saw collapsed after my rescue. When I knelt by her surveying again the damage to her face. She eye-spoke. *"Are you hurt?"*

The pain she endured was obvious on her face, at least the top half of it. Did you know a forehead could display obvious pain with only wrinkles? I decided she did not need to know my own problems since she was so disfigured.

A tear formed in her eye and fell. She eye-read my assessment of her damaged face. She passed on the thought, *"I know I was always ugly, but now I'll be grotesque. So be it. It will only fuel my desire more for revenge every time I look in a mirror. You never said, how are you doing?"*

"I'm fine. I was only thinking about how beat up you are; I don't think anything done to your face is permanent. I'm sure healers can put you back together just fine, even your face. It's mostly bruising, which all goes away." I needed to change the subject. *"If the Aurors aren't coming, and the Death Eaters seem to come and check every few minutes, I think it's time to leave."*

"How?"

I staggered to my feet. I opened my fanny pack and took out my broom and enlarged it. I summoned a rope I saw on the side of the barn. I also summoned the largest solid board from the destroyed wagon. I lay the plank beside her and went back to her eyes. *"I'm going to strap you to this board and wrap you with my Invisibility Cloak. Then I'll rope you to my broom and fly out of here real low and slow, avoiding anyone and everyone. Do you want me to petrify you to keep you from hurting?"*

Instantly she responded, *"No. I want to see you and maybe talk to you as we go along."*

I levitated her onto the board and then levitated the board up off of the ground about three feet. I rose while making a sharp intake of air signifying my own pain. I looked into her eyes. From this angle we couldn't speak or whatever it was we were doing, but I could see her rising pain.

I pulled out another vial of painkiller from my fanny pack and conjured a drinking straw. I stuck it into the side of her mouth that seemed the least damaged and it went in about a half inch. She struggled a bit and I looked into her eyes. *"You need some pain killer. I'll tilt the board. Suck in just a little and let it seep down your throat. Can you swallow?"* She nodded her head slightly after a moment. It only occurred to me as I said this that I hadn't considered where to go. I just wanted out of here. Three small swallows and I could see the relief in her forehead and eyes. I staggered on my leg in stasis, and lowered Millicent's sling to about a foot off of the ground. It took several minutes to create a rig with the ropes that I felt would serve without falling apart as we flew along. I concentrated on my Sticking charms to make sure nothing would happen to drop her.

I mounted my broom hesitantly. The Firebolt is a racing broom, not an emergency lorry. It would buck at having a second person ride on it in pillion. It did NOT like this arrangement at all. We rose shakily. I looked down into Millicent's eyes and she 'spoke' to me, *"Thanks. After all I've done-"*

I cut her off. *"We've fought together now. You can tell me later why you were attacked, but this battle makes us comrades if not friends, and I defend those who fight with me with all my strength."* I hate motivational speeches but she needed one.

I wish I'd moved off in that thirty seconds we spent communicating. We'd have probably made the cover of the woods to the east and might have gone unnoticed flying away. Instead a new *Reducto* r grazed my left arm and broke it. I barely held on but the broom bucked with my movements. Pain screamed through me as I used my broken left arm to steer as I raised my wand arm for battle. I turned the broom and turned my wand arm even faster, sending out silent "Incendios" as fast as I could. Three Death Eaters dodged and one succeeded. The other two were screaming fireballs. I hoped the third would tend to his comrades but he ignored them and Disapparated.

I performed the Bone Mending spell on my arm. It was somewhat nominally useable but I could tell that it was not as together as I had thought before mending it. True to my inability to use the spell properly, I could tell instantly that though the bone was fused, it was not properly knitted together and would need to be re-broken and set. A crack told me that someone had Apparated nearby. The same Death Eater, I think, appeared with a broom and mounted it. He'd risen less than six feet when I "Accio'ed" it out from under him. I summoned his wand as well and broke it before him.

In that moment several things occurred to me and I acted on it. I said loudly to Millicent, "On to London." I shot several *Incendios* inaccurately at the Death Eater who's robe hem caught fire and he began to put it out. I then pointed my broom due east towards town with the setting sun at my back and shot forward as fast as I could with the bucking Firebolt. I made it to the woods and went several hundred yards in before slowing. As I slowed I maneuvered north, slowed even more, and checked on Millicent.

I looked down at her and she eye-spoke to me, *"Even I thought you wouldn't be stupid enough to tell him where we were going, Potter. But the ruse might buy us a little time. How do you feel? I'm fine for now."* I heard the Slytherin sneer in her voice, er, thoughts, at first, but she softened her usual tone after remembering where we were and what we were doing. She looked a fright and I decided she was trying to lighten my load. She eye-spoke, *"Yes, I still look bad, but I truly don't hurt too much."*

Her question reminded me of my own pain. The magical survival book said that once a Localized Stasis charm was used, the person should remain still. Everything around the body parts frozen would hurt from any use supporting those parts of the body in stasis.

I was beginning to hurt. A lot. Her eyes showed that I had transmitted my pain to her.

I thought to her, *"I hurt but I've felt a lot worse after a Quidditch match with Slytherin."* I heard a mental snort from her but I continued, *"It's going to be completely dark soon and I can rise above the trees and make better time. Although, I don't think my broom will go anywhere near its normal speed rigged like this. The only place I can think of to go is Hogwarts. I can't go home and I can't find Gr-"* I was instantly stopped from mentioning or even thinking about the Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix. *"-the other place I can think of. Any ideas?"*

Millicent looked away for a moment. In that span of time I could see the exhaustion roiling across her body in the top half of her face.

She looked back. *"Nowhere we might not be turned in to the Death Eaters."* She closed her eyes in pain, but opened them quickly. *"Thanks again, Potter. I still can't believe that you're helping me, but I guess the enemy of my enemy is now my friend."* She said, or rather thought my name with a little less derision than usual. Old habits die hard I guess, regardless of changing circumstances. She closed her eyes once again and they stayed shut for several long seconds. I'd been looking into them and using my peripheral vision to steer through the sparse trees. I looked up and made my way through a larger clumping of oaks, I think they were, and then looked back down at her as the trees thinned again.

She thought to me, *"I hurt but I'm going to close my eyes and try to sleep unless you need me awake."*

I spoke out loud to her as I looked back up. "I'm going to fly as long as I can down here like this hidden by the forest. I might have to stop before it's pitch dark. I won't risk flying above the tree line before then, but we may not be able to go forward too much longer in the growing darkness."

I looked back down into her blue orbs. *"Sleep, Millicent. I'll keep you safe and wake you if I need you."*

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In the Eye of the Beholder

Chapter Two - North By Northwest

Chapter Two - North By Northwest

*My gratitude goes to my two writing coaches, kokopelli and ebdarcy.
Thanks also go to Jbern, who helped me think through several issues.*

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

By the way, this takes place less than two weeks after fifth year ends. Aberration Day and the Harry and Millicent chat of my other two Paladin stories has not happened yet. This is a different timeline.

Previously, Harry traveled with his aunt into the West Counties to visit the many shops at the huge Clark Village discount center in Somerset. Afraid of driving on the M highways again, Petunia drove back home across country. On a deserted stretch of road Harry saw a Dark Mark cast into the sky above a distant farmhouse and went to help. He found a Death Eater attack in progress and helped a classmate from Hogwarts fight them off. It was Millicent Bulstrode, and she was the lone survivor from her family. Death Eaters seemed to keep coming, and both of them were wounded. In desperation Harry rigged a sling under his Firebolt and flew the badly hurt Millicent off towards Hogwarts, a destination of last resort. Millicent's face was smashed and Harry put it in stasis. To communicate, Harry mongered a spell to let them speak through their eyes.

~*~

I look back now and realize that night was one of the five worst nights of my life - up to that point. It was tediously boring and laced with the fear of discovery by Death Eaters and Muggles. Millicent woke several times in the night and I stopped to give her more pain potion. She was going through it at the prescribed rate -- taking some roughly once every three hours. I only had one dose left as dawn broke and she'd need it soon.

I felt like I'd been dropped from the backside of a Hippogriff. Every breath reminded me that I had several cracked ribs. I'd tried a Bone-Mending spell on my broken left arm but I'd muffed it. It wasn't set right and it throbbed continuously - joining with the other pains in my own personal symphony of suffering. Occasionally the stings and twinges from the many places on my back and face where I'd caught splinters during the fight in the farmyard would divert my attention from the more serious injuries. My broken leg in stasis was numb, but it hurt a bit, too, where the stasis ended. But enough about my injuries. I knew I didn't hurt as badly as Millicent did, and I took care not to wince in pain when she looked my way.

I figured out later that my Firebolt and I made somewhere between twenty-five and thirty miles an hour with Millicent in the sling underneath. It was a plodding, jerky ride. My racing broom *did not* like the new sling arrangement one bit, but I had no other choice. I had Apparated once before, but I'd also read somewhere that it took at least two very powerful wizards to Apparate anyone larger than a child. Bill Weasley and Mad-Eye Moody, both strong wizards, had Apparated Hermione's dad together on the day the Granger family was attacked. Mr. Granger made it all right, but he had a splitting headache the rest of the day.

Portkey manufacturing was a less than a slim possibility. I knew the incantation, Portus, but this was one of those spells where the intent behind the spell involved multi-dimensional mechanics that made my head hurt. I didn't know how to arrange the different elements in my mind before casting those two syllables, or even what all the different factors were. I knew I had to set the location, but do I use coordinates, the name of the location, or a visualization of the location? Did I need to know about wards? Since Hogwarts was my intended destination, its wards might have some effect even if I was aiming for just outside the front gate. I also needed an activator. How do I configure whether to activate at a set time, or would it be best to activate on command? Then, I'd also need to set it for the number of people going and what about power? How do I know I have enough power to make it work even if I knew all those things that I don't know? Portkeys were definitely out.

If Dobby were here I could send him for help, but a master has to be in the same house, or at least on the same property to call his house-elf. Dobby went to great extremes and it still took him nearly a month to find me back before my second year. Though Dobby was probably already looking, I couldn't wait for him to stumble on me.

So my poor Firebolt was slugging along, balking at the demands I made on it, and Millicent and I were both hurting from the bumpy ride; she had the worst of it, of course. Thank goodness she slept a good part of the way.

Hermione had taught me the *Point Me* spell, *Designo Aquilonius*, for the Triwizard Tournament, and I remembered reading about a mapping spell somewhere. I even thought I remembered the Latin word for map: *tabula*. That is the word I learned later, but it refers to a "map," not to "mapping," as in making a map or to map something. Somehow the grammatical error didn't stop me.

I called up my Spell Monger' Spell Analysis Tool, and cast into it the *Point Me* spell. Then, breaking the rules of Mongering, I brought up a small slug of raw magic from my core and imbued it with the variable pointing elements of the *Point Me*, but not the fixed north indicator that always pointed in

that exact direction. Here is where I really broke the rules. I didn't know the mapping spell or charm so I couldn't cast it for analysis. Since that wasn't an option, I just imagined what I wanted it to be and hooked it onto the pointing part of the first spell in the raw slug of magic. Then I compressed it and packaged it, assigning it the incantation, *Designo Tabula*, which would be followed by the city or location I was aiming for. Later when I had time to think about it, I realized that the fact that this spell worked proved that the words of an incantation don't really matter.

We were still near Millicent's family home in the West Counties. That meant Birmingham wasn't due north, but rather north and west to some degree. It was the first big city in our route to Hogwarts. I cast the standard *Point Me* spell and held it until I fixed a particular point of light in the distance as due north. I then cast *Designo Tabula Birmingham* and my wand turned to the west of that first fixed point. I sought out a light to steer by in that direction and put my wand back in my jacket pocket.

Birmingham. As the lights of the city appeared, I steered toward the less populous west side. All through that night I would fly around smaller towns and other lit areas. It was tedious and nerve-wracking. The fear of being spotted by Muggles or worse, Death Eaters, gave me just enough adrenalin and frayed nerve endings to stay awake. The hundred and twenty miles or so to Birmingham should have taken about four to four and a half hours at that speed, but I was only just north of the city and back riding along dispersed wooded areas as the sky lightened to the east.

During the night I reviewed my escape options. Because of the uproar over the dementors in Little Whinging last August I decided the Death Eaters would know about the small town, though not my actual address. I felt Diagon Alley was out too, because it would be too obvious. I'd not paid enough attention to directions to Grimmauld Place or St. Mungo's to go straight to them. Likewise I didn't even know in which part of southern England to find Ottery St. Catchpole; I'd been too excited to pay attention flying in the car that night four years before. Hogwarts was the only place I had a clue about finding, and there only because I'd looked at that map at the Clark Village Information Desk the day before.

I never found out the name of the village, but I landed in a wooded area about a quarter mile east of the Spar petrol station on its outskirts. Millicent had been awake for ten minutes or so and she was shifting around. At first she simply seemed uncomfortable, but then a panicked look came on her face that I had to ignore as I frantically looked for a place to land and settle her. I couldn't maintain eye contact, so I used my voice to tell her I was trying to find a place to set down. In the growing light I was continually scanning from side to side, looking for Death Eaters, Muggles, and anyone else that shouldn't see us. Every turn of my head reminded me about my ribs.

I needed drugs -- as in painkillers, you daft prats, not recreational narcotics.

We landed in a small clearing surrounded by dense trees. It was only about thirty feet from the road leading to the Spar station. I removed the ropes binding Millicent to the board and levitated her over toward a small mound of earth for support. I hit the mound with Cushioning and Warming charms and placed her there as gently as I could. Millicent was leaning against the hill with her head elevated.

I hadn't used my eye-speak with her in nearly three hours so I hoped it hadn't disengaged or whatever it did to deactivate. I looked into her eyes and concentrated. *"Howdo you feel?"*

It didn't work. I never gave that mongered eye-speak spell an incantation when I mangled it together the day before, so in desperation I just took a deep breath and willed it to happen. Wordlessly, wandlessly, heck, even non-commonsensically, it worked.

"Howdo you feel?"

She smiled wanly at me and I knew she hurt much more than I did. *"I've felt better."* she thought to me in a grouchy tone, not unlike how she'd always spoken to me. Her eyes widened and she changed her non-verbal tone as she continued, *Sorry, Potter. Howare you? You look dead on your feet? Are we near Hogwarts yet?"*

Her "are-we-there-yet" question reminded me of Dudley on a trip when he was excited about where we were going, or angry to be in the car. *"I'm fine, just tired. I hate to tell you, but we are only about a quarter of the way to school, if that much. There's a Muggle store not too far from here where I plan on grabbing us some food and water, and some medicine, er, Muggle potions for pain. I only have one more dose of pain potion for you."*

I popped the cork on the vial and conjured another straw. She took it down through the corner of her mouth carefully, but I could tell she was eager for it.

I moved to engage her eyes again. *"That's the last of it, so we'll need something else for your pain, and I could use something too. I knowabout Muggle potions and can buy us something that will work. Is there anything else you need? I have enough Muggle money to what we need to get us through the day."*

Her forehead turned red and she thought to me, *"I need feminine supplies. Nowyou're going to make fun of me."*

I was still receiving both her intended words, and any other thoughts while looking into her eyes. I redoubled my efforts to be careful about what I thought to her. However, I didn't know what she meant. *"Uh, excuse my ignorance, but what exactly are feminine supplies?"*

Her brows pointed in anger and she shouted her thoughts at me, *"Very funny, Potter, get your laughs, bloody Gryffindor prat. All right, I'll spell it out -- I'm on the rag. I'm entertaining my monthly visitor. I'm seeing Aunt Aggie. I'm back in the saddle again. I've got roses in my knickers. Visits from Auntie Flo and Cousin Cramps. Satisfied! Nowhave your laughs."* She then looked away in disgust, a hot tear flowing from her blackened right eye.

Somewhere in the middle of that diatribe I figured out that Millicent was having her monthly period.

Hey, I'm a teenaged guy, and this is soooooo No-Man's-Land for me to discuss with anyone, much less a girl, but I do have one advantage over most guys my age -- Hermione.

The blokes around the dorm mentioned this in early fourth year, and I didn't have a clue what they were discussing. In a moment of brilliance - fear of being proved ignorant actually - I did NOT ask Dean and Seamus what they were on about. I'd heard enough to figure out it had something to do with girls, so I slipped into an empty classroom with Hermione later and asked her to explain. My name had come out of the Goblet of Fire just a week before, so Ron was avoiding me, and being alone with Hermione was easy. She turned bright red at first, but then her lightning-fast mind made the leap of understanding.

"Neither your aunt nor uncle have told you about how women are physically different from men, have they?" I shook my head. Warming to her mission, Hermione continued, "And I bet they've never taught you anything about sex and sexuality, either?"

No Weasley ever blushed redder than I did at that moment, except possibly when one of them had The Talk with their Mum or Dad. In my extreme embarrassment I wanted to yell at Hermione, but I had to keep it down so no one could hear.

"You know how they feel about me, Hermione. Do you expect Aunt Petunia or Uncle Vernon to help me understand anything?" I shuddered at the idea of that conversation. I was so frustrated by my own ignorance that I wanted to cry, but being a guy I'd never cry in front of anyone.

Hermione placed Locking and Silencing charms on the door and pulled the shade in the unused classroom. She calmed my nerves and made me feel at ease surprisingly quickly. Over the next two hours she gave me what was, I believe, a thorough and *way too* graphic explanation of the male and female reproductive systems and how they work and inter-relate, complete with diagrams on the chalkboard. She explained everything, *I mean everything*, first in clinical and then in laymen's terms, and even told me most of the crude names for body parts and actions that she'd thought I'd hear in the boy's dorm. I was a sponge that day, and it stuck for the most part. Well, not all of the clinical terms, but then who needs to know all that?

I placed my hand against Millicent's cheek and she looked at me, through a few hot tears. I thought to her, *"I understand about your monthly cycle. Hermione told me all about it--"*

Her eyes went wide with evil mirth. *"Ha! The Boy-Who-Lived had to have the Mudblood tell him about sex!"*

I spun away from her stinging words and stood awkwardly on my bad leg. Then mustering what dignity I could I limped about six feet away and stood with my back to her. In a bit I heard a small scrapping sound behind me. I looked over my shoulder and Millicent dropped a stick and waved for me to come to her. I imagined a look of contrition in the midst of her banged up and frozen face.

"I'm really sorry, Potter. I'm a witch with a capital 'B.' I've spent five years hating you and Granger, and now that my world is completely upside down, I'm stuck with nothing but old habits of being mean to you and all Gryffindors. This time yesterday I thought my brother was helping us cover up the skeleton in our family cupboard by being a Death Eater. My parents raised me to hate half-bloods and Muggleborns. Then this summer, they told me that my grandmother, my mum's mum, was a Muggle. I always thought that she was a Squib. She was loving and wonderful, Potter, a saintly lady and you can imagine I knew few like her. Dad's mum was hard and cold. Then, yesterday, they killed my Grannie first--" Tears welled up in her eyes again.

I let her cry for a few long moments. She clinged her stomach and then turned to me. I figured it was cramping from her period and eye-spoke to her, *"Well, with Hermione teaching me, you know I had a thorough education. You need pads, tampons, or both? I know these small Muggle shops should have some things, but I doubt there's a great selection. Do they have sizes, or what should I look for?"*

She told me of several items that would work and gave me ideas about how they might be listed. Millicent evidently was familiar with the Muggle brand names. I later learned that since the time of Grindelwald's War most witches used Muggle feminine products because they were more convenient than the old solutions of the magical world.

I told Millicent to try to sleep. I draped her with my Invisibility Cloak and hid my broom and the body board in some undergrowth. Then I walked toward the road.

When I was within sight of the road, it felt as if a hammer had slammed into my gut. I fell in blinding pain and nearly fainted. Somehow in the midst of the agony, I rolled against a log for the barest of cover and pulled my wand. I thought I had been hit by a punching spell of some sort. I felt it again, but it was less intense this time. I wasn't being attacked at all. I couldn't imagine what it was, until I realized the alarm on my watch was ringing. It was time for me to take the next Accelerator potion for the Paladin Program.

They'd warned us that missing a potion would hurt, and that if we wanted to quit the program we needed to take a cancellation potion. Well, they were right. It hurt like two Bludgers at once in the gut. I wobbled to my feet and staggered towards the station.

When I missed my potion the night before, I'd felt my stomach rumble, long and loudly. I just thought I was hungry, which I was, but it hadn't rumbled again last night. Evidently the pain increased with each missed dose. I hadn't thought about the Accelerator Potions until my recent gut wrenching. After all I'd hoped to be at Hogwarts by now.

None of the passing drivers even looked my way as I walked to the Spar station. A man was pumping petrol outside the station. I waited until he drove off, and then I walked to the shop. The clerk was a young man, not a whole lot older than me. He barely looked up and didn't even nod my way, before ducking back into his comic book.

I grabbed water bottles at first, but then I saw energy drinks. I realized it would be hard to get food into Millicent's mouth, and that she couldn't chew. I also saw some soup tins that I could heat in a little oven they provided. The feminine products were the right type and size. Boy, was that a relief. I blushed enough taking these items to the counter and paying. I did NOT want to ask this bloke any questions on the matter. I grabbed several pain relievers that I recognized. At the Dursleys' I'd often snuck out of my cupboard during the night and nicked something from the loo when I was sore from yard work or a Dudley beating. I knew from experience which ones I could double up on and which ones not to. There was even a liquid version of my favorite painkiller. I bought a bottle of that for Millicent. I grabbed some small things to go in my pack: strips of cured beef, small tins of

sausages, packages, and several pastries. It took over half of my Muggle money, but I knew the stops for lunch and dinner wouldn't include buying pain relievers or feminine products. There should be enough money to last us -- maybe.

I ate some of the chewy stuff as I walked back, not wanting to eat it in front of Millicent. I thought I'd done enough by buying her supplies, but Millicent expected me to help her with the process. She actually yelled at me with her eyes when I said I didn't want to help with her feminine problems. Realizing she really couldn't manage on her own, I quickly reconsidered. I levitated Millicent and shifted her angle. Then I unzipped her pants and slide them past her hips. I gave her what privacy I could by turning my head but I had to support her back as she maneuvered to take care of things. First Millicent emptied her bladder, which I certainly understood - I'd done the same on my walk to the road. Then Millicent did what she needed to do with the feminine stuff. I caught various smells in the process and sights after the fact -- but we won't discuss any more on that topic. Thank goodness she didn't need to perform the other typical morning necessary. I guess I was lucky she was only two for three.

Once Millicent was back together and levitated away from the scene of, well, you know, I pulled out the can of soup I'd heated at the store. I hoped she would be able to slurp it through a straw. *"Millicent can you use your tongue at all? This soup has some small noodle and chicken bits in it. You can't chew, and the bits are small enough to swallow, but you may need to push stuff around in your mouth. You must be careful."*

"I knowhowto eat, Potter."

"Of course you do," I thought to her. I almost thought something about how her bulk was proof of that, but lucky for me she broke eye contact before that thought made it to my eyes. She looked back. I eye-spoke, *"But this is different. Your tongue, mouth, and jaware bound. If you choke, you may drown or ruin something in your mouth before I can release you from the Localized Stasis spell. I'd rather not have to re-cast that on your face and head again, thank you very much."*

She looked contrite again as she thought to me, *"You do knowthat women can be vicious when having their periods, don't you? I'm sorry. I owe you my life and my opportunity to avenge my family. Thanks for all you've done. I mean it, Potter. Please help me eat, I knowI need it."*

Millicent had about two more hours of relief from the pain potion she'd taken, so I didn't give her any Muggle medicine then. I took the maximum dose of my favorite, and would have taken more but I wanted my wits about me as I tried to fly further north. I had her drink half of an energy drink. Millicent refused to try it at first because of the look of it - it was a hideous, nearly glowing lime color. I explained it was a slow acting, Muggle version of Pepper-Up Potion that would also quench her thirst. I even promised her it would taste good. When she finally tried it, she liked it at first sip. In the interest of getting along I graciously didn't mention the fact that I'd told her so, but I wanted to. I drank an energy drink and a can of soup in quick order. I also ate one of the pastries. It was borderline stale, but nourishing to whatever degree a sweet wrapped in plastic that has sat on a store shelf for weeks could be. I'd already scarfed down a package of nuts and two strips of beef on the walk back.

I placed Millicent back on the board and configured her for flight. Wanting her to feel more useful, I made sure Millicent's arms were free to move, and placed her wand in a pocket near her right hand. Absolutely brilliant move on my part doing that, we later found out. I had to actually wrestle my broom back through the loop holding the sling-rig. When all was secure, I pulled my wand and used my modified *Point Me* to find Manchester and then Liverpool. I aimed for the middle distance between the two cities and took off.

We stayed in the tree lines when possible, but and the terrain was littered with open fields. I'd skirt across small fields after stopping and looking to be sure that no one was around, but that was too risky for the larger fields. I had to circle those, flying in the bordering trees.

It was about mid-morning and we'd come to a broad open expanse. No way to circle this. There was no activity in this large clearing and there was an abandoned warehouse of some sort in the general direction I wanted to go, about a mile forward. I headed towards it. We were almost there when the red beam of a Stunner crossed my path. Had my broom not bucked a second before and slowed for a bit, I'd have been knocked off. I started shifting left and right and turned, wand drawn. Boy, my ribs hurt. I gripped my broom handle tightly as I swung from side to side looking for my assailant.

A wizard in Auror blue was on a broom a hundred feet behind me. He fired another Stunner. I blocked it with a Shield spell, and shouted, "I'm Harry Potter. I'm on your side." He fired yet another Stunner. I blocked it and used a *Sonorus* to make myself heard this time. "Stop! I'm Harry Potter!"

The Auror came forward with his wand still drawn, but not casting spells at me. I lowered my wand a bit, but kept it pointed in his general direction. The Ministry hadn't been my friend this past year, and Fudge finally acknowledging Voldemort's return had not made everything all ducky between us.

The Auror was Dawlish, the man who'd come to arrest Dumbledore; one of the Aurors who'd hit McGonagall that night when he'd been trying to arrest Hagrid. I knew he was Fudge's pet Auror, which meant I didn't trust him a bit.

"I'm taking you in for questioning, Potter."

"What for?"

"The deaths of the Bulstrode family, and an Auror named Pew."

"What?" I raised my wand again, as did he, but neither of us cast anything. "I came up on the Bulstrode farm and found Death Eaters attacking them. I saw them kill the mother and father, and their daughter is right here under my broom escaping from the Death Eaters with me. If I killed an Auror, then he must have been wearing Death Eater robes."

"That's not the way we see it. Minister Fudge ordered you brought in for questioning. If you resist, my orders will be upgraded to arresting you for murder."

We were about thirty feet off of the ground at this point. Dawlish raised his wand and shot another Stunner at me. At that height I could have been

killed if it had hit me and I'd fallen. I blocked the Stunner again and fired off one of my own. Millicent blocked it but he did not count on Millicent's weak, but silent, Cutting curse. It clipped off most of his broom straws. His broom started to go down and I didn't wait to see if he'd make it. I steered my bucking broom for the warehouse and hoped to put the structure between us and Dawlish, before he hit the ground.

I heard the crash and subsequent swearing. Too bad he wasn't seriously hurt. We had almost made the warehouse when he Apparated ahead of us. Dawlish shot a *Reducto* r at us, and I sent a series of *Reducto* rs back at him. Dawlish managed to dodge them all, but not the shrapnel that came from the *Reducto* rs hitting the warehouse. A sheet of corrugated metal whacking his head finally dazed him. Then I hit him with *Petrificus Totalus* . I hovered in front of him. Dawlish was frozen in place, but I knew he'd only be frozen for a while. I hit him with an *Incarcerous* as well. "Dawlish," I said, "I didn't kill any of the Bulstrodes, and I only fought Death Eaters who attacked us first. I don't expect you or your boss to believe me, but know that this is the truth and saying anything else aids Voldemort, not the good witches and wizards of Great Britain." Where that little melodramatic speech came from I'll never know.

I turned my broom to the northeast, not exactly the 'where' I wanted to go but hopefully misleading him as to our direction. Then I took off as fast as possible. Once we were well away, I looked down and used eye-speak to ask if Millicent was all right.

"I'm starting to hurt a little bit, but get us to a safe place before you slowdown to give me some of your Muggle potions. Mr. Malfoy always spoke well of Dawlish, though he isn't a Death Eater. Let's get as far away from him as we can."

In minutes I hit the tree line and turned due west. We continued west for about twenty minutes, flying through the trees as fast as the bucking broom and countless obstacles in our path allowed. Once we were back on course, I found a tree-covered clearing and landed.

"Are we making any progress north, Potter?"

"We been flying for over two hours and we've made maybe fifty miles progress towards Hogwarts. I have to stay in the trees during the day, which slows us down, but it is forward progress. After that idiot Dawlish showed up, I made a considerable detour to throw him off our course." Once I'd calmed down, I told Millicent about the liquid Muggle pain potion.

"--it doesn't take effect right away, but you should feel some relief in twenty minutes or so."

Millicent took the liquid pain reliever gratefully, but refused anything to drink. I allowed myself enough time for several gulps of the green energy drink and a single pill. Then I got us back in the air. If I'd been on foot, I'd say I trudged onward, but at least we had my faithful broom. We were flying, but barely and reluctantly if the broom's opinion counts for anything. Does that mean we fludged? Whatever--

I spoke little because I had to concentrate on weaving through the trees. Millicent either looked at the scenery or at me. I think she slept some.

It was almost midday when we came to another huge tract of open ground with an old barn in the middle. To go around would take forever, so I took us down very close to the ground and we attempted to fly across the fields. We were roughly two miles past the barn and almost to the next tree line when a Cutting curse whizzed by. We weren't hit, but it came entirely too close for comfort. I swung around in a bizarrely out-of-sync circle and saw three Death Eaters on brooms, coming up behind us in a 'V.' A new adrenaline-laced magical surge kicked in and I raised my wand, ignoring the pain in my arm and ribs that had throbbed moments before. I sent a series of *Incendios* out in a spray around them. One target became a fireball and another Apparated away. The third caught fire on the hem of his robe and he shot a Water spell at it. We entered the trees and he eventually came in after us. I'd flown on into the trees a bit and landed. Once the Invisibility Cloak securely covered Millicent, I ran to put some distance between us. The Death Eater wasn't far behind us. He flew right at me and I fired a *Reducto* r. His broom shattered and I heard him scream as he hit the ground. But then a Portkey activated and he popped away. I'm not sure if he was only unconscious or worse. At the time, I was just relieved he was gone. I jumped back on my broom and headed deeper into the forest. We had only covered another mile or so when I saw several Death Eaters flying a search pattern overhead. They missed us. Too bad the next Death Eater to fly by didn't.

As he turned to attack, he ran into a spray of *Reducto* rs I'd fired in his flight path. His scream was cut short so I guessed I'd reduced Voldemort's ranks by one more. If the spell didn't do it, a fall from that height probably would. No sooner was the one Death Eater gone than two more flew in to take his place. This pair bombarded us with spells and curses as they split up for a two-pronged assault. One hit me with a split second of the Cruciatus before a tree limb came between the curse and me. The limb exploded and splinters hit me in the face. There are some definite advantages to wearing glasses.

His partner flew a tight holding pattern directly overhead, firing down at us all the while. Fortunately he wasn't able to fly and aim at the same time. His spell barrage was wildly inaccurate. I used a Summoning charm to call him down off his broom and for a furious moment it was raining Death Eater. His scream halted abruptly when he hit the ground. I'm not sure if you'd call it a whim or a flash of inspiration, but I summoned his wand and tried to cast with it left-handed. I sent a *Reducto* r at yet another Death Eater that had just spotted me and decided to join the party. I am right-handed, but I'm not bad with my left -- maybe it's a seeker thing. Quite often I hold the broom with my right hand and fly while reaching for the Snitch with my left. The *Reducto* r I sent with the filched wand and left hand was less powerful, but it still hit the Death Eater and caused him to swerve into the path of a tree. Death Eater pulp, anyone?

I had never heard of a witch or wizard using two wands at once, but I needed some extra firepower, so I didn't care much if it was unorthodox. Could I cast two spells at once or did I have to verbalize one at a time for each hand? Would my spell's power be halved since I was casting through two wands instead of one? Would it work at all? Great questions all, but I had little time at the moment to theorize. Learn by doing usually works best for me.

The three Death Eaters coming at me now provided an excellent learning opportunity. I shouted "Reducto!" and spells shot out of both wands. I hit nothing at that distance. Each spell was just a little less powerful than if I'd cast with only one hand. I felt within my magic to see if twin casting took much out of me, and other than the same tired feeling I'd already felt for hours, and the adrenaline rush of battle, I seemed no more depleted from twin casting than I would have been from casting with one wand. I'd just succeeded in doubling our firepower. Brilliant.

Reducto!" "Reducto!" "Reducto!"

Three Death Eaters fell out of the sky. One screamed in pain until silenced by his impact with the ground. The other two were silent as they dropped. Later I'd wonder where all these Death Eaters came from, but not now. I didn't like the answer once I heard it. A lot of people were looking for me in all the wrong places, but a few found me.

With those three down, the only sound was the wind rustling through the trees. I ran back to Millicent and got us back in the air. Once we were above the tree line, I turned and flew us out as fast as I could - in the wrong direction. We needed temporary sanctuary and we needed it fast.

I made it back to the barn we had passed some number of Death Eaters ago. I flew us through an open door to the hay loft, and then lowered us slowly down to the ground level and around into a corner where there was fresh hay. There was a washbasin there and thankfully the water was still connected and ran clear. The well water had a slightly brackish taste, but I was thirsty and it met my needs.

I was spent, and I knew I'd crash soon as the magical surge died down and the adrenalin wore off. It had been eight or nine tedious hours with my aunt, and over eighteen hours of nerve-scorching travel at night and day under the constant threat of discovery, punctuated with several battles risking both my own life and that of the witch I'd taken under my care.

"Millicent, are you all right! You weren't hit by any of these spells or anything were you?"

"Potter! Your face is bleeding - poring!"

I raised my hand to my face and found blood and splinters in several places. Funny thing, that -- I mean it hurt a lot the instant I realized I was wounded, but not before. I gingerly pulled out three large splinters and some of the smaller one. The tiny fragments were irretrievable. I ran water from the basin over my face and saw the blood splash against the abused porcelain.

That done I reassured Millicent., *"Nothing serious here. It hurts some, but Madam Pomfrey will fix me up in a jiffy. The face bleeds freely but it's all superficial. Howare you?"*

"Well, I'm cramping, bloated, ugly, broken, and in pain. Other than that, I'm fine, thanks, and you?" There was a bit of a laugh in her eye-speak and I fancied there was a little laughter in her blackened eyes. I grinned in spite of our situation. She thought to me, *"Was it my imagination, or did we go back south for several miles, away from Hogwarts, to land here?"*

"That's right. I figure all the Slytherins among the Death Eaters will assume a Gryffindor would never give up ground and reverse his direction to hide. They'll surely fly north from that place in the woods and never think to head this way."

"How positively Slytherin of you, Potter, oh!" She arched her back in pain for a bit. After thirty long seconds or so, she looked my way, in agony. *"I thought cramps were bad enough, but they really hurt when you add in the broken ribs."* She took several deep breaths through her nose and then exhaled slowly. *"I don't suppose you want to try putting my rib cage in Localized Stasis, like my face. It doesn't really hurt much at all as long as I try not to jerk my tongue around inside my mouth. My neck's a little sore though."*

"I'm afraid to try it on your ribs, Millicent, I might freeze some of your internal organs. I think I got very lucky with your face. In fact, I'd be very afraid to try it again, so let's hope that stasis holds."

"I understand, Potter. Could I have some more of that Muggle pain potion? And if there's more of that green potion, I'd like some of that too. I'm parched."

I helped her with both and even got Millicent to sip some soup. It was cold but nourishing, and I gulped the last third of it. I drank a green energy drink as well. I was grateful for the "extra" stuff I'd purchased that morning. With Voldemort actively searching for us, we couldn't risk another shopping trip anytime soon. What we carried would have to take us a good way.

"How long do you plan on staying here?" She eye-spoke to me.

"Three or four hours, I think. I had no sleep last night, and I'm dead on my feet now that the rush of battle is over. Plus the Death Eaters will probably be scouring the woods ahead of us for several hours more. It's nearly noon now so I plan to sleep until mid to late afternoon and then see how things are. I wish I could leave now and get you to help sooner, but our luck fighting multiple Death Eaters can't hold out forever."

Millicent slowly nodded in reply.

I had slept only an hour or maybe a little more, when I woke with a jerk. It was only a dream -- and not a Voldemort dream, but I couldn't go back to sleep after being startled awake. As brief as the nap was, it helped. I was actually rather refreshed. I checked on Millicent and she'd not slept, even a little. Even though I was physically ready to go, we needed to stay put as planned to give the Death Eaters time to move on. Thinking conversation would help to pass the time, I asked Millicent to tell me more about her maternal grandmother.

"Why do you want to know, Potter? So you can make fun of me?"

I looked away for a second in anger, but then turned, determined to have my conversation.

"No, Bulstrode. My mother was Muggleborn and I don't consider that anything to laugh at. Have I ever made fun of you?" My anger flared in my eyes and in my unspoken voice.

She thought to me, *"I was in the library once and I heard you three, the golden trio, and one of you, Weasley, as I recall, called me a fat hag and*

you all laughed."

I didn't remember that happening, but I didn't doubt it occurred. I stared at her eyes until she looked back at me. In the ten seconds or so I waited for Millicent to meet my gaze, my mind wandered in fatigue and once again I noticed her eyes were such a beautiful shade of blue.

I came back to the moment when she gasped in eye-speak, *"You really think I have pretty eyes?"*

I decided on honesty. *"Well, Millicent, right now your eyes are just about the only part of your face that isn't bruised, smashed, broken, or out of joint. That fact emphasizes that they're a very lovely shade of blue, one that I've never seen before. I'm sure that if we'd ever had a civil conversation before yesterday and you'd smiled at me, instead of sneering, I'd have noticed how pretty your eyes are."*

"Now," I continued, *"It was wrong of us three to talk about you and call you an ugly hag. Malfoy's gang has been abusive to us, and we've not been nice to you in return, in any manner. Tell me truly, have you ever sat in your common room with Malfoy and laughed at one or all of the three of us, calling us names?"*

After a moment of looking away, she said, *"You're right. We have – plenty of times. It's the Gryffindor and Slytherin thing to do, I guess. Sorry."* She looked down again.

When she looked back up I said, *"I understand that Slytherin and Gryffindor have been the major house rivalry since Salazar and Godric, but it's usually just been Quidditch and the House Cup they fight over. I know three adults that were in Slytherin and I consider them fairly good friends. I say 'fairly' only because I don't know them as well as I'd like."*

"Millicent, we got off to a bad start our first five years, but now we have a common enemy. You do want revenge, don't you?"

"More than you can imagine." Her eyes went wide after that statement. *"That was stupid for me to say, Potter. If anyone can imagine how I want revenge, it's you. You lost your family, too, and you've had to live with it your whole life."*

I sighed and looked away for a moment. *"Mainly I just want the killing to stop. Your grandmother is only one of hundreds of Muggles that Voldemort and his Death Eaters have killed for no good reason. Maybe many of them weren't as saintly as your grandmother, but murdering them is no less wrong. Muggles, Muggleborns, half-bloods. Murder is murder and it's wrong. My dad was as pure-blood as they come, but he's only one of many pure-bloods they've maliciously killed."*

"I've been reading a lot this summer, Millicent, and I've read a number of good things that pure-bloods can teach those of us who weren't raised in the Wizarding world. Most of your culture and traditions are wonderful, although some seem a little weird. I want to understand them and I don't want to make fun of any of them. But there are also a few things I think we Muggle-raised can teach you pure-bloods, but that's off subject. Let me ask you, do you just want to kill the Death Eaters that killed your family? 'Cause they're all dead already - you and I killed them. Or do you want to seek revenge against all of Voldemort's followers and the Dark Jackass himself?"

Millicent flinched at his name. Then she looked at me pensively. *"Potter says his name and nothing ever happens. I was raised to revere his name, but how can I respect the Dark Lord now?"* She had thought this to herself, forgetting I could "hear" it. *"Millicent, I can hear you thinking when you look into my eyes. Do you want me to sit over there for a while so you can ponder this?"*

Millicent jerked in response to another cramp, and then favored her broken ribs as she struggled with her various pains. She took several quick deep breaths through her nose and exhaled the last slowly. I'd pulled back but she looked at me again and eye-spoke, *"What I need, is to change my pad again. I'm sorry, Potter. Could you levitate me over there? I know I stink because of this, and I make a mess changing this way. Take me over there, open another pad for me, help me with my pants, and I think I can do everything else."*

I did as she asked and then turned away from Millicent to give her some semblance of privacy. I kept a hand on her shoulder to steady her. Millicent grabbed it when she was done and I turned back to her. I didn't mean to look, but my eyes were instinctively drawn to the refuse she'd only been able to toss a few feet away from her. I quickly glanced away and never turned back, but Millicent saw me look, and I blushed profusely. I had to help her pull her pants back up the rest of the way. After she was finally dressed with my clumsy assistance, I looked into her eyes. Tears of pain streamed down her face. She was breathing heavily and her right arm held her rib cage.

Millicent nodded to me and I levitated her back to our original area, near the washbasin. I placed her gently in the straw with her head elevated and I offered her the liquid painkiller. She drank it, greedily, and I had to pull it away, explaining that it could hurt her if she overdosed. That is also true of painkilling potions, so she understood.

"Thanks, Potter. You're doing more for me than anyone I can imagine. Could you see Malfoy or Nott, or, God forbid, the troll twins Goyle or Crabbe helping me with this?" I smiled at her and snorted a laugh. *"Parkinson would have helped me just because she's a girl and can sympathize with me, but I'd never hear the end of it, and she'd act like I owed her a life debt or something."*

We smiled for a moment in silence, looked around for a bit, and then looked back at each other.

"Millicent, would you call me Harry? When you Slytherins call me Potter I hear a lot of ill will in it. You're saying it differently now, but I still hear you like you said it meanly, a month ago."

She said, *"All right, Harry, I'll try, but I'm sure I'll slip up, now and then. Can you stop calling me Millicent? I hear you Gryffindors saying it like a swear word or something."*

"Okay, I admit I used to say Millicent like it was another name for evil. Sorry. What do your housemates call you?"

"Most call me 'Bulstrode,' but somehow I can't see you saying that any better. The girls in my house usually call me Millicent."

"What do your friends call you?"

She looked away from me with a hurt expression. I wanted to look into her eyes and hear her thoughts, but that would've been very rude of me.

"Potter, er, Harry. I don't have any real friends. I'm just a girl in with the other girls. They all talk about boys and make-up when they're being frilly and leave me out as though I'd never be interested, or even understand. I was the only fourth year girl in my house who didn't go to the Yule Ball, and what hurt is the girls acted like they didn't expect anyone to ask me. Goyle and Crabbe went stag rather than ask me. I refused to go by myself, so I sat in my dorm room, all night, alone, and feigned sleep behind my curtains when they came up from the ball."

"Oh, they're all for asking me for help, particularly when they want to move furniture around and the like, but they never ask me to do things with them." She laughed derisively in eye-speak. *"How pathetic am I? Spilling my heartache out to the Gryffindor who was number one on my hate list less than twenty-four hours ago."*

"I know what you're talking about, having no friends."

I actually heard her snort both in her mind and through her nose. *"You're the great Harry Potter. Everyone wants to be your friend."*

"Oh, sure they do, Millicent. Remember second year, when I spoke Parseltongue and didn't even know what it was? Oh yeah, people really lined up to be my friend after that. And remember when my name was drawn from the Goblet of Fire? Even Ron abandoned me, for over a month. And of course everyone wanted to be friends with the mad liar Minister Fudge and the Daily Prophet spoke ill of all last year."

She sheepishly eye-spoke "Sorry," to me.

"No, with Ron and Hermione, and a few others, I have more friends that I ever had in my life. I was talking about being friendless before Hogwarts." I went on to tell her about my life with the Dursleys. I told her just enough about my aunt and uncle to explain things in general, and why Hermione had to explain to me the facts of life. I told her about how I had no friends, in school or around Little Whinging, because of Dudley.

"So Snape's talk about you being a spoiled prince is all wrong?" she asked. *"And when Malfoy talks about you being raised by disgusting Muggles, he's right?"*

"Malfoy's right as far as that goes, but he knows little else about me so beyond that bare statement I wouldn't trust anything he says. Those particular Muggles are disgusting, but not all Muggles are. Muggles are like witches and wizards - some good, some bad, and most of us struggling in between." At this point I wanted to leave the discussion of my life and not go back to Millicent having no real friends either. *"So, Millicent, you don't want me to use your given name and using your last name doesn't work either. So, what should I call you?"*

Her forehead pinked a little. *"Well, my family gave me a nickname when I was little, and they still call me that, or did until --"*

She cried a little. I could understand and pulled back a few inches. After a couple of minutes of silence broken only by her sniffles, she looked back at me and resumed her thought, *"When I was born, my brother was three and a half, and he couldn't say words that begin with the letter 'M.' He ended up calling me Centi, and all my family followed his lead. They still do -- or did. Could you... would you...?"*

"Centi," I jumped in. *"I like it. It's unique. I think it will work. Well Centi, since I told you about my bizarre childhood, and you had a rather normal childhood for a witch, how about you tell me about growing up on that magical farm I saw back there. I've only seen two magical households. One had a big garden, but that's about all I know."*

We spent the next couple of hours talking through eye-speak. Conversation quickly turned to a number of happenings at school over the years, and we told each other about these events from Slytherin and Gryffindor perspectives. Centi told me that most of the members of Slytherin house were amazed at my flight against the Hungarian Horntail in the Triwizard Tournament. I impressed her house that day, despite Malfoy's insistence that I'd just been lucky. Many Slytherins didn't and don't like me, she confirmed, but they do begrudgingly respect my flying. She also said that most Slytherins thought me a dope for staying behind in the second task of the tournament to see that everyone was safe. They all knew Dumbledore was too big a softy to let anything happen to the four hostages asleep in the water.

Just about every Slytherin was as afraid of me when I spoke in Parseltongue in second year as all the rest of the houses were. Centi thought it was hysterical that we had thought Malfoy could be the Heir of Slytherin. She gave me the impression that few in her house respected Draco. They did, however, fear the financial and political power his father wielded, and everyone knew that Draco would go off crying to his father when he was thwarted.

When it was nearing time to go I stopped our "chat" and gave Centi another dose of the liquid pain reliever. We also had another snack.

"I'm going to take the Invisibility Cloak and go outside for a few minutes to look at the skies. I want to see if it's safe to leave." There was a moment of panic in her eyes and I made a big show of leaving my Firebolt right beside her to reassure her that I would not leave her. She understood and gave me a grateful smile.

Everything seemed clear, and soon later we were back on our way.

The rest of the afternoon was uneventful. At one point we hit a heavily populated area -- somewhere between Manchester and Liverpool according to the modified Point-Me charm -- and I did a lot of weaving in and out, skirting little towns and jumping across roads. It was overcast and a little foggy so we weren't quite as exposed as if it were sunny. I even shortened the ropes for Millicent's sling and brought us close together so I could

grape the Invisibility Cloak over us. I weren't completely covered, but it was the best I could do. When we had to cross big highways, I'd fly along the roadside until I found an underpass or major drainage ditch. Then under the cloak I'd fly us through and on. Luck was with us.

The Longbottoms lived somewhere near Liverpool but who knew where? It's a big town and I couldn't very well fly my broom up to a Bobby and ask for directions, now, could I?

The clearing where I landed us late that afternoon was much farther back from the road than where I'd stopped this morning - a necessity because the trees were much sparser in this area. I left Centi and made my way to a no-name petrol shop fairly similar to the one I'd been at in the morning. An old lady stood behind the counter and inspected my every move. At first I thought she might have been looking for me and would call for the Death Eaters after I left, but they'd rather rot than ask for Muggle help. It finally hit me that she thought I might try to steal something, so I made sure to stay in plain sight and act friendly as I paid. Thankfully, I didn't have to draw attention myself by buying more "products" for Centi. I only had four pounds, six left in my pocket afterwards. Fortunately I hoped to make Hogwarts before dawn, and the supply of food and energy drinks I bought was more than enough for the two of us until then. Centi.

The name suited the girl I was getting to know. I don't like 'Millicent.' Every Millicent I've ever known -- all one of them -- I've despised.

I liked my new friend, Centi.

Whatever gets you through, Potter.

The clouds were thickening as I made my way back to her. I transfigured a wrapper from a tin of biscuits into a tarpaulin and levitated it over us, charming it to stick to two branches on a tree. The good thing about the weather is that darkness came sooner than was usual this time of year.

"Centi, I have an idea. I'm going to take a few of these branches and stick them together to make a frame. I think I can attach my Invisibility Cloak to the frame, hang it beneath us, and make it so no one can see us if they look up. Then, when it's dark enough, we can fly up to just at the base of the clouds, or in them even. My direction spell tells me where to go, so we can fly in the proper direction without having to follow landmarks. That way we can't really be seen from below or the sides or above. It will be like being in thick fog, but we should make good time and not be seen. What do you think?"

She pondered it for a moment. *"That would work, but I'm wide awake. Can we have a weak Light spell so we can eye-speak? Maybe you could put that tarp over us and the light. That way no one would see our Lumos moving through the clouds."*

"I'm afraid to fly for long at all like that." I said. "Flying with any kind of light increases our chances of being seen. Muggles have aeroplanes, and the cloud cover could dissipate at any moment. I'll also lose all night vision if we're flying with a light. I don't think it wise to do anything that might give even a hint at where we are. After all, we've been spectacularly unlucky so far in being found by Death Eaters and Fudge's Aurors and I'm sure neither side has stopped looking for us. But I'll rig the tarp anyway. Then I can risk a Light spell from time to time to check on you and give you painkillers. I'm sorry, Centi. I was bored and lonely too last night, but it's the only thing to do."

"I suppose."

We rested and talked for another half hour. I told her (out loud) all about the Paladin Program while I made the rig. Snape had recruited among the Slytherins for the program, but Centi had turned it down flat. Most of Slytherin House was shocked when Draco and Pansy volunteered, but the general assumption was that they'd joined to sabotage the program or spy for Voldemort. I made a major mental note to share this with Dumbledore.

After I gave her a basic overview of what the Paladins were learning, Centi asked if it was too late to join. I told her I doubted it was too late. As it was Dumbledore would have to help me catch back up on the potions. Maybe we could do it together. She seemed stunned when I made the offer, but readily accepted it. The way I figured it, one less fighter for Tom and one more for us was a good thing. And I *knew* she was motivated to fight Voldemort now. Having seen her in action, I also knew Centi wasn't afraid to do serious harm.

She was a killer, just like me, I realized glumly.

I had my rig all set to go. Now all we needed was a little more darkness. I saw an Auror fly over as we waited. Maybe he was trustworthy, but I just couldn't bring myself to call out and risk it. How he flew about like that without a Disillusionment was beyond me. Just inviting a Muggle sighting, that was. I later found out that he was Disillusioned, but I could somehow see him anyway. We waited a bit more before proceeding.

It began to rain just as we took off. I'd already cast charms to waterproof us and warm us, but they needed renewing every half hour or so. We climbed up into the base of the low cloud covering and I set course for the next city on our route, aiming us just to the east of Carlisle.

Flying to the west of Carlisle was a straighter shot to Hogwarts, but it meant flying over a wide body of water, the Solway Firth. I couldn't risk it. I wanted to be able to set down on solid ground if necessary. At thirty miles per hour, Carlisle was four hours away. Three hours past that was Glasgow and about two and a half hours beyond that was Hogwarts. I thought that we could make it just before dawn. Perhaps it was my imagination, but my much abused yet trusty Firebolt seemed to be acclimating to its cart horse status.

Centi's idea of putting the tarp over us was a good one. During the night I cast a quick *Lumos* at my modified Point-Me charm every ten minutes or so to see if we were still on course -- a necessity since visibility was too low for us to navigate by lights in the distance most of the time.

At three hours we were almost to Carlisle. I'd thought we were flying a bit faster. I could see the lights of the city through the cloud covering, and I steered to the east of it, as planned. Maybe we had a tailwind to help us along, maybe my broom was flying faster - anyway, it took less time than I'd guessed. Thank God for any help in a storm - and boy were we in a storm. I almost set us down once after a couple of hours but it cleared up a little just before I did. Every four hours, I gave Centi a dose of the Muggle painkiller. Each time she thanked me profusely.

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cracker. She moaned -- the only noise she could make with her face in stasis.

I swerved out of the way and into a denser copse of trees where I stopped and unstrapped her. She asked that I release her from all the rigging and I did so. Tears poured down her face, and yet she staggered to her feet to face our enemies. My cracked ribs howled at me, and my badly reset broken arm throbbed like nothing I'd felt before.

I still had the second wand I'd taken from that Death Eater the day before and I drew both out and stood up, looking around.

I counted at least twenty Death Eaters heading our way, some on brooms and some on foot. Where were they all coming from? Centi sent out carefully aimed, low power Cutting curses, and I was impressed at her ability to do it wordlessly. I splashed out *Reducto* rs, *Incendios*, and Cutting curses like I was dispensing free candies to first-years after a Hogsmeade weekend.

We hit a good number of our attackers, but Centi and I were both at the end of our endurance. We were physically incapable of effectively dodging the incoming spells. I took a Bone Cracker to my right leg and fell. Centi took a partial *Reducto* r right in the chest and fell behind a fallen log. Somehow I staggered upright--powered by magic, I suppose, because physically I was dead on my feet--and kept firing. A Bludgeoning hex hit a nearby tree and ricocheted right into me. It was a good thing it wasn't a direct hit. The deflection reduced its power.

When I fell next to Centi I could see that she was in a bad way. Her blouse had ripped on the side and I saw her rib cage below her bra. A rib bone stuck out of the skin, and blood pulsed weakly from wound. Her face had come out of the Stasis charm and she was coughing up blood.

I raised my head and a *Reducto* r barely missed my face, hitting a nearby tree instead. As it was, a jagged piece of wood cut my forehead and blood clouded my vision. Another giant splinter embedded into my collarbone area. I screamed in pain.

Curses, hexes, and jinxes came our way faster and faster. We had no real defense, and I knew that in seconds we'd be face-to-face those who wanted to see us dead or worse, captured.

I looked into Centi's eyes. She and I both knew that she was near death. With her last mental effort she eye-spoke to me, "*Save yourself, Harry.*" Then she passed out. Her ragged, shallow breathing confirmed that she was still alive, but each inhalation might be her last.

How very Gryffindor of her to tell me to leave her.

How very NOT understanding of how Gryffindors think for her to think I would.

I cried Centi's name as I held her. Her head lolled in my arms and I feared she'd died right then and there.

In my personal experience, desperation has led to some wonderful things, but on the whole, I don't recommend it.

I raised my hand and my Invisibility Cloak and my Firebolt appeared there. I also called Centi's wand to me. I pointed my wand at my Firebolt and shouted "*Portkey!*"

It was the only way I could figure out that we could escape, so I determined it would work just like I wanted it to, and just because I willed it.

It didn't at the time register in my pain-addled and fear-consumed brain that I called for a Portkey and didn't use the actual incantation. That's probably just as well. I'd only heard Dumbledore say it once and that was over a month before.

I closed my arms around my Cloak, Firebolt, Centi, and her wand, and said, "Activate in five seconds."

In those last seconds I thought about the biggest fireball I could imagine. I imagined a fireball engulfing everything within a thirty-foot radius from our position, and I imagined it going off one second after we Portkeyed away. The way I looked at it, I had about equal chances: we either would Portkey away or take just about all of our attackers with us.

Never had that tug behind my navel felt so wonderful. And the sound of the subsequent explosion rang in my ears while we swirled to our destination.

~*~*~

The Portkey trip was NOT smooth like all the ones I'd experienced before. I felt like I was wading through a flooded river that was chock full of floating furniture, all of which was managing to hit my body.

We landed, just like I hoped, with Centi hovering a few inches above a hospital bed in the Hogwarts Infirmary. I, however, was hovering right beside her and three and a half feet off of the spic-and-span hardwood floor. I shrieked in absolute torture as my broken bones, cuts, and bruises crashed down. The blood, mud, and gore littered poor Poppy Pomfrey's pristine floor, and at the time, I couldn't have cared less.

I screamed again, but my noise paled in comparison to the klaxon-like honking going on. A magical voice that sounded suspiciously like Professor Flitwick's proclaimed, "Security breach in Infirmary! Security breach in Infirmary! Illegal Portkey entry by two unknowns. This is not a drill!"

That message was evidently blasting through the castle, as Madam Pomfrey stormed in, wand drawn, an angel of mercy and an avenging angel all rolled up into one power-packed bundle of bustling mediwitch. It took only one second for her to start casting spell after spell, lifting me to a bed right beside Centi.

"Check Millicent first. She's dying!" I half screamed, half croaked. Madam Pomfrey nodded and went to it. Her wand was a blur of diagnostic spells and healing charms and who knows whatever else. She didn't stop to end the warning horns, but in less than two minutes Minerva McGonagall rushed into the Infirmary, her eyes ablaze with the fight she'd bring anyone invading her beloved Hogwarts.

The assistant headmistress ended the warning klaxon shouts. After that all you could hear was Centi's painful breathing, and my painful sobs and frustrated attempts to play down my wounds. I prayed Centi would live, that I had brought her here in time to save her. I didn't need ... I couldn't have... another death. Oh, my vanity, thinking that her death would be about me, and not her dying.

I looked up in time to see McGonagall flash out a silvery streak. A few seconds later she sent out another one.

She rushed to my side and said, "Potter, er, Harry, how did you arrive here, where did you acquire a Portkey--"

"Centi!" I shouted. "How is Centi?"

"Centi? Who's...?"

"Millicent," I explained. "That's Millicent Bulstrode," I said in desperation. "How is she? She's alive, isn't she? I got her here in time, didn't I?"

"Miss Bulstrode? How did you--?"

"Miss Bulstrode will live Potter," Madam Pomfrey shouted without looking my way. "Be still, boy. I re-applied your Localized Stasis charm to her face, and almost have her stabilized. You stay where you are, Potter, I'll be there directly. Minerva, stun him if he doesn't settle down." "Harry?"

My head of house really had no clue why Centi was with me or how I had laid hands on an illegal Portkey that slammed right through the wards to this room--just like I envisioned. I roused myself to give her some semblance of an explanation.

"My aunt and I went shopping in the western counties. I should have known that Aunt Petunia taking me shopping was a sign of the end of the world," I began hoarsely. "We came back across country and we became lost. I saw a Dark Mark in the sky and me, -and my-saving-people-thing, I went to the rescue. It was the Bulstrode family and Death Eaters were trying to kill them all. I attacked the attackers and Centi, er, Millicent is the only one to survive, but she was hurt."

I gulped air in pain. I yelled slightly as I rolled over to look at Centi. My previously cracked ribs on my right side were matched by the broken ribs on my left side now.

"Give Potter this Pain potion," Madam Pomfrey yelled and tossed the vial our way. McGonagall missed it but my accursed Seeker reflexes reached out and snagged it from the air, hurting my ribs all the more. In all of this, my right arm was untouched, and that's the arm I used to catch the potion. McGonagall took it from me and brought the opened tube to my lips. I drank greedily. I decided then and there I'd never leave my bed again without ten vials of Pain potion with me, instead of the five I'd had in my fanny pack two days ago.

Great God in Heaven, had it only been two days since I left Privet Drive?

"What happened next, Potter?" she asked. Since I was Potter again, I figured my head of house had decided I wasn't dying.

"Death Eaters were coming every few minutes, and Millicent told me the magic detectors were down in her area. The Aurors wouldn't come. I had no choice. I bundled her up and flew her out under my broom. We flew all night Monday night and into the day. I fought Death Eaters, oh, twice more that day, and even fought Dawlish, the Auror who tried to arrest Dumbledore and hit you with a Stunner last year."

"I know who Dawlish is. Why'd you fight him?"

"He shot a Stunner at me first. He said he wanted to arrest me for killing the Bulstrodes and an Auror named Pew. I said I had only fought Death Eaters and told him I had Millicent with me. Then he attacked me again, and I had to stun him and tie him up to escape.

"An hour later I fought some more Death Eaters and once we killed them all, we doubled back and hid in a barn from mid-day to about 3:30 yesterday."

"Killed," McGonagall gasped. "Why didn't you just stun them?"

"They were using deadly spells and curses, including the Cruciatus and Killing Curses," I said, thankful that her question had jarred my memory. "Oh, Madam Pomfrey, Millicent has had the Cruciatus on her as well."

"I saw that, Potter, thanks for the warning," Madam Pomfrey said distractedly. "How about you?"

"Yes ma'am, once or twice, I don't really remember the number."

"Harry," McGonagall called my attention back to her. "About killing those Death Eaters."

"Yes, I killed them. I killed a lot of them, every one I could," I shouted. This outburst drew Madam Pomfrey's attention. She looked my way, as McGonagall took a step back. Realizing I probably sounded hysterical, I took a deep breath and continued more calmly, "I lost count, but I guess we were attacked by about twenty-five or thirty Death Eaters before this morning. A few of them escaped, and Centi, er Millicent killed a few of them, but I guess I killed fifteen or twenty Death Eaters, before it turned all stormy yesterday. We went up into the cloud covering and that's how we made it without being attacked until the storm grew too bad and I set down about forty or so miles south of here at 3:00 or 3:30 this morning.

"I ... I fell asleep." There were tears in my eyes as I remembered my failure to stay awake, which caused Centi so much harm. But that was spilt cauldrons, now, and thank God Centi was all right or at least out of danger.

"You were up for over two days, weren't you Potter,?" McGonagall asked. "Did you sleep at all?"

"I napped for an hour yesterday--"

"So you fell asleep this morning at 3:30 after flying for over thirty-six hours with little rest, and fighting Death Eaters on and off through out. I think you're forgiven for being sleepy."

"But if I'd only rested for thirty minutes like I'd planned, we'd have made the rest of the flight here during darkness and she wouldn't have been hurt more." I felt I was whining like a child, but I couldn't stop myself. Exhaustion was roiling within my body and mind, and worry for Centi was washing over me like a tidal wave.

"Potter, no warrior can fight on indefinitely. You fought bravely, but why did Death Eaters attack the Bulstrodes?"

"Does Voldemort need a reason?" I answered hotly, but then I remembered that she was simply trying to understand. "Sorry, Professor. He had just found out Centi's grandmother was a Muggle. Centi's brother, grandmother, mum and dad were killed before her eyes. I saw her mum and dad go down. We killed all of the ones who did it, but then more came, and they kept coming."

"So, Potter, how did you arrive here? Where did you get a Portkey and how--?"

"I made it?"

The mediwitch gasped at that, and McGonagall looked as gobsmacked as any Muggleborn first year gawking at Hogwarts on September first.

"You made it? How? Did Miss Granger read about it and teach you how?"

"No. I saw Professor Dumbledore make one in the Ministry of Magic and I heard his incantation." "But, Harry, that's not possibly enough information," McGonagall insisted. "Portkey enchanting is a very complex subject." "Yes, ma'am. I thought about making one earlier, but I guessed I'd need to know how to set the destination, number of those riding the Portkey, and the activation word at least, and there could be more to it than that so, Monday night while flying along I gave up the idea of trying to make one."

"But you said you made the one that brought you here."

"Yes, ma'am." I hung my head. Here was one more 'Isn't-Harry-Grand' thing to make me feel like I'm not just one more student in the crowd. I hated it, but I told her what happened anyway.

"This morning we were discovered by Death Eaters - a lot of them - thirty or more at least. My broom doesn't like flying two, so we couldn't escape that way. We were both hit and hurt badly. Centi was pouring blood from all over and I was, well, like you see me now. I knew she'd die if I didn't get her here fast, so I ..." I swallowed raggedly a for a moment and thought about asking for water before going on. But I couldn't see McGonagall's patience standing still for that.

"I knew Centi was dying," I said quietly, "So I just thought real hard about where I wanted to go. I thought about the two of us using the Portkey, and I thought about a word-based activation key. Oh, and I cast, 'Portkey' on my Firebolt. Then I said 'Activate in five seconds' and we landed here in the Infirmary."

"That's not even the incantation. Hold it, you used your Firebolt?" McGonagall asked. "Oh, Harry, when you use an object as a Portkey it loses all other magical enchantments. That's why we use old boots and tin cans. Maybe the Firebolt factory can re-enchant it for you."

My Firebolt was on the floor on the other side of the bed from my professor. I held my arm out and cried, "Up!" In hindsight, it was a stupid move. That was the arm that was broken in the fight just minutes ago. Pain shot through it as I reached out and I almost fainted from the agony when my broom crashed into my hand. I pulled it back screaming and the Firebolt stayed in place, hovering right where I called it.

McGonagall looked at the Firebolt and said, "Well, maybe not in your case." She looked at me with mixed parts of pride and confusion and then said, "Why did you say 'activate in five seconds' and not just 'activate' right away?"

I looked around at the sun coming into the room, and then looked south. A window showed a small, dark mushroom shaped cloud in the distance. I nodded towards it and said, "I guess I killed a few more Death Eaters, Professor."

"How many?" she asked.

"All of them, I hope." I couldn't help but chuckle, which hurt my ribs and everything else except my hair and one toenail on my right foot.

"No, Potter, how many Death Eaters did your, well, that fireball kill?"

"I don't know," I muttered. I was getting tired of her questions. "Thirty, forty, a hundred and forty. I imagined a fireball big enough to burn everything in a thirty-foot radius around us just as we Portkeyed away. I think there were twenty to thirty Death Eaters there at the time, but I didn't stop to count."

Something I wondered about came to mind. "Professor, where did all of these Death Eaters come from? Over the last couple of days Millicent and I saw maybe sixty or seventy--maybe more."

She ignored my question. "There's no such thing as a fireball spell that size, Harry."

Now she calls me Harry again. "I guess there is now," I said as if commenting on the weather. McGonagall looked out the window for several long seconds and then turned back to me and said, "Be that as it may, Potter, you say you created a Portkey, and obviously you have. How did you pass through the wards of Hogwarts? Did Albus tell you the runic algorithms and how to bypass them? No, he'd have never done that, particularly since he didn't teach you how to make a Portkey in the first place."

I didn't know what to say about this so I said nothing.

Madam Pomfrey came to my side at that moment. "Step aside, please, Minerva. I want to take a look at Potter now that Bulstrode is stable."

"Thank God!" I exclaimed. "You can put her back together? Will there be any permanent damage? How long before she recovers?"

"She'll be fine, but there is much work still to be done. She's stable and has Monitoring charms in place so I can work on you for a bit. Sit back and be still. I must examine you and I'm not above stunning you myself to do my job. Lord have mercy, you're a mess."

I leaned back and felt the familiar sensation of her magical diagnostic tools running over my body. I glanced over at my head of house and she had an oddly pensive look on her face. I crooked my eyebrow and it stimulated the question I felt was in her eyes.

"Potter, Miss Bulstrode has been almost as much your enemy as Mr. Malfoy. Why this level of concern? You've done more than your duty to the Light in saving her life and delivering her here."

My anger flared at this statement. I'd always assumed Snape was the house bigot and my head of house, though a Gryffindor advocate, would be scrupulously fair to all, and only hate Death Eaters, not Slytherins in general. But then it occurred to me that last year Millicent had been on Umbridge's Inquisitorial Squad and regarded as a likely Death Eater-to-be.

"Professor," I started to answer her. "OW! That HURT!" The healer had extracted the large piece of branch sticking out of my collarbone.

"I could knock you out with a potion or stun you," she said, "but you've never wanted to be made unconscious before, Potter. Do you want to be under for the rest of my ministrations?"

"Don't you have a localized numbing charm or something?"

"There is one I'll use on most of you, but I can't use it near your brain without adverse effects. Don't move and I'll apply it to your ribs, arms, and legs to deal with your broken bones. You are quite proficient at breaking them, did you know that?"

I felt her comment warranted no answer. Besides, more talk with her would just delay her healing me, so I turned back to McGonagall. The distraction had given me time to figure out a way to explain.

"Professor, I think that facing death with someone, fighting side-by-side tends to change my sentiments as to who's my friend, and who's my enemy."

She looked at me as if trying to read my mind. She was not a Legilimens, or at least she wasn't using it on me now. I'd worked on my shields enough the last week--now that I had a book that actually explained the subject--and I could detect the lightest of touches if I paid attention. Professor Dumbledore had come by and tested me one day.

"I think I see what you mean, Potter."

Now we were back to Potter. "Well, it's more than that, Professor. We've fought together and killed together, and we've killed to protect each other. She owes me more life debts, I guess, than I owe her, if you count such things, and I don't. But she's saved me a number of times. And it's not just that. We had a number of hours where we talked, really talked. I know about her family and she knows about the Dursleys. She's having her period and I bought stuff for her, and helped her when she changed them--"

I crashed to a full stop in blathering about my time with Centi. I couldn't believe I'd just said all of that about her monthly period, but I had. Madam Pomfrey broke the silence. "I wondered how she managed that, Potter. Her wounds were varied over time and I saw that her recently applied protection wasn't that far along. You did well."

I glared at her. "I didn't change her pads myself. I helped her shimmy down her slacks and opened the package for her. I held her steady and she did the deed itself. Her arms weren't too badly broken until just a little time ago."

"Speaking of broken arms, you did a poor job of mending this one," Pomfrey sniffed at my failed efforts. "If you want a better education on how to perform this spell, I'll tell you what I'm doing as I mend these."

Her words distracted all of us from what I'd just confessed about assisting Centi with her 'delicate situation.' Grateful for the change of subject, I said, "Please work on my legs first. I mended one of them and it seemed okay, but you should check it."

"Yes, you mended that break very well," she admitted. "Any ideas why this one was successful and not your arm?"

"I think my leg was, I don't know, farther away from my head I guess. It was easier to work on because I could see it easier."

"That's a fair assumption. You do need to stand back a bit to do this properly. There's a temporary broken-bone mending spell that doesn't need the exact concentration." She placed her wand on the bed and said, "*Ossis Integro* completely mends a broken bone, but it takes concentration on the exact break and imagining the bone whole. The more you know about how the bone should be, the better it heals, but you did a fine enough job on your leg that I won't have to re-break it. Your arm will be different.

"Os *Sarcio* is a quick bone mending charm," she continued. "You just tap the broken arm or leg, whatever, and say the incantation. It fixes the nearest broken bone temporarily. It's good for a day or so, and you must never recast it on the same bone. Use *Ossis Integro* if you go more than twenty-four hours after that quick mend charm. Now stay still while I re-break and mend your arm."

I hurt like the dickens, but only for a second. I had some what functioning arms and legs. I had two badly broken ribs, which she healed next. She applied the Numbing charm to the two cracked ribs before fixing them, but hadn't applied it to my bruised ribs before we were interrupted.

We all three turned to the sound of snapping fingers. Centi held up her left arm a little, the one not in a traction device, and snapped for our attention.

Pomfrey said, "She can't speak. I have her face in a Localized Stasis, but she looks into my eyes like I should be able to read her mind."

"I can eye-speak to her," I said.

"What?" The two females asked in unison, it was like having Fred and George around, only without the humor.

"I tried Legilimency," I explained. "She's a basic Occlumens, but we couldn't communicate, so I modified Legilimency to communicate with her."

Now I'd gone and stepped in it. I'd have to tell them about my Spell Mongering, and they'd react like everyone else would. Centi told me about how people mistrusted to the point of hatred the idea of Spell Mongery, even though the last one died in the eleventh century. Dumbledore had warned me, too.

Not meeting their eyes, I asked, "Did Professor Dumbledore tell you about my new book from an old relative of mine?"

Pomfrey looked to McGonagall and the Transfiguration professor shook her head negatively.

Well, I instantly knew what to say to avoid the subject. "He asked that I keep it a secret, but let me just say I was able to create a way to communicate with Millicent with our eyes." I moved to rise from the table and inhaled sharply at my rib pain. "Please help me."

"You stay there, Potter. She's my patient and I'll look after her needs."

"No, ma'am. She knows I'm hurt and wouldn't call if it weren't necessary. Either help me over to her or get out of my way, er, please."

A quick *Locomotor* and I was hovering over Centi. "*How are you,*" I thought-asked her.

"Much better. You saved my life. You made the Portkey when you said you didn't know how, and you blew through the Hogwarts wards, to boot; not bad for a Gryffindor slacker."

I blushed. "*You were hurt bad. You would have died. Failure was not an attractive option."*

"I know. You always do what has to be done, even the impossible, don't you? Draco always despises how you succeed, saying you're just lucky, but he's wrong. Now I know just how wrong he is about you."

I needed to change the subject. I felt I was lucky more often than not, and my luck could easily run out one day. "*I'm glad to talk to you again, but you called me. How can I help you?"*

Her eyes looked away. They were still the same deep indefinable blue that kept my attention. There was misgiving and self-doubt in her gaze though. Only much later did I wonder how I could read so much from that one glance.

She turned her eyes back and a tear appeared in one of them. I reached down and brushed it away gently. I asked her again to tell me what was the matter.

"It's stupid and vain of me. I tried interrupting your conversation while they were pushing you, but the subject changed to your health and I snapped my fingers in frustration. I... I need to know..., Madam Pomfrey's fixed all of me up except my face. She told me about every bit of the damage elsewhere, and what to expect for healing, but she never mentioned my face. Ask her about it, please. I'm afraid, Harry."

I looked up from her. "Tell us about her face, please, Madam Pomfrey. You've done a grand job on fixing her up otherwise, and she's grateful. What can you tell us?"

"I put her tongue back into stasis. She should be all right but it needs to be repaired in conjunction with what is done to the rest of her mouth area. The muscles that control her jaw and tongue are interrelated, and their repairs will be also. Her face, well, I just don't have the training to put it back like it was. We'll have to wait for the Headmaster to see what we can do. But right now, in stasis, nothing will degenerate. Also, she's not in any pain from it, or shouldn't be. Ask her where she hurts. It should only be her ribs and collarbones, and those should hurt only a little. Her arms and legs should be all right as well. Overall she should just feel tired and a bit sore."

I looked down. "*She's right, Harry. I only hurt where she says and only a little. But, I'm... I'm afraid."*

"Please tell me why," I asked. "*I'll do whatever it takes to help you if there's any way possible, and if it's impossible, well, magic can do a lot, and we're always discovering new things it can do."*

"Thank you, Harry. I don't know where I'd be..."

"We'd both be dead without each other. Let's leave it at that."

At that moment, Professors Dumbledore and Snape charged into the room. Pomfrey moved me back to my bed. The Headmaster came my way, only glancing a moment at Centi, and Snape made his way to his house member, barely casting a sneer in my direction.

Harry, how did you come to be here? We were looking for you between Somerset and Little Whinging. How are you, my boy?"

"I'm fine, Professor. I figured there were Death Eaters all along the way to my Aunt's house. They have a rough idea where I live based on my trial last August. Did you run into any of them?"

"We did until yesterday, mid-morning; after that, we saw none of them. It worried us that you might have been captured. I sent Severus to check with Voldemort last night, and only just met up with him now, coming up from the gate."

I said, "Yesterday I had a run in with Auror Dawlish about that time. He said Fudge believes I killed all of the Bulstrodes and an Auror named Pew. Well, if I killed someone by that name he was wearing Death Eater robes."

"Severus?"

"There were three Death Eaters named Pew, two brothers and a cousin. The cousin was killed by Mister Granger," Snape sneered as if being killed by a Muggle didn't really count. "I was able to find out nothing about the search for these two, other than they were off on their own and Death Eaters were looking for them."

I explained about Dawlish, then backed up and told our whole story, tastefully omitting any details as to Centi's menstruation or the eye-talk conversations about our lives. Snape sneered at every mention I made of hitting a Death Eater with a curse or jinx. After several such instances Snape declared I was bragging and could not have done what I said. Millicent snapped her fingers at us and made a brief and difficult shake of her head to agree with me.

I completed my story and asked, "Madam Pomfrey said that it's up to you, Headmaster, what help we find for Millicent for her face. She says she can't fix it."

"Can't you just heal her broken jaw and cheekbone, Poppy," Snape asked. "Why bring in any outside help?"

"Severus," the matron said, "Without a surgeon to at least reassemble her face, she'll most likely be deformed and incapable of normal speech."

"Yes, but she will be safe," said Snape. "No one knows she's here now, and bringing in outside help will inform those keeping an ear out at St Mungo's where she is. I'm sure you can put her together as good as new, or nearly so. It's not like she's ever been much to look at."

When the two wizards had come into the Infirmary, Millicent struggled to sit up. Pomfrey helped her, and placed several pillows behind her back. I moved so I was sitting on the edge of my bed while this happened. Everything hurt, but I knew from that position I could move about if needed.

I watched Centi while Snape's words first frightened her, and then hurt her feelings as he started to talk about her looks. She was not a pretty girl by any means. Her jaw was too big; her cheekbones too prominent and, well, her face just wasn't put together well. She knew this and was resigned to the fact, but she didn't want to look like a Hag's nightmare.

It didn't take me long to figure out that she was my friend now, and as I wouldn't let this happen to any of my other friends, it wouldn't happen to Centi, either. And it really galled me that Dumbledore was nodding his head in agreement with what Snape was saying.

"No!" I shouted as I stood and made my way to her to interrupt Snape's cold assurances that all would be well. Both Dumbledore and Snape were in my way. "Shame on you, Headmaster for considering that idea. You know you'd never allow this if it were Hermione or Ginny who were injured, and I won't let it happen to Millicent."

Dumbledore said nothing, though his mouth hung open. Snape spoke however. "This is not your decision, Potter; you're not the Prince of Hogwarts making such decrees. I'm her head of house, and I say there is no reason to endanger her life just to make her face more appealing than it will be now. She never was--"

"Silence!" I screamed at him, wincing at the pain in my side as I raved at him. It was not my place to stop Snape from saying hurtful things about a student, but as the Headmaster and the other two staff members present had abdicated their roles, I wasn't going to stand there and let him continue.

"I'm not the prince of Hogwarts and you're not the King of England. It's her decision, and she told me she's worried she'll look bad--"

"How dare you!" Snape shouted, "I'm her head of house, and--"

"How dare me?" I asked. "How dare *you*? Where were you when she was being attacked? You're the high and mighty spy in Voldemort's ranks. Why couldn't you save her or at least warn them maybe?"

"There are certain risks I have to take, sacrifices I have to make," Snape said as if discussing the weather, not life and death. "All in her family were Voldemort's followers and I deemed them... The Headmaster knows I have to provide information and allow certain... events..."

"Shut up!" I shouted. "How can you say these things at all, must less in front of her? You are the most miserable excuse for an educator... Give me Umbridge over you any day. At least she only sent two dementors after me, where as you sent dozens of Death Eaters after her--"

Snape brandished his wand with a whirl and sent a wordless Cutting curse at me. I should have been able to dodge it, but all my ribs still weren't healed and I was too slow. The Cutter hit my right arm and blood flowed freely.

The thing is, like many clean cuts from very sharp instruments, I really didn't feel it much. It wasn't deep, and I decided to act instead of tending my wounds.

"Petrificus Totalis! Incarcerous!" Snape fell back against the wall, bound and stiff, but still able to hear my words, and boy did I have something to say.

Dumbledore and McGonagall were stunned by my actions, and Snape's, apparently, and barely had their wands drawn by the time I'd clipped his wings. Pomfrey bustled forward and began to minister to my arm. The two professors stood there, wands by their sides, at a loss what to do.

Madam Pomfrey made a fuss, muttering about teachers attacking students and students returning spell fire.

Dumbledore aroused from his stupor and moved to release Snape. McGonagall watched him and didn't see me fire off a Stinging hex at the Headmaster's bottom. It was like Dudley's Saturday morning cartoons when Dumbledore jumped into the air as the hex hit his posterior. McGonagall turned and I wordlessly summoned her wand. I pointed my wand at the Headmaster even though he didn't raise his my way.

"Harry, I must release Professor Snape--"

"Why?"

"Why what, Potter?" McGonagall asked.

"I'm speaking with the Headmaster at the moment, Professor. Why must you release your precious Professor Snape?"

"Well, er, he's a Hogwarts professor and--"

"Before you go on," I interrupted, "think long and hard about what he just said about a student in his very own house, and what he just did to me, a student in your school. *Then* answer me. The future of the chess pieces you've been pushing around the last few years depends on your response. Why must you release the person who betrayed one of your students to the Death Eaters and lethally assaulted another one before your eyes?"

"Potter," McGonagall spluttered.

"Not now, Professor, I'm waiting for the Headmaster's answer."

As McGonagall distracted me, Dumbledore once again moved to release Snape. In retrospect I'm sure Summoning the Headmaster's wand would be impossible in battle, but he wasn't expecting my actions.

Accio wand! Incarcerous! I tossed his wand on the bed besides McGonagall's. I'm sure he could have released himself from my bindings. I had only created a few strands around him and those weren't very tight, but Dumbledore simply turned back towards me in shock.

"Potter, how dare you?" my Albus-worshipping head of house shrieked at me. "'Tis a sad day when a Gryffindor turns magic on two professors and a Headmaster--"

"No, Professor," I interrupted her. "Tis truly a sad day when a Gryffindor head of house forgoes Gryffindor courage for self-serving expediencies. I've always believed that Gryffindor's house stood for something, yet you told me with Umbridge that I should keep my head down instead of doing the right thing. You know all about her Blood Quill, now. Do you know I spent over fifty hours writing with it because I refused to lie? And since I had no truly Gryffindor head of house to turn to, I sat and took it.

"Now, Professor, in Snape you side with an evil man who has harassed your students for years. A man who's sacrificed his own student and her family, and attacked one of your Gryffindors right in front of you. How very *Slytherin of you*." I tried to wield that last phrase like a knife in the gut. "How very Slytherin of you to side with the Headmaster, approving and promoting long-term gross misconduct of another professor."

"But, Harry, Severus is a Hogwarts Professor." She was calling me Harry again, and falling back on details to justify her actions. I was sure that later I would regret this, but at the moment I didn't care.

"That's the easy way out, Professor. Reprimand me since I did, after all, attack a professor, two now with the Headmaster, and I did take your wand, so make it three. Yet everything I said about your Professor Snape is true. Are you so tired of taking Gryffindor's complaints about Snape to this unhearing Headmaster that you, too, refuse to see the abuse? Or are you just like Umbridge? The Ministry says this or that, so it has to be true - that was her answer for everything. So is yours, if Dumbledore says so, it must be true?"

I had one more indictment to make turning to both of them. "I believe I've heard more than once from someone I thought worthy of listening to, that we should always do the right thing, not the easy thing."

Plainly McGonagall was stunned by my words. Dumbledore said, "But, Harry, we must let Severus act this way so he'll be acceptable as a spy for Voldemort."

"Only half true, Headmaster," I said taking him to task. "I'll agree that to a degree, your Professor Snape needs to act cruelly towards Gryffindors especially, as well as Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws. He also needs to favor Slytherins wherever possible. That last is right as head of that house, even if he were not trying to spy. *However*, and this is a big however, you as Headmaster have no reason to let him get away with much of his prejudiced actions at all.

"A Headmaster should be fair and just, requiring all staff members to act rightly. How many complaints have you received about Snape's behavior in and out of the classroom? A hundred? A thousand?"

"Snape needs to be disagreeable, but you need to bring him into line as you would any other professor doing what he does. If Professor McGonagall here had ten percent of the complaints Snape's had, wouldn't you have talked to her?"

"I have talked to Professor Snape, Harry on numerous occasions, particularly on your behalf as well as others I might add, and at Minerva's request."

"But has it done any good? Oh, perhaps he's curbed his enthusiasm a bit for a day, but he's always been back at me in short order, and it's gotten worse over time, leading up to his attacking me just now."

I sighed and winced in pain at my still hurting ribs. Pomfrey moved to work on me but I waved her off. She huffed at me and I continued my tirade ignoring her.

"Don't your staff members have a handbook or something? Isn't there a rule that says a staffer or teacher gets three or four warnings and then they're sacked?" Dumbledore started to speak here but I held up my hand and stopped him.

"I know, you're going to say he has to stay here as a spy. Well, because you haven't sacked him or clamped down on his excesses, I'd bet Voldemort already knows Snape's a spy."

Almost involuntarily all of us looked at Snape, who was still petrified and bound. His eyes only moved, and the expression on his face looked as if he was trying to cast the Killing Curse at me through them at this moment - or it could have been constipation, I've been known to misinterpret these things.

Dumbledore and McGonagall turned back to me, and he said, "How do you mean Voldemort already knows Severus spies for us?"

"Actually, Headmaster, I said that Voldemort already knows Snape is a spy. There is a difference. You've let him get away with gross misconduct as a professor too many times for him not to be something more to you than a simply one of your teaching staff. He has to be special to you, yet he comes and goes to Death Eater meetings, and you're not the least bit suspicious. Tom calls you an old fool, but he knows you're not stupid. You let Snape get away with constant misconduct, you let him protect all the little Death Eaters in training, and you let him come and go as he pleases. Tom must know *you think* Snape's your spy. But that's only one possibility"

I sighed and winced again at my rib pain. Madam Pomfrey didn't move this time. I guessed she was too busy wondering what I'd say next.

"The other possibility, and I think this one is true, because Snape isn't dead yet -- the other possibility is that he's really Voldemort's spy on you and the Order." The second I said this I ignored the gasps and looks of the others and looked directly at Snape. Too bad he was petrified; his restrictions stopped any facial expression that would have indicated any truth in my accusation. His eyes did go wide for a second, but it could just as easily been from shock as anger that I'd guessed.

I turned back to the others. "Tom is a madman, Headmaster, but he's not stupid; what he is, is barbarically cruel. If he's even suspected Snape's your man in any way, he would have penetrated Snape's mind with Legilimency. Finding barriers there, he would have assaulted them. If Snape is that good at Occlumency, and kept Tom out, Voldemort wouldn't have hesitated to torture him until he broke Snape or killed him.

I paused and stared into Dumbledore eyes. Partly I was daring him to use Legilimency on me, but mostly I wanted to see if he'd reveal anything in them.

Of course he didn't.

I continued before anyone else could. "Actually, *if* he is one against you, Snape being a spy isn't the most damaging thing he's done. I'd wager well over half the members of Slytherin in each year since I've been here at least are well on their way to being inducted as Death Eaters. Probably more. Oh, you've said that Zabini and Greengrass are neutral and Davis and Spinks have joined the Paladin Program, but too many are like Malfoy, Nott, and Parkinson."

I held up my hand again to stop Dumbledore. "I know Draco and Pansy became Paladins, but Millicent thinks that's the funniest thing she's heard in a while, and she thought that before her family was attacked. I'll bet you a thousand Galleons Draco proves he doesn't believe any of your Paladin chivalry ideas before Christmas break.

"Also, I think Millicent will admit that if she hadn't been attacked, she would have gone right into the arms of Voldemort, and your Professor Snape hasn't done a thing to stop her. His actions and words have probably encouraged her that way."

I looked Centi's way and she slowly nodded in agreement with me.

Then another point came to me. "How many Death Eaters has your Professor Snape told you Voldemort has?"

Dumbledore looked confused at the question, but soon answered, "He reported somewhere between thirty-five and forty-five I'd say."

The pain from my bleeding arm was getting to me, as well as the rest of my injuries. I sighed and cackled, "Well, let's celebrate. Centi and I have killed at least that many in the last few days. I'll give you the Pensieve memories to prove it." I looked at her and she nodded her head even more vigorously.

Hurting, spent, and knowing not what else to say from here, I just stopped.

Madame Pomfrey fidgeted, wanting to finish her work on me. I'd shoed her off after she'd barely stopped my arm from bleeding.

Realizing I was finished, Dumbledore simply closed his eyes for a second and the ropes I'd cast around him disappeared. I knew he wasn't really held back, but I'd hoped his willingness to stay in my constrictions was a sign he was truly listening.

Silly me.

"Well, Mr. Potter," Dumbledore said, "you seem to have me over a barrel. I suppose I will take Professor Snape outside and then release him. I'll see he doesn't enter here again until he is ready to act with more decorum, and I apologize to you and Miss Bulstrode." Dumbledore then moved towards Snape once more.

I saw red. "That's it? You'll take him somewhere for the time being because I have you over a barrel? I'm very disappointed in you, Headmaster. Fawkes!"

Almost as quickly as I said the bird's name he flamed into the room and circled once, trilling his wonderful tunes before he landed on the bed beside me. I noticed everyone in the room seemed to calm with his song, except Snape.

"Hello, Fawkes," I said, while stroking the feathers on his back. He leaned into my hand and crooned tunelessly with my touch. "I'm sorry to bother you, but will you please fetch Professor Dumbledore's Pensieve?" Fawkes nodded and was gone in another burst of flame.

I turned to the Headmaster. "My apologies for not asking you first, sir, but there are some memories you three need to see before we go forward."

Fawkes flashed into the Infirmary again and plopped the stone device down next to me. Without really taking my eyes off of anyone in the room, except Millicent and Pomfrey, I pulled strand after strand of liquid recollections from my mind.

When I was finished I placed the Pensieve on a rolling table Pomfrey used to put meals before patients so they won't have to get out of bed to eat. "Professor, I'm not sure how to make this thing project my memories. I want you all to see, including Madam Pomfrey here, and Centi, er, that is Millicent."

Obliging me, curiosity manifest on his face, Dumbledore stepped up and tapped his wand on the Pensieve. He stepped back and now everyone, including Snape himself could see.

I started with my very first Potions class and the humiliation I received for not knowing fifth year Potions questions. I showed a number of snippets of classes over the years, including the ones where points were taken for things Malfoy did to our cauldrons to make them explode or overflow. Even I hadn't realized that quite often Snape was watching all of this and still took points from us, but the memories made it obvious.

I showed the constant insults Neville and I endured, and several hurled at other Gryffindors. I showed how Hermione was hit by the hex in our fourth year that caused her teeth to grow. I was glad I had McGonagall's wand when she heard Snape say that he didn't see any difference in Hermione's six-inch teeth. I'd always known she was McGonagall's favorite, but I'd hoped for a little sympathy along the way for myself.

I ended with excerpts from several of my Occlumency lessons from the year before. Up to this point my two unpetrified professors were at first stunned, and then disheartened by what they saw of the completely ineffective mind lessons. McGonagall went beyond disheartened into angry. The book I read on Occlumency clearly stated how to start learning that mind art. Snape's "Clear your mind," and then attack method was there, presented in the book as a valid training exercise only for those in the last stages of gaining their Mastery in the subject.

As my memories ended I said before any one else could, "I've given you example after example of completely incompetent teaching skills, malice, favoritism, and bad behavior. I've shown you a multi-year pattern of abusing students and educational malpractice. Can you honestly say that you'd tolerate a tenth of that from any other professor in this school? Snape doesn't teach; he just puts a formula on the board, tells us to get busy, and then harasses us while we try to make it with no help from a proper instructor."

I went on before any response. "Now, just today, your Professor Snape has cruelly insulted a member of his house. He's admitted to knowing about the attack on her family ahead of time, and letting it happen with no warning. And, he attacked me first with a potentially fatal curse. Now, I have two questions for you, Headmaster. First, with you letting Snape get away with everything you've done so far, how could Voldemort *not* think you believe Snape spies for you? Second, why did you say that I have you over a barrel, when all I have asked for is fair and even treatment? Why do I have to force you to do the obviously right thing? But that makes three questions. Actually, I'm more interested in what blackmail material he has on you, as your actions are not those of a rational man with the ability to think strategically."

Dumbledore winced at his choice of words just minutes ago. I let him stew in his own juices. Dumbledore looked at me in an indecipherable way. To her credit McGonagall looked traumatized. Perhaps I was too hard on her, but then again, maybe not.

Centi snapped her fingers and I ignored everyone else and went to her.

"Harry, Snape, that... that bast-"

I held up my hand and mind-chuckled. *"Please, Centi, my delicate Gryffindor sensibilities. You don't have to use such language. I know what he is."*

"Yes, well..." She looked away and back immediately. *"Well, I just found out what he thinks of me, so the gloves are off. You know how he doesn't teach in class, he just puts up a formula and hopes for students to fail? Well he does teach us Slytherins what we need to know, the night before in our common room so we know what to do in class."*

I smiled. *"I can tell them this?"* She nodded as pain ran across her frozen face. I put my hand on her shoulder and eye-spoke, *"Thanks. I could kiss you for this."*

I turned and told McGonagall and Dumbledore what Centi had said.

"How can you speak to her, Harry?" Dumbledore asked.

I was exasperated as to what to say. I stared at him to make him even more uncomfortable. Then Millicent snapped her fingers on her working hand again so I left him to steep in his failings.

"Now, I'm going to talk to Millicent," I said. "You can choose to release Professor Snape or even bind me. Do as you please. However, since I have to force you to do the right thing, rest assured that if you let him go now, or attack me; I'll be enrolled next term in a proper school in New Zealand."

I was breathing raggedly from the pain from my remaining unhealed wounds and the exertions of the past minutes. I took a steadying breath and looked down into Centi's eyes.

"I can't believe you just did that!" She thought to me first thing.

"What, attack Snape, accuse McGonagall, or yell at Dumbledore?"

"Well," Centi said, "All three, really, but mostly stand up for me."

"Well, your head of house had no business saying that about you, and as for McGonagall, she needs to re-evaluate her priorities."

"Would you really go to New Zealand?"

I smiled mischievously at her. "I would, but it's an idle threat. It will never come to that, but if it did, I'm sure the school down there would let us in."

"Us?"

I looked down. I realized I'd jumped ahead of myself. "If things got so bad that I'd leave, I'd offer to take all of my friends with me. You have no one to stay here for, so I just supposed..."

"Harry, I'm glad you want me with you, but neither of us is going to leave. You need Dumbledore. Don't press him too much. Now, I don't want you in any more trouble, so let's just let Pomfrey work on my face and--"

"No! A surgeon can fix you up and there's no reason not to bring one here. Pomfrey says you're good for a while. And Galleons speak. So does my fame. I'll get someone here to help you. Oh, by the way, do they even have plastic surgeons at St. Mungo's?"

"What's a, er, plastad, er surgeon?"

"Plastic surgeon. It's a Muggle term. It's a surgeon that can change a person's face to get rid of wrinkles, make their noses smaller, remove scars, make people prettier or more handsome."

"Prettier?" She turned away for a second and then turned back. I had heard a trace of hope in her unspoken voice. She placed what little sternness she could create on her face and eye-spoke, "There's no money for such things. I'll make do with Madam Pomfrey. Besides there's little you could do with my face."

I turned, having made a decision while we'd been speaking; I was going to call in a few markers in the Wizarding world.

"Madam Pomfrey, the Muggles have plastic surgeons, someone who puts faces back together and does it right. Is there a magical equivalent?"

She looked off for a moment. Dumbledore and McGonagall tried to speak to me but I raised my hand rudely to them and didn't even look their way.

"Surgical-wizard Timothy Binderly is visiting from America this month, teaching at St. Mungo's on fixing burn victims' faces. I guess he could be called in. He was a student at St. Mungo's in the early eighties studying war injuries when you defeated You-Know-Who. He might come if you call."

"How long before something has to be done to help Millicent?"

"We must do something by tomorrow, early afternoon at the latest I'd say."

I turned back to the two professors and folded my arms, which hurt like you wouldn't believe unless you've ever had ribs in my condition. I grimaced, but kept my arms folded gingerly against my chest.

"Harry," Dumbledore spoke first, "with your permission I'll take Professor Snape out and talk with him about all of this. I won't allow him back in here unless he assures me of his proper behavior. I'll only take a minute or two and then we'll see what can be done for Miss Bulstrode."

I stepped to where Snape could see me better. "Shame on you, Professor Snape," I spat his name. "Insulting a student of your house, shirking your responsibilities, and not trying to do your best by her. And now that you've assaulted me, things *will* be different. If I understand it correctly, because Hogwarts is associated with the Ministry of Magic, I can sue you before the Wizengamot Judiciary for attacking a student. .

"I've *never* sought fame or used my name as you've accused me, *and you know it*. But rest assured, I'll go to any lengths and use every Boy-Who-Lived favor I can call on to ruin you if you ever treat me or my friends badly again, and that includes Millicent."

"Grow up. You're not fifteen and fighting my father any more."

turned. "Fawkes, you've heard what I've said, would you please stay here so you can protect me and Millicent from any attackers? I know I can trust you, and you, too, Madam Pomfrey," I added, turning to the mediwitch and giving her a friendly nod.

Then I turned back to Dumbledore and said, "You may take him with you and release him, but please return as quickly as possible. Your number one priority should be the student that's so hurt right now she needs a special surgeon."

He levitated Snape away and I turned slightly to address my head of house. "Professor McGonagall, I'm sorry for my words--"

She rushed to me and took my hands. It startled me and I backed up, stumbling a bit when I hit the bed. My ribs reminded me they hurt - a LOT - and I inhaled sharply in pain.

"You're still very hurt, Harry," she said, her eyes moist. Let me--" She helped me into bed and Madam Pomfrey came forward and began knitting my ribs back into place. Fortunately none of my skeletal damage crushed anything so badly I'd need Skele-Gro. In no time I felt considerably less pain, and could breathe easily. I hadn't realized how much I'd been hurting until it didn't any more.

Once again I turned to McGonagall. "I apologize for being so severe with you. I was in pain, but that's no excuse." Although Dumbledore hadn't looked a bit repentant, McGonagall was now nearly in tears. The Slytherin side of me realized she could be a powerful ally if I needed to continue fighting the Headmaster.

Okay, being the angry, disrespectful bloke isn't really me at all. I felt horrible for saying what I had, but I was only going to apologize to those who showed that they finally got it.

My head of house had completely dropped her Scottish dourness. "I'm sorry, Harry," she said. "I've no real excuse on any of this. I'd grown tired of fighting Albus about Severus long before your first year, and you never said anything."

"Yes," I admitted, Pomfrey's pain relief potions relaxing me and my tongue. "I learned never to complain from the Dursleys."

That brought more stricken looks from McGonagall. "Indeed, another failure on my part. I should have insisted you go anywhere else, but about last year. I comforted myself that I stayed to protect you from Dolores' excesses, and perhaps I did slow her a bit, but... but if I'd have known about the Blood Quill... Oh, dear!"

Looking down, she had seen the words still carved in the back of my hand. McGonagall raised my scarred hand to her face and cried over it as if her tears would heal the marks.

I was distinctly uncomfortable with her crying, more so that most teenaged boys might be. You can imagine how tears were greeted at the Dursleys.

I reached my other hand up and patted her face awkwardly. She looked at me. "Professor, I'm sorry I unloaded on you like that. Please believe me. I've never thought of you as uncaring or cowardly. I was shocked by Professor Dumbledore's reaction and other things that happened between the two of us the night Sirius You just got caught in the blast of my anger at him."

By this time McGonagall had wiped her eyes and nose with a handkerchief, and was composing herself. "Aye, Harry, I've asked Albus about that night." Her brogue seemed heavier during this emotional time. "He's refused to say anything, and I'm not asking you to tell me of it, but I'm here for you, lad, for that and whatever else may arise. Please allow me the opportunity to help you in the future."

"Agreed," I said and smiled. "As long as you agree to correct me if you feel you need to."

"Rest assured, Potter." Ah yes, we were back to me being 'Potter,' but her smile was genuine. "But I promise to listen better and make sure we both understand each other, and agree together on the *right* course; the Devil take the easy path." I smiled up at her in my slightly potion-addled state. She then did the most un-McGonagall like thing I've ever seen her do. She reached forward and ruffled my hair like I was a little boy. For some odd and inexplicable reason I found it comforting.

Minutes after he had left, the Headmaster came back into the Infirmary. He looked to Pomfrey and McGonagall, who both merely returned his gaze, and then Dumbledore looked at me as if at a loss for words. I decided to give him a full minute to offer to help Millicent, before I either demanded his help or demanded Pomfrey release me so I could go to St. Mungo's to find this Surgical-wizard Binderly.

I counted slowly to sixty so I wouldn't have to look at my watch.

It was at twenty-two by my count that Dumbledore said, "Harry, why don't I go invite Timothy Binderly to come here and treat Miss Bulstrode?"

"Please do that, Professor, and be as persuasive and resourceful as the Supreme Mugwump can be. And sir, money is no object. I inherited a lot of Galleons from Sirius. I'll spend what it takes to make this happen now rather than later. Do whatever it takes to get him here soon." I hesitated, then added, "Please, er, sir. It's important."

"I will do my best, Harry," Dumbledore said.

"Well your best should have him here very soon," I replied. "Thank you, Professor."

~*~*~

The rest of that day had fleeting moments of interest, but on the whole it was as boring as a rainy Saturday.

McGonagall helped me back to bed and adjusted my pillows so that I could sit up. Then she offered a profuse apology for her outbursts about Snape and about Umbridge. I assured her again that I had spoken out of my pain. I also told her that keeping my head down was good advice that I

was not likely to ever--ever. It would be several months before McGonagall wasn't just a little bit more attentive towards me than she was to other Gryffindors, and that extra care would help me several times.

Dumbledore came back to the Infirmary well after 3:00. He told us that Binderly wanted to meet me and help out. However, he was booked all day and early tomorrow morning as well with training surgeries to perform. He'd be here by mid to late morning to work on Centi. Dumbledore assured me that Binderly knew noon was Centi's limit.

By this time, I was completely put back together, but I was exhausted from my wounds and lack of sleep, and glad to stay in bed. My various bandages would be removed the next morning, and with the possible exception of some additional scars, I'd be as good as new.

The Headmaster asked about how I made a Portkey and I told him I didn't really know how I did it. The simple truth was that I just *had to* to save Millicent, so I did it. After a bit of discussion we figured it was a bit of Spell Mongery added to exhausted, adrenalin-laced accidental magic. I didn't really believe that, but it was as good an explanation as any.

When Centi woke, I got out of bed and staggered over to speak to her. Dumbledore cautioned me, but I told him I needed to tell her what was going on.

"How are you feeling, Centi?"

"Tired, sore, and my face hurts a little. What news? I see Dumbledore's back."

"Yes, the surgical-wizard Pomfrey knew about will be here tomorrow morning. I'll make sure he does a good job. Is there anyone in particular you want to look like when this is all over? Celestina Warbeck? Fleur Delacour? One of the Weird Sisters?" I chuckled to make sure she knew I was kidding, and then added, *"Your regular face will be fine with me, you'll look better with a kind smile, I'm sure."*

"Harry, please grab the photo album you saved from my house. It has a couple of recent photos of me in it. Oh, and ask the Headmaster for me if he'll have someone check my house and see if they burned it down completely, or if some things like my clothes can be retrieved."

I turned to do as she asked and Dumbledore stopped me.

"Harry, are you somehow talking to Miss Bulstrode through Legilimency?"

"No, sir. I tried that and it didn't work. She had a few basic Occlumens shields, but let them down right away for me. Even with her mind organized through Occlumency, I couldn't communicate really. She did show me a picture of sorts of where to search for a few prized possessions when we escaped, but we couldn't talk.

"No, I pulled up my Spell Monger's Spell Scrutinizer and looked at Legilimency, which really didn't tell me anything. I'm too new at Mongering to be able to analyze a spell that complex. So, I just thought about the Mind magics, and then I just mongered something in place and bullied it into working for me through sheer will power, I guess. I cast it on Millicent and we are able to speak, somehow, through our eyes." I paused to consider my explanation.

"No, actually I cast it on myself," I said. "I *'think'* the spell, there is no incantation. I just think about engaging it and I seem to be able to feel it come up. Then I look into her eyes and we can communicate.

"I call it eye-speak as a matter of fact. We have to look at each other and when we are, we can hear all of our thoughts, not just what we want to say. It caused a few embarrassments, but Millicent and I made it through the rough spots." I smiled towards Centi and she raised her hand and waved at us in agreement, I guess. Her eyes smiled and she nodded slowly.

By this time both Pomfrey and McGonagall were muttering about Spell Mongery, though neither sounded angry over it, just perplexed about how I had become involved in it.

It's grossly misunderstood and I was tired of it. I raised my voice a bit and said, "Please ladies, Spell Mongery is just like Healing spells and Transfiguration. I can use a Bone Resetting spell on a person's skull and kill him, or I can transfigure a person into a fish and let them die, painfully, on dry land from asphyxiation. Spell Mongering is no different. Please tell them, Headmaster."

"Harry is correct, ladies. Spell Mongery is much misunderstood branch of magic and the Arithmantic Spell Crafters at the Ministry have spread many falsehoods on the subject throughout the centuries."

He then turned back to me. "Harry, it is most remarkable that you've created a way to speak mind-to-mind through the eyes."

"I guess so, sir, but I did it in desperation and not using standard Mongering procedures. therefore, I don't know how to cast the spell into my Monger's Spell Scrutinizer to see what I created. I have a new piece of magic and I'm too new at Mongering to figure out what it is and how it works. I hope with experience I can figure out how to package it for sale. I'd charge a Knut just to get the spell out there for use by people with problems speaking."

"That's quite humanitarian of you, Harry. I wasn't aware that Spell Mongery was such a precise craft. I believe you when you say it is falsely maligned by the Ministry Arithmantic Spell Crafters, but your description of hammering and banging a spell into shape led me to believe it a crude practice."

"They use a lot of iron monger words, or what we call blacksmithing today," I explained, "but Mongers follow strict safety practices and I'm required to document everything very carefully. That's why I'm unhappy about this eye-speak. I wasn't able to follow procedures. I broke the rules, but I think other Mongers, if we had any alive today, would understand the emergency nature of what I did. I can't wait to get back to Grind's journal and research dealing with such accidents."

"Grind?" McGonagall queried. "As in Telemachus Grind?"

I couldn't avoid rolling my eyes as I went on to explain to her and Poppy Pomfrey about how Dobby brought me the journal of the house-elves' First Master, my many generations ago ancestor, Telemachus Grind. Grind was the last Spell Monger. He is greatly reviled in the British magical world, though there is no clear statement as to why. I have difficulty reconciling this hatred of him and the man who wrote the journal entries I've read. Of course, I bet Tom Riddle has nice things to say about himself in his memoirs.

McGonagall and Pomfrey eventually agreed, with Dumbledore's persistent chiding, to give me the benefit of the doubt. I told them stories of some of the great spells lost to history because no Spell Monger had lived past Grind's death to make the spell available to the public.

Eventually they both acknowledged that I had a point when I stated even simple magic could be used for evil, and blood magic was used everyday when a witch or wizard used a finger prick to make their personal diaries unavailable to anyone but themselves. I promised to never Monger anything evil. I didn't bother to explain that this promise didn't extend to violent magic when it came to fighting Death Eaters.

This was going along too easily. My life hadn't been threatened and no major cause of pain had hit me in over seven hours. Oh, yes, there was Snape's attack, but that hardly counts, compared to Death Eaters.

Of course, things had gone entirely too smoothly for the last few hours. This was one of the rare days in the entire Paladin Program. Today each Paladin took two Acceleration Potions. Missing the potion at 7:00 woke me up with major pain. The next one would be worse.

As the clock above the Entrance Hall struck 4:00, I was gut-shot. Well, not literally, but a small caliber bullet might have hurt less. I lurched up from my bed where Dumbledore, McGonagall, and Pomfrey were listening to me describe the Monger's Spell Scrutinizer, the tool I used to look at spells and charms.

"*ARGGHH!*" I would have fallen off of the bed, but for Dumbledore's quick action to hold me in place on the hospital bed.

"The Acceleration Potion!" Poppy shouted.

"Harry," Dumbledore asked with concern. "When was the last time you took one?"

"Monday morning," I barely made clear.

"It's too late to give him the current dose, and we can't give him a Catch-Up Potion while he's like this." Dumbledore stated. He held up his left hand and a vial of purple something shot into his fingers from a cabinet on the other side of the room. The stopper flew off with no effort and he had it in my mouth in an instant.

In less than a minute the pain was over - all except for a queasy feeling in my gullet.

I just knew this wasn't good. "I'm out of the Paladin Program now, aren't I?" I wanted to vomit. I wanted this program. Dumbledore said he designed it with me in mind.

The mediwitch explained, "That potion ended the program for you now, Potter, but you're not out. You are still within the time period where you can be reinstated." She looked at her watch. It's 4:00, in eight hours, at midnight, you can take a potion that brings you back up to speed. You'll be out for twelve to sixteen hours, but then you'll be back in the program. It will hurt some, but not anywhere near as much as your ribs hurt earlier."

Centi snapped her fingers and I walked over. That potion did the trick and I was feeling much better than the gut slam would have indicated.

I engaged my Eye-Speak spell. *Harry, ask if I can start on the program after I'm well.*

I turned from her and spoke to them. They'd followed me over to her bed. "Centi wants to know if it's not too late to start the program potions."

Dumbledore looked at Poppy. She finally said, "Tomorrow is the twenty-first day of the program. It's the cut off point to join all of the others. Even though it's an evening potion, she won't be fully recovered enough from the surgery. But she could start the next day in the evening, couldn't she, Headmaster?"

"She could and just run a day behind everyone else. The problem is that she will be out of schedule with everyone else in the program and her Paladin 'visits' won't align with anyone else except for perhaps one day in six or seven. We could try to find other fifth years like Colin Creevey to visit with her, but there is the security risk. Severus has reported that Voldemort is most anxious to see her dead."

He turned to me. "You've made many valid points about Professor Snape, Harry, but you fail to see that he was correct that Miss Bulstrode is in grave danger. I'll willingly admit it is hard to see in the midst of everything else he said."

"I don't doubt you or him on that, Professor, but I have a solution. I'll not take the restart potion until Centi is safely through her surgery. That way I won't be knocked out tomorrow when Binderly comes by. I'll wait and take my potion when she does, and then we'll visit together whenever possible. I believe you mentioned here will be the safest place for her?"

"She will stay here, Harry, but I must insist you start your potions this evening. Timing is more crucial for you than her, because you've already been on the potions."

Seeing my anger rising Pomfrey explained further, "The elements are already in your nervous and blood system, Potter. You've been to the limit of not being engaged before we can restart you. As it is, you'll hurt, but waiting even until tomorrow will increase the pain immensely. And waiting two more days to start with Missed Bulstrode will bring the pain level up to unbearable."

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In the Eye of the Beholder

Chapter Four - The Things I Do For Science

Chapter Four - The Things I Do For Science

My gratitude goes to my writing coaches, Pamela St Vines and Kokopelli, and to my beta reader, Sparky40sw

~*~*~*~*~

In the last Chapter

In the last chapter, Severus Snape left the Infirmary furious at Harry. Once he departed the discussion turned to Millicent's request to join the Paladin Program. The Program had been running several weeks, and the last moment she could take the Paladin Catch-Up potion would be right after she had recovered from her surgery. This would put her out of sync for the necessary Paladin visits.

Harry determined to postpone taking the Reactivation potion so he could coordinate his visits with Centi. This was a dangerous and painful decision. When the extreme levels of discomfort from waiting two days to take that potions were described to him, Harry still refused to reactivate any sooner, but asked if there might be any way to reduce his agony.

"Harry," Dumbledore began, "You've asked the one man who can answer your questions to go away."

I stared at him for a long moment. "Please invite Professor Snape to join us if you will. I'm sure he will delight in discussing howto lessen my pain a bit, since I'm volunteering for a lot more of it."

~*~*~*~*~

Considering how furious he was at me, Snape sat impassively during Dumbledore's explanation of the situation. Finally the potions master spoke, "I will prepare Miss Bulstrode's initial potion for two nights from now. Potter's will take a little more time to research thoroughly, he might be able to take a mild pain reliever just before it starts to lessen his discomfort a bit, but only a bit."

He rose to go and I just knew this went entirely too easily. "Excuse me, Professor Snape, I truly mean no disrespect, but after our recent exchanges, you seem entirely too willing to help me. May I ask why?"

Snape gave his trademark sneer, drew his wand but pointed it only up and over his heart. Then he said, "On my magic, I swear I will do my best to make the potions for Harry Potter as correctly and effectively as I possibly can. So mote it be." A silvery light illuminated him for a moment.

After I picked my jaw up off the floor, and everyone else in the room did likewise, it was McGonagall who had to asked, "Severus, why did you make such a pledge?"

Grinning wickedly Snape said, "Because, Madam, with the maximum dose of pain relieving potions compatible with the mixture I must brew for his exact situation, Potter will be in excruciating pain for at least twelve hours; and on a happier note, by waiting to take it on Friday night rather than tonight as is proper, he will have a one in nineteen chance of dying." He grinned genuinely at me, and said, "Care to wait until Saturday when the odds are one in ten, or how about Sunday when death will be a one in three chance?"

Then Dumbledore spoke up, and what he said went a long way towards healing our present breach.

"Well then, Severus, since this magical oath insists you do all you can to ensure effectiveness, as the commissioner of the brewing series you committed to produce, I remind you that at the outset you also promised you could make all potions safely for each program participant. That is the definition of effectiveness in accomplishing the desired results of the potion in question.

"Therefore, retaining your magic depends on you being able to resolve the aspects of the potion that would kill Mr. Potter. I suggest you begin your research immediately."

Snape turned green and then white. He wordlessly turned and lurched out of the door.

Dumbledore beamed at us and McGonagall quickly asked him if he was mad.

"Perhaps, Minerva, many have said so over the years. However, I have read the brewing instructions for the various forms of the Paladin potions and all the many supporting concoctions, and having been apprenticed by Nicolas Flamel, I am no mean brewer myself. I know of at least one ingredient that will render the potion non-lethal for Harry."

Dumbledore paused and turned my way as he said, "Harry, Severus is correct in one matter, there will be pain; most probably you will pass out from it, but not before experiencing untold agonies. Won't you consider at least starting the potions tomorrow night? Miss Bulstrode will only be one day behind you and we can find enough volunteers to make sure she has companions for all of her Paladin visits."

I pondered this for only a moment. "No, sir. I'll go through this with Centi. I feel honor bound to be with her. She's taking on a great deal because of my words over the last two days. I'll see this through *with* her. Although, perhaps you'll consider stunning me or something when if it becomes too much for me."

He looked at me for a moment. "I'll check to see if that will be advisable, Harry. If so, I'll do it or see if another spell or charm will do, if no relieving potion is acceptable."

"Thank you, sir. I've been through a lot of pain, just ask Madam Pomfrey, but that doesn't mean I'm looking for more if I can avoid it."

My generally favorable relations with Dumbledore lasted only until the next morning.

~*~*~

The morning began with me going from a dreamless slumber to an annoyed wakefulness in the course of less than a second; the transition was about as unpleasant as other crashes at high speed.

"Hi ya, Mate. We're glad to see you're safe. Whatcha doing sleeping so close to a Slytherin, and *that* Slytherin particularly?"

~*~*~

The night before Centi and I eye-spoke for quite a while after all the others left us alone. After an hour Pomfrey insisted we try to sleep. Centi's bed was a space away and across from me, and our mediwitch drew a partition between us when we actually slept, but during waking hours we could easily see each other. I insisted on sitting or standing near her as much as possible. I was her only communications link with anyone, and I could only imagine that if the tables were turned I'd want her close by to talk to as well.

"Harry, please take the Paladin potion tonight," Centi eye-spoke to me, "or at least tomorrow night when it will be much less painful than the night I take it. I can go it alone. Dumbledore promised to find all the guys I need to visit with. You've done so much for me. Do this for me too."

It was hard, even after all our practice eye-speaking not to think about just how pretty Centi's eyes were. I guess the ravages of her face made them stand out even more for their beauty. I'm almost sure she didn't "hear" me thinking that.

"No," I eye-spoke back. "I have a feeling you and I are going to be in this together pretty closely. If Snape felt it appropriate to report back that Voldemort wants you dead, you are in danger."

"But, Harry, Dumbledore said I could stay here. And this is the safest place in Great Britain, isn't it?"

"Oh, yeah, for the most part it's safe. Definitely safe from army-sized Death Eater attacks. But do you know how many times I've almost been killed either here at Hogwarts or because of something going on at Hogwarts?"

She painfully shook her head.

"Well, in first year once in the Forbidden Forest, once on the Quidditch pitch, and once when I fought Voldemort who was riding the back of Quirrell's head. In second year once again in the Forbidden Forest, and then in the Chamber of Secrets. Oh, yes, and Filch wanted to strangle me, and Lockhart tried to wipe my mind clean permanently."

I smiled at her. "Then in third year..." The count eventually came to twenty times that I'd been in grave peril while on the very-safe Hogwarts grounds.

"So, what are you saying, Harry?"

I looked down, and decided not to tell her what I was really thinking. I wasn't sure what I was really thinking. Instead, I eye-said, "Just that I want to better understand just how you'll be safer here at Hogwarts before you commit that this is the place for you. Paladin Program or not, you're a major target for Voldemort, apparently up there with Dumbledore and me now. Besides just staying here at Hogwarts, you need to know what other security measures will be in place for you specifically."

I continued, but not mentioning the best method I knew of to protect her - the ultimate solution - which wasn't really what I wanted to do, but I was *willing* to do it for her safety.

"There is a place outside of Hogwarts. It's not ideal, but convenience takes a back seat to staying alive in my mind these days. I own a house. It's used as a headquarters by a group that Dumbledore leads. They're fighting the Death Eaters. It's even more secure than Hogwarts, but it's also a dreary place, depressing even. I just mention it because I want you to know we have options, you have options. So don't just accept the first plan they give you."

I had time and blood invested in keeping Centi alive. I didn't want Dumbledore to bungle her life away, assuming she was protected like I'd been, *safe* all these years here at school, or at the Dursleys'.

~*~*~

"Hi ya, Mate. We're glad to see you're safe. Whatcha doing sleeping so close to a Slytherin, and *that* Slytherin particularly?"

When you miss sleeping completely for a day or more, Hermione would explain much later, you don't really experience the best sleep the first night you go to it. Something about dream cycles and other psychological mumbo-jumbo. Well, when I woke up that particular morning, it was with a vicious headache. One quick potion and it would be gone, but Madam Pomfrey wasn't there just that moment, and the axe in my forehead had me just a bit on edge - -that is ready to spit dragon fire.

"Ron, I hope you're joking," I said sternly.

My tone of voice would tell perfect strangers to tread wary around me, but my best mate Ron was never one to pick up on people's feelings, even if they were broadcasting those feelings with the accompaniment of a brass band.

"What flew up your kazoo, mate?" Ron asked.

No, Ron *didn't* catch my warning.

"After all, it's just Fattie Bulstrode. I don't know why you even bothered to save--Oof!"

My brain was pounding like a jackhammer, but I still managed to rise swiftly and stick my wand into Ron's face, hitting his right cheek. Hermione had moved to quiet him as well, but I arrived first.

"You bloody, inconsiderate pig!" I said. "She's right here, and probably awake, thanks to your clomping big feet and your ruddy loud mouth. Do you have to insult her too? She's in a bad way, and that's after Pomfrey healed most of what ails her."

During the time I said this Ron's face went from startled, to perplexed, to angry -- at me.

"Why should I care, Harry, and why do you? You remember what she did on the Inquisitorial Squad, don't you? She *is* fat, isn't she?"

"Yeah," I interrupted. "And you're a carrot top and poor as a church mouse. Do you like it when Malfoy rubs your nose in it?"

He didn't like this, and raised his fists.

Hermione intervened.

"Ron, I have more reason to dislike Millicent than you do, but still, you shouldn't say such things, and you know it. It's only worse with her laying there."

"I come all this way to see him," he said to Hermione, pointing towards me, "and he jumps down my throat."

"Did you came all this way," I retorted, "to insult Millicent, mate?"

"No," Ron replied, straightening his non-existent lapels on his shirt, "that was just a bonus. Dumbledore sent us to see how you're doing and to try to figure out what's up with you and Bulstrode."

"Ron," Hermione tried to intervene. Ginny hadn't said a thing in this unreal start of a hospital visit. Whatever she was thinking, she sure looked uncomfortable.

Ron threw off Hermione's warning hand, which I've heard is not a good thing for a boyfriend to do. He said, "Blimey, mate, why are you all so fired up over Bulstrode? I understand it's your 'saving-people-thing' to charge in and fight those Death Eaters, but couldn't you leave her there for the Aurors? Even Dumbledore doesn't understand. That's why he sent us."

"Ron!" Hermione tried harder to interrupt his tirade. It might have gone better if she'd had a mallet - but then again, this was classic Ron, so maybe not.

"He sent for us," Ron charged ahead, "and asked us to talk sense into you. He said you're going to spend good Galleons, putting her face back together, maybe even trying to make her prettier."

"And you're thinking maybe I should use the money to buy you a new broom instead, huh Ron?"

Ron's face gave away his desire, but before he could say anything...

"Silencio!" Hermione shut him up, and none too soon. Ginny pulled Ron back and away from the two of us. Ginny always was good for direct action.

Hermione stepped between Ron and me, and then turned to face me. "Harry, please ignore my prat of a boyfriend. He and I will have a long chat about manners and priorities, I promise."

She took a deep breath and turned her withering gaze on Ron, who duly shrunk before her stare.

She turned back to me and continued, "We're here to see about you, *and* Millicent. You two have been through a lot together. I understand your ties, having been in more than one fight by your side. Our fights didn't last as long, we weren't hurt as badly as either of you were, and we didn't have to kill anyone, but still, I think I understand how you feel."

She paused and took a breath, looking at Ron who now had the good sense to look down in embarrassment. "We're just concerned about you, both you and her, but since you're our friend we are understandably more concerned about you."

I looked into her eyes for several silent moments. I turned and looked at Ginny, who was staring at Centi at that second. Then I looked at Ron. He looked at me with an unfathomable gaze, one telling me he didn't understand me at all, or so I guessed.

"Ron, you're my best mate." I looked over to Ginny. "And Ginny, you stood by me in the Department of Mysteries, for which I'm eternally grateful." I turned and faced Hermione. "You know you're my best friend, don't you, Hermione?"

She nodded and I stated, "I believe you when you say you're concerned about me, but Ron let the kneazle out of the bag. Dumbledore sent you, and none of you denied it just now. None of you understand why I'm concerned about Centi, and for that I'm a little ashamed of you, all of you."

I knew saying 'Centi' caught their attention, so I gave a quick explanation of why I'd adopted her childhood nickname.

I paused for a deep breath. Hermione tried to speak but I cut her off. "There are a lot of reasons why I'm mad at Dumbledore right now, but I'm not going to go into them this moment. If you ask him and he tells you, and you're not mad at him after he explains, then he didn't tell you everything. Some of it, a lot of it, is secret to the war effort, so let's leave it for now."

"But specifically at the moment I'm mad at him because he refused to help Centi until I forced him to. Look at her." She was awake and gazing at me with her broken, frozen face. I gave her a look, and she nodded her head. "She'll be the first to admit she never was much to look at but her face is a wreck now. Her tongue was nearly chopped off and if a specialist doesn't work on her, she'll never be able to talk clearly and she'll look pretty much like she looks now, only without the bruising."

I took a deep breath, and no one tried to say anything.

"She and I fought together. They killed all of her family right before her eyes. I saw most of them die." This wasn't going to work. They'd all fought by my side and thought they understood. "It's not like when we fought together."

When I said "not like when we fought together" I circled my finger to include the other Gryffindors in the hospital room. They all gave me a resentful look, expressing that they thought they were my better battle companions. I had to make it more personal, more real to them what Centi and I had been through.

"Ron," I said grasping at an idea. "You and your family have been longtime fighters for the Light, followers of Dumbledore, and my friend. You've treated me like I was a one of you, a black-haired Weasley, and I'm ever so grateful."

He nodded, and so did Ginny.

"Now imagine, one day Dumbledore, the Order, and I showed up at the Burrow and killed everyone. You were the lone survivor and the only one to help you was Draco Malfoy."

Ron's face showed that I'd just sprained his imagination. "That would never happen!"

"Of course it wouldn't," I stated. "That's why I said *'imagine'* it happening.

"All your family is dead, the Burrow is badly damaged, and everybody you used to think was on your side wants to kill you." I paused here and he seemed to be thinking about it. At least he didn't say anything and a quick glance at Ginny and Hermione's faces showed me they started to see where I was going.

"Now, imagine, Ron, that *Draco*, as preposterous as it sounds, stood by you through several terrible days, helping you and saving your life when you couldn't hardly help yourself."

Still no response from Ron when I paused a second time.

I plunged ahead. "Now here's where my example breaks down. Draco isn't like me. We all know I have this 'saving-people-thing' that Hermione so clearly pointed out, and I can't let Centi down. Draco would sell out his friends just for practice.

"I'm not like that, but Centi has been living in the scenario I just described for you. Voldemort sent her brother, to kill his own family, only he didn't know that. When he arrived and realized the targets were his own family, he turned on the other Death Eaters, and was the first to die. Centi's *Muggle* grandmother was the next to die."

All three looked up jolted by that revelation.

"Yes, her grandmother is the reason they were attacked. Voldemort learned that the Bulstrodes had a living Muggle in the family and decided to purge that stain. Death Eaters killed her brother, then her grandmother. I showed up right after that. I saw the Dark Mark hovering over their house from the road, and did the 'typical Harry' and charged in to the rescue, and you know what? I don't regret it for a second. I saw her mother take a Killing Curse right in front of Centi. I started attacking. Centi, her Dad, and I got several, but then he was killed.

"By the time we stopped the rest of the Death Eaters, Centi was hurt fairly badly. I helped her and more Death Eaters came. We fought them and she was hurt again, and so was I. We fought our way out of there but a Death Eater escaped to tell the others I was with her and we were flying together on my broom."

I took a deep breath and continued a little less frantically. "I felt like the Death Eaters would be waiting for us between her farm and Little Whinging. I couldn't think of anywhere else to go but Hogwarts. I don't really know where in England the Burrow is, and the same with headquarters in London. You remember the Department of Mysteries. You don't think clearly. The magic detectors were down in the area of her farm, so the Aurors wouldn't come for the Dark Mark. Therefore I just headed north."

"Why didn't you call the Knight Bus, Harry?" Hermione asked.

"Maybe for the same reason ~~we~~ didn't call it before ~~we~~ went to the Department of Mysteries; we didn't think of it. It would have been faster and less dangerous than the Thestrals - assuming that the Death Eaters hadn't compromised it, which is an interesting question." I turned this back on Hermione. She immediately realized her own personal experience of not thinking clearly under the pressures of an emergency.

I gave the bare highlights of the story after that point - tastefully bypassing my introduction into the world of feminine hygiene products

"I flew through the night with Centi strapped to a board and hanging under my Firebolt. You can imagine, Ron, my broom didn't like that, so we went very slowly. I guess about fifteen to twenty-five miles per hour, and we were low to the ground sneaking around Muggle towns and going through forests whenever possible, to avoid being seen by Death Eaters.

I told them about Dawlish attacking us. I told about the Death Eaters throughout the day and hiding in the barn. I told them about flying through the night in the storm. I told them about falling asleep under the stone ledge, not too far from Hogwarts. I finally and briefly told of how badly we were

hurt, how Centi was dying, after Centi was discovered and attacked by the large group of Death Eaters the morning before. I finished the tale by telling about making a Portkey and arriving here just in time for Madam Pomfrey to save Centi's life.

I'd thought of going into all that occurred with Snape, McGonagall, and Dumbledore after we'd arrived here, but first I wanted to see if they understood. I knew by the look on her face that Hermione wanted to ask *how* I made a Portkey, so I addressed Ron.

"Can you see, Ron? Can you see why I'm so concerned about her?"

There were so many emotions on his face I couldn't begin to read him, and I can usually read Ron better than most, other than Hermione, his girlfriend, and maybe Ginny.

I don't know what emotion it was, but Ron looked at me almost pleading for this to go away.

"But Harry..."

A single finger snap interrupted our conversation. We all looked over towards Centi, and she beckoned us, or at least me, to her side.

I engaged eye-speak. *"What's up, Centi? Are you hurting?"*

"Hurting for you. I admit I understand your friends' hesitation about me, but I don't care for their lack of faith in you."

In the midst of all of this, I needed to defend them to a degree, although only a bit. *"They've seen me make bad decisions before, but I think this is mostly Dumbledore's work."*

"I have an idea. This may not mean as much to Granger being a Muggleborn, but the Weasleys should understand and respect this. Hand me my wand."

I did so; glad I had thought to gather it before I made my Portkey yesterday. She took it in her working hand and 'said' to me, *"Repeat out loud the words I'm going to say."*

She eye-spoke and I repeated out loud, *"Harry Potter, I, Millicent Jeanne Bulstrode do make a Witch's Pledge to you this day. I pledge to serve you in this crusade against the Dark Lord and against all of his minions. No boon that is mine to grant will I withhold from you. I further pledge to train my best to be prepared, to help you, however you ask, and to follow you into the gates of Hell, if need be, to destroy that evil git and his followers. This pledge lasts until such time that you may release me, but not until the jumped up half-blood named Tom Riddle is dead. Upon my life, upon my honor and that of the family Bulstrode and most importantly, upon my magic, do I so pledge."*

A soft white glow surrounded her for a moment. Ron and Ginny gasped when the glow appeared. Hermione seemed startled by these events. I didn't really understand anything about a Witch's Pledge, but I recognized a Magical Binding when I saw it, even though I didn't know what it was called.

I looked at Ron to see his reaction to this. He was obviously confused, but he finally shook his head once and blurted out, "But Dumbledore said it not right and she's still a Slytherin--"

"THAT'S IT!"

I was more than ready to go ballistic.

"Out of here, all of you. Madam Pomfrey!" I shouted for the mediwitch.

"All three of you leave."

They all started to protest, and even dense-as-a-door Ron finally realized he'd said the wrong thing. I didn't address a word they said, but when Poppy arrived seconds later, looking upset at the noisy disorder in her Infirmary, I used her to have my way.

"Madam Pomfrey. These *visitors* are upsetting your patients. They've been very rude to Miss Bulstrode, and I feel I'm losing ground because of them."

"All right you lot," she said. "Out with you, I might let you back in after you learn to behave, but only after Miss Bulstrode's surgery and they've both taken their potions to rejoin the Paladin Program. Out. Out! Now!"

I backed up immediately as Pomfrey spoke, and watched my friends leave.

Yeah, they were my friends - without a clue-- but they were still my friends.

Friends that I was enraging and cold-shouldering for the sake of a person who would have been number four or five on my enemy list, just seventy-two hours ago.

Well, I didn't think their cluelessness was irreversible. Of course, looking at Ginny and Hermione, those two seemed to understand, for the most part. Ron was the problem, and since Hermione was his girlfriend and Ginny his sister, they were tasked with setting him straight. I'd rather face detention with Snape for a week.

~*~*~

Breakfast was delivered to me—elves shortly after those three left. I had a typical Hogwarts meal of potatoes, eggs, rashers of bacon, and pumpkin juice with toast and my preferred coffee. Half way into gulping it down just a little less crudely than Ron, I realized Pomfrey was feeding Centi a concoction through a straw.

I dropped my fork and went to my comrade in arms, re-engaged my Eye-Speak spell and asked her how her meal was. I tried to tell her the food wasn't that particularly good this morning, but she wasn't buying it.

I hovered nearby on the right side of her bed. She held the beaker with a Nutrient potion in her one good hand. Pomfrey sat on the left side watching her.

"Ask her, Mr. Potter, if she can drink this down easily. I thinned it a bit, with water, but she really can't consume too much at this point with surgery coming soon, so I know she's hungry."

I looked into her eyes. *"Please tell her, Harry, that if I go slowly, I can take it past my tongue without difficulty. I'm hurting some, and... I'm worried, Harry, so I've lost most of my appetite."* She then smiled with her eyes tiredly, and eye-spoke, *"Who knew that I'd start a really effective diet this summer?"* It was a weak attempt at humor, but I chuckled nonetheless.

I relayed her words to Poppy, and then the matron shooed me back to my food before it went cold. Reluctantly I went, and I only wanted to eat just a little while Centi watched me, but I lost that effort. I was so hungry from our days of forced fasting and near-constant adrenalin pumping rush. Even though I was off of the Acceleration potions at the moment, I had the cumulative effects in my body also driving my hunger. I wolfed the large meal down, and our mutual healing angel insisted Centi and I take a nap before Binderly arrived.

Looking back, I think she drugged our food.

My forced nap lasted a good long time. Binderly showed up later than I'd hoped. A quick consult with Pomfrey and we collectively decided to leave Centi asleep - she'd be really hurting by now, and the healers didn't want to give her a generic pain reliever when surgery was imminent given the fact that she'd need a different potion to keep her knocked out.

That didn't encourage me not to worry.

Binderly was one of the few people I've ever met who never looked at my scar. Oh, it's not like he ignores me; he stated that he was glad to meet me, as he'd heard my name before, but it wasn't a fan talking, just someone who recognized that I had somehow done something to become famous.

"Mr. Potter," Binderly addressed me. He'd called me Harry at my request during our introduction, but now we were on a more formal footing, as he was playing the part of consulting physician. "I understand from the Headmaster that you are the interested party who called for me. I understand that Miss Bulstrode has consented to this operation, and you are acting in her stead."

I hadn't realized just how formal such a declaration sounded, but I didn't hesitate to nod in agreement.

"The basic medical contract I have with St. Mungo's, and by extension, Hogwarts, will cover reattaching her tongue and fixing what's broken. That will take little time and can be done by nearly any competent magical surgeon. She'd look a wreck though. To reconstruct her face, since I am not in a teaching environment, will require additional charges. I assume you have a picture of her as she was, for basic reconstruction?"

I nodded my head. We had Centi's family album on the table.

"That cost will be roughly 200 Galleons, barring complications, as a favor to Poppy here, who I regard highly. Now, to improve on the original face, the charges and time needed go up. Does she want me to use my own judgment? Has she picked a famous face to emulate? That decision is always sticky unless the face picked shares similar structure. Or do you have some other face to work towards?"

The last time we'd spoken Centi had insisted I only ask for her to be put back the way she had been, even just near to that to save the Galleons. Her pain had been increasing at that moment, and I didn't argue with her much; I'd assumed this would be an easy decision when it arrived.

Some times I can be so shortsighted.

Part of me assumed that someone else would make these decisions, but no one else was stepping forward, which I finally realized. I stepped over and picked up the family album.

"This is a picture of Centi taken at Christmas of this year," I said. "It moves to give you a good shot of her face from left, right, and center." I took the album back after a few seconds and a single nod from him. I then flipped towards the front. "This is a picture of her at about three years old. 'Similar facial structures' is the term I believe you used, since it is her face, but this was a very cute little round-faced girl." I hesitated before my next statement. "She once said that her grown up face 'went wrong.' Can you take your artistic talents and make her look like a grown up version of this cute little girl?"

He took the album from me and flipped back and forth, several times. "She's left this in your hands, Mr. Potter?"

I hated that he was making me face the responsibility so starkly, but this is an adult-level decision to make; one a parent or spouse would make, not some teenaged kid. Yet, who else did Centi have? I'd rather give the decision duty to Filch than Snape, and it seemed pretty obvious Dumbledore and Pomfrey were abdicating to me.

Then I remembered the last thing she said early this morning before she asked for a stronger Pain potion. "Harry, just tell him to put me back together as I was, or just as best he can to save money. I'll trust you with anything that comes up while I'm under."

That was it. I'd already decided to reject completely the idea of going the low cost route just to save money. Her pain-racked and timid question about making her look prettier, which she rejected moments later - *that* was the cry of her heart. To make her look like someone else would open her up to ridicule and scorn. In the little time I'd really known her, I couldn't imagine she'd welcome that scrutiny. And just saying to Binderly 'do what you think best to make her more attractive' would be placing too much trust in the hands of a man admittedly an expert, but still an unknown quantity.

Well, Potter, I thought, you chastised Snape and Dumbledore for not doing right by Centi. Time to act on her interests as best you can.

"Yes, Mr. Binderly, She's left this in my hands."

Pomfrey said, "Mr. Potter, in America surgeons are addressed as "Doctor."

"That doesn't matter, Poppy," Binderly stated matter-of-factly. "Mr. Potter, if Miss Bulstrode gave you authority it's proper for you to decide, doubly so since you're paying me." With this he cut his eyes to the Headmaster momentarily. Dumbledore had the good grace to look away.

Binderly continued, "Wanting to go with a grown version of Miss Bulstrode as a child is for the most part a wise decision. People who want to look like someone else never find the satisfaction they think they'll achieve. Most ask for a nip here and a tuck there, which are the easiest changes to adjust to."

"With major reconstructive surgery like this, improvements are usually significant. To improve on a younger version of the same person stands the best chance for satisfaction with the changes. However, the complication for going with a grown up version of her as a child is that it takes longer to accomplish. Subtleties require more time and effort than massive changes.

"There's no danger in it taking too much time. I've performed operations two and three times longer than this. Miss Bulstrode will suffer in no way. The issue now is cost. I told you 200 Galleons to put her back together as she was, and seeing her face in the pictures I'll stick by that amount. If you were to tell me to do what I think to make her a bit prettier, that would be 500 Galleons.

"To give her someone else's face would cost between 700 and 1000 Galleons, if possible at all. Her face is basically round with a large chin. I can't put a long thin face on her - the bone's just don't support that.

"Updating her childhood face on her existing facial structure will require much more time and artistry as I said. Her jaw has grown beyond all proportion with her face at her younger age. When I'm done, she'll still be big jawed, but a number of beautiful women have large jaws.

"Do you know the American actresses, Sigourney Weaver or Melanie Griffith?"

I shook my head, no.

"Well, it doesn't matter. American magicals watch movies much more than you do here in England. But suffice it to say both women are considered very attractive and both have large jaws.

"In addition to her jaw, I'll have to shave her cheek bones down and do a little restructuring of her nose. She told you that her face 'went wrong.' I'd never use such a phrase professionally, but to make it 'go right' requires a lot of time under the knife. Just one example more: her eyes need to be placed just a little further apart. It would hardly be noticed on many people, but on her it will make her smile much less a sneer. I'll move her brow lines accordingly and that will add to the improved effect."

He stopped here and looked directly at me. He'd been glancing to Pomfrey and Dumbledore all along but now he held my gaze only. "I see her sneering and sometimes scowling in a number of her more current school pictures. She never did in her pictures before Hogwarts. That's a choice, not an expression. If she still only scowls and sneers, surgery will not make her a more pleasant person."

"Did Professor Dumbledore tell you how she came to be here?" He nodded and I continued, "Her family's gone, and her house mates are a rather snide, sarcastic, sneering, and scowling bunch--"

"Now, Harry--" Dumbledore tried to interrupt.

I ignored the Headmaster and didn't even look his way. Pomfrey called his name with a reprimanding tone, and he said no more.

"She's now my friend and has reason to distance herself from them to a degree," I stated firmly. Binderly's raised eyebrows gave me the impression he knew I wasn't really speaking to him. "As for sarcasm, I'm beginning to see its value in certain conversations, so we'll leave that for later. Please continue, Doctor."

"Well, Harry, all of this time and expertise doesn't come cheap. I'll give you the discount for my services I'd give Poppy, but the equipment and my technician and assistant, well, I can't short-change them. The cost to do what you want for your friend will be 1500 Galleons."

Without hesitation I turned to Dumbledore and asked, "Did you call Dobby when I was found?"

"Yes, Harry," he responded, "But we must discuss this. It's not proper for a young man to spend so much money on a young lady to whom he's not related, or betrothed."

"Headmaster," I let the anger rise in my voice. "When you want to discuss propriety, we'll discuss why I went to the Dursleys as a baby, and how *you* could have left me there with no one checking on how badly I was being treated *for years*. We'll also discuss why my friends attacked me about Millicent this morning."

I turned from him, ignored Binderly and Pomfrey staring at me wide-eyed, and called for my house-elf.

Dobby popped in and attached himself to my leg, all in one motion. "Dobby is too pleased to see the great Harry Potter is well. Dobby has been preparing Harry Potter's food and will be do so for Harry Potter's Centi, but Professor Dumbles has not allowed Dobby to visit Harry Potter--"

I interrupted Dobby saying, "Unless Madam Pomfrey disallows it, as this is her infirmary, you can visit me as you wish, if you remain calm and out of her way or the doctor's way. You know when to make yourself scarce. You're mine now, and I'm yours, we're friends, remember?"

Dobby almost exploded after hearing what I'd just said. I knew if he started his usual gushing it would take too long to stop. "I have an assignment for you, Dobby."

He stood up straight. "Yes sir, Harry Potter SIR."

"Go to Gringotts and ask for a bank draft for 1500 Galleons, made out to Doctor Timothy Binderly."

Dobby snapped his fingers and a small clipboard appeared with a Gringotts limited power of attorney on it.

Binderly interrupted, "Harry, this isn't necessary, I trust you're good for it--"

"No, Doctor, I want this settled right now, not just for your sake."

"Well, then, if you insist, Harry. Dobby, please have the draft made out to Binderly Surgical Associates, LLP. "

Dobby snapped his fingers again and then handed me the clipboard and a quill. I signed and he was gone instantly.

Binderly said, "I'm going to take these two pictures out - actually, several more also. All right?"

I nodded.

"Let's get started. Poppy, may I use this Floo?"

The doctor called St.Mungo's and was connected to his two staff members. He asked that they Portkey in with the equipment needed. Dumbledore told him the Hogwarts wards would not allow normal Portkeys, and offered to go to the hospital and make special Portkeys with authorized clearances.

I thought he just wanted to avoid talking to me.

In minutes Dobby was back with the draft and then left again to fix lunch for all of us. I asked Binderly what he wanted to eat after telling Dobby my choices, and he and Poppy asked for the same. I thought Madam Pomfrey was a bit surprised I included her in my meal plans, and I made one of many mental notes this day to include her in more of such niceties in the future.

In no time a major portion of the infirmary was cordoned off and converted into a surgical theatre. Binderly told me that it would be evening before he finished, and Poppy offered to stay nearby just in case.

I refused to leave. I wanted to know what was going on. Even though the cordoned off area was sound-proof and opaque, I wanted to be near. I stated that I didn't want anything to interfere, which was left hanging as no one inquired about what I meant. I would not put it past Snape to come in and interrupt everything, but refused to say so because I thought if I did, then Dumbledore would surely insist I leave, as if my leaving would improve the greasy git's reliability.

My foresight would prove me prescient, though not for anything having to do with Snape.

Pomfrey told me I was released from her care until the next evening when I would take the Reactivation potion to rejoin the Paladin Program. After the Doctor began, I took a shower and put on the newly purchased clothes Dobby retrieved from Privet Drive.

As the surgery started, Dobby told me that he'd been frantic for my safety while I was gone. A house-elf cannot find his master if they are not in the same building or on the same property. That's why Dobby had been traveling with Lucius Malfoy the day I freed him.

When Petunia explained to Bill Weasley about my gallivanting off across country talking of Death Eater attacks, Dobby had popped to every location he could imagine where I might be. He followed the line of thinking the Order of the Phoenix took; that I'd be heading towards Surrey. By the time he'd identified the Bulstrode farm from house-elves who took shelter in the Ministry of Magic, I'd been too long gone for his magic to reach out to me.

"Harry Potter SIR must Monger a spell to allow Harry Potter SIR to call Dobby from any location. Dobby will assist Harry Potter SIR in using the Monger's Spell Scrutinizer on the bond between us to create this magic. Many good house-elves would work extra jobs to pay Harry Potter SIR for the spell for their masters and mistresses."

"I'll find a way to charge the owners, Dobby, they'll be the ones to benefit." "Oh, no, Harry Potter SIR, house-elves would benefit more in being more available to serve."

I wasn't going to argue with Dobby, but I'd figure a way to make it not cost the elves if it came to that.

As much as Dobby liked to be with me and I liked to have him around, particularly when I was living at Privet Drive, he felt the need to make himself scarce in the infirmary. Dumbledore left me when I pulled out one of the many books Dobby brought to occupy me during the long wait. The Headmaster came back in a couple of hours to check in, and pulled out a scroll and conjured a plush purple chair to sit in.

Maybe he wanted to read the scroll, or maybe he wanted to wait with me and have the conversation I'd alluded to earlier. Who knew? I figured Minerva McGonagall probably knew him better than anyone else I'd ever heard of, and I've seen her flummoxed by him on a number of occasions over the years, and she's as poker-faced as anyone I've met.

"Professor," I asked, "Where is Remus Lupin?" Remus and I had grown fairly close since the reading of Sirius' will. We both think of him as my guardian now, though we see each other only sporadically.

"I sent him on a mission to the werewolves of Ireland. He is supposed to be back by the middle of next week. As I understand it, you two weren't going to see each other until then, so he asked me to tell only if you inquired before his return. I have no way to contact him."

I shook my head and returned to my book. Remus told me he would go to Ireland soon for that purpose, and said not to worry if he did. He'd have Dumbledore or another member of the Order tell me if he couldn't and wouldn't be back whenever we were to meet.

"So, he heard from Collin Flaherty, then?"

Dumbledore nodded. Flaherty was an old friend of my guardian's, and a werewolf who informally ran a peaceful wolf pack near County Cork. Remus told me the two of them planned to work on some of the less peaceful groups in that country.

The Headmaster and I read in silence for nearly half an hour.

This far north there is hardly ever a problem with insects. Today the windows near the surgery area were closed, but at the opposite end of the infirmary a number of windows were open, and a small breeze made its way through the room.

In the spring and early autumn, we've occasionally had a few birds fly into Hogwarts, mostly sparrows and the like. It usually takes a professor or even a seventh-year a moment to cast a gentle Repelling charm to send it on its way. A general charm to repel birds would make it difficult, if not impossible, for owls to deliver their posts.

The operation was into its fourth hour, and the sun was about half way through its slow descent into the west. I looked up to see a robin and a small hawk fly in the window together - which struck me as odd. The hawk had some sort of rodent in its talons, though not a rat. The hawk quickly morphed into a Death Eater and transfigured the other two back to humans. I was leaning back on what had been my hospital bed and it took me the time they transformed to stand and draw my wand, all the time shouting for Professor Dumbledore's attention. One attacker shouted *Ramah!* and then turned and pointed his wand at the surgery area. The other two aimed at us.

Poppy Pomfrey walked from behind the partition at that moment, and had her wand drawn, levitating a tray of soiled instruments. Dumbledore and I were on our feet but she saved the day, at her own expense. She dropped the tray and put up a weak Shield spell to stop whatever magic the third Death Eater cast towards her. She probably knew her limitations as to its power and angled it noticeably. The three assailants were shouting incantations in a language I didn't recognize, but their spell work was effective.

It was some sort of Blasting curse that hit Pomfrey's Shield, deflecting off to her right. She, however, took much of the force from the Blaster and flew back into a cabinet, crumpling to the floor.

Dumbledore was closest to the two attacking us, and he stepped in front of me, which was valiant and all that, but it cut off my line of fire. That proved fortuitous because when I stepped around him, I was at the perfect angle to hit the third Death Eater. I wasn't using half measures, so I hit him with as strong a *Reducto* r as I could produce, stopping the second spell he was trying to shoot at the downed Pomfrey. My *Reducto* r appeared to fold him in half backwards and sent him into a heap not far from our mediwitch.

Dumbledore spent entirely too much time with fancy Transfigurations and one of the attackers turned from him and pointed his wand at the cordoned off surgical space. My Cutting curse relieved him of his wand arm - lucky for me, because I'd aimed at his body. He grabbed at his stump and screamed, and my next *Reducto* hit him in the head, which disappeared in a spray of gore. The rest of him crumpled like a dropped robe.

I turned to the final Death Eater just as Dumbledore captured him with a Body-Bind curse.

"Harry, did you have to kill those two?"

"If I'd spent my time swapping spells with the first one the second one would have killed someone behind the partition. That was the Killing Curse he was casting at the end, the only words they spoke that I understand."

"I've heard a number of Slavic languages in my days," said the Headmaster. "That first word was 'Raham,' I believe, which means attack in Hungarian if I'm not mistaken."

We had time to discuss this because Binderly had walked out of the surgery and was tending to Pomfrey.

"I'll help her, Doctor," Dumbledore said, "You return to your work."

He didn't stop, but said, "No, I was just stopping to take a short break. Our soundproofing kept us from hearing the excitement out here. It was a good time for this if it had to occur. She'll be fine. Nothing's broken. "Ennervate!"

Pomfrey awoke, and Dumbledore levitated her to a bed. "You take your break, Doctor," the Headmaster said, "What can we do for her?"

He said, "A Headache potion will probably suffice, but please watch her. If she goes forgetful or loopy on you for the next hour or so call St. Mungo's for another mediwitch. That would mean a concussion."

I had Dobby bring Binderly and his assistants' refreshments. One technician stayed with Centi and would trade off with the other after half of the

break. The Headmaster had to order Madam Pomfrey to stay in bed for the allotted hour. I chided her about being a bad patient, but her withering stare convinced me she wasn't in the mood, and I needed to be somewhere else in the room.

Only after all of this did we turn to the prisoner. Dumbledore insisted we call the Aurors, which was proper. I wanted to call Tonks or Shackbolt, but the Headmaster went through channels and called the Ministry. In half an hour or so two Aurors Dumbledore barely remembered from their years at Hogwarts came and took the prisoner. Dumbledore told them about the Hungarian, but they seemed unimpressed.

What really caught their attention when Dumbledore let slip that I was the one who killed the other two.

"All right. Potter, we're taking you in for their deaths. You can't just go around killing people," said the one called Barksdale.

I gave the Headmaster a look that would have clotted cream, and he rose to my defense.

"Gentlemen, I give you my word Mr. Potter acted only in self-defense, and in the defense of the innocent. His actions, more than mine, saved lives. I was too occupied in capturing this one, and either of the other two would have killed had it not been for Harry's actions."

"That's all and well and good--"

"Mr. Barksdale," Dumbledore interrupted him. "Do you really want me to come with you to Auror Headquarters to discuss with Madam Bones and perhaps even the Wizengamot why you're treating the Boy-Who-Lived in this manner?"

Barksdale started to insist, "Our orders from the Minister--"

The other Auror, one Archie Jakes, grabbed his shoulder and spun Barksdale into conference before that last sentence was completed.

We both watched the two Aurors, glancing at each other only once, both of us curious.

Jakes said eventually, "You'll come in Professor and give a full report, and memories for our records?"

"Of course, gentlemen; I'll be there tomorrow morning by 10:00 at the latest.

They left with the prisoner after Transfiguring the two bodies into wooden planks, shrinking them, and placing them in a satchel.

During all of this, Centi's operation continued. Neither of the Aurors asked about the cordoned off section in the back of the infirmary. But both looked that way often.

Moments after the door closed, I said, "I don't trust them; something's not right. They were more interested in taking me in than the prisoner. I know Fudge hates me, well, he hates the both of us for that matter, but these two seem suspicious beyond being Fudge lackeys."

"Now, Harry," Dumbledore began. "I'm sure they only seek to do their duty."

"Always giving people the benefit of the doubt," I sneered.

"Like I did you, Harry, in your second year when you'd discovered you could hear voices in the wall, and refused to tell me?"

This set me off, and rightly so. "You see no difference? No difference between a second-year keeping a personal secret and two fully grown Aurors, people who said they were acting on the orders of Cornelius Fudge, the man who tried to ruin both of us last year and succeeded in driving you out of your office? There's no difference in your mind between childhood evasions of a boy under major pressure from an entire school that thinks he's a monster and two Aurors who want to take me in more than the Death Eater who invaded your school, and attacked people under your protection?"

Once again the Headmaster had the good grace to look down. I seemed to be on a one-man mission in the last day to drive the wool stuffing out from between his ears. I decided I'd give him one more push and give us both a reason to drop the subject.

I smiled to lighten the mood. "I'll wager with you, Professor, a Galleon, that their Death Eater will never make it to Azkaban. As a matter of fact, I'll wager the same Galleon he won't even be in Ministry custody in three days."

Dumbledore smiled back. "The academic handbook says that I'm not allowed to wager with students, but let's just say we'll wait and see if you're right."

Poppy interrupted us. She kicked her feet around and off of the bed. "Well, this has been educational, gentlemen, but my hour of resting is up and I feel fine. No dizziness, which is a lesser but still important sign compared to being incoherent. So, I'm back to work.

"Mr. Potter, thank you for stopping my attacker. I no more recognized the incantation he was about to cast than either of you, but I doubt it would have been beneficial to my health."

She looked at us with a professional eye. "Were either of you two hit by any curse or hex? Particularly you, Mr. Potter, you usually suffer some damage."

"You're right, Madam, but this must be a special day. I just went through a fight and wasn't hurt at all. Dobby."

"You called Harry Potter SIR?" the elf asked batting his eyes, as he was so glad I'd called.

"Yes, Dobby. We'd like a little celebration for surviving another attack. Madam Pomfrey wasn't hurt too badly, and I survived without a scratch."

"Dobby is most pleased that Harry Potter SIR is unharmed. 'Tis a *miracle*. What would Harry Potter SIR like?"

I looked at Dumbledore, turned back to Dobby, and smiled. "Can you prepare lemon-flavored biscuits, Dobby?"

~*~*~

I woke up Friday morning realizing I was in the Infirmary, but forgetting for a moment what day it was. The doctor would remove Centi's bandages at three this afternoon, but she would be waking up before then and could speak. Her tongue was fixed, and her mouth was held in a slightly open position. Her speech would be a bit slurred, but she'd be understandable. No more Eye-Speak needed.

At 6:00 that evening we'd eat a hearty dinner especially designed to aid the Reactivation potions catch up Centi with those already in the Paladin Program, and to reinstate me in said program.

It was after 7:00 a.m. when I awoke, but she slept on. Pomfrey encouraged me to remain quiet. Centi had no potions in her system but was sleeping because she was still exhausted. Noise could wake her, but more sleep would be better.

I stepped to the far end of the infirmary, and called Dobby for breakfast.

I read through the morning until Centi awoke, some time after 10:00.

"Harry." Her voice was a bit garbled, but she was easily understandable.

I looked up and went to her bedside. "Good morning. How do you feel?" "Odd." After a few long moments she asked, "Am I supposed to have all these bandages on my face?"

I could hear a bit of panic in her voice.

"Yes, nothing to worry about. The doctor said he'd be back about 3:00 to unwrap you. 'Unveil you' I think was how he put it. You'll notice, if you haven't already, that your jaw is still locked in place but open a little. You can speak, but without moving it." I went on to explain her vocal limitations so that wouldn't cause her concern either.

Pomfrey came out and examined her. All was well, and we all sighed in relief.

"So," Centi asked as Pomfrey finished. "Anything exciting happen while I was in surgery?"

"Oh, nothing much. I read. Dumbledore sat with me."

"Mr. Potter, your modesty is inappropriate." I tried to wave her off, but both Centi and Poppy wouldn't stand for it. Soon the mediwitch was regaling Centi with the saga of the 'Battle of the Infirmary' as she called it. I huffed and sighed, and returned to my chair at the foot of Centi's bed. The term battle is used too often for what Mr. Granger calls a simple fire-fight.

"Thanks, Harry." With the bandages I could see less emotion on Centi's face than when she was in stasis. Her eyes weren't as visible.

"It looks like my new job is killing Death Eaters." I waved off her thanks. "Hey, do you want to know what you're supposed to look like?"

Her head tilted and she said, "You were *supposed* to just tell the doctor to put me back together as best he could with as little effort as possible." I snorted. "Yeah, like I'd ever let that happen to a friend of mine if I could help it." I walked over to her with her three-year-old picture from the album. I held it out, but not so she could see the image. "I asked him to make you look like this cute little girl, or as best as he could. He said no one can look exactly like someone else, but he could make the best of a particular face applied to the facial structure of an existing person." I turned the picture around. "Since this is you younger, he expects the end result to be pretty close."

She looked at the picture almost as if she didn't recognize who it was. Quietly she stated after almost a minute, "That picture caused my Dad to refer to me as his princess for over a year."

"So I should call you 'Princess Centi'?"

She looked up, her expression still unreadable through the bandages. After a pause, "Do it and die, Potter."

In our relief, Poppy, Centi, and I laughed longer than was warranted by that comment.

~*~*~

Centi couldn't chew with her jaw locked in place, so she had a big breakfast of watered down porridge, and some creamed potatoes. Pomfrey had her swirl each bite around in her mouth before swallowing to mix saliva in with the food and start digestion. Lunch went similarly with a soup made of pureed vegetables and chicken.

Centi's appetite was back and she ate a lot of the mashed mess. I ate heartily too.

Doctor Binderly arrived a little ahead of schedule, and examined her with several different Diagnostic spells.

"Miss Bulstrode, did Mr. Potter tell you of his choices for your reconstruction?"

"Yes, sir. I'd told him just putting me back together would be fine, but Harry has a reputation of being pigheaded and loyal to his friends. I not sure which is stronger in this case, but I'm glad he's the one acting on my behalf."

The surgeon and Madam Pomfrey both displayed looks of relief when she answered agreeably.

"Now," the surgeon continued, "I'll take these wrappings off shortly, but I have to warn you, it will be several days before you look like you will eventually look. Many people are so excited when they're unveiled, and then disappointed. Your face will be a bit puffy and your skin will be reddish. You'll be able to barely see your scars if you look closely. Plus, since I had to restructure certain parts of your face, your overall appearance will seem a bit... 'off' I guess would be the word.

"The redness will be gone by tomorrow afternoon, Sunday at the latest. The puffiness will slowly lessen. Remember, when you were three, you were a round-faced little girl with beautiful big cheeks. You'll still be round-faced, and cute-cheeked. Your jaw will be smaller than it was, but bigger than in this picture of you at three. That I couldn't change too much without making your head look too small for your frame."

He smiled. "I like women with big jaws, my wife's jaw is just a little bit smaller than yours."

Centi tilted her head sideways, just about the only expression she could offer still wrapped up.

"Here's the thing," the doctor said, "And this is true about everyone who undergoes such surgery, so I'm not singling you out. You're going to have to let your face settle until about Monday or Tuesday before you'll see the new you. You may be pleased with your new appearance right off, but many people are let down and some even become depressed.

"Some people don't like themselves, and feel changing their face will improve their personalities. Nothing has changed there obviously, but you'd be surprised how many people hope for such a miracle. If you don't like something about you on the inside, you need to work on it in another way. You have a fine friend here in Mr. Potter. He showed maturity and good judgment in his decisions on your behalf, and genuine concern. If you have similar or even better friends to help you change the you inside, then you are truly blessed."

He paused, looked up at the ceiling, and then said, "Enough on that. I'm a surgeon, not a counselor. Madam, Pomfrey, scalpel, please. Scissors at the ready."

I backed up and turned to leave, but Centi asked that I stay.

It took five minutes to slowly remove everything. The doctor was gentle; stopping several times at what I guessed were major incision points to slowly loosen the sticking wadding with a potion-laden swab. Once he finished, he immediately applied a lotion of some sort, stating it would reduce the stinging she felt and aid in the reduction of redness and swelling.

When he finished, Binderly said, "Oh, yes, you have another common effect of the swelling and the type of work I did around your eyes. You look a little oriental." Then he gave her a hand mirror.

Centi moved her jaw back and forth tentatively, moved her neck around, which hadn't been touched in the operation, and then she winked and blinked several times. I could see her from her side, and she slowly turned towards me. "What do you think, Harry?"

I smiled instantly, but hopefully not in exaggeration. I looked down at the picture of her at three and said, "The doctor's right, you are a little puffy and red, and slightly oriental looking, but I think you'll look a lot like a grown up version of this picture." Then, without thinking like a teenaged guy, but like a good friend, I added, "By Monday or Tuesday, your face should go very well with those beautiful blue eyes."

Have you ever done something that knocked the wind out of your lungs? How about, have you ever opened your mouth and embarrassed yourself completely?

Okay, we've all embarrassed ourselves. Add this moment to my list.

Madam Pomfrey had more experience in such matters I'd guess, or maybe she just wanted to help me out of the spotlight. She said, "Why, my dear, you look lovely even now, and in the good doctor's few days I do believe you will be most pleased.

Binderly thankfully changed the subject. "Now, we have to go over several different facial exercises you need to do to aid in the internal healing of the muscles; then we must talk about potions and lotions."

Pomfrey turned to me as she gently pushed me away and pulled a partition around them. "Mr. Potter, please go inform the Headmaster that Miss Bulstrode is unwrapped and why don't you have your house-elf bring up a snack. Something soft but chewy, but not too much. You both have a large meal you must consume in three hours time."

I knew when I was being shuffled out of a room. So be it.

By the time I was back, Centi was in a school robe, typical apparel for a witch at Hogwarts. Binderly had packed his bag and shook my hands. He was preparing for Madam Pomfrey to escort him to the front doors.

"There is one last check we must do before I leave," Binderly said, "Harry, there's a very important test I need you to help Centi with. She'll tell you what it is."

I looked at Centi and she was redder than she was when I left her. I gulped and looked back at him then back at her.

Centi said with a mixture of embarrassment and horror, "He says you need to kiss me.""

"Uh, right," I replied, stunned. After no one stated that was a joke, I gulped, and said, "Are we talking about close-mouth kissing or open mouthed?"

Binderly gave an evil smirk. "Both - I need to assess how much feeling and control she has in some of the fine muscles."

Where's a Death Eater fight when you need one? Don't get me wrong, a very odd-feeling part of my mind thought this was a good idea. I'd have to think that through later -- much later.

Another part of me, the part that remembered all of time we'd spent laughing about Bulldog Bulstrode, was appalled at the idea.

It was my shame at that last thought that forced me to agree. I'd do this and a lot more for a friend, wouldn't I? Granted, I'd never do this for Ron - Hermione or Luna would do that for me, I guess - but I'd do this for Hermione or Ginny or Luna, or Susan, heck, almost any of the girls in the DA. We'd laugh and feel awkward, do it in private, and then it would be over.

Okay, I said to myself, Centi is my friend. I've killed to protect her. I can kiss her to make sure her mouth is working properly.

I looked up. Pomfrey and Binderly were both smirking, enjoying our discomfort too much. Centi blushed, looking down a little sadly. I put on a half-smiling, resolute face.

"I'm game if you are, Centi. Let's arrange some privacy for us, away from prying eyes."

Centi's relieved smile told me I'd made the right decision, even if this was a prank.

This time I pushed the two medicos out and made a show of pulling the partitions in place. I even pulled out my wand and cast a quick Privacy charm.

"I think this may be a joke, Harry."

"Well, if it is, we need to make them as uncomfortable as they're making us. We'll tell them we take our medical tests very seriously, and use as much objective sounding detail as possible. Sound good?"

She smiled and nodded. Then a question appeared on her face. "Harry, is this going to brass off your girlfriend?"

"What?"

"The rumors have gone around about how you fancy either Granger or the little Weasley - we were never able to figure out which one was your girlfriend. Skeeter in fourth year and Cho Chang last year made out that you were with Granger, and Weasley has been your fangirl from the start."

I thought about it for a moment. "They're both nice girls, but they both have boyfriends - not me, I might add." I shrugged.

"Okay," she said momentarily. "I wouldn't do this if there was another girl in the wings - even Slytherins have scruples. Okay, well some of us do. But I do like the idea of reporting our findings in great detail to see if we can turn the tables on them."

We sat there awkwardly. Finally, I said, "Right then," and stood.

She stood up and we hesitantly approached each other. We raised our arms and looked for a bit like we were about to wrestle. Finally we locked arms at a distance that had our middles touching just a bit. It was additionally odd since Centi was four inches taller than me.

Next the craning-neck dance occupied us for what seemed like an eternity. Our first bruising lip bump was as awkward as anything; we backed off but didn't break our hold.

"Sorry," we both said in unison.

I turned my head to the right, and she turned her head contrary to mine, and we slowly engaged our lips. This made our previous awkwardness pale in comparison.

Gryffindors forward. I wondered briefly what Slytherins said to encourage themselves for difficult or uneasy tasks. We could mark off the closed mouth kiss as successful, now on to uncharted territory.

We moved into position again, lips parted, eyes closed, arching my feet a bit to eliminate the difference in height. She slouched a bit to meet me.

It was different.

Which is like saying that having your arm de-boned is uncomfortable.

For the first bit we attempted to engage in the types of oral activities Binderly so lurid described. However, instinctively we both began kissing in earnest.

Centi is no shrinking violet - once we forgot the medical exercises, she managed to invade my mouth. It was like she was trying to beat me into submission, but I wasn't about to roll over that easily, so I pushed back.

There was a lot more to this kissing business than I'd first believed.

It was fun. Kissing Cho was confusing, what with the tears and all. I don't know what I was expecting, but I found that I'd pulled quite close to Centi.

The brain does funny things at moments like this - some part of my consciousness was reporting back to me like a play-by-play announcer. Another part of me felt lightheaded for the joy of it all.

I liked kissing.

I liked kissing Centi.

WAIT - I WAS KISSING MILLICENT BULSTRODE!

I pushed back from the kiss gently, and soon we were blushing furiously.

"That went well," I said. "Any pain or difficulty?"

I could feel the heat rising in my face. Centi was much redder than she'd been when the bandages came off - which was saying something.

"I felt no pain at all. I think my tongue is completely healed. My jaw muscles were stretched a bit, and my cheeks felt a slight strain that I wasn't used to, so I have several things to report."

We backed away and she sat on the bed. An eternity passed in the next few seconds and we both calmed from our efforts. Finally I stepped over to the partition, turning back to ask, "You ready to make them squirm?"

She nodded, smiled, and then obviously forced a serious look on her face. We chuckled at that.

I cancelled the Privacy charm and pulled the partition away.

I looked at them with a serious look and said, "Mission accomplished. I believe we have quite a bit of medical data to report. Come in Doctor, Madam."

Centi and I worked as a team and reported every detail we could think of. We didn't mention any of our awkwardness, but each of us tried to make as much as we could about every motion in excruciating detail. In a couple of minutes I could see that these two had indeed meant to prank us. They turned red, embarrassed with how seriously we took this and how excruciatingly specific we were in our report.

I winked at Centi half way through and she smirked at me before launching into what she had felt while trying to suck my tongue down her throat.

"Well, Doctor, I'd suggest giving written instructions if you want to make sure that you test all of the muscle groups. Perhaps you could write a paper on it or something. We'd gladly be involved in any field studies you need to do, or offer our expert testimony when and where needed." I really liked Centi's wicked sense of humor.

"Perhaps," I chimed in, "we could go with you if you deliver this paper before any of the Healer faculties in Great Britain or on the Continent and demonstrate the technique. Or do you think they will be familiar with this protocol?"

By this time Binderly had his head down and was passing Centi in the red face contest. Pomfrey figured us out. She said, "All right, you two. You caught us in our little game, and turned the table on us. I apologize, Miss Bulstrode, Mr. Potter."

Binderly looked up with her words and added, "Yes, my apologies to the both of you. I couldn't resist. Not very professional of me, I suppose."

In near unison Centi and I crossed our arms, scowled and huffed. Then we both started guffawing. Moments later Poppy and Binderly joined us.

~*~*~*~

Centi and I were scheduled to take the potions to bring us into the Paladin Program at 7:00 in the evening. The doctor left before 4:00 and Pomfrey insisted we take a brief nap. We'd need our rest even though we'd both sleep during at least half of the time we were under the effects of the Reactivation potions.

Pomfrey woke us in time for Dobby to place a huge serving platter, roughly the size of three dinner plates in front of each of us. Both of us made noises about not being able to eat so much, but when we started it only took a little effort to down it all.

As she reached the last few mouthfuls, Centi stopped cold. So much so that I immediately noticed and asked her why.

She sighed. "I'm going to have a prettier face, but I'm still fat, and eating like this isn't going to help; I need to go on a diet."

"Centi," I said, "Finish your food; you'll need it."

She started to protest and I interrupted her.

"A few more bites won't change anything one way or the other. You've not been in this Paladin Program before. Between the potions and the exercise regimen, you'll be fit by the end of the summer." I grinned and said, "Haven't you noticed my physical improvements?"

She smirked. "I don't make it a habit to notice your figure, Harry, but, yes, I've noticed you're not the runt you've always been. I just figured you finally started to grow. About time."

I chuckled and explained, "At the end of the school year I was five feet four inches tall. In the first few weeks on the Paladin potions and exercising, I grew to five feet six inches and put on a good bit of weight, all muscle."

I then told Centi about the projection that I'd be about 5 feet nine inches before the summer was over. I did not tell her that in the pre-Paladin physical Pomfrey had told me I should have reached 6 feet one or two, since both of my parents were tall, but my malnutrition and neglect at the Dursleys' during key points in my early years had prevented this.

"The thing is," I told Centi, "you'll be changing physically. You'll have to do a great deal of exercising, usually several times a day. I don't know if you'll become any taller--"

"I hope not," she said. "I'm already taller than any other girl in the school, and I have been since half way through fourth year."

"If I understand it correctly," I explained, "you won't grow any taller than you would have normally, except in a case like mine, because I was a bit of a malnourished runt. But if you grow an inch more let's say, you would have anyway."

"But that's not the point I want to make. I understand Neville Longbottom has lost loads of weight and is looking right trim, or so Ginny Weasley told me. I don't know if you noticed, but Hermione was not one to exercise, though her dad had her running during the summer hols. Now she's very trim, standing straighter than before, and I never thought she had bad posture. And she's... oh, I wouldn't say muscular, that's not the reason for the exercise, but Hermione's stronger. I guess that is how to put it. If it wasn't for her book bag, she'd have never exercised her arms and she had limited upper body strength."

"Okay, I noticed her, and Weasley."

I smirked at her. "If you and I are going to be friends, you're going to have to start calling them by their first names, because they often travel in a pack and 'Weasley' doesn't tell me which one you mean."

"Oh, it was Ginny I noticed." Her sarcasm, now applied with a friendly tone of voice, was quite clever. "She's the one becoming all buff. Ron Weasley, is he on the potions?"

I laughed. Not only were those in Ginny's year not allowed into the Paladin Program, Ron, who was five feet eleven inches at the end of school, had reached his projected height of six feet three inches already. *And* he'd added quite a bit of muscle and lost what little fat he'd gained around his middle from his yearly school eating binges.

Centi's comments on her own weight made me think of something that had nagged at the back of my mind a couple of other times when discussing the physical changes she'd go through as a Paladin.

"Centi. At the end of the summer you'll be in better shape than you ever have been or likely would have ever been, considering exercise is not a part of the typical Wizarding lifestyle. That said, you have to realize that you will always be a big-framed woman, just like Hermione will always be fairly slender. I'll always be short and my hair will always be a mess. Oh, and I'll always need glasses unless I buy Muggle contact lenses or have this new surgery they've invented to improve vision."

She looked at me for a while, looked out of the window, and then turned to me with a brave smile. Then she said, "Well, thanks to you, I'll have a much prettier face. And if what you say is true I'll be able to thank the Paladin Program at the end of summer since I won't have hardly any fat on my body, except for my bust and bum. I'll be a whole lot better off than I would have been, and I hear that some guys like big women. If that's true, then I'm coming out ahead."

Her smile told me she didn't really believe that, but her words were true. In five days she'd lost her family, had her beliefs turned upside down, been near death, undergone major reconstructive surgery, and magically pledged her life to fighting at my side for the foreseeable future. Now she was going to go through a potions series she didn't understand, and starting on a rigorous daily routine that was unlike anything she'd ever imagined.

All things considered, I figured she was quite the trooper.

Dobby had just cleared the dinner debris when Dumbledore and Snape entered the Infirmary. Poppy joined their formation as if expecting them, which we were.

The Potions Master ignored me and addressed Centi. "Miss Bulstrode. You are the one on a critical timetable. Potter here can start a little after you. His timing doesn't require your precision. You'll start and we'll monitor you through the first half hour or so. You'll hurt. You'll hurt all over; about like the muscle pain of Wizard's Flu, which Madam Pomfrey informed me you had at the age of nine. Do you remember the aches I'm describing?"

"Yes, sir. It hurt, but the whole sickness is what made it bad. The body aches wouldn't be that hard to take by themselves, if that's all. You say it's only for a half hour?"

"Almost precisely. Then you'll merely feel sore for the next few hours. About three hours in, you'll experience any actual physical growth that will occur. There may be little if any, since I believe you've reached most the physical growth you are going to receive. Roughly fifteen to twenty percent of all females have reached their physical growth target by your age. From the end of this physical development cycle, changes in your body occur in smaller measures over a longer time period."

"The magical growth you'll experience this evening probably won't make itself known. That is, I'm projecting only a ten percent chance that you'll see manifestations of your magical growth, somewhat similar to accidental magic. That might occur, but if it does, it will begin in your third hour and may happen on occasions until seven in the morning. This is a twelve-hour potion. All residuals will be expelled into your lower intestines by that time, where they will be neutralized by the acids found there. Shortly after that you'll find yourself in imminent need to visit the loo."

"Do you have any questions?"

She pondered this for a moment, and shook her head. "No, Professor."

Snape turned my way. "Mr. Potter." Snape was being very formal, even in his vocal inflections. I wondered just how hard Dumbledore had pressured him to behave.

"You, *sir*, are going to hurt -- a LOT -- and for several hours probably. If you remember the pain of Skele-Gro in your second year, just imagine your whole body feeling that way." He smiled for the first time. "Only more so!" His delight at my situation was almost breathable.

"Severus." The master pulled on his dog's leash.

The calm Potions Master of a few seconds before returned. "The Headmaster and I have fully researched this and there is no fear of permanent damage to you, physically or magically. You will grow up to an inch perhaps, since you have three inches left in your projected growth pattern. You will most likely give off bursts of accidental magic. Do try to control yourself, Potter. We don't want to--"

"That's enough, Severus. Harry, Professor Snape, Madam Pomfrey, and I will be here for you throughout the time you experience this. We project you will go twelve hours as well, but perhaps a bit longer. You'll be exhausted and may sleep three to ten hours after the potion leaves your system. You'll be tired when you awake tomorrow afternoon, and want to go back to sleep tomorrow evening very early. You will, however, awake the next day in fine condition ready to take the next Acceleration potion early Monday morning.

"Professor Snape did not exaggerate the pain, but I tried to ensure that you understood the consequences before you prolonged your re-entry to the program. Do you still intend to proceed?"

I looked at Snape and asked, "Have you ever taken Skele-Gro, Professor?"

He was caught off guard by this, but answered that he had.

"Well," I said, staring into his eyes. "I've had that and I've had Voldemort hold me under his Cruciatus Curse for over two minutes. I'd say several hours of all-over Skele-Gro can't really compare, can it Professor?"

Our eyes locked. Neither of us blinked. Finally he said, "I see your point, Potter. You are correct, there is little comparison."

He walked to Centi's bedside and proceeded to remove three phials from a wooden box.

"Drink this," he said, and Centi did without question. "It will clear your digestive system of any harmful unprocessed food. I suggest you go to loo now," he turned to me and gave me an identical vial. "Both of you."

It was almost exactly 7:00 when we two were back in place. Centi sat on her hospital bed as instructed with several pillows under her back.

Snape held up two phials. "This one activates your magical growth, and this one, your physical. They are time released and will activate each other one to two minutes after you have downed them."

Centi took them and leaned back. She looked nervous, and rightly so. I walked up to her and patted her shoulder.

"I remember being nervous too. The first time I almost got up when nothing happened at first, and then in a few more minutes I was bouncing around my bed. This is different I'm sure, but whatever occurs it happens once, and then you only need to look forward to what all the rest of us go through five or six times a week. No big concern."

I could almost hear Snape sneering at me, but Centi sincerely thanked me. About a minute later she froze as the first pains hit her. The next wave caused her to grab my hand. If she was going to be stronger, I made myself a note to never enter in a contest of strength while shaking her hand. Her grip was vise-like.

"Talk to me," she gasped. After her first burst of pain, she'd calmed down, and I could see she had managed to come to grips with it. I'd gladly distract her. "Tell me again about your expanded room at your relatives' house."

I did, in great detail after the first few sentences seemed to draw her attention. I could tell when the half hour was up because she relaxed with a deep breath at the precise moment.

She smiled at me and said, "I like your digs, Harry. Sounds cozy. I'll probably rattle around this old castle just like during the school year."

"Potter." Snape interrupted and I knew it was my time to pay the piper.

I went straight to my hospital bed and assumed a similar position to Centi's.

Snape held out one large phial. "This is also time activated and will engage in two minutes after consumption. Still time to back out, Potter. I don't envy you the next half day or so."

"Severus."

I snatched the potion from his hand. I knew Snape meant to ensure I'd go through this so I'd experience all of this pain. He didn't know me at all. I'd never renege on my commitment. I took a deep breath and started gulping as fast as possible. Unlike all other Paladin Program potions, which were rather tasty, this was like drinking sewage. I gasped from lack of breathing after the last swallow. Surprisingly I experienced no gag reflex.

I leaned back. Time sort of stood still. I practiced some of the meditation exercises I'd read in my Occlumency book. It hit me that I'd not done so

since early Monday morning.

At the exact moment that thought crossed my mind, I stiffened and screamed louder than I'd ever done in my life. The next scream proved that I'd thrown out my voice with the first one.

I was on fire - all over my body.

Nails were being driven into every square inch of my body.

My hair hurt.

My blood boiled.

I'd stopped trying to scream shortly after realizing my voice was gone.

Moments, minutes, hours later, I didn't know, I began to scream again futilely. It felt like my bones were trying to explode through my skin. Said skin tried to fight my skeletal actions. My muscles all went into spasms one way and another. My nerve endings decided to yell at everything.

The Cruciatus Curse was an infected hangnail compared to this.

During all of my writhing I heard voices that I pretty much could identify, shouting different things I didn't want to hear.

"I don't understand. This isn't supposed to be happening."

That was Snape.

"You swore on your magic, Severus."

Dumbledore.

"I did nothing, Albus."

This was Snape, and a very sincere, confused Snape. This didn't sound very good.

"We checked everything; you were there."

Pain drowned out their words for a while.

My bones, skin, muscles, and nerves had started a little war. Then I heard Poppy.

"Headmaster! His limbs. Look!"

I heard Centi shout, "Can't you give him anything?"

Apparently the answer was 'no,' because I received no pain relief.

Some little time later I screamed again and felt magic pour out of my body. I heard the crash of hospital furniture and equipment all around me.

Then I heard Snape's words, "He needs the Ending potion. This will kill him."

I groaned out "NO!" At least I hoped they heard me.

I convulsed with more muscular and skeletal spasms. I could feel magic throbbing off of me. I squeaked opened my eyes when a pulsing light hit them. Alternating white, red, and yellow light emitted from my body it appeared.

It was raining and hailing inside of the Infirmary - and then trainers began to fall from the ceiling.

I heard Pomfrey call the Headmaster's name, confusion and worry laced her voice.

"I believe we must end this, Severus." Dumbledore shouted.

"NO!" I croaked as loudly as my tortured voice could produce.

I began to thrash about trying to think of some spell to keep them away from me.

I opened my eyes barely just in time to knock a potion out of Snape's hand and blast him away from me with raw magic.

I heard an angry voice shout, "Leave him alone!"

Protective, strong arms grabbed me and I was pushed and pulled into a warm embrace. I found myself held against a soft body. There seemed to be some small comfort in this, but only a little. Another spasm of pain roiled through my body, and my bones, muscles and nerves began to fight each other again.

"Hold his arms, Millicent," I heard Snape say as he approached once again.

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Budding Legilimens and Eye-Speaker I may be, but I could not mentally communicate with her.

"Snap!"

All I could will myself to do was snap my fingers, once. You can be sure that I paid for that effort.

I couldn't raise my head to look her way. I made the index finger on my right hand do the 'come here' movement. I hope she saw it. After four pulls inward to send that message, I stopped in exhaustion.

I felt someone hovering over me. I cracked my eyes opened.

"Harry?"

It was Centi. I heard Malfoy snort over her concern.

"Harry, are you okay? Can I call Madam Pomfrey?"

I managed to shake my head -- one swing.

"It's just after 9:00," she said. "You should sleep seven or eight more hours at least. What can I do for you?"

I cranked open my eyes, screaming at them to stay open. I mustered all of my magical powers and was about to cast my Eye-Speak spell when Centi was pushed out of the way. Malfoy's face loomed over me. Fear dawned as I realized I was completely at his mercy. Just where he's always dreamed I'd be someday.

"Not the tough man now, are you, Potter? Why, I could easily-Oof!"

I heard the punch in his stomach.

"Touch him and you'll answer to me, Malfoy."

My guardian angel, Centi, sounded like the wrath of God at that moment. I relaxed - well, as much as possible under the circumstances.

"Harry, Cast the Eye-Speak spell, if you can."

She stood over me really close; closer than I ever had when talking to her this way. I guess she thought I needed all of the help available. She was right.

I willed the link between us. *"There you are,"* she spoke silently into my mind. *"Are we connected? Can you speak this way? How do you feel?"*

"Yes, yes, and really, really bad - the pain is something terrible -can't Pomfrey dose me with something?"

"No. Nothing, and that's from Dumbledore, not Snape."

"What are you doing, Bulstrode? You going to kiss him or what?"

She whipped away from me.

"Harry created a spell while we were on the run so we could speak through our eyes. My face and jaw were frozen shut as I told you. Now, either stay over there where I can keep an eye on you both or leave. Otherwise I'll Petrify you right now; both of you."

She returned to my face. *"I'll kill him before I let him hurt you, Harry."*

"I know," I said. *"Thanks. Can I have some water?"*

"I can put a fewice chips in your mouth. Here."

She did so.

"You can have all you want, but only a fewat a time. Careful not to choke."

"Thanks." I sucked on the chips. *"Oh, that's good. Thanks again."*

"You're welcome. You called me over, is that it? You're thirsty?"

"No. Don't go with them. You can't trust Malfoy or Parkinson. You'll be handed over to Voldemort in the minute it would take to break Lucius out of Azkaban. "

"They're not that bad, Harry. Snape promised--"

"Snape! The same man who knewabout the attack on your family and didn't warn you?"

"Harry, I was going to say that Snape promised to check on me and Dumbledore has his oath that he will check on me everyday."

"Fine. So Snape visits you at Pansy's at breakfast time and then Death Eaters show up for lunch. By dinner they have a story concocted that explains how you insisted on going to Diagon Alley or some such. No one will believe it. No one will be punished for it; you know how Malfoy takes a pass on everything. And you'll still be dead! Think about it. Malfoy plans to take most of your 'visits' even though they won't synch with his. When has he ever volunteered to be helpful to anyone?"

I was breathing heavily and perspiring even more. She stared at me and I could Eye-See a whirl of thoughts and emotions fly through her mind at barely recognizable speed.

"You're right, Harry. That could happen. I'll have Dumbledore make the Parkinsons take an oath--"

"No! You know they'll swear anything and everything and yet still someone will figure a way out of it. It's very Slytherin, isn't it, to make such oaths with wiggle room? I trust you, Centi, I trust your oath, but you're betting your life. Think bad Slytherin, not good Slytherin."

When we sat in the old barn Tuesday afternoon, resting from a sky full of Death Eaters, Centi and I coined the terms 'good Slytherins' and 'bad Slytherins' to express the traits we admired and disliked in her housemates. We had similar distinctions for Gryffindors. Centi said that 'brave Gryffindor' and 'stupid Gryffindor' were the same thing, but more on that later.

"What's he saying, Millicent?" Pansy had moved close to us. Questionable sincerity tinged her voice.

Centi looked away from me. "He says that I can't trust you, and he makes a good case."

"Millicent, why I never..." A Muggleborn first year wouldn't have believed Pansy's show of indignation. She continued, "We've been friends since first year. We've been through so much together. Why, we've... we've..."

Parkinson was making my case for me. Centi had told me how she'd been treated in her house and dorm room. She was furniture to them, not a friend.

Centi's face was still positioned so I could see her. She frowned more and more as Pansy spoke.

Finally Malfoy said, "What's Potter ever done for you, other than save your life?"

Centi smiled. "I'm not sure how to tell you about that, Draco, but I do believe that question is really the stupidest thing I've ever heard in my entire life, topping anything from Greg and Vinnie."

I stirred, trying to raise my hand to her shoulder. I didn't make it, but she looked down because of my movement.

"Find my wand and put it in my hand, please." I requested.

"They won't attack you; I won't let them."

"I know. Please do it."

She retrieved my wand and placed it in my right hand. *"You can't even raise that hand, Harry."*

"Place it over my heart, Centi and repeat after me so they can both hear."

Those beautiful eyes I've admired for - has it only been less than a week? Anyway, those beautiful eyes went wide and then she stared at me a little harshly. *"Okay, Potter, no need to go all Gryffindor on me here. You don't have to take an oath, like the foolish Gryff you are most of the time."*

I tried to smile with my eyes like she had when she was in Stasis. *"Actually, it's my inner Hufflepuff coming out. You showed your loyalty to me in front of my friends while they insulted you. I must return the favor."*

She snorted.

"Come on, Centi, let me do this. Think of how much it will really brass off Malfoy. You wouldn't deny me that pleasure, would you?"

She huffed, but smiled a truly striking smile with her new face. The redness was down, though she was still pinker than she should be, her eyes were still slightly 'oriental' as Doctor Binderly had expressed it, but she was pretty, if not beautiful. She had two dimples, one in each cheek, and a part of me, the delirious-with-pain part of me, wanted to stick my finger in one of them.

"All right, you two," Millicent said. "You say you're my friends. Potter here wants you to hear something. I'm going to tell you what he's saying, because he can't speak out loud at the moment."

She spoke with little hesitation and less stops than when I had expressed her pledge to me to my friends.

"I, Harry James Potter, do so swear to protect my friend, Millicent Jeanne Bulstrode from all harm that I can possibly prevent. I extend to her the friendship and protection of the Historic, Ancient, and Noble House of Potter." She gasped at this, and so did the other two. She continued saying for me, "I make this pledge upon my life, upon my honor and upon my magic, so do I pledge."

When Centi made her pledge to me the day before, at the end a small golden glow emanated from her in a brief flash. At the end of my pledge a blinding light filled the room. Snape, Dumbledore, and Pomfrey came rushing in. Apparently they had been in Poppy's office, giving the three housemates time to chat.

"What was that?" Snape demanded.

I could only see Centi's face. She was no longer hovering over me so we could eye-speak, but it took only a little bit of painful movement on my part to see her face.

Almost in a daze, she said, "Harry doesn't want me to go with them. He says I won't be safe, and I agree." She sounded slightly stunned.

Snape snorted but Dumbledore asked, "And that light?"

"Harry pledged to me the friendship and protection of the Historic, Ancient, and Noble House of Potter."

Snape snorted even louder, as if to make sure I could hear. "No one could produce that bright a pledge aura. He must be faking. Leave it to a Potter to rig up a bogus pledge light to impress people. Why I'm amazed his father never--"

As I fell asleep from the magical exhaustion of the pledge magic, the last thing I heard was Centi screaming a rather unladylike diatribe at her head of house. Part of me wanted to stand up and applaud, but I couldn't lift a finger. I knew she'd take care of it.

~*~*~*~

That conflagration, er, conversation took place about 9:00 in the morning. By 5:00 I was awake and ready to be moving about. My glasses were right where Madam Pomfrey always placed them, and I scooped them up and placed them on my face before opening my eyes.

My body... "itched" to be moving it seemed. No one was there, I almost panicked that Centi might have gone with Draco and Pansy, but when I looked to her bed, her photo album was still there.

That made me unaccountably happy.

I swung my legs off of the bed, and let the dizziness pass. I stepped off of the bed and stood, and then immediately fell over, crashing into a table and losing my glasses.

The funny thing is I could still see without them. Strange. I held out my hand for them and they popped into my grasp as if I'd Summoned them. I'd experienced a little wandless and wordless magic this summer since starting the Acceleration potions, and this was like it, but not quite. Intent was one of the main factors that drove Spell Mongery and intent drove wandless and wordless casting. I guess I'd been practicing.

I looked at my glasses. They seemed to be clear glass. I could see well enough without them.

Odd.

Centi and Madam Pomfrey rushed in and helped me up. Centi let go and exclaimed, "Potter!"

Centi is a hair below six feet tall. I turned to her and realized that instead of looking up the usual five inches or so to her, she was a few inches shorter than me.

Poppy realized this and let go of me as well. I crashed to the ground once again. The mediwitch drew her wand and speedily levitated me back onto the bed.

"Stay right there, Mr. Potter. I knew you grew, but looking at you on the bed I hadn't realized just how much. I have an Equilibrium potion for you. Be right back."

I tried to sit up on the bed and became dizzy again. Centi placed her hand on my shoulder and forced me back down. I didn't need much coaxing.

"Well, Harry," she was grinning like a kneazle in the cream. "Looks like you're not a little runt any more. You're at least six feet two, maybe more."

"Here, Mr. Potter, drink this down." Poppy had run back to my bedside.

I did, and it tasted sort of like maple syrup, though thin, like water. The mediwitch ran her wand over me, from head to toe and back again, several times.

I found myself standing behind myself. Okay, that doesn't make sense. What I mean is I felt like I was looking out of my eyes from far away. Nope, that doesn't float either.

Slowly, somehow, I found myself seeming to float back into my head. In about a minute I could see straight, and I felt like my balance had returned. The potion worked.

I tried to sit up and accomplished it. Poppy and Centi helped me, but their aid wasn't needed.

"You experienced a loss of balance because you're so much taller than you were. The Equilibrium potion restores balance for twenty-four hours. You need to walk around a lot, sit and stand, bend over and move side-to-side. This helps you gain the balance you would have if you'd grown to this height naturally, or even over the two months of the Paladin Program."

"About that," I started.

"I'm sorry, Harry." Dumbledore spoke from behind me. "We had no way to know that would happen. Severus is not to blame. I approved everything."

This was just unforeseen."

"Well," I said, "I now know what hurts more than Voldemort's Cruciatus. You don't know why it happened, do you know *what* happened?"

"Somehow," Dumbledore stated, "You experienced all of the growth you should have had if you'd grown up with a normal diet, and did it all in one day, er, in twelve hours rather. We don't know if you will grow even more or not, but we doubt it. You will probably expand your muscle bulk when you exercise, like any fully grown person would, but we think you'll stay at six feet two inches - your present height."

I flexed my arms and legs. I was wiry muscular - no fat at all on my frame. I stood. I looked Dumbledore straight in the eyes, or nearly so. He might be an inch taller, but I wasn't standing perfectly straight either.

"Try magic, Harry," Centi suggested. She seemed to be excited about something.

"All right, hand me my wand please."

She smiled. "No, Summon it yourself."

I stood about five feet from it.

I raised my hand and before I could say, *Accio*, it flew into my hand.

So did the flowers and the vase on the table with my wand, the pitcher of water and goblet on that table, and then the table itself.

I snatched the wand out of the air and swirled it towards the rest of the items heading towards me. They all fell, but I had to jump out of the way of the vase, which seemed to be trying to cut off my toes.

This upset my balance and I'd have crashed to the floor again, had not Centi moved like lightning to catch me.

"Easy there, mister. This isn't a dance hall." Centi smiled at me, beamed at me actually.

"What?" I asked. This was confusing.

"Harry," Dumbledore said. "I think it is safe to say that just like your height was restored to what you would have attained before your malnutrition, your magic is now where it would have been if Voldemort hadn't been pressing down on you through your curse scar all of these years. And yet, there is more. You added what you would have had naturally to what you developed extraordinarily because you 'exercised your magic' so to speak, fighting Voldemort all that time."

"Hold it," I said. "I'm confused. Say that last part again slowly."

"All right, but let me explain something about the first part before the last part." Dumbledore cleared his throat and went on. "You, for some reason we don't even know how to contemplate, have fully grown physically in twelve hours, not only what you would have in the remaining months of the Paladin Program, but you have redeemed what should have been yours before your unfortunate upbringing."

I let him continue without reminding him that he, and his miserable decisions were *why* I had experienced that unfortunate upbringing.

"So, Harry, this was an act of restoration of what would have been. That is your physical growth, but now regarding your magical maturation.

"Because of your curse scar, you've had Voldemort draining some of your magic away all of this time. He used your magic to live all of those years in his half-life status. Normally, you would have used the magic he drained off to help with your typical magical development. Until today you've not had the power you should have."

I lowered my head. I'd always felt I could do better, and now I knew I'd kept that bastard (in all senses of the word) alive at my own expense.

Pomfrey cleared her voice. "Mr. Potter. I test every student's magical development each year. I've never had to send for you to test because you've always showed up with a Quidditch injury or something else before it was your turn.

"I've been matron here since 1963. I've never tested anyone more powerful than you, even with this drain. And now...."

"Yes," Dumbledore continued. "It appears, Harry, that you've had all of that restored to you in the last day. And yet, there is more.

"There is a positive to having your curse scar all of these years. Part of the reason that Madam Pomfrey has recorded such high power levels in you, is that your magic has fought against Voldemort for all of these years. Your magic has fought him off trying to restrict his access. While all other magical children your age have mostly used their magic to nurture their further magical development, you've used yours to fight evil. It's made the magic you've kept much stronger."

"And now," I asked, "This somehow combines or works together... I don't understand."

"Your father and mother were both very powerful magically. But because your mother was Muggleborn, she introduced very beneficial fresh elements into your bloodline. You were fated to be powerful indeed."

Centi interrupted, "But, Professor, the Pureblood doctrine states that Mudblo-- sorry, Muggleborns introduce bad blood into magical family lines."

"Yes, Miss Bulstrode," Pomfrey answered. "But we in the medical professions have known for many score years that the old family lines need to be

infused with fresh blood before inbreeding occurs. The Weasleys are an old family, and have married no Muggles or Muggleborns in many generations. They are perhaps the purest in the school now. But they have married across many social barriers and from diverse parts of Great Britain, and even the continent. A Weasley even married an American witch in the early part of this century. That introduced fresh blood as well.

"However, few Pure-bloods marry outside of their social circles, or at least few admit to doing so."

But..." Centi was confused. I didn't really understand either, but her family had lived this Pure-blood doctrine for generations.

"Miss Bulstrode," said Dumbledore. "By marrying a Muggle your maternal grandfather did a very good thing for your family. You are much more powerful than you would have been otherwise."

Centi stared away thoughtfully. Finally she said, "You know, my mother was always much more powerful than my father. She took great pains to not display it in front of him, and he never said anything cross to her about it, but he knew as well. We all did."

Dumbledore said, "It is something for you to ponder, Miss Bulstrode, but back to Harry here. He was scheduled, so to speak, to be a very strong wizard because his parents were both powerful and because his mother introduced fresh magical elements into his bloodline. Much of that powerful magic was sapped from him. However, of the magic that remained, it became very powerful in its own right because of the constant exercise in struggling against Voldemort."

"And so," I said, "I get all of my magic back that Voldemort drained away, *and* I add to it the strength I gained fighting to keep Voldemort from taking more from me. Is that what you're saying?"

"No, Harry. Well yes, but really not that exactly." Dumbledore's eyes twinkled on overload. "That would be addition - combining the two power factors. From all of our tests while you were sleeping, you seem to have multiplied your magic. It's as if all of your originally intended magic also went through the exercising and grew from the struggle also. We estimate you are three and a half to four times more powerful than you would have been."

"And" Poppy added, "you still can grow magically like you would during the last two years of your time here at Hogwarts. In your case, as a Paladin you will also benefit from the Acceleration potions you'll be taking along with Miss Bulstrode. Stay with the series and you should see even more magical growth. We can't imagine how much stronger you'll become. Twenty percent more? Fifty percent? We just don't know."

You could have knocked me over with a unicorn hair.

I heard Centi whisper, "You're going to kill him, Harry."

"What's that Miss Bulstrode?"

"I said that he's going to kill Voldemort. Harry has survived fighting him what, four or five times so far? Now Harry's so much stronger and getting more so. He just needs more training and practice fighting with others, dirty fighting like my brother told me the Death Eaters do, none of this polite dueling by rules and regulations.

"And I want to help, Harry," she said turning to me. "I want to help you and I want to learn right along side you. I've pledged my loyalty to you until the end. You've extended your protection and friendship. I claim my vassal rights to train in service to the Historic, Ancient, and Noble House of Potter."

Before this sunk in, actually before I even understood what it meant, Dumbledore demanded, "What have you two pledged to each other?"

I looked over at him. He did *not* have a pleasant look on his face.

Centi did most of the explaining to him. His face went from surprised, to shocked, to dismayed with many stops in between. At the end the Headmaster seemed barely able to conceal his anger over the content of the pledges Centi and I had made to each other.

It was very Slytherin of her to make her pledge sound like an effort to join the ranks of the valiant Gryffindors and Paladins Dumbledore had unofficially begun gathering around me to fight Lord Voldemort. She never once used the title most of Voldie's followers used: 'Dark Lord.'

Then she told of my pledge, using Malfoy and Parkinson as the bad guys, something I told her Dumbledore wouldn't want to believe, since the two had somehow joined the Paladin Program. By telling him how those two acted so badly she explained why I felt that I had to make my pledge overwhelming, and she validated my promise of support like I never could have. She also cast doubt on Draco and Pansy's sincerity, something I had no problems believing.

I like having a Slytherin on my team. All that cunning and understanding how to manipulate people really comes in handy.

"You should have heard them, Professor," Centi told Dumbledore. "Malfoy couldn't say enough bad things about Harry. Draco and Pansy both made it clear they looked forward to the day Voldemort kills Harry. And they were insulting to my family. It was as if they didn't feel their deaths were important.

"And Harry, laying there immobile, struggled to defend me and himself, when he shouldn't have even been awake - he knew they couldn't be trusted. Harry made me see that they could promise to keep me safe and then just look the other way when I was taken by Death Eaters. They've lied to you and the other professors many times; what's one more lie when Voldemort has already made it clear he will send Death Eaters on one-way missions to kill me.

"In that state Harry summoned up enough magic to make a pledge, you saw the brightness of the pledge emanation he produced. It was worthy of the head of a great house - not surprising since we know Harry is destined to lead House Potter."

She looked my way and noticed my confused look. "Harry, have you not been educated in the rights, responsibilities, and traditions of the Three-Thirty-Three Families? You should already be attending the two major social events of the year and observing the occasional Wizengamot assembly. House Potter isn't only Ancient and Noble, but Historic."

I shook my head. This headache was going to be migraine-quality I could tell. "I don't really know what any of that means, Centi. Sirius just laughed when he called his family the Ancient and Noble House of Black. I thought it was some pureblood bigotry and dismissed it. I only found out House Potter was described as Historic as well Ancient and Noble when Sirius' will called it that."

Centi turned with a frown on her face towards the Headmaster. I saw his look indicating he wanted to escape scrutiny. He'd had to use that expression a good bit in the last few days.

"Chief Warlock, as the last Bulstrode, and soon to be heir to the title, if not the Family vote, I wish to know of the *regere fides* of the House Potter. Mister Potter, do I have your permission to ask these questions on your behalf? I'm asking about those responsible for House Potter's Rights to Rule, and why you've been left so ignorant of these important matters."

Dumbledore turned to me shaking his head.

This angered me. Before he could say anything I said, "Of course, Miss Bulstrode."

She turned back to Dumbledore. She asked, "Sirius Black was Harry's godfather, and therefore his magical guardian. Did he hold regency powers for House Potter as well, on Harry's behalf?"

Dumbledore merely shook his head and turned to me once more. I stared at Millicent when he did so, causing him to look back at her.

"Who then?" She asked.

The silence confirmed it. This was going to be migraine-quality even though Poppy once told me witches and wizards don't get migraines like Muggles do. Muggleborns don't even get them. Of course, I have this curse scar that gives me headaches like no one else enjoys.

"I do, Miss Bulstrode," the Headmaster stated. "How do you know about all of this? You were the third child, I believe."

"When my oldest brother, Milton, the one I never met, joined the Death Eaters the first go around, my parents had Mylon. When Milton died at the hands of an Auror late 1978, they decided to have me. The old adage, 'Heir and a spare' was the idea I believe. They'd have had another when I proved to be a girl, but complications during the pregnancy rendered my mother incapable of doing so. As the spare, I've been trained in everything a family head should know - everything Harry should know by now.

"Don't try to change the subject again," she added. "Why didn't you educate and inform Harry about being a Three-Thirty-Three Family Head? I was trained even though it's only my heir who will hold the Wizengamot place. Harry heads an active branch with many votes, as well as the Black Family Right to Rule. Surely Sirius insisted that you train Harry."

"I've wanted Harry to concentrate on his magic. He has a vital roll in the fight coming--"

I exploded. "That's it! You've done bloody well nothing to train me to fight Voldemort, saying you wanted me to have a regular childhood. Now you say you haven't trained me for my role as head of House Potter because I'm training to fight.

"Even this summer, all of this Paladin stuff is supposed to train me, but no one has even attempted to teach me a single spell. In five years, of all your Defense professors, only Remus wasn't rubbish at teaching Defense. Barty Crouch, Jr. had moments of lucidity, but he didn't really want us to learn much in the end."

All of a sudden, I decided I wanted to rub the Headmaster's nose in this hippogriff dung.

"Centi, what did you score on your Defense O.W.L.?"

"Acceptable, Harry, like the rest of us fifth year Slyths. We only did that good because Tracey Davis thought to ask some of the sixth years for a bit of help. Ministry approved materials, my big backside, most of the explanations in Umbridge's course book would have been wrong on the O.W.L.s if we'd used them."

I nodded and looked back to Dumbledore. "I bet there were seventeen Outstanding O.W.L.s this year, weren't there, Professor? Eighteen if Seamus made it."

"Seventeen, Harry." Dumbledore admitted.

"How did you know, Harry?"

I looked at Centi. "Because, I trained seventeen fifth years last year in Dumbledore's Army, which I plan to rename the Defense Association this year."

Dumbledore winced at this, and then said, "I've no intention to deny that you are an excellent instructor on Defense, Harry. That's why I asked you to design a curriculum to train everyone in Practical Defense. That's what I've decided to call whatever I do with what you give me."

"Fine," I said. I wanted to go back to what Centi started. "So, I've been given to abusive people who treated me like the Malfoys treated Dobby because you wanted me to have a normal life away from the fame of being the Boy-Who-Lived. You've given me little training even though I have a very important fight ahead of me.

"Now you say I'm too busy training to fight Voldemort for you to have educated me about, or even told me I'm the head of House Potter. I don't know about you, but this sounds really stuffed to me, Professor."

I stopped talking and looked at him. He looked to Centi, who I saw had a very angry look on her face as well, much harsher, I thought, than my stare.

He turned back to me and said, "I don't know what to say, Harry."

"You seem to suffer from that a lot, recently, Professor," I responded. "So stand there and ponder that while I decide what I want to do."

I turned and call for Dobby.

Pop!

"How may Dobby serve Harry Potter SIR?"

"Hello, Dobby, thanks for coming so promptly." The elf beamed at me, and I continued before he could say the usual. "You know how my room is arranged after Professor Dumbledore expanded it, and you're the magic behind its daily transformations, right?"

"Yes, Harry Potter SIR."

Well, I need to know if you can handle my next request or if we need the professor's help. I want to roughly double the size of that room. I need you to give my bedroom area a door with a lock, and create an identical lockable bedroom beside it. I need twice the space for the training room and a copy of every piece of exercise equipment. The library is fine, but I need to double the Potions area with a second complete worktable and everything needed for two brewers. Oh, and do whatever you must to be able to cook for another Paladin there.

"Can you do that or do you need Professor Dumbledore's help? Oh, and we'll need a bed, dresser, nightstand and lamp, desk, chair and a bookshelf in the second bedroom. You can buy that with access to my vault funds can't you?"

"Harry, I can't allow--"

I rudely held up my hand to Dumbledore and he stopped speaking for the moment.

"Harry Potter SIR, Dobby can make all of the adjustments SIR requests and can also furnish the room as Harry Potter SIR mentioned..." He tugged on his ears, indicating he couldn't do everything he felt needed to be done.

"Stop with the ears, Dobby," I said, "Just tell me what's bothering you. I know you'll do all you can for me. Tell me."

"It's just that... Harry Potter SIR and Harry Potter SIR's relatives all have a hard time using the one loo upstairs. Another half loo at least is needed, more would be best, considering Harry Potter SIR's relatives."

Then he rushed to say, near tears, "Dobby cannot create plumbing; plumbing takes a witch or wizard of Harry Potter SIR's power but also special experience to do as Harry Potter SIR wishes. Dobby suggests a loo for Harry Potter SIR's aunt and uncle and another loo in the hallway for Miss Centi."

Dobby was a smart house-elf. He picked up right away what was on my mind. Dumbledore, the great manipulator had as well, but Centi hadn't, not considering it possible that I would think of it.

Both Centi and Dumbledore said, "But, Harry..." in unison.

Once again I ignored the Headmaster and then addressed Centi's concerns. "You asked to be my vassal, right? Well, I don't know what that means in the magical world, but in the Muggle world it means I provide safe haven for you, as well as room and board. I make sure you're properly equipped for battle and add to your training. You, in return will educate me in any matter where I need your expertise, and you will serve House Potter as I see fit, within reason, of course. Correct?"

She nodded her head.

"I've told you about my relatives," I continued. "They can be bribed and threatened into behaving themselves. The Headmaster here will go and gain my uncle's consent and perform whatever tasks concerning plumbing that are needed."

I turned to Dumbledore. "Can you make a permanent loo in my aunt and uncle's bedroom? That will go a long way to making them happy. I guess it will have to be removed if and when they ever sell the house, but they've often complained about how they wish they had one."

"I can do all of that, Harry, but I won't. Miss Bulstrode can't possibly stay with you. The risks to your safety--"

"Risks!" I interrupted. How can there be any risks? Do you think she's faking all of this? That she agreed to watch her family be killed so she could fight her way with me across the length of England and on into Scotland on the off chance I'd worry enough about her safety to invite her to stay with me this summer?

"Or is it that her presence will weaken the blood wards you've placed so much confidence in? If that's the case then they're not much good. Or is it that if she's with me, Voldemort will try to kill me?"

"Oops! Too late. He's already decided to kill me. Or is it you think that if we are friends, now Voldemort will want to kill her? Oops again! Too late on

that count also.

"This isn't a security issue; so, what is it really, Professor?"

"Well, you would need a proper chaperone," he said almost petulantly. I noticed he avoided answering the real question, but I wasn't finished yet.

I asked, "Can't Dobby be our chaperone?"

"No, a chaperone must be a female."

"Does it have to be a witch? Could a squib do it for example, like Mrs. Figg?"

"It doesn't have to be a witch, but Mrs. Figg is busy."

"Fine. If I hired a personal servant, a female lady-in-waiting, would that assuage your tender sensibilities?"

Dumbledore said, "Even a Muggle female according to the old ways would do, but there's no room for two more people in your home, and we can't make more rooms for Muggles--"

"Winky," I called.

"Harry, I don't think--"

"She is a female," I pointed out. "There seems to be no qualifiers beyond sex."

"House-elves have been used for such purposes before, but--"

"Winky," I called. I heard the distinct sound of a house-elf popping in to the room. I turned away from Dumbledore and looked at the elf before me. She looked even worse than the last time I saw, her, but she wasn't drunk, just worn out and downtrodden.

"Winky, do you know of the rules Dobby lives under as my house-elf? I don't allow him to punish himself and I consider him a friend who works for me, not a slave. Even though I understand the master-elf relationship is a form of enslavement, it's not the way I want my relationship to exist with Dobby. Do you understand this?"

"Yes, Harry Potter SIR. Dobby is explaining everything to Winky. 'Tis a shame Dobby can't live as a proper house-elf, but Dobby is bonded, is happier than Winky has ever know Dobby." She hung her head as she said that last bit, probably because she was unbonded and miserable.

"Winky, would you like to be bound to House Potter? You'd have to follow the same rules as Dobby, but I have need of a female house-elf, and..." I decided to try to build some self-esteem her in her. "Well, Winky, you're the finest female house-elf I've ever heard of. I'd love to have you in my service."

Her eyes lit up, but before she said anything I continued, "Oh, and I want you to dress better. I don't have a uniform for you yet, but you and Dobby can make up whatever you want and I'll consider it as the official uniform for House Potter's valued servants. What do you say?"

"Oh, Harry Potter SIR, Dobby is always saying Harry Potter SIR is the bestest and mostest wisest, mostest powerfulest wizard in all of the world. All Dobby is being saying is true!" She lunged at me, hitting my leg just a little lower than Dobby did every time he made a similar attack.

"Winky... Winky, doggonit. See here, Winky, do you need to perform some binding with me to make it official?"

She pulled back. I knelt before her. She gasped in awe. I knew Dobby never ceased to be amazed when I knelt to look him eye-to-eye, and this was a first between me and Winky.

"How do we do this?" I asked.

Winky came forward and took my hand. She placed it on her head.

In a fraction of a second, Dobby popped into the Infirmary, followed by as many other house-elves as could possibly fit on the floor space, on shelf tops, in windowsills, and hanging from the torch holders on the walls.

She chanted tunelessly, "Winky is bonded to House Potter, and the greatest of all wizards in the land, heir of the First Master. Winky pledges to serve without reservation. Winky pledges to keep all of Harry Potter SIR's secrets and protect House Potter and Winky's master with Winky's life. So Winky does pledge."

With that she began lowering her head towards the floor. Before she touched it with her nose, I spoke up, stopping her.

"I, Harry James Potter, do accept Winky the house-elf as my elf and my friend. I pledge to provide for her, protect her, and look to her welfare as best as I can. You, along with Dobby, are part of House Potter. So I do pledge."

The next moment a bright light, swirling with house-elf skin tone green and a pale golden yellow, filled the Infirmary. Its center was where Winky and I knelt with Dobby beside me. The light caused all present to squint and turn away from us. It died down to reveal all of the house-elves kneeling on one knee and bending at their waists.

Slowly they chanted, "So it was with the First Master. So it is with the Heir."

Instantly they stood. They all seemed to have a robustness to them. They smiled, chuckled, half of them danced quick little impromptu jigs. Winky was a changed house-elf, as full of energy and life as any house-elf I've ever seen.

The sea of elves parted and an elderly house-elf stepped forward and bowed. "Harry Potter SIR. This elf is called Dinker, chief house-elf of Hogwarts, eighth cousin once removed to Dobby, yet close enough related to the line of Dobert, the first house-elf, to be named with the letter 'D.' When the day comes for the Magister to arise, he may call on the old oaths. Until that day, Harry Potter SIR may call on *any* elf to serve."

Okay, like my life needed another notch up on the Wizarding Weird-O-Meter.

"Er, thank you, Dinker. I appreciate your offer and I'm sure Dobby will explain it all to me. Likewise, please let all house-elves know they have a friend in Harry Potter."

Once again all of the elves present slowly chanted, "So it was with the First Master. So it is with the Heir."

It was beyond weird - it was downright unnerving.

The uniform pop was deafening as all the elves, save Winky and Dobby, left at the very same instant.

"Er, yes, well, that was unexpected."

Master of the obvious I was.

"Er, Winky, you will act as female chaperone for Miss Centi here. Dobby will prepare rooms for us at my Aunt and Uncle's house," I paused, "Er, and I guess you should help him. Professor Dumbledore will be there shortly to negotiate with my Uncle about the other changes needed. Oh, hold it a second." I turned to Dumbledore. "Sir, do you know if anyone has gone to Centi's home and gathered up whatever the Death Eaters left usable or repairable?"

"Er." This caught him off guard. He stumbled out, "I've er, not had time to do so."

"Or, shall we say you forgot? No real importance, just the personal effects of the lives of generations." I tried to stare a hole in him for a moment. He did have the good grace to look away. He'd had to do that quite often recently.

"Dobby, Winky, Miss Centi is a sworn vassal of House Potter, find her home, it was attacked by Death Eaters on Monday, and see if there's anything of value to be recovered. Is that possible for you? I don't want you to risk being hurt in anyway. If Death Eaters show up, leave it. Can you check for traps or such things, or do I need to hire Gringotts curse breakers to see to that?"

The two scurried over to Centi and stood next to her for several seconds, each placing a hand on her lower leg. He said, "Dobby has been to Miss Centi's before looking for Harry Potter SIR. Now, Dobby and Winky can find Miss Centi's home as part of serving Harry Potter SIR. Miss Centi is part of House Potter and Dobby and Winky can now protect her house, while Dobby or Winky is present, with basic house-elf spells. Would not prevent Death Eater attacks, but would protect long enough for Dobby and Winky to escape with Miss Centi's possessions. Dobby and Winky will be safe, Harry Potter SIR."

I thought about this. "Well, I'll leave this to your judgment about how and when to do all of this. We won't be at Privet Drive until tomorrow some time. Madam Pomfrey won't release us until then. Professor Dumbledore will have everything right with my family this evening as I said."

I couldn't think of anything else. "Anything you two can think of, or need to ask? Centi?"

Shaking heads all around. I sent the elves on their way.

Centi rubbed her hands together and had an oddly happy expression on her face. "I've never had a house-elf to order around, pick up after me, and teach a lesson to when they make mistakes."

That really bothered me, and Dumbledore displayed a look of triumph on his face.

"Centi," I asked, "Do you think I'd let any head of an ancient family order you around at his whim?"

"No, Harry, why do you ask?" Her face lost its smug look and took on one of worry.

"And you're right, Centi. I might put you under orders to another family head, but I wouldn't unless I trusted him not to abuse your service and to have your best interest at heart."

With a look of relief and confusion Centi nodded her head.

"You're not just a vassal to use as I please, we're comrades at arms, we owe each other life debts, and I'd like to think we're friends and will become better friends, regardless of your commitment to service."

She nodded again, smiling, but her face told me she didn't see where I was going with this.

"Dobby and I have fought together also. He and I owe each other life debts, although it's different than our relationship, you and me. But I will not treat them badly and I won't let anyone else do so either. What makes you want to boss them around?"

"Well... er, well we never had house-elves, but my father grew up with one. He'd talk about it. My grandfather was cruel to it and Dad said that was the way of things. Then Parkinson, Nott and Malfoy always laughed at how they'd punish their elves; they said that elves liked it."

I looked her right in the eyes. It seemed like a long time to me that I stared, and it probably seemed longer to her.

She looked down. "That's pretty stupid, isn't it?"

"I wouldn't say stupid," I told her, "But it's not using your brain. No one likes pain and humiliation."

"You, Harry, are truly unique," She said. "They'd laugh at me sometimes when I... well, when I didn't know something the other girls did or the guys and girls would both laugh when I said something showing my poverty. I so tried to emulate them, tried to fit in..."

She straightened. "Mister Potter, I need to become a better person; would you please help me?"

I smiled and nodded. After a few moments reassuring her that I wasn't all that great at being kind to others, but we could learn together, I looked at Dumbledore.

He wasn't pleased Centi and I were getting along so well. This made me angry again.

"Professor, would you please go visit my uncle and ask his permission to house Centi there this summer as well?"

"I still say it's not--"

"Safe?" I interrupted. "It either is or isn't the safest place because of the blood wards. Which is it?"

Dumbledore narrowed his eyes. "I was going to say it isn't wise. Even with a proper chaperone, *you* shouldn't stay with..." He broke off here.

I'd pushed the old man to the point where he wasn't being his usual polite self. I wondered what it really was that had him against Centi staying with me.

"Please tell me, Professor, what's bothering you?"

He cut his eyes towards McGonagall. She had a look on her face I easily interpreted as clueless as to his reasons, although I can't imagine she liked the idea of Centi staying with me on general principles alone.

Finally, Dumbledore said the wrong thing. "Harry, I just think you should listen to your elders. We know bet--"

Like I said, the wrong thing to say.

"So you say you know better, old man?" I exploded. "That's why the Dursleys treated me like the Malfoys treated Dobby, and *still treated me* until you bribed my uncle a couple of weeks ago. I grew up in a cupboard with spiders as my only friends because you knew better. Even when I came back here each September starved, you knew better.

"Oh, and you can't say you didn't know I was kept in a cupboard. The first Hogwarts letter I received was addressed to me at, 'Cupboard under the stairs.'

"You even knew best when you had Hagrid bring me to Diagon Alley my first time. I've compared notes with Dean, Hermione, and Justin Finch-Fletchley over the years. All Muggleborns or Muggle raised had three four-hour sessions to introduce them to the Magical world, but I had Hagrid."

"Harry," McGonagall interrupted, "Hagrid begged us to let him go for you."

"And I appreciate that, Professor, truly I do, but can either of you honestly say you expected Hagrid to tell me everything you told Hermione? Did you train him for it? Did either of you think for a minute he'd do as good a job as the rest of you?"

I didn't want an answer to that question.

"And while we're talking about knowing better, was it better for me to be ostracized in second year for being a Parselmouth? What did you do, Headmaster, to make it easier for me to survive all that ridicule?

"Quirrel, Lockheart and Barty Crouch, Jr. showed you knew better?"

I paused momentarily. I had a dozen other lesser points to raise, but picked only a few from last year.

"And as to last year, how could you send Snape to teach me Occlumency without inspecting his efforts? You know he hates me. And how could you ignore me for a year, without even telling me why? You didn't have to tell me about the prophecy, you could have simply told me Voldemort wanted to trick me to go to the Ministry and that would have been enough.

"But *nooooooooo!* You knew better and Sirius was killed.

"You told me it was your fault he died because you wanted me to have a childhood. Every Gryffindor in my year could have told you I've never had a childhood, and I never talk about it to them. But you *knew better* than to ask."

I stopped again. I was panting in my anger and frustration. A couple of hot tears stung my eyes.

Before Dumbledore could say anything I held up my hand and looked to my side to step back a bit. Then I turned around, and all in one motion I drew my wand and shouted, "Accio wands!" This startled them and I had their wands before they could react.

"I held their wands towards Centi without looking her way. She took them and I said, "Draw your wand, Centi, and hold it on them. That's an order." I didn't look to see if she'd complied. I knew she would.

"Professor McGonagall, you've told me you're sorry, and I believe you. But you're here at his side, so I include you in this at the moment. Guilt by association." I didn't wait for a visual nod or any verbal response.

"Headmaster, I hold you at wand point because I can see only two reasons why you've done all of this. First, either you're incompetent and gullible, or you placed me with the Dursleys to break me, make me hopeless and solely dependent on you, so you can rescue me at the end of each summer from them. That way I'll be a pliable dupe you can use as a weapon to defeat Voldemort. Since you haven't trained me to fight, my guess is that you want me to die killing him."

I paused and took two very deep breaths. I trembled with the idea of what I just said.

I calmed and finally said, "I'm hopeful you have another explanation, but I've taken your wands, just in case my second idea is true, because I don't want you to *Obliviate* Centi or me. Now what are your reasons?"

Time seemed to go both fast and slow. I remembered Uncle Vernon bragging about his selling skills. One thing that he said was important was to ask for the order and then not say anything until the buyer responded. Well, I'd asked for an answer, and I didn't expect to receive one, but I could remain silent as long as he could. Vernon always said that the one who spoke first lost.

Finally, Dumbledore said, "There are plenty of decisions I've made, Harry, that I regret. How would you like me to help you?"

I smirked at him. He didn't answer my question really. I knew it, and he knew I knew it. But this would suffice for now.

"First, sir, I need you to go to the Dursleys' and convince my uncle to accept Centi's presence. Have them all agree to leave her alone and not ask questions. Offer the new loo for my aunt and uncle's bedroom, and double the loos in the hall upstairs, making sure Dudley knows one is for Centi alone.

"Second, we'll need whatever wards adjusted for Centi to be there, and to be able to walk safely from number four, Privet Drive to Mrs. Figg's. Everything else about wards and protections in the area needs to be adjusted or we need to know about our restrictions.

"Third, are there some sort of Owl-post ordering catalogues for Wizarding clothing? Centi needs robes and whatever, and I could use some as well. We can't go to Diagon Alley, so Owl-post and house-elf are the only methods I know of to make our purchases.

"Can you think of anything else, Centi?"

"I'll need all of my toiletries and such," she said.

"If you'll permit me, Miss Bulstrode, I'll acquire the basics and make sure you have them by the time you are at the Dursleys' home," McGonagall said. "Anything else I don't find you can send Winky for, after Mr. Potter sets up accounts."

I didn't know what "sets up accounts" was all about, but I figured Centi knew and would explain it to me, since she nodded knowingly.

No one said anything. Finally Dumbledore said, "Well, if that is all, Harry, if we may have our wands, we will be about our appointed tasks."

I grinned and did as he asked. With no other words, everyone left the room except for the two patients.

After the doors closed, Centi asked, "Do you really trust them, Harry? It scared me to no end when you accused Dumbledore of possibly Obliviating us. How do you know he still won't?"

"Centi, have you ever seen Dumbledore use wandless magic?"

"No."

"Well, I have. If he'd have wanted his wand back, you wouldn't have been able to hold it. I'm sure he has a plan to bring me back into check, but I don't think, and I've never thought that he has evil intentions towards me. He has done so much good. I just wanted him to face the fact that he's done very poorly by me, so we'll have some freedom with our safety, even though we'll be mostly stuck in that room for the summer.

"I'll apologize when he comes back, if he's done what I've asked. I need him, and he needs me. We both know that, but he needs to know that I'm a partner in this fight, at least a junior partner, not a first-year drooling over meeting the Great Albus Dumbledore."

"Harry, that's so very Slytherin of you. I'm impressed."

I looked away. Inside I seethed and cried. Why did Dumbledore have to make my life so blasted hard for me? He could have insisted Sirius have a trial under Veritaserum and then I could have grown up living with someone who loved me.

I've thought a lot this summer about what could have been. Now I have three people, er, beings directly dependent on me, Centi, Dobby, and Winky. And if you count that I'm the only one who can kill Voldemort, I guess everyone else is dependent on me too.

No pressure, Potter. Take your time. Dumbledore doesn't seem to think there's any rush to train me to fight Tom, so why should you worry?

"Because I'm better than him."

"Better than who, Harry?"

I didn't realize I'd said that out loud. I spun towards Centi.

"Centi, do you think I'm crazy?"

"Oh no, Harry, you're not crazy. You've just stayed awake for two days, fighting your way across the length of England protecting one of your biggest enemies who had fallen on hard times. You've killed Death Eaters left and right, Mongered a spell to talk to those who can't, and learned to cast with two wands on the fly. You invented a brand new Portkey Spell from what I can tell, saved my life several dozen times, stared down your head of house more than once, disarmed the greatest living wizard since Merlin - twice - once, even, when half your ribs were broken. Oh, and you've cajoled said greatest wizard since Merlin into doing the right thing four or five times in a forty-eight hour period.

"No, you're not crazy. You're Absolutely-St.Mungo-Certifiably insane and brilliant. But then, I pledged to follow you on your crusade against Voldemort, so who's crazier, me or you?"

Not since Hermione told me I was a great wizard when I went on alone to protect the Sorcerer's Stone in first year, had anyone given me such a vote of confidence.

My world was upside down and pear shaped - as I'd realized more than once since last Monday.

"Why do you ask if I think you're mad, Harry?"

I shook my head as if clearing cobwebs. "I just realized that Dumbledore has failed. He's known all this time about my situation and me and left me there with the Dursleys hoping for the best. He's done nothing to prepare me, hoping I'd have a childhood he'd received evidence wasn't occurring. He's let me go through each school year, watching things unravel and hoped for the best.

"Well, you need hope, but hope doesn't accomplish anything unless you also have to have a plan and execute it properly.

"Therefore, I said that I'm better than him. I'm going to train myself, and train you. Then I'm going to train all of the Paladins. Dumbledore is supposed to be bringing in these great teachers, well, we'll see, but I'm not counting on anything. I'll be prepared to make it all work, in spite of Dumbledore.

"And since Draco seems to think he's one of us, I'll give him a chance, but when he proves he's not with us, I'll kick him out of the program one way or another. Dumbledore and Snape can rot in Perdition for all I care.

"I'm going to Monger the new spells we'll need to fight, and sell them for a pittance to those I know are on our side. And now that you're here, Centi, I'm going to learn all I can about the Ministry of Magic and the Wizengamot. Will you help me, please?"

She smiled, and then laughed out loud. "Oh good, a revolution; Slytherins love a good revolution. There are so many ways to profit, and so many unique opportunities to use our native cunning. For my first act as a Slytherin vassal to a Gryffindor, shall I be un-Slytherin and openly declare myself a rebel with you?"

She paused here. Neither of us knew what to say next. Finally she stated, "Oh, and Harry, I've never thought much of Dumbledore. He's too good to be real, considering all that he's accomplished behind the scenes. Don't misunderstand me; I'm convinced he's for the Light, but he's not the saint most think he is. Manipulating peoples and governments in the background is never a clean job."

"You're not perfect, Harry," she ended, "But you're genuine, and I don't feel like a pawn in your hands."

~*~*~

It would have been great if the professors had come back with everything arranged and Centi and I had made it to the Dursleys' without any more problems.

Nice dream, but it wouldn't have been *my* life if it went that easily.

~*~

Shortly after Dumbledore and McGonagall left on their 'assignments,' I realized I was famished - starving - ravenous for food - lots of it. I called Pomfrey and she told me she'd been expecting that.

Evidently, though there were no precedents for what I'd experienced, Dumbledore, Snape, and she had predicted I'd spend a great deal of time eating, in addition to the regular Paladin prescribed meals. My body had grown and put on a good deal of wiry muscle in a matter hours, something that would have normally taken place over many months, meaning hundreds and hundreds of meals. Now my system craved the actual nourishment to support the growth that magic had produced in me.

Pomfrey called a house-elf and gave her instructions about the types of foods I needed. "Beji, Mr. Potter will be very hungry, *very hungry*. Start with what ever the meal was for Paladins yesterday at dinner time, and bring him that. Then bring lunch, dinner, lunch dinner going back until he says to stop."

Beji turned towards me and bowed low, "Anything for the Heir of the First Master." Then she popped away.

"Mr. Potter," Pomfrey said, "do you want to explain that First Master and Heir business to me? Do I even want to know?"

I told you about Spell Mongery. My two ago ancestor, Telemachus Grind, was the last Spell Monger. His journal is rather hit or miss about explanations, but evidently he also rescued what became the house-elves from some sort of bad fate. Though house-elves exist in a version of enslavement, they revere him for saving them, from what I don't know.

"Grind had no children, but his mother was a Potter. Therefore, I am his heir, though I don't know why no Potter since Grind and before me was considered his heir. Beyond that limited explanation I'm clueless."

That night I ate - and ate and ate and ate. I'd have made three Ron Weasleys at his hungriest, look finicky. Before an hour had passed Centi and Pomfrey were laughing openly at my consumption. I laughed too--between bites.

The next morning Centi and I finished the prescribed huge breakfast by 7:00. She complained about being over weight and not needing so much food, but I held her off and suggested she just follow the plan for a few days and see how her appetite changed with the rigorous exercise regimen designed for us.

I had awakened during the night twice, consuming huge meals each time, and had already eaten three breakfasts *before* the specified Paladin breakfast that she ate with me. Pomfrey assured me my appetite would lessen soon, and all would be back to normal.

My life normal - what an alien concept.

At that moment Snape swept in, cape billowing behind him, carrying the normal potions for sixth-years in the Paladin Program. He sneered at me and then smiled oddly at Centi. She did not see that as reassuring. When he saw her look my way, his expression grew stormy, and we knew that this truly was our Professor Snape.

"Miss Bulstrode, Potter, these are your next potions. Since you two are no longer synchronized with the others, you are now on a cycle of taking most of your potions at this hour. One day in four you'll take one at 7:00 in the evening instead. Your Paladin 'visits' will vary throughout the day, but since you will be taking most of them together, at least until your safety outside of Potter's house is ascertained, timing with other participants is irrelevant.

"Your house-elves, Potter, charter member of SPEW that you are, have your timetables in the journals they keep for you, since you, Potter, can't be bothered to take responsibility for--"

"That's enough, Severus," Dumbledore interrupted him. "I've asked you not to antagonize *any* of the students. What did I say that made you think Mr. Potter was excluded from that request?"

A snidget feather could have knocked us all over. Dumbledore had walked in behind Snape and none of us had noticed him. For the hundredth time I wondered how he did that.

"Er, yes, Headmaster," was all Snape managed to say at the moment.

Dumbledore had acted strangely last night after visiting my "family." Uncle Vernon had driven a hard bargain. The Headmaster had to not only provide a large loo for the master bedroom, *but* Vernon had also held out for another new business account for Grunnings. It was much smaller than the four large accounts Dumbledore had secured for him over the past twenty years, but Vernon was satisfied to have "landed" another new account - Shingleton Kitchenwares, Ltd.

Gaspard Shingleton invented the Self-Stirring Cauldron in 1983. To produce them in quantity required an investment in machinery too large to be supported by the Magical community alone, so Gaspard founded a company shortly after his invention to make kitchenwares of all types. Many upscale Muggle homeowners prized Shingleton pots and pans. The factory needed drills and taps to bore the handle attachment holes in their products.

Aunt Petunia was particularly upset to learn that the kitchenware she aspired to own one day was made by "freaks," but Uncle Vernon couldn't care less, as long as they paid for their purchases in normal script. He did insist that none of their cookware would ever be used in their home.

Dumbledore thought this was a particularly funny tale as he told it, but I wasn't amused. That was *soooo* like the Dursleys.

So here the Headmaster was, calling down Snape for his snarkiness and ready to watch us take our first Acceleration potions after our entry, my re-entry, into the program at this late date.

I should have known he'd be here for this non-event only if there was the potential for problems.

What was it I said about, 'welcome to my life?'

We both took the phials and looked up to the clock above the fireplace. As the minute hand clicked straight up, we downed the concoctions. There really wasn't much to it as far a flavor goes. It tasted a little like some sort of vegetable.

"ARRGH!" I fell to the floor gasping for breath as I held my gut as tightly as possible. I half-screamed, half groaned again before someone made it over to me. It was Millicent. She should have been preparing for her shakes that would happen a few minutes afterward taking her potion, but she held me much like she had throughout the night I'd endured the Re-Instatement potion.

"Headmaster," Snape called, "I have the Cancellation potions right here--"

"No!" growled Dumbledore. "He's been poisoned, I believe. Let me..."

"But, sir," Snape called, "I brewed this myself. I've sworn to make the potions to the best of my abilities."

"It's not your fault," said Dumbledore.

I barely wondered through my pain 'whose fault was it?' And was that why the old guy was here? He'd suspected something, and didn't forewarn me.

With that thought I passed out. At least I was already in the infirmary this time.

~*~*~

When I came to, I had a very bitter taste in my mouth - like vomit. That was because I had vomited. Dumbledore had hit me with a Regurgitation charm, and I'd tossed up most of the potion and almost all of my last two huge breakfasts.

I was not hungry at the moment.

Dumbledore noticed I was awake and said, "I'm sorry, Harry. There was only a four percent chance that this would happen to you. I didn't think about this until just before it was time for your potions. I thought, 'How could it happen with those odds?' I seem to have forgotten your tendency to defy the odds."

I always try to ignore the fact that compared to my life, that wizard named Murphy - the one who came up with the probability model about things going wrong that was so famous even Muggles throughout the world could quote it from memory--was an optimist.

So, I wheezed out, "What is it this time?"

"You're done with the Paladin potions, Harry."

He was standing near me, almost hovering. When he said this I winced, depressed at failing to be able to go ahead and be a Paladin. Millicent shoved him gently out of the way and leaned over me. I was too dizzy to raise my head for fear it would fall off.

"Harry," she said, "he means you're finished with them. Completed the course. You've made it to the point physically and magically where the rest of us will be on August 21st.

"You have your full physical growth and the magical expansion you would have normally had by your eighteenth birthday. And as you know, the best part is that you've received all the physical growth you'd have had if the Dursleys had fed you properly, and because of your having to resist Voldemort's drain on your magic, you have well over twice the magical power you would have had normally."

She smiled down at me and stated, "So, no more potions for you. You're the first Paladin to complete the summer course and all you have to do is keep up your exercises, study, and eat as you will. Oh, and keep me company as I go through all of this."

The throbbing in my head began to lessen, and I cast a weak smile her way. "Gladly."

~*~*~

So, here it is, Monday about half one in the afternoon. Centi and I landed by Portkey, Dumbledore's Portkey this time, in the back garden of number four, Privet Drive. There was a permanent and very powerful Notice-Me-Not charm on the back garden this summer, so no worries about arriving here in this manner. I'd use it in my own designs soon enough.

Who would have ever thought I'd be glad to be back here?

Back to normality. Yeah, sure. Normality in *my* life - which means bizarre in the extreme.

We opened the backdoor and I called out. No one answered, and I dared to hope they were gone. I could use several days of never seeing my relatives.

Heck, I could use a lifetime of never seeing my relatives.

Of course I'm not that lucky.

Just as we made it from the kitchen into the corridor leading to the stairs, Dudley walked out of the lounge. The tellie was on. I should have known.

Before I could introduce Centi to Dudley, my world went pear-shaped once again.

My cousin looked at Millicent with obvious lust in his eyes and said, "Helloooo, Beautiful!"

That was unexpected.

Centi stepped forward and rendered him unconscious in one punch.

That wasn't at all unexpected.

Back to normality, Harry Potter style.

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starting again. I had to remind him that Winky was also my elf now, and he grudgingly let her help him.

Centi ate the normal meals of a Paladin, which were overly filling in their own right, but I went through food like I could Disillusion it. Centi made no comments about her own eating or need to lose weight, while I ate from just after noon when I awoke until dinnertime. I stopped just before that meal and went to the loo, where I passed the smallest and most dense... well, you know. It took time to pass, and it hurt. When it finally fell out, I heard an almost metallic clunk as it hit the bowl. It sounded rather like a marble hitting porcelain.

I told Pomfrey of this while I ordered more food from Dobby. The mediwitch asked Dobby to add fruit and vegetables to my next meals and required me to drink a glass of water every ten minutes while I was attempting to empty the larder of the Hogwarts kitchen.

My next trip to the loo was relatively uneventful and I stopped eating constantly after the next seven hours of virtually nonstop consumption at a record rate of food inhalation.

I wished Ron was there so I could show him what real eating was all about.

I only woke up three times during the night to request a snack, er... full meal - boy, I was sleepy.

The next day I only ate four large breakfasts and six snacks before 10:30, a decrease in caloric intake per hour from the day before. I paused for a full fifteen minutes before insisting on starting in on lunch. I ate one big lunch - from 10:45 until 1:10 - before I felt full, though I took three apples away from the table with me.

My Olympian belch was impolite, but Dobby and even Centi chuckled at me.

In twenty minutes we had gathered everything together and were off to number 4, Privet Drive. That was when all the fireworks went off, and I had an angry uncle to deal with.

"A lot of things happened, Uncle Vernon, none of which you're really interested in, but we're here, you have a new account, and we will not be in your way. You have your new loo in your bedroom, and Centi has her own loo as well. Dudley and I can easily share since it will only be the two of us, instead of the four of us.

"This is Centi, Centi Bulstrode, my friend. You know she will be staying here this summer and we will not pretend you didn't make out like a bandit forcing Dumbledore to give you a new account for life just so she could stay here less than two months."

"Boy, you'll not give me a lip about money. We've feed you, clothed--"

I stuck my wand into his fleshy left cheek to silence him.

"I wonder just how much you've made in commissions and bonuses from the four companies Dumbledore sent to you? I'm glad you've earned your keep Uncle, providing good service to these drills purchasers. How long would Grunnings keep you on if I told the relatives of witches and wizards managing those accounts just how well you've fed and clothed me all of these years? Shall we call them, Uncle? I know Dumbledore could give me their names and addresses, if not phone numbers."

I said nothing. Vernon said nothing. Petunia squeaked again and Dudley complained that he was hungry.

"Vernon," I said. No 'Uncle' this time. "Let's pretend we don't know each other. Should we see each other, let's agree to ignore each other. Nodding in acknowledgement is optional. I don't want to hurt you. You may want to hurt me, but you must choose between your desire to hurt me and your desire to keep your clients. I do not wish you impoverished, even though you've kept me a ragamuffin. But attack one of us and I'll see your four big accounts gone." The only change in Vernon's demeanor was a sudden twitching of his right eye. Had the vein in his forehead turned purple, I'd have backed up and prepared for a fight. The eye twitch was new, so I simply said, "I'm glad we are agreed.

"Come on, Centi."

I looked into her eyes, and though we didn't eye-speak, she nodded. I signaled for her to go ahead, and she made her way quickly and quietly upstairs, while I watched her back. I went by my family tensed to repel any attack, but none came.

And that set the tone for interaction with the Dursleys. It worked. We'd pass in the hallway and occasionally on the stairs, but I don't think we ever really said anything to each other except on a few unique occasions. Dudley would stare at Centi, but he did not speak to her.

No, I never went back to the Dursleys' after that summer, but the reason why... well, we'll see, won't we?

~*~*~*~

Dobby was delighted with my new appetite. I had to settle a dispute between my two elves that first night.

"Dobby, Winky, I don't have a house, I just have this room. You know, Dobby, you were bored when there was only me. There's only so many times a day you can dust and polish, and now the two of you want to do everything and it can't work that way. I thought you two were friends, perhaps even sweet on each other."

In the next second I observed the disconcerting color green-skinned beings turn when they blush.

Dobby finally said, "Dobby is thinking Winky is the prettiest elf that is."

I turned to Winky. She ran and hid in my trousers legs and pulled the hairs on my leg while trying to escape this scrutiny.

"Winky?"

"Winky is embarrassed to speak in front of the master until Dobby does proper."

"Dobby," I said, "I don't know what 'does proper' means but maybe you should just go ahead--"

"Harry!"

"Yes, Centi?"

"Before you ask Dobby to go ahead, perhaps you should ask Dobby to explain to you what it means. Ask about house-elf courtship and mating practices."

"Why, do you know something?"

"No, but I'm under the impression from hearing Draco, Vinnie, and Greg joking around about house-elves and their little joeys that you might want to understand this before you give a nod."

"Okay. Good advice, look before you leap." I turned back to Dobby. "Please tell me how house-elves court and marry, or whatever you do."

"Yes sir, Harry Potter sir. Where does Dobby start?" he asked himself.

"Start by explaining what 'doing proper' means," Centi suggested.

Dobby nodded. "Dobby does proper by taking Winky as Dobby's mate and joeys is born three months later. Doing proper is being married as wizards think it, and the first time always means three joeys. There after one joey is usually born, although two is not impossible, but rare."

"Is there a ceremony or ritual, Dobby?" Centi asked.

"Yes, Miss Centi. Harry Potter sir gives Dobby and Winky the Master's Blessing and Dobby and Winky be a matched set of house-elves, what wizards calls married. Then Dobby and Winky goes to the land of the First Master for a whole day. Is great burden on masters to be without house-elves for so long, but to be matched set of house-elves and first mating is required."

Centi was in control of this conversation and I gladly let her continue. "So, Harry would bless you two, you'd be gone for a day, and then three months later Winky would give birth to three new baby house-elves, joeys, correct? How long before they are grown? What do they need to grow up big and strong, to be good house-elves like you two?"

"Oh, Miss Centi asks the question that tells why Dobby hasn't asked Harry Potter sir for permission to do proper. Since Harry Potter sir doesn't have a house with plenty of work, Dobby and Winky's joeys will not grow up as good, hard working house-elves, will be bad elves. If too bad, Dobby will have to kill Dobby and Winky's joeys."

"Is there no other way for your joeys to be raised correctly other than as you've described?"

This question produced in Dobby a look of sadness. "Yes, Miss Centi. Harry Potter Sir could sell Dobby and Winky's joeys within a week of birth to families with other house-elves to train them, and lots of work for them to do. 'Tis common practice with first joeys and even after first."

"You're sad, Dobby," I finally asked a question. "Why?"

"Does Harry Potter sir really want to know?"

"Dobby!" Winky shouted. "You is a bad elf to ask."

I held up my hand said to try to calm Winky, "To ask me is not bad if I want to know, is it? Dobby, if the answer to that question breaks some sort of house-elf law, don't do it, but if it is just that most masters don't care about their elves, then you know I care, so please tell me. Why is it bad for joeys to be sold in the first week if it's common?"

"Because, Harry Potter sir, Dobby and Winky will never know the joeys as theirs; joeys will never know Dobby and Winky as parents."

I was stunned and saddened myself about this. It was Centi who asked, "Then why does Winky want Dobby to do proper if she knows Harry doesn't have a house and there isn't enough work for you two, much less your joeys to be raised as good elves?"

"Dobby asked Professor Dumbles permission to romance Winky. Hogwarts has plenty of work for house-elves. Professor Dumbles gave Dobby and Winky permission but Professor Dumbles said Dobby and Winky could not do proper for a number of years."

"Is that why Winky wants you to do proper now?"

"Oh, no, Miss Centi. Dobby and Winky were happy romancing, but..."

"Go on, Dobby," she said, "what's changed?"

"Once Dobby bonded with Harry Potter sir, in the spring, Dobby and Winky were still able to romance. Now that Winky is bonded to Harry Potter sir, Harry Potter sir must decide. Winky is freed from Dumbles' permission to romance, and a house-elf free to want something is unbalanced."

"So, if Harry tells you and Winky tells you to go back to romancing until he has a house with your first three joesys, then Winky will, er, be balanced again?"

"Yes, Miss Centi."

I took over from here. "Dobby, do I have to do anything special, or just tell you two to go back to romancing?"

"Harry Potter sir must give permission to romance."

"Okay, Dobby, Winky, front and center."

Immediately the two elves were standing side by side in front of me and I knelt to look them in the face. Both of them became wide-eyed when I did so, but I preferred to do it this way.

"Dobby, Winky, you have my permission to romance each other, er, or however you do it. I hope that in the future I will have a house to provide you two with plenty of work and also enough work for you to do proper. Until that day please be satisfied with romancing."

When I finished that pronouncement a look of relief crossed their faces for a moment, and then joy replaced relief and Dobby flung himself on my neck. Winky moved to do so also, but then she hesitated. I reached out with the arm unoccupied by Dobby and pulled her into the hug, much to her surprise and delight.

At that moment my stomach growled. I still needed a good bit of food so proper nourishment would support in my body what magic had created.

Dobby and Winky immediately pulled away from me. Dobby began making a snack for me big enough for any ravenous Quidditch team, while Winky consulted her journal to see what Centi would eat next, and when.

I stood.

"Well, Harry," Centi said, "that's not the way the Malfoys would have done it, I imagine, but then again, probably it's best to ask, 'what would the Malfoys do,' so you can then do the opposite. Every hour or so I'm finding out new ways that you are not like I thought you were, and I'm glad of it."

I blushed a little at that but said nothing. What could I say?

~*~*~

Throughout Monday afternoon and evening I ate and ate, but I could tell I was slowing down by bedtime.

That first night was awkward at first. Centi had pajamas but no robe. She came in from the loo in a rush and told me she had waited until Dudley went into his room and shut the door before running to our door. The thing is, Centi's pajama top was rather taut, and I had to face away from her. She had the good grace to say nothing except, "Okay, you can turn around," and when I did I saw she had a Hogwarts robe on over her bed apparel. I didn't look into her eyes because I didn't want her to see the blush that would explode if I looked at her directly

None of my clothes I bought at Clark Village seven days before fit me, and even Dudder-wear didn't meet my needs. I was a lot taller than he so I wore his old sweats like calf length pants and three-quarter length sleeves. I found Centi looking at me, and at first I thought she pitied me for my apparel. I looked away in shame, but when I turned around again I saw no pity in her eyes. I was clueless as to the reason she seemed to be examining me so. It was a look that I wouldn't identify until a number of days later. It was a sort of eyes-glazed-over-look, and I shook it off once I realized it wasn't pity.

In the morning we both awoke before 6:00. Centi woke up because Winky had a Paladin potion for her and she needed to exercise for an hour beginning at 6:30. I had needed less sleep as the Acceleration potions worked through me thus far this summer. Now that I was rested up from our ordeal and had finished the Paladin potion series, I apparently needed only four to five hours sleep a night. I felt fully rested and hungry but only slightly more hungry than I normally was under the potions' effect.

Centi and I had a light snack; four hardboiled eggs each, before I started showing her how to use the various pieces of exercise equipment. Most of the fitness machines were of standard Muggle operation, but with magical indicators to tell us when we were performing at acceptable levels and to record our progress. All of the equipment had been duplicated before we discovered I was finished with the program. Now I could exercise when and how I wanted, but I planned to follow Centi's routine for the most part, particularly while she was starting out.

"But, Harry, I can't possibly ride this contraption for twenty minutes," she said after less than thirty seconds on the device. "I've never exercised in my life; this is hard."

"Centi, first of all, I thought I was incapable of most of these exercises when I started, but believe me, you'll find the extra energy once you reach your normal available limit. The potions kick in and give you what you need, pushing your muscle development and stripping fat from your body wherever it is to fuel your efforts."

"Are you calling me fat?"

I winced and then sighed. "No, I am not, Centi. I received a full explanation about how exercising helps us grow strong, lose weight, and put on muscle from Mr. Granger when this equipment arrived, but that was weeks ago. You're having to listen to my incomplete explanation from memory.

"Body fat is stored energy. The way you and I can reduce our body fat to the proper levels is to exercise and maintain a diet that helps our bodies to burn fat wherever it is. The Acceleration potions and our diets help promote that, and those reasons are why I told you to eat what the program tells you to and to exercise when and how it tells you to as a minimum. Now, since we are stuck here without a lot to do, we can exercise more than the

minimum required. That will help you increase muscle and reduce body fat faster than strictly sticking to the program minimums alone."

I paused, wondering how I'd ended up channeling Hermione just then, and then said, "I found it pretty boring to exercise until I Mongered a charm to hold a book in front of me and turn the pages when I wanted. You can read, or we can talk, although it will be a huff and puff conversation as we tire."

"I'm sorry, Harry, that I snapped at you. You've not mentioned my weight at all, at least not since we've become friends. *I'm* the one who brings it up. I just... it's so..."

"I think I can understand."

"Yeah, right, perhaps you've been kidded about being thin, but that's nothing compared to being call Fatty Bulstrode all of your life."

I winced because I had called her that on occasion before a week ago.

"And I've apologized for calling you that, Centi. No, I've not experienced that, but I can identify because my relatives have called me a worthless freak all of my life. You can't hear that all for years and years without it hurting you. Name calling is name calling."

"Oh, Harry," she puffed as we rode on our stationary bicycles. "You told me about that, but it hits home just how bad it was now that I've met Giraffe and Elephant One and Two ."

She sneered, and I started laughing. We cycled on in silence for several more minutes.

She puffed, "I see what you mean now. I felt like I was going to pass out a minute ago, but I just felt a surge of energy."

I cycled on, not really winded. I was keeping up with Centi's pace, and just a little faster to challenge her slightly. "I know that feeling. You've probably heard about catching your second wind. It happens in physical exertions naturally, but you can really feel it on these potions."

She smirked. "I've obviously heard the saying, but I haven't done much physical activity to know the feeling first hand, at least not since I was a little girl running around the farm." She paused and her expression grew sad. "The farm..."

We rode on silently until the cycle time was over. It was a more subdued conversation that occurred through the rest of the exercise period.

~*~

I only needed to work on my Potions this summer to qualify for the Auror curriculum for the coming school year. Centi needed help in Defense and Charms, so we traded off helping each other. That's how the morning went, along with Centi's required breakfast and snack at 10:30, and my double breakfast and four major snacks before lunch.

Okay, so I was no longer a full time hyper-Ron but I was still eating *a lot*. I'd gone past the frantic craving for food while my body was catching up with what magic created in it physically, but now I was eating to fill myself out to a more natural shape. I was tall with wiry, stringy muscles--the only thing keeping me from looking malnourished at my new height. From eating almost non-stop with rare breaks, I was now eating often and exercising to place the calories and everything else on my body where it should be for someone six foot three inches with well filled out musculature.

I hoped my conspicuous consumption helped Centi subconsciously feel like she wasn't eating that much, as she partook of the large Paladin meals and snacks.

We were both relaxing, reading after lunch when Winky interrupted us. "Miss Centi's visit is set for 1:30 today." She read from her Paladin Journal similar to the one Dobby had kept for me. We both looked at the clock and noticed we had nearly twenty minutes before that time.

"How do we do this, Harry?"

"I hadn't thought about it. Er," I was stumped. Would Centi be like I was at my first visit with the opposite sex in the Paladin program, lunging at me with all her strength, or would it be different at this later entry point in the program?

At that moment we heard a crack behind us as we were both sitting at our desks facing a window. A little over two-thirds the room's size was behind us, and so was the only open space.

I purposely fell out of my chair and rolled across the floor drawing my wand and the spare one and pointing them at the noise. Centi stood and faced the sound with her wand drawn as well.

It was Professor McGonagall.

"Well," she said with pursed lips and a thin smile, "I've had warmer receptions, but I'd wager you were not expecting me."

"No, I expect I should have assumed someone would be here to chaperone this first visit at least, but shouldn't Dumbledore have informed us somehow?"

McGonagall looked like she didn't know how to answer at first. "Indeed. Well, I've heard about this room, but please show me how it works so I can decide how to proceed."

Down to business in fifteen seconds flat - ruthless efficiency, thy name is McGonagall. I explained the Kitchen/Library/Study room configuration that we were in now, as well as the room rigged for a Potions laboratory and the training dojo, as I called it.

"I see." McGonagall drew her wand and caused the bookshelves to grow legs and pace forward about six feet. She walked to the space behind the shelves and conjured a stuffed chair in tartan colors. Then she waved her wand and created some sort of translucent barrier.

"I'll stay with you for the first five to ten minutes, until Miss Bulstrode is under control. Then I'll sit here for the rest of the hour, and check in from time to time. The barrier is marginally sound proof up to a certain noise level. I will be able to hear shouts. "Would you like tea, Professor?" I wasn't sure what Dobby could cobble up, but I'd see.

She had a sour look on her face for a moment, but nodded and thanked me for my offer.

"Dobby," I called.

Dobby popped in with a tray and full service. I saw a tea label beside the pot.

McGonagall's eyes went wide. "My favorite, James Aimer blend. How did you know, Potter?"

I hadn't a clue, but wouldn't give her the satisfaction of another pursing of her lips.

"My staff," I waved and bowed to Dobby, "knows I like to make my guests as comfortable as possible."

She blinked twice, and then said, "Thank you, Dobby, please place it by my chair and put a Warming charm on it if you will."

"Dobby will do as Professor Gonagly asks."

Dobby went behind the shelves and McGonagall said, "Please tell me what you've heard about these visits, Miss Bulstrode."

"I know they are to help with my emotional growth. The idea is that I feel a surge of desire to kiss Harry, but by resisting the urge and making myself behave, I will mature in that way.

"I believe I'm supposed to step away in a few minutes and then rejoin Harry at precisely 1:30. When the visit is over I step away again, or he does, and then a few minutes after that the effects should be over and we can continue with our studying.

"Harry and I were both wondering if I will feel the urge like he did in his first visits, or if I will feel less drawn to him. Or, I just realized that since I'm catching up, it's possible I will feel a stronger urge than the rest of the Paladins at the start."

"Essentially correct as to the function of the program," the professor said. "A week ago we would have thought that we could predict precisely how you would react, Miss Bulstrode, but because of recent events, exactly what will happen remains a curiosity. We speculate you will feel a tug similar to, or just a little less than, someone first taking the potion. I will admit Madam Pomfrey and Professor Dumbledore eagerly await my report."

"What about Professor Snape?" I asked. I had decided I'd save McGonagall the need to correct me for leaving off his title.

"Professor Snape seems uninterested, but I will be sure to report today's event within his hearing to prevent his curiosity from straining itself."

She looked at her pocket watch. "Please proceed to your room, Miss Bulstrode. I'll call you directly."

Centi did as requested and McGonagall turned to me once the door was closed.

"Harry, are you sure having her here is wise? Are you two amiable?"

Here my head of house was, again calling me 'Harry,' something she rarely does. It only occurs when she is very concerned. Using my given name when I was in great pain or when she felt she had failed me made sense after the fact. Now... I wondered what had her worried?

"We have settled in nicely, Professor, and we're getting along with no problems. We had the inevitable conflict with my family, but that has been settled. Er, Professor, you seem worried; please tell me what's on your mind."

She looked at her watch and said to herself as much as to me, "Three minutes."

She looked me in the eyes and made her decision. "Headmaster Dumbledore is certain this is a terrible idea. He sees this... well, I cannot determine what he envisions happening, but he borders on distraught one minute and marginally accepting the next." She paused again as if deciding what else to tell me. "I've heard him muttering to himself, and the only word I understood was your name."

She paused, sighed, looked at her watch again, and then said, "I've considered the matter, and the only thing I can see coming out of this is that you will understand our world better, Miss Bulstrode will become a better student of Defense, and you will have companionship for the summer, something you have lacked in your life thus far."

She offered an enigmatic smile. "Perhaps Albus fears you and Miss Bulstrode will end up boyfriend-girlfriend before the summer is over."

I smiled too, but I felt I knew the Headmaster's concern. "Perhaps." I shook my head for a moment. Why did I say 'perhaps' instead of denying the idea of that type of relationship between Centi and me?

I shook my head again and said, "Perhaps, but you and I both know he fears I will go Dark under her influence. Do you fear that as well, Professor?"

She seemed to pause longer than necessary and even then didn't answer. She looked at her pocket watch again and said, "Thirty seconds." She stepped to the door to Centi's small bedroom.

You stay there. I'll knock, and step to midway between you and to the side.

"And, no, Potter, I do not fear her turning you Dark. You've had a tremendous impact for the Light on her in the last week. If anything, you could stand for a dose of careful cunning."

And that ended our discussion, because Centi opened the door.

Though I was now two stone heavier and quite a bit taller, Centi was still a big girl. If she charged at me, she could knock me over. I realized placing myself with my back to the table where we eat our meals was poor planning on my part. But I found out it didn't matter.

She opened the door and her eyes flashed at seeing me, and her nostrils flared. It looked for a split second like she would run towards me, but then she closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and reopened them with a much calmer look on her face.

"That's a jolt," she said. She took another deep breath without closing her eyes, and said, "I think I can make my way to the edge of the small sofa. Assuming I make it, please sit on that chair. Then we can talk."

She did as she said, and I followed her instructions as well.

"Excellent, Miss Bulstrode, fine self-control. I suggest you ask her the first question, Harry, and see if she calms more."

"Centi, tell me about growing up in your family. Were they magical and if... so..." I should have read these questions ahead of time. "Tell me about why you like your house' won't do either..." I was muttering to myself loud enough for both to hear.

"Oh, here's one. What do you plan to do once you leave Hogwarts?"

Centi looked at me for a long moment. "Follow you into battle against your enemies - my enemies, my liege."

"But after that, Centi?"

"I don't think I'll live through that, Harry, so I have no plans other than to train for battle and fight."

Her cold, stark admission caused me to shudder involuntarily.

"Professor, please leave us now," I said to McGonagall. "Centi is fine. If I need you I'll call."

"But, Potter--"

"Please. Professor."

She nodded, turned and walked to the shelf where she would disappear from sight and not be able to hear. She paused and looked my way. I nodded to try to reassure her. She went behind the barrier reluctantly.

Now what do I say? I'm the one with a Dark Lord chasing me personally calling for my death, and sending Death Eaters after me--

Oh my, now I realize that I am not the only one who can say that. What do I say to her? Do I joke about it and accuse her of sounding all Gryffindor-ish? Do I ask her if that was the comment of a true Slytherin? Do I try to help her develop a plan to survive in this world?

Then I remembered one thing Hermione said once that made no sense to me at that time. She'd said it wistfully, but then she'd laughed it off when I asked her to explain.

I am a guy and a teenager; it's not in my nature to be sensitive. I cannot imagine this will work, and it might set her off trying to snog me.

Anything to remove the hollow, hopelessness haunting in her eyes.

I slipped off of the chair and moved the few feet to sit beside her on the small sofa. I said, "I'm so sorry, Centi." Then I raised my arms and hugged her.

Hermione had said that sometime girls just need a good cry and a hug. I'm a guy, as I said, and I have this saving-people-thing as she said. I always want to fix things, and that one evening Hermione probably just wanted to cry.

Blimey, it seemed to work.

Centi didn't try to kiss me. She didn't push me away and treat me like I was daft to try to hug her - that's what Millicent Bulstrode would have done to any guy at Hogwarts, laughing at them as she hexed them every which way but loose.

Centi *eeped* -- a sound that can hardly be produced on purpose, and has no real definition in the dictionary. It was quickly followed by a sob and then another, longer sob ending in a sniff, that led right into a small cry of despair, quickly followed by a tried and true, good old fashioned crying jag.

Soon I felt the moisture seep through the enlarged sweatshirt I wore. Before long I was pretty sure I'd want to change the sweatshirt as soon as possible.

But for right now I let Centi cry. Interspersed in her sobbing were vague snippets of such words as 'Mum', 'family', and 'alone'.

She finally pulled away and half turned from me. I kept my right hand on her shoulder.

Silently, and I didn't know house-elves could pop in and out making no noise, Winky appeared at my side with a handkerchief. I nodded my thanks and handed it to Centi.

I almost said something, but restrained my guy-ness for a few moments more.

"I guess no one would believe you if you told them I've been crying like this, Harry. I'm not girly enough, they'd say."

Still I restrained from speaking, though it took a lot of effort.

She continued, "No one would expect Bull Dyke Bulstrode to have a feminine bone in her body, much less that I'd become such a Chang about anything."

She sniffed. I waited. She raised her red-rimmed eyes and gave me a sideways glance. I had no idea what look was on my face, but if it reflected my feelings, my face at least showed concern.

"What?" she said, and looked away. "Why isn't McGonagall out here with me screeching?"

"No idea," I said. "Centi. First off, anyone who just lost her family needs to grieve. Not doing so would be unhealthy. Second, Hermione would understand your crying, believe me. And Ginny probably would, if she thought about it. I'm a guy and dense as a Hogwarts door, but I understand at least in part.

"Now, as to the feminine part, I've always known you were a girl, from the first day. You used to wear your hair long, and there were other things. Even I knew." I blushed again.

"And as to bull dyke, I cannot believe that of the woman I kissed a couple of days ago. I don't think you like girls. They're too silly. You don't care for flightiness, but that doesn't make you unfeminine. You just don't suffer fools well.

"Once you get to know mature people, I think you'll make good friends. I never had friends before Hogwarts because no one would brave Dudley. You have no friends because, well, most people prejudged you. They thought you not worth the effort because you were unattractive or because you weren't wealthy. Didn't you tell me all the girls in your dorm room are very well off, and even the sixth years in the other rooms are in much better shape financially?"

She nodded.

"Well, forgive me for saying this. My friends have all proved themselves right thick about you recently, but yours are all snobs. They show too much cunning and ambition just like Gryffindors have too much foolish bravery and prejudice about other houses. Of course Slytherins are prejudiced too. Both houses could use a strong dollop of Hufflepuff loyalty and friendship to smooth out our rough edges towards each other."

Centi had stopped crying and was listening intently, if her face was any indicator. I shut up and let her think about it, mostly because I'd run out of things to say. After a minute or so, Centi used the handkerchief to wipe her eyes and nose once more, and pulled herself together.

"You're right, Harry. I've been silly, and I'm just not the silly type - that's why I did it so poorly."

I did not know where it would go from there, but thankfully I thought of something else that needed addressing. "Centi, up until a few weeks ago, I never thought I would survive this fight with Voldemort. For some reason, I now find myself hopeful of defeating him.

"The thing is, if I do, I have no idea what I want to do after leaving Hogwarts. Now I might still die, and so might you, but since we're together this summer, let's train together to make sure we're as prepared as possible to survive. And since we plan to survive, we need to figure out what we want in life. Now's not the time, we have McGonagall to send off, but let's discuss what we might be *when*, as opposed to *if*, we grow up and leave school."

"All right, Harry. You can be the Herbology professor at Hogwarts and I can teach Muggle Studies."

I smiled. I like a good portion of Slytherin snarkiness inserted into the conversation from time to time.

"No, Centi. I'll be the star Seeker for the Chudley Cannons, and you can be the president of my fan club."

She shoved me in the shoulder hard enough to have pushed me off of the small sofa a few weeks ago, but not now.

We talked a bit about our childhood dreams of what we would grow up to be. When she was six and just starting the Little Witches Day School, Centi had wanted to raise flowers along with the herbs and cattle her father had grown. Long before she'd started Hogwarts, Centi had given up on a farming life, but she still loved flowers, and wanted to grow them for the fun and beauty of it.

"What about you, Harry?"

I sighed. "I grew up being constantly told that I would be a wastrel and a drunk like my father, so I never really thought much about it. I thought being a teacher might be nice when I started school at six and Mrs. Dunstle took an interest in my well being, but then Uncle Vernon protested to the principal that she was interfering, so I was moved to Mr. Clarkson's class. He believed my uncle when he said that I was no good. That ended my desire to teach."

"Harry," Centi said, "You know I'm going to hurt your relatives very badly when it's time for us to leave, don't you? Maybe even kill them, now that I

think about it."

"No, I don't want them dead. They won't suffer long enough if they die. I don't want them even hurt. The fear of me or one of my friends hurting them will do. I want them to spend a long time regretting what they've done. I want them embarrassed and humiliated, and unable to leave the humiliation behind. I don't know how I'll accomplish it. I've only just recently thought I might live to see it, but that's what I want for them."

"All right, very Slytherin of you, Harry. I like it immensely."

"Mr. Potter, Miss Bulstrode," McGonagall interrupted as if out of nowhere. "I see you've done well together alone. The hour is over. You need to go to your room for a few minutes," she said, looking at Centi.

Centi did, and my head of house turned to me. "You handled that with great feeling and dignity for both yourself and for her, Harry. I listened to the first few minutes just in case you needed my help, and I came to listen for a few moments a couple of times during the hour."

She ended my embarrassment from her compliment by asking, "Why do you remain in these off sized rags, the both of you? Now that you have a house-elf, you can set up your accounts--, oh, you probably don't know about that." Once again she looked ashamed that I knew so little of how matters worked in the magical world.

"Once you reach your majority, or in your case, once you have passed your O.W.L.s and are the head of your household, you can have Gringotts set up accounts for your house-elf to access and transact business for you. All of the Wizarding shops and businesses work with such accounts, and Gringotts has a number of Muggle establishments where you can use their catalogs to order items as well. Gringotts uses Squibs to act as buying agents, and there is a surcharge as you might think, but they are reasonable, I've always felt."

"As a matter of fact, your food probably comes from such an account - Goldsteins' Fine Foods, I'd imagine. They are acting as the go-between for all of the Muggleborn students in the Paladin program for the unique foodstuffs the Paladins need, such as dragon burgers and steaks."

"I cannot imagine Dobby doesn't know about this, and I'm sure Winky does since she managed accounts for the Crouch family. They are probably waiting for you to ask, assuming you know about this as I did. Miss Bulstrode's family didn't have a house-elf, did they?"

I said that they didn't and thanked her for her suggestions and help. The professor left and I called Centi.

Winky and Dobby popped in with the after visit snack. Centi had a small sandwich and a fruit/protein smoothie. I had both and three dragon burgers with two servings of chips and a pumpkin juice along with an extra smoothie.

I asked Dobby and Winky about household and house-elf accounts. Dobby began pulling his ears and Winky took off as if to ram her head into the wall. I snapped up my wand and wordlessly *Accio'd* her to me before she connected.

"All right, you two. I've told you no punishing yourself, and no ear pulling either, Dobby. I don't know about such accounts and neither does Centi. You cannot be expected to guess what we know; I only ask in the future that if you think we should be doing something, tell us."

"Winky would never presume to correct her master--"

I held up my hand to stop her whining. "It's your job to help us, right?" They both nodded so fast I thought their huge eyeballs might pop out. "I wouldn't consider it correcting me," I said, but their faces showed they didn't believe me.

How do I explain this? "Well, you've both worked at Hogwarts, and have seen that Muggleborns not know some of the basic things all witches and wizards grow up knowing. I was raised by Muggles, so I'm just like them. Centi was raised in a magical family, but they didn't have house-elves."

"So, since it's your job to help us, one of the ways you can be most helpful right now is to explain household house-elf accounts. I, your master, will not consider it correcting me, but helping me make our lives better. Also, you want us to be happy and to not be embarrassed, right? Well, I want you to inform us about anything you would expect a magical family to do, or have, or experience, if you don't see us doing it. If we know about it and have decided to do something else, well, we're just learning how to live and work together. But you will be doing us a great service if you inform us about something we're unaware of."

I asked them to start by telling us about the food account and what McGonagall had said. Winky volunteered to wash the dishes since Dobby was the number one house-elf and it was his place to manage such accounts.

"Harry Potter's Professor Gonagly is correct, Harry Potter Sir. Goldsteins' Fine Foods gives Dobby and now Winky food for Harry Potter Sir and Miss Centi. Hogwarts guarantees payment if necessary, but Gringotts goblins pays for Harry Potter Sir's food, and Miss Centi's as well." Dobby looked to Winky at this and she nodded in agreement.

"There is being papers," Dobby continued "for Harry Potter Sir to sign for Gringotts to open any and all accounts Harry Potter Sir wants opened. Gringotts has a complete listing of all shops and other businesses in the Wizarding and Muggle worlds for you to buy from. I can be back in a few minutes with the contracts and common catalogs for you, as well as the list of more unusual places you can buy goods and services."

"A house-elf usually manages all of these activities since household accounts are maintained over generations, but setting up new households happen often enough when a child moves away from home but is allowed to take an extra house-elf with him."

"Dobby!" Winky exclaimed after popping back in quietly. "Bad Dobby is not speaking proper!" She leapt at him, clamping her hand over his mouth. For his part, Dobby looked scandalized.

"Dobby! Winky! Front and center!"

In a popping flash they were both standing at attention before me. I sounded angry, and I was, to a degree, but mostly I was confused. I was about to ask what was going on with my angry tone of voice still in place, but I realized both elves were trembling in fear. I calmed down and knelt before them.

Their faces showed some mixture of fear and confusion. I never want anyone to fear me, besides Death Eaters and Voldemort. But these two are so innocent in so many ways.

I smiled at them and said, "I'm not angry at you or upset with you, either of you, but I am a bit confused. For the last few sentences you didn't talk like you normally do, Dobby, do you want to explain it to me?"

"We's not supposed to, Dobby."

"Harry Potter Sir is different, Winky. I've known it since I first heard about what he did as a little baby. Knowing him over these last few years has confirmed it. What he did at your bonding, didn't you feel it, Winky?"

Winky nodded her head in agreement, and bravely fought back tears. "You're right, Dobby, my love, tell him."

Dobby faced me, keeping one arm wrapped about Winky's waist. "House-elves are just like people, Harry. You do still want me to call you Harry, don't you?"

I nodded.

Dobby sighed, smiled sheepishly, and continued, "House-elves and people grow up speaking just the way those around them speak in their households. The Crouch and Malfoy families, for all their faults and failings, and for the Malfoys' evil intent, well, both families speak the Queen's English very well. It's how their children learn to speak correctly, polishing their speech with schooling in their days before Hogwarts.

"House-elves speak like their families, but learn to speak the house-elf slang and patois to fulfill the stereotype expected. It allows masters and mistresses to underestimate us and then we can better serve our families by being ignored for the most part. We can accomplish more that way."

They both seemed depressed to be found out.

I said the only thing to come to my mind. "Well, I'm delighted. I've always felt house-elves were more intelligent than wizards think, and now I know I was right. So, we'll just talk like we all can and should around here. Anything else?"

"No, Harry Potter Sir--"

"Oh, now, I thought we've agreed you'll call me Harry. Now Dobby, go bring back the contracts from Gringotts for all of the accounts you think we might need, as well any information, magical and Muggle on clothing, shoes, et cetera, okay? Anything I haven't thought of to ask you about?"

Dobby looked at Winky hesitantly.

"What is it, Dobby? You know I want to know what you're thinking might help."

"Harry. You'll probably want catalogs from bookshops, both magical and Muggle. Do you want lists from book shops that might be a little Dark?"

"Hmmm"

Centi said, "They have a lot of information on the magic we'll be facing, if nothing else."

"Good point. Dobby, do you know if a shop is actually breaking the law?"

"I can usually find out from their elves. I cannot tell you the name of the shops if I ask their elves, but I just won't bring the lists or catalogs from such businesses. Will that suit you, Harry?"

"Well enough. Anything else? I tell you what, just bring back anything you think might be of the remotest interest to us. We can always throw it away if we decide we're not interested."

Dobby popped off, and I turned to Winky after looking at the wall clock.

"Winky, it's been almost forty minutes since Centi's last snack. What can I have to eat?"

Winky's eyes lit up, and Centi gave out a groan.

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Paging through the clothing catalog made it abundantly clear that we looked pretty shabby.

"Harry, I don't have any money, and I have no idea how my family's vault stands at Gringotts. My tuition for this year has been paid, but I don't know if there are funds available for new books, robes, and so on. I can make do with Dudley's old cast offs here. We're not going anywhere."

"Nonsense, Centi," I said. "I happened to know that my tuition has been paid through finishing Hogwarts, and I have huge stacks of Galleons in my vault. I can afford to outfit you now and for the rest of school."

She shook her head. "You paid for my surgery, and now you... you can't just keep paying for--"

I interrupted. "Centi, did you, or did you not, swear vassal loyalty to me?"

She stuck out her chin, which looked nowhere near as large as it had back at school. "I *am* your sworn vassal, my liege. Are you going to use that status to buy me new clothes?" "I'm not going to buy you a new wardrobe, if for no other reason than you will substantially change between now and start of school, due to exercise and diet changes. However, I can afford to buy you enough to wear for different occasions this summer, and then we can see from there once we figure out how to go to Gringotts."

"Er, Harry."

"Yes, Dobby?"

"Gultangk, the Gringotts Director that handles the Potter family vaults, asked that I arrange for you to visit with him as soon as possible."

"Vaults? As in plural, more than one vault?"

"Yes, sir," Dobby said. "You have your school vault, and of course your vaults from your Godfather, and then there are several more vaults from the Potter family. They are one of the oldest families in Wizarding Great Britain."

I groaned. "My house-elves know more about my family than I do."

"I'm sorry, Harry."

"It's not your fault, Dobby, but I want all three of you to make suggestions on how to fill the gaps in my knowledge, both family and the Wizarding world in general. You're all charged," I said, looking to Centi and my elves, but grinning, "with reducing my ignorance."

They smiled back to me.

"So, how much do I have, Dobby? Surely I can afford to buy Centi and myself some new clothes. There had to be thirty or forty thousand Galleons there last time I looked."

"Eighteen million, three hundred and fifty-two thousand, nine hundred and two Galleons," Dobby stated matter-of-factly. "There are several barrels of Sickles and Knuts as well. But that doesn't include what will come in on your birthday in a few weeks, when you turn eighteen, Gultangk said. Of course that is only money on hand, and doesn't include investments, properties, heirlooms, and other items of value such the two barrels of precious gems."

I gulped and was speechless. Centi's eyes went wide, but she recovered quickly. "That makes sense, Harry. The Potters are not just ancient and noble, but a historic family as well. There is no way a historic family wouldn't have amassed quite a fortune, unless they were also stupid about managing it. The Potter family has a reputation of being brilliant in financial matters, so..."

She turned to Dobby. "I assume the goblin's comment... Gultun, did you say?"

"Gultangk, Miss Centi. G-U-L-T-A-N-G-K. He is a Director level goblin and leads a clique. His clique have managed the Potter accounts for centuries, it appears."

"How did he treat you, Dobby?" Centi asked.

"I was accorded the correct respect given the senior house-elf of a family with the status of House Potter. I also believe it was genuine respect, not begrudgingly given."

"Oh, excellent. Gultangk is one of those goblins. We can trust him with anything, most probably."

"Hold on," I said. "Er, what's that all about?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, Harry." Centi said. "One of the things my brother mentioned about Death Eater activities, is that the Dark Lor-" She paused, "Okay, Voldemort was approaching the goblins to try to destabilize the Wizarding economy at first, and then give them their alliance eventually. One of the indicators of a corruptible goblin, the Death Eaters think, is their treatment of senior house-elves. If they are rude to all house-elves, then they are Voldemort's kind of goblin, for lack of a better way to put it. Therefore, a goblin polite or even friendly to a house-elf is suspect to the Death Eaters, and therefore a potential ally for our purposes."

I thought about it for a moment. "Makes sense. Does the Ministry have anyone trying to make nice with the goblins? I've only been to that bank twice, and most wizards and witches didn't seem at ease dealing with them."

"Harry Potter sir," Winky spoke up after a pause.

"Winky, I'd like you to call me Harry like Dobby does."

"I'll try, sir. Mr. Barty Crouch Sr. mentioned once that a Dirk Cresswell had been put in as head of the Goblin Liaison Office. Mr. Cresswell is Muggleborn. He was put there by Minister Fudge, and Mr. Crouch thought it a waste of talent. The last statement my poor dead master said about him was that he had learned Gobbledygook and was making progress in building relationships. That was just over three years ago." "That's excellent information, Winky," I said. "Do you know your way around the Ministry?"

She nodded. "I performed many tasks for my late master in the time between his fall from power due to young Master Barty, and the time Master

Bartemius brought young Master Barty home from Azkaban. I don't think house-elf activities at the Ministry would have changed that much since then."

"Is there a way for you to justify going there and finding out what you can about this Dirk Cresswell, and anything else you think we need to know while you're at it?"

She nodded. "As my master, Harry, you can appoint me your elf at the Ministry. All heads of Three-Thirty-Three Families have house-elves assigned to assist them there with information gathering and other matters. Wizengamot membership is not a full time occupation for most. Part of such duties of a Ministry assistant house-elf would be to provide materials and information for the training of a new Family Head before his or her eighteenth birthday."

"That reminds me," I said. "Dobby, you said Gultangk wants to talk to me before my eighteenth birthday in a few weeks. I turn sixteen in a few weeks, not eighteen."

Dobby and Winky looked at each other nervously.

I sighed. "All right, just tell me."

"You will be eighteen, Harry," Dobby said. "House-elves know true age, so they can serve properly. I can only assume goblins know true age as well. You evidently are really eighteen after whatever those potions did to you." He lowered his head and said, "You have lost two years, my master."

I was stunned. Two years is a lot, but I instantly thought of two factors to lessen the impact. First, wizards live a lot longer than Muggles. I'd always thought a long life would be eighty years. Now I know living to over a hundred and fifty is not too uncommon, so I'm still to the good of what I'd expected. The second thought was not nearly as cheery. Voldemort could kill me any time soon, so who cares if I've lost two years; I'm bigger, healthier, and stronger physically and magically. It's worth the two years.

I came out of this thought process and saw all three were concerned for me. "Okay, I'm two years older. How can we benefit from it?"

They all smiled.

Winky said, "That fact will help explain why I need to go all over the Ministry asking for information. I'll only talk to house-elves, and they'll understand without question."

"Good," I said. "Look for whatever you think might be useful. If in doubt, grab it. Any ideas, Centi?"

She made some suggestions and Winky popped off. Dobby fixed us dinner - I was really hungry - and we looked at the catalogs while we ate. After we had picked out several outfits each for working out, hanging out, and robes for going to Gringotts, Dobby left to make our purchases.

Wizards and witches, the Ministry of Magic, and Wizarding shops all keep regular hours. But house-elves do not. I could send Dobby to any business with house-elves at 3:00 in the morning and he could make any purchase I required.

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It may be laziness, but Centi and I decided we weren't going to study any on our second full day at Privet Drive. We had new clothes that fit. We were well fed and my appetite was lessening, but I still had a snack about every hour, just not three dragon burgers or the like. We'd also finished our scheduled exercises for the day, and it had gone well. Centi had made it through both sessions without falling over, and I found I could really build a head of steam going at it, and felt great doing so.

It was almost 1:00 in the afternoon, and Centi asked, "So what's the special training plan for you this summer to improve your fighting skills? What does Dumbledore have you doing to defeat Voldemort?"

"Er, nothing," I responded. "I've been reading these Defense books and practicing on my own whatever looks good. I've mostly just used my wand against the Spell Dampening Barrier to build my casting strength, using *Reducto* rs and Cutters. I've Mongered very few offensive spells, since Spell Mongery is still rather new to me."

Centi's face clouded over as she exploded. "No training plan! You've had crap for Defense instructors except for third year. You're number one on bloody Voldemort's hit list. And you're the only one able to kill him. Sheesh! I can understand Dumbledore having no real plan for me - I'm nothing special - but... you're *important!* Not to plan is to plan to fail."

"That last sentence, Centi, is that a famous saying or something? 'Not to plan is to plan to fail.'"

"It's a Slytherin Principle."

"A what?"

"A Slytherin Principle. We're not just a bunch of sadists looking for non-purebloods to torture and kill while kissing the hem of a Dark Lord's robe. We're the house of ambition. Doesn't it make sense that we'd have methods to help train the ambitious to succeed?"

She smirked as she continued, "Don't you Gryffs get formal training in glory seeking and ways to identify suicidal bravery opportunities?"

"Oh yes," I said, letting out my own snarkiness. "I teach dealing with the press and managing fan club enrollment and recruiting to all of the first-years." I'm beginning to really like sarcasm, I thought to myself, now that I have someone to enjoy it with.

She chuckled. "I bet you do, but we really do have Slytherin Principles. The more academic of us are also willing to help others with planning, if you want. We Slytherins only hesitate to ask for help because we don't want to give someone blackmail material.

"Of course, Harry, you don't really spend time with Slytherins outside of classes. The few of us Slyths you do talk to any aren't a representative sample. I've stood nearby when you've talked to Draco and his little group. The sum total of Pansy's plan is to marry Draco. Greg and Vinnie wouldn't know a plan if it walked up and bit one of them on the hand. And Draco's plan is to shout about being a Malfoy until divine right provides him with everything his heart desires. No wonder you're amazed that we have guiding principles and are known for planning.

"The Slytherin Principles are sort of attributed to Salazar Slytherin, but they can't all be, because some of them deal with issues that arose long after he died."

"Such as?" I asked.

"Such as rules for dealing with the Wizengamot. It wasn't formed until 1205, and Hogwarts was founded in the late nine hundreds. Wizards live a long time, but not that long, particularly not back then.

"I can't really tell you all of the Principles, but that one, 'Not to plan is to plan to fail,' is too easy to understand. The important part isn't just that the saying makes sense; we also have a logical outline that you can follow to identify how and what you need to plan for.

"Let me show you. Do you have a wide piece of parchment?" she asked me.

"No, but if we need it I'll have Dobby pop out--"

Pop! Dobby appeared beside me with an oversized roll of parchment.

"Begging your pardon, Harry, but I overheard Miss Centi talking about planning and Slytherin Principles. Master Lucius would often send me out for wide parchment for G.O.S.W.O.T.A.L. planning. So I went to fetch some for you."

"Gos-what?" I asked. "G.O.S.W.O.T.A.L." Centi said. "It's a horrid acronym for an excellent analysis tool to help with planning. Once you've done a G.O.S.W.O.T.A.L. chart, your plan sort of plans itself."

Centi went to our side-by-side desks and peeled off a large piece of parchment from the roll. She quickly smoothed it out so it would lie fairly flat. She drew a line down the middle, and then bisected the two halves with two more vertical lines. In the first vertical rectangle she wrote the two words, 'Goals' and 'Objectives' and then underlined them and drew a dividing line about six inches down between those two words.

"So what's your primary goal, Harry?"

"To defeat Voldemort," I said instantly.

"That can be considered a worthy goal, but I want you to view these two words, goals and objectives, very specifically," she said.

"You defeated Voldemort as a baby. Only a few of his fanatics thought he would rise again; most Death Eaters thought he was gone, so they bought their way out of prison, and went back to their secretive ways, waiting for the next Dark Lord. Defeating Voldemort for good is essential, but unless something more important and far reaching occurs, we'll be fighting another Dark lord in twenty or thirty years like those who fought Grindelwald had to fight again when Voldemort rose to power in the seventies.

"So the overall goal is to change Wizarding society to prevent extreme pureblood prejudice. Even that needs to be better stated, but it's a start."

"That leaves a lot unexplained and, well..." I said.

"You're right, Harry. Let me use that idea to make a point. Parchment is cheap, especially for you. We can write a bunch of things down and then throw it all away. The planning is important, and once we have a plan the parchment it's written on is invaluable, but scratching around is cheap and easy to do.

"So, to give you an over view of the G.O.S.W.O.T.A.L. process, I'm going to fly through this and make a few notations in each column to show you where we're going, then we can throw this one away and you can do one for real, since that will be your plan, and I'll help you only if you need it. Here, watch."

She wrote 'Fix Wizarding Society' for the goal. Then she said, "We'll actually make a separate list of what that will look like after diagramming out this chart, and of course the planning process is ongoing. We always refine, correct, redirect, add to, and eliminate parts of our plan as we go along. Changing the plan only means we're getting closer to our real goals.

"So, our goal is to fix Wizarding society. A few of our objectives are:

- Defeat Voldemort permanently
- Kill or permanently imprison the Death Eaters
- Neutralize pureblood bigotry in the Ministry and Wizengamot
- See Fudge out of office

"And my favorite, for your own good..." She wrote:

- Limit Dumbledore in Harry's life.

She said, "I know you may not like that one--"

"I have no real problem with limiting him in one sense," I interrupted her. "He has to get out of my life in a number of places. Setting my friends against you and me being friends was way over the line. That part definitely needs to be neutralized. It's like the pureblood bigots in the Ministry and Wizengamot. You're not saying we eliminate them; we just make sure that any prejudice they maintain after we're done will have no effect. If they sit at their desks and only do their jobs, then fine. If they need to be fired, that's neutralization also."

"Dumbledore is the same in a sense. He'll always be the headmaster and a great wizard for the Light, but he's fed me crumbs over the years. Like this idea of a plan that you've raised, why hasn't he told me what *his* plan for me to me, or at least started training me for my fight with Voldemort long before now, long before the Paladin Program? I need a more level relationship with him, a partnership perhaps. He can be the senior partner, but I need to be fully informed about everything having to do with me. If he has a plan now, it's just been a plan to manipulate me to some end, not to help me become the wizard I need to be and want to be in the future."

I paused for a moment and Centi gave me my time of contemplation. I needed Dumbledore's help; there's too much raw knowledge and history locked up in his head to not to ask for help. He needs me to fight Voldemort, but how does he want this to end? Not training me - does that mean he may not want me to survive?

I decided I couldn't think that way. I had to hold onto my hope and trust in the Headmaster.

But I'd also be a lot more wary.

"Centi, I definitely need to limit Dumbledore in my life as he is now, but I need to make him an important part of my life as well, just different. Is there a place on this sheet to put Dumbledore down for the good he can do us?"

"Of course, Harry. He is after all, the defeater of Grindelwald. Surely there is a lot he can teach us. I'm just furious that he didn't plan something like this out with you several years ago. He didn't even need to show you the plan, just set it in motion and already have you in whatever programs he'd arranged. G.O.S.W.O.T.A.L. is a Slytherin idea, but it's not the only way to plan. Surely in all of his years he's developed some such skills or techniques, and he should have used them regarding you before now."

She moved back to the parchment and I suddenly felt more hopeful.

"Now, Harry, that's your goal, although you can have more goals of course. And this is just a quick example of every aspect of G.O.S.W.O.T.A.L. These are a few objectives to start with. They're like little goals, or you can think of them as milestones on the path to succeeding."

"The 'S' and the 'W' stand for Strengths and Weaknesses. Strengths can be different things." Then she wrote:

- Great reflexes
- Moral character
- Strong body
- Spell Mongering
- Dobby, Winky and Centi

On the Weaknesses side she wrote:

- Your brooding
- Your temper
- Your friends

"Hey, now," I said, "My friends can also be strengths." I had to admit they were a potential weakness. "Oh, they are a very positive force in your life, and a strength for sure, but let me, for demonstration purposes place them in another positive column a little later and just put them in the Weaknesses column for now. The way they were acting while we were at Hogwarts, they are a weakness in that they drag you down, depress you, and help you very little. Remember this is just an example chart for now."

I nodded hesitantly.

She said, "Next we have Opportunities and Threats. The Paladin Program was an opportunity, and still would be if you hadn't finished it. Another opportunity is your meeting soon with Gultangk, to make some sort of alliance with the goblins."

"Now Voldemort and the Death Eaters are threats, but so are:"

- Snape
- Fudge
- Your relatives
- All of my former friends

She took a minute and wrote all of these things down. "Threats can be much more subtle, and someone can be an opportunity and a threat. If we didn't have such good information on Gultangk - the fact that he is a director and your money keeps him in check - then the goblins could be both an opportunity and a threat."

"The final letters stand for Assets and Liabilities." She wrote in the Asset column:

- Your friends

- Dumbledore
- Your power levels
- Your money
- Already mongered spells
- This library

"See, Harry, I've put your friends back in as an Asset, and I include Dobby, Winky, and myself in that list. I've also placed Dumbledore in this column as well, where he should be, for all the good reasons you mentioned earlier. If the last week hadn't occurred, Ron and Hermione would have never been in the Weaknesses column, and we would never be considering limiting Dumbledore."

"No," I corrected her. "Limiting Dumbledore in my life would have been on the list without recent events with you. He's essential to my success, but like I said, he's entirely too involved in other areas where he's not needed or wanted. I've been his puppet. He has good intentions, and I do need him, but I need about half of what I have of him."

With that, Centi and I both paused reflectively for a long moment. Without a word she took up the quill and wrote in the Liabilities column:

- Your housing situation (outside this room)
- Your ignorance of Wizarding society
- No plan or special training so far
- No politically connected allies that you know of

She looked at me and said, "Now I know a number of these things can go in different columns, and in your real G.O.S.W.O.T.A.L. chart they would be in more than one, but this is just a quick training exercise in planning. Also, I am a liability to you in that I have caused Dumbledore to be angry at you--"

"If it wasn't you, Centi," I said, "it would just be something else. He and I have argued a good bit this summer while trying to work together. You've just given the Headmaster and me a new focus lately."

At that moment, speak of the devil, Dumbledore Apparated into the room unannounced.

I panicked momentarily because of what we'd written on the chart that would look negative to him - because it was negative about him. I tried to snatch up the parchment and hide it, but my actions were childishly obvious.

Dumbledore smirked a non-Snapeish smirk and said, "Should I turn around while you hide something, Harry? You're being as subtle as a first-year."

He seemed in a jovial mood.

Centi answered him. "I was teaching Harry about the Slytherin Principles and G.O.S.W.O.T.A.L. planning. You know of it, don't you, Professor?"

"Yes, Miss Bulstrode. I've even used it on occasions in the past, but I've adapted a simpler Muggle planning acronym for use now."

Ignoring Dumbledore's one-upmanship, Centi said, "Well, as I was explaining to Harry what types of entries go into the different categories--"

I interrupted her. In those few seconds between the time I panicked and Centi started to cover for me, I realized it was time to let the Headmaster know exactly how I felt about him at the moment. Therefore, the interruption of Centi to takeover the conversation I should have been having with Dumbledore all along.

"Centi has been showing me how to use that method to draft a plan, Professor,"

"Who?" Dumbledore looked startled at the nickname, and I told him about it, although I thought I'd told him at Hogwarts.

"Anyway," I continued, "Centi has been showing me how to fill out a G.O.S.W.O.T.A.L. plan, writing it up as we go along, but it's my plan."

"My, that sounds a bit ominous," Dumbledore said with a forced chuckle. "May I?" He reached for the chart.

Dumbledore looked at it and frowned, as you'd expect.

"We *are* both serious about seeing Fudge out of office, Professor," Centi said. "He's been a menace to everything you and Harry have tried to do since Diggory died."

Centi was nervous. I placed my hand on her arm, and she stopped talking. She'd never spent any time with the headmaster, and he made her uncomfortable. I often forget most students go through seven years at Hogwarts and never speak to the man.

Dumbledore frowned for most of the time, but then he looked up with a neutral look on his face and said, "I understand why you say that about our Minister. I have a problem with removing him right at this moment because I cannot ensure that he will not be replaced by someone worse - that is, someone more capable but not on the side of the Light. Once I can be sure that happens then I will start the process to see Cornelius removed myself."

Centi nodded in agreement, calming down, and even joking a bit. "Well, we weren't going to ask that he go away tomorrow."

"Let's talk about the obvious," I said, "You're on the list twice, and once isn't a positive category."

Dumbledore had returned to the chart, but with words I could only look up at me over his reading glasses. "I'll admit that I was hurt at first, but then I saw that I was in your Asset list as well. Upon further reflection, it is clear that you only want to limit me in your life, not eliminate me from it. You've told me in the past weeks of your tragic home life here, and yet I told you that you'd have to come back next summer as well. There are several other such demands that I've made of you, and perhaps I've no right to make a few of them. Boundaries are always negotiable - something most of us don't learn until late in life, if at all."

I was a little taken aback by his admission, but he isn't my enemy, just my keeper, unfortunately.

"There is a very good chance, Harry, that because of your extraordinary growth and maturation, that you probably won't have to come back here next summer. We'll know by the end of the year, but at most it will be only for a few days.

I was stunned by his statements and ready to be all friendly with Dumbledore, but Centi emerged from her awe of the man and came to my rescue.

"Professor, I suggested creating a G.O.S.W.O.T.A.L. chart because I couldn't believe you didn't have a training plan for Harry this summer, or for the past few years, come to think about it. We basically plan to go through his book here and find good defensive and offensive spells and learn them. Can you suggest something better?"

Dumbledore avoided the issue of not having planned for my training. Instead he told of the different professors coming to act as guest lecturers on Defense from around the world. Then he told us the name of three books in the small library he'd provided that would prove to be the best sources for our spell research.

We were all becoming more comfortable after the tension of minutes before. As the conversation came to a close, Centi asked, "Perhaps you can help us, Professor. Where should the Weasley twins go on this chart?"

Dumbledore laughed heartily at the question. "Several very positive and a few quite negative places, I am sure." He handed the chart back to Centi and she crumpled it up and tossed it at the rubbish bin.

"Now that Harry understands the process, I intended to toss that one and start a new G.O.S.W.O.T.A.L. chart and let him fill it out. It's his plan, after all."

Dumbledore looked at her directly and then looked away quickly. I had the fleeting impression that he'd tried Occlumency on her, but she said nothing, neither did her face reveal an attempt.

Rather than be mad at him for something he might or might not have done, I asked, "What brings you here on this fine afternoon, Headmaster? I still have seven more days until I promised to give you my proposed plans for an enlarged DA for the whole school."

"That's not why I came, but do you need a few more days because of this past week?"

"No, Professor, I'd have had my proposal to you early if all this hadn't occurred."

At that point my stomach growled. I blushed, and said to cover it, "Where are my manners. Tea or a snack, Professor, Centi? Dobby!"

Crack! "Yes, Harry?"

"Tea and biscuits for all, lemon biscuits if you have them, and, er, something a little more substantial for me, if you have it."

"Now, Harry," Dumbledore began, "I can't stay--"

Crack! Winky appeared with a huge tray levitating beside her. Dobby said, "Harry, we figured you'd want tea and had this in preparation. You called just before I could come and announce, 'Tea!'"

Dobby turned to the Headmaster. "They are your favorite lemon biscuits, sir."

The Headmaster's eyes widened. "Well, I do have a minute or two."

~*~

The Headmaster finished his tea in less than ten minutes. During that time he told us that Professor McGonagall had given him a good report about our situation and Centi's first 'visit.' He only wanted to pop in and see that we were comfortable and if we'd found suitable clothing sources. Several lemon biscuits later, he was gone.

I called for my house-elves. "Okay, you three, opinions on what the Headmaster was up to?"

Centi said, "I'm going to take his word for it, Harry. He could have reacted much more angrily about the G.O.S.W.O.T.A.L. chart, but he didn't. Had he been looking for something to use to try to remove me, that would have done it."

"Dobby?" I asked. He hesitated. "I really want your true opinion on the Headmaster," I said. "House-elves see and hear things."

He hesitated, took a deep breath, and then said, "Because I was shunned on occasions by the other elves at Hogwarts, the Headmaster used to ask for my assistance quite often. He requested that I listen in on any conversations where my knowledge of Death Eaters from my time with the Malfoys might give him insight. I've seen him act that way with close friends, other teachers, students, and probable enemies, or at least competitors.

"The look on his face *now that he is no longer with you* is what will tell you how he feels. I can't deduce anything from his meeting, since it was basically cordial."

"Then I remembered. "Did he use Legilimency on you, Centi?"

"A little, but I brushed it off. He and I have never talked before this week, but Snape tries to use it on all the students in our house regularly. It's no big deal."

"It is a big deal. He swore to me that he never uses it on students unless he thinks it's a dire emergency. He swore he never used it on me even in bad times. Now, either that was a lie, or he considers you a dire emergency, or threat, rather. Either makes me uncomfortable."

Then I remembered the project I had planned to do the day after I went shopping with my aunt. I waked over to a bookshelf.

"I ordered a book from Flourish and Blotts about warding homes and the like. I was surprised Dumbledore hadn't included any such information in this library. I had planned on using my Spell Monger's Spell Scrutinizer on the wards around this house to try and see how I'm protected. Maybe we need to find out how the Headmaster and Professor McGonagall Apparate into this room. If they can, I wonder who else can do it?"

"We'll look at that soon, Harry. The wards have to be fairly safe or Voldemort would have attacked you here long before now. Let's create your G.O.S.W.O.T.A.L. chart and develop a list of Things To Do."

Centi was right of course, as she would prove to be quite often throughout the summer there on Privet Drive.

~*~

In the end these were some of the elements of my first G.O.S.W.O.T.A.L. chart:

Goals

- Fix Wizarding Society
- Find a Satisfying Career
- Loving Family Life

Objectives

- Defeat Voldemort For Good
- Permanently stop the Death Eaters - Imprisonment or Worse
- See Fudge Out of Office
- Neutralize Pureblood Prejudice in the Ministry and the Wizengamot
- Limit Dumbledore in My Life

Strengths

- Centi
- Dobby and Winky
- My Friends
- Moral Character
- Magically Powerful
- Great Reflexes
- Strong Body
- Spell Mongering
- Paladin Program Benefits
- Training the DA

Weaknesses

- My Brooding
- My Temper
- My Friends (Hopefully Temporary)
- Centi's Friends

Opportunities

- Pre-Auror Paladin Training at Hogwarts
- Meeting with Gultangk
- The Potter Family Place in the Wizarding World

Threats

- Voldemort
- The Death Eaters
- Snape
- Fudge

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