

## No Good Deed

Order of the Phoenix :

*"Guess what I got for my birthday?" said Neville.*

*"Another Remembrall?" said Harry, remembering the marble-like device Neville's grandmother had sent him in an effort to improve his abysmal memory.*

*"No," said Neville. "I could do with one, though, I lost the old one ages ago... no, look at this ..."*

*He dug the hand that was not keeping a firm grip on Trevor into his schoolbag and after a little bit of rummaging pulled out what appeared to be a small grey cactus in a pot, except that it was covered with what looked like boils rather than spines.*

*"Mimbulus mimbletonia," he said proudly.*

*Harry stared at the thing. It was pulsating slightly, giving it the rather sinister look of some diseased internal organ.*

*"It's really, really rare," said Neville, beaming. "I don't know if there's one in the greenhouse at Hogwarts, even. I can't wait to show it to Professor Sprout. My Great Uncle Algie got it for me in Assyria . I'm going to see if I can breed from it."*

*Harry knew that Neville's favourite subject was Herbology but for the life of him he could not see what he would want with this stunted little plant.*

*"Does it – er – do anything?" he asked.*

*"Loads of stuff!" said Neville proudly. "It's got an amazing defensive mechanism. Here, hold Trevor for me ..."*

*He dumped the toad into Harry's lap and took a quill from his schoolbag. Luna Lovegood's popping eyes appeared over the top of her upside-down magazine again, to watch what Neville was doing.*

*Neville held the Mimbulus mimbletonia up to his eyes, his tongue between his teeth, chose his spot, and gave the plant a sharp prod with the tip of his quill.*

*Liquid squirted from every boil on the plant; thick, stinking, dark green jets of it. They hit the ceiling, the windows, and spattered Luna Lovegood's magazine; Ginny, who had flung her arms up in front of her face just in time, merely looked as though she was wearing a slimy green hat, but Harry, whose hands had been busy preventing Trevor's escape, received a faceful. It smelled like rancid manure.*

*Neville, whose face and torso were also drenched, shook his head to get the worst out of his eyes.*

*"S – sorry," he gasped. "I haven't tried that before... didn't realise it would be quite so... don't worry, though, Stinksap's not poisonous," he added nervously, as Harry spat a mouthful on to the floor.*

*Harry wiped the lenses of his glasses, forgetting to keep a hold of Trevor. The toad immediately hopped off his lap and under Luna's seat.*

*"Trevor!" Neville yelled.*

*Harry groaned and dived after the errant amphibian. The space under Luna's seat seemed disproportionate to the size of the cabin, but as he could see Trevor ahead, he squirmed further under it.*

*At that precise moment the door of their compartment slid open.*

*"Oh," a nervous sounding voice said. "I was looking for Harry... never mind." The compartment door slammed shut.*

*Harry grabbed Trevor and backed out. "Who was that?" he asked, dreading the answer.*

*"Ch-Cho Chang," Neville said nervously.*

*The only thing Harry could find good about the whole situation was that at least she hadn't seen him covered in plant vomit.*

---

17 Months Later

---

The only thing worse than Valentine's Day, is a Valentine's Day weekend. My favourite Headmaster decided, in one of his crazier moments, that as Valentine's Day was a Sunday, and the Saturday was a Hogsmeade Day, we should have two days to celebrate this most excruciating of holidays.

I can sense the nervous anticipation in the air, as over-enthusiastic students pretend that today means more than any other day, and that their entire self-worth is tied up in how many cards they can send themselves.

I'm not a fan, mainly because I can't have what I want on Valentine's Day -- or should that be 'who' I want?

I want her, more than I did two years ago. She's grown up in that time -- we all have. Some things are the same, her hair is still long and black, with a texture that make my fingers itch when ever I see her.

I want to touch it, I want to touch her.

But I don't, I can't.

So I watch her instead and try to pretend that I'm not doing so.

Speaking of denial, I do have some good things to be thankful for at the moment. A couple of very good friends who really need a kick up the arse for one. They're both about as subtle as Uncle Vernon. They're not dating; they never seem to actually admit to each other that they want to.

I don't really think that I'm in denial -- not to the same extent anyway. I know I want her, I know that I feel something for her. It's different, what I feel; it's not the same as it was a few years ago. It's grown; it's bigger, deeper.

And I know things about her now. She doesn't like Butterbeer, but she understands what it is like to fly. She's smart - she's a Ravenclaw - but more than her intelligence, she's smart. She's calm as well. Never gets upset, never gets angry; she just solves a problem and moves on.

When she's sad, she wears yellow to cheer herself up. When she's happy, she wears blue.

I want her, but I can't have her.

I've tried arguing with myself, telling myself that I deserve happiness and that I deserve a chance, but I fail. I have Voldemort after me. And I can't do it anyway. I can't do it to *him*.

I have learnt, though. I don't moon anymore. I don't make it obvious. I'm a master of hiding my emotions, my feelings; I have to be now. I won't let Voldemort know I feel something for her. I can't.

And this is how it's been; this is how it will be.

"Harry?" Hermione asks.

I smile at her -- it's a genuine smile -- or as much as I can manage.

"What are you thinking?" she asks.

"That you guys have been the best friends a guy could ask for," I say; it's true -- mostly, but that's not what why I say it, "and I want to do something nice for you to celebrate this weekend."

"You don't have to do that," Hermione protests, and I think that Ron is agreeing.

"I know," I agree. "But you've been babysitting me through my moods for a year now, so you may as well accept that I'm in a good one today, and that I'm going to get my way. The only question is how long we spend arguing over it."

They both look a little stunned, which is a good look for them.

"I have a detention with Snape today," I continue.

"Again, Harry?" Hermione sighs in disappointment.

I nod. "So, you two are going to go and enjoy Valentine's Day in Hogsmeade without me. And," I finish cheerfully, "I'm paying."

They both get the same rebellious looks on their faces; Ron's tinged with that 'I'm far too proud to accept money' look he gets whenever he remembers that I'm well off.

I ignore their looks and pull out some money, placing it in front of them. They both treat it as if it's a snake and back away.

I smile and lean across the table and whisper to Ron, "This would be a good day for you to have that chat." I then lean across the other side and whisper the same thing to Hermione.

They both look at each other and then at me.

"Don't worry about me," I say casually, sitting back down. "I've got a morning of fun and games with Snape planned, followed by an afternoon of pouting, sulking, and cursing his name. It will be fun. How else would you expect me to spend this wonderful holiday?"

They both laugh, which is what I'd planned. I grin at them, taking one last bite of toast before I proceed to my detention.

I get to the Defence classroom before he does, and I lounge around, knowing full well it will irritate Snape. After all, you have to take advantage of whatever small pleasure life gives you.

He enters with his cloak swirling. "Pick them up," he says and points to a couple of chairs that have fallen over.

I walk over and right the chairs. "Sir?" I ask.

He leans against his desk and stares at me. I meet his eyes. Perhaps I should hate him, perhaps I should look away. But I don't think so. Not now. Hate is powerful; it gives and takes your will, your desire. I'll save my hate for the person that truly deserves it.

Snape, I'll just hold in contempt.

"Why?" he eventually asks, "did you feel the need to curse Mr Malfoy?" Said curse being the reason that I'm here in detention. Next time, I'll check Snape isn't around before retaliating after Malfoy tries to curse Hermione.

"I woke up with a bad case of Gryffindor-itus," I offer with a straight face.

His lips twitch.

"What's going on, Potter?"

I look at him, waiting for him to elaborate.

"Judging by your recent behaviour, the cursing was out of character. Why do I get the feeling that you're thinking things through before acting?"

"I'm a Gryffindor, not an idiot," I reply. "I can learn from my lessons."

"Fascinating," he drawls in that creepy way of his. "Elucidate."

"I act, people die," I respond. Sirius. Cedric. I didn't kill them, but I didn't help, either.

He moves, like a snake, pulling his wand out and spits a curse at me. The Cruciatus.

This is his idea of training. After Dumbledore's *brilliant* plan of getting him to teach me Occlumency last year, he moved us onto to duelling this year. I'm supposed to be ready all the time. About the only good thing is that he doesn't yell 'Constant Vigilance' at every opportunity.

I feel the pain. I always feel the pain; but pain has been my companion for a long, long time. Growing up, coming to Hogwarts – everything has been a mixture of pleasure and pain. It's a constant. It's almost reassuring.

I embrace it, I allow it in, I stop fighting and spread my arms and I laugh. This is what I am used to, the ecstasy of agony. I welcome it, because I feel alive feeling it. I have no worries about her; she can't see me. I have no worries about my friends, they are together.

It's just me and Snape and the unending pain.

Until the pain stops. I look at Snape, but he's still casting it.

"Why are you doing that?" I ask.

And Snape responds by doing something so unbelievable that I wish I could still feel the curse. He smiles.

"You've done it," he whispers in disbelief.

I'm tempted to ask 'done what', but I know what he's talking about. I've accepted the Cruciatus curse, and it no longer hurts. He stops the curse and starts it again, and I let it hit me.

"Impossible," he says, but his eyes disagree; they're excited. "How?"

I start a flippant answer but stop. For whatever reason, Snape's given me a rather large, almost unbelievable gift. Without the curse and my current mindset, I might never have discovered the secret. And besides, he might understand.

I draw my wand and he places his away.

I close my eyes and drag the one person I hate to my mind. I add Sirius falling through the veil, and the words 'kill the spare'. I look at Snape and remember every slur, every insult and every unfair act. "*Crucio*," I hiss.

Snape falls to the floor; he didn't try to move out of the way.

I keep the curse on him and walk over, so I'm looking into his eyes.

"Think about my father, think about Sirius," I whisper harshly. "Think about Snivellus and embarrassment. Think about almost being killed; think about Voldemort and being a Death Eater."

"Ahhh," he screams.

"Don't fight it," I order. "Accept it. Accept the pain. You know what it's like; you've had enough of it. Take the pain, take the torture, take it inside you and revel in it. Revel in the pain of living another day, drawing another agonising breath."

His eyes un-focus, and his face changes slightly as he gets caught up.

"Take the pain and realise that you have nothing else to worry about. Accept it Severus; accept it as your destiny, as your curse and your life. Take it inside you, further, and embrace it."

I reach out and smack him across the face. His eyes blaze open and he glares at me. "Potter," he shouts.

"I'm still casting the spell," I point out.

He takes a deep breath and looks at the magic streaming between us.

"Again," he whispers.

"*Crucio!*"

He opens his arms wide. But then he tilts his head and looks at me. "Show me," he says.

"Why?" I ask, cancelling the spell.

"I want to understand."

I nod.

"Legilimens," he whispers.

I don't fight him, I allow him in, and I let him see. I let him see the Dursleys. I let him see me growing up. I let him see Hogwarts. I let him see the Troll; I let him see Ginny in the Chamber of Secrets; I let him see Voldemort reborn and Cedric die. I let him see Sirius. I let him see Umbridge and then I stop him.

He looks at me, but his demeanour has changed. "*You* are not your father," he says, as if he's surprised by that very idea.

I nod. He understands that you can only beat the Cruciatus if you have experienced real pain, and if you can let it all go.

"You were failing Potions," he points out. "Now you're not."

"That is courtesy of the Half-blood Prince," I say with a slight grin.

He looks at me and almost smiles. "How ironic that, despite my best efforts, you will end up with a good Potions grade because of my teaching."

I almost laugh.

"I don't like you, Potter."

"I don't like you, either, sir," I reply.

He nods. "Truce?"

We understand each other more now. We share something that others would never understand.

"If you fight with Voldemort, then I will do my best to kill you, and expect the same from you."

He shakes his head slowly. "I have decided my path."

I wait.

"For better or worse, I am on your side."

I am a little surprised at the phrasing – my side. Not Dumbledore's.

"You broke the Cruciatus. You can break the *Imperio* us; you have broken the Killing Curse before. You scare him, more than the Headmaster."

"I am the only one who can kill him," I agree.

He nods. Then he looks really uncomfortable. "I have a favour to ask," he says.

I look at him.

"Draco."

Why?"

Snape took a deep breath. "I promised his mother I'd try and keep him alive."

"And he has to kill Dumbledore to prove himself to Voldemort," I nod.

He looks startled at my knowledge, but when have I not known what I need to know?

"He's done a lot," I point out. "To friends of mine and to me."

"He failed," Snape replies.

"Do you have money?" I ask.

He looks blank.

I sigh. "This afternoon you will give me a detention. You will arrange for me to clean potion cauldrons. You will hide Draco there, and you will tell him to torture me."

"And?"

"And you will prepare to go into hiding. You will tell Narcissa to get ready. And you will prepare the *Fidelius* charm and two adjustable Portkeys."

His eyebrows reach his hair line.

I turn and walk out and go to the Gryffindor common room. I hope I know what I am doing. It's only when I get there that I remember that I wasn't just in a normal training session, that I was actually in detention.

---

It's time for me to earn my detention. If all goes well, it will be the last with Snape, so I may as well enjoy it.

Fifteen minutes later, I hang around the front of the school, wishing I'd remembered to wear a thicker jumper. February is bloody cold.

"Potter!" Snape screams, charging out toward me.

"Sir?" I ask, making it as impudent as I possibly can.

"What have you done to my dungeon?" he asks, almost spitting with rage – only his eyes have a vaguely amused cast to them.

"Me, sir?" I drawl, "nothing at all." Well, nothing except charm the walls pink and then write a nice poem for him on those walls.

"Detention, Potter," Snape snarls.

"Professor," a new voice joins us. "If Harry didn't do it, you can't give him a detention!"

It's her.

What the hell is she doing?

Snape sneers at her. "You might be Head Girl, but I am still a Professor, and you can join him."

"That's not fair," I say. What the hell is Snape doing? This isn't part of the plan.

"Three o'clock, Potions dungeon," Snape says, ignoring me. He turns, his cape swirling dramatically.

"Don't worry," she says with a shrug.

I look at her and want to say so much. But I can't. I won't. I nod, and turn, walking away myself, cursing Snape.

The hours pass in a blur. I'm nervous about this afternoon. I don't want her to be there, but I haven't got a choice, and Snape's been avoiding me since he gave us the detention.

I walk down to the Dungeon a few minutes late, deliberately. She's already there. And sadly, the pink has gone, and it's looking like normal. Pity, I thought it added something.

"Good of you to join us, Potter," he sneers.

I shrug at him.

"I expect these cauldrons to be spotless," he says. "You have two hours, no magic." He turns and leaves the rooms and I get to work.

I can feel her eyes on me. She's looking curious; I sometimes forget she's smart. I wonder what she knows, but I can't ask. I won't.

The door slams open and Draco appears, right on time. "Potter and the Head Girl, what a wonderful surprise," he sneers.

“What are you doing?” she asks, in full Head Girl mode.

I sigh and cast *Petrificus Totalus* on her. “Sorry,” I say. “This is between the two of us.”

Malfoy looks surprised; I don’t think he expected that. “*Expelliarmus*,” he shouts.

I almost sigh in contempt but let my wand fly out of my hand. Draco looks pleased.

“I told you, Potter,” he growls in that way of his that makes you think of a puppy snapping at a wolf. “You are going to die.”

I shrug.

“*Crucio*,” he shouts as he casts the curse with glee.

The pain hits me and I embrace it again, but I don’t want him to know that, so I fall to the ground dramatically.

He keeps the spell on me as he walks over to her. “Perhaps I’ll have some fun with you when Potter is dead,” he says, but he sounds like he is trying to persuade himself that he will be able to kill me.

He thinks he’s being suave and charming, but all he’s managed to do is irritate the crap out of me. How dare he threaten her, when I’ve done bloody everything to stop him from even knowing that I like her? “You just have to be a git, don’t you,” I say as I climb to my feet and head toward him.

His eyes are almost bugging out of his head, as he looks at me in total disbelief.

“*Crucio!*” he shouts out again, desperately.

I spread my arms and glorify in the spell, and then I smile at him. He looks afraid, especially as I reach out and take my wand back. He still casting the spell at me, and doesn’t seem to know what to do. The idea of a different spell obviously not occurring to him.

I cast a spell on him and it’s a genuinely nasty curse – not an Unforgivable, though. It closes his windpipe. He can’t talk, he can’t beg, he can’t do anything but whimper and fall to the floor.

I release the spell; as much as I might want to, the idea isn’t to kill him. “You have a choice,” I say, acting the part. “You may choose life, or you may choose death.”

“Death,” he says, proudly, but his eyes tell a different story.

“Okay,” I say cheerfully, and I start to cast the spell again.

“Wait!” he yells. One bluff successfully called.

“For reasons you don’t need to know, I promised someone I’d give you a choice. You can continue to be a wannabe Death Eater, or you can escape him.”

“No one escapes him,” Draco says, but there is a flicker of hope in his eyes.

“I have,” I point out. “You know I can beat the *Imperio* us, you know I can beat the Killing Curse, and now you know I can beat the *Cruciatus* as well. There is nothing left for him to use on me.”

“He can get your friends,” Draco points out.

“And so he has tried,” I agree. “And he has failed there. He is incompetent, and I know his secret.” I lean in and whisper, “*Horcruxes*.”

Draco gapes at me.

“Choose,” I hiss, “now. Choose Voldemort or choose life.”

I raise my wand and point it at him. I really hope he gives in, because I don’t think I can kill in cold blood.

He seems to be having a mental crisis, before he bursts into tears. Typical. “I want to live,” he moans like a child.

I roll my eyes. “Snape!” I call.

Snape storms in, with Draco’s mother in tow. “What was that spell?” he asks.

I cast it on him, and he drops to his knees, before I release him.

He shudders. “Nasty,” he croaks.

I shrug. “You have the Portkeys?”

He nods.

Mrs Malfoy looks at me. "Thank you," she says distantly.

I shrug again. I'm not doing it for her.

"What's going on?" Draco asks.

"I asked Severus to keep you alive," Narcissa says to Draco. "Despite your best efforts to the contrary, he has managed that. Now that you have realised the futility of your position, we are going into hiding."

"How?" Draco asks again.

I pick up the Portkey and concentrate, changing the destination. "Hold on," I say, and they all do. We vanish and appear in a small building. It's got three bedrooms, a kitchen, a living room, and a library. It isn't much, but it will do.

"Where are we?"

"Little Whinging," I reply. Yeah, I've got a strange sense of humour. "The spell?"

"Who's going to be the Secret Keeper?" Snape asks.

I roll my eyes at him. "I am, obviously."

"Why?" he asks me. But he's asking why I'm doing it for him, for them. I decide to go for honesty. "So I won't have to kill you."

He pales and nods.

"*Fidelius*," I whisper, making the wand movements, and fall to my knees as the magic rushes out of me.

"Dobby," I call. He arrives and looks upset that I'm on my knees. He blinks out and returns with a drink. "You sure you're okay with this?" I ask.

He nods. I look at the three of them. "I'll remove the spell when Voldemort is dead or the spell will die if I do," I say cheerfully. "Dobby will keep you informed a little. He'll be here for your meals."

Draco's looked a little overwhelmed, as if he doesn't understand what's going on. He's always been a little slow. But then, five minutes ago he was trying to find the nerve to kill me – now he's under my protection. The irony amuses me.

I take the other Portkey and prepare to activate it.

"Harry," Snape calls.

I look at him. He looks at his arm.

I reach into my pocket and pull out a potion bottle I stole from him earlier. He looks vaguely amused and reads the label. He stares at me.

I shrug.

"Thank you," he says.

I nod.

"What is it?" Narcissa asks.

"Knock-out potion," Snape says.

"He can't answer the call if he's unconscious," I agree.

"What are you going to tell Professor Dumbledore?" Snape asks.

"That you're safe and well. I'm sure he'll be delighted to hear that."

That almost smile flicks across his face.

"Why?" Draco asks.

I look at him pityingly. He'll never understand my answer. "Because some things are right and some things are wrong. This? It's the right thing to do," I say and vanish.

I arrive back in the Potions dungeon and she's still there. This is where I should stroke her face and make some obscure comment before kissing her tenderly.

To hell with that idea: I've not come this far and this long to screw things up now. I release her. "Sorry," I say casually.

"What was that?" she asks. Her eyes are wide and very pretty.

Another day in the game," I respond. "A pawn, a knight and a rook have fallen, the fields are level again."

She blinks at me.

I almost smile at her, but I keep myself under control. I turn and walk out, heading toward Dumbledore's office. I don't think she'll say anything, but I couldn't bring myself to cast a memory charm on her. Maybe Voldemort is right – emotions do get in the way.

I whisper the password and walk up, knocking on his door, entering at his prompt. I slump down on the sofa and look at him.

He's a tired old man, but he's the best we've got, and he's *my* tired old man.

"Miss Chang?" he asks, looking at the door.

She enters and sits next to me.

"I want to know just what's going on," she says in a polite voice that doesn't fool either of us.

Dumbledore turns his pale blue eyes at me inquiringly. I smile at him. "The playing field is level, a pawn, a rook, and a knight have fallen, and the queen has gone a step further along the path."

Dumbledore opens his mouth and shuts it again. He looks at me and sighs. "Maybe that isn't as nice from this side of the table," he admits. I want to jump for joy. I'd just Dumbledore'd Dumbledore.

"Cast the Cruciatus on me," I tell him.

"An illegal curse," he notes curiously.

"Just do it," I reply, "without the histrionics."

He looks to protest, but then doesn't. He pulls out his wand, and after a look at Cho, he casts the spell on me.

Pain. Again. I embrace it; I wonder if it will ever get easy. "Ouch," I say, making my tone as sardonic as possible.

"Remarkable," he says, his wand already away.

"Incidentally," I say. "Voldemort is slightly more powerful than you are, but you are a lot more powerful than Snape, and Draco Malfoy's a babe compared to any of you."

Dumbledore's eyebrows shoot through his hair line.

"I think, Harry," he says quietly, "that the time for explanations has arrived."

I look at Cho.

"I'm not moving," she says firmly.

I almost smile at her. She's amazing, but I don't smile. I won't. I can't.

"Miss Chang," Dumbledore says firmly. "I'm afraid that there are things going on that you do not know, and that very knowledge will put you in jeopardy."

She glares at him. And I don't think I've ever seen her glare at anyone before. "I am not leaving," she says. "I want answers."

Dumbledore looks at me. I finger my wand and look at her. I'm at war. Part of me wants to throw her out, not let her know, but part of me does - the part of me that loves her.

"Please, Harry," she says, looking at me through her lashes, a pleading expression on her face.

I fold like a Malfoy.

"Snape and I have come to an understanding," I say to Dumbledore. "He wanted out of the game, so I helped."

"In what way?"

"He's hidden, along with the ferret and the ferret's mother. They're sitting it out for the rest of the war."

Dumbledore looks very surprised now. "I found out how to get through the Cruciatus with Snape and taught him how to do it as well. He confessed that he was only helping Draco because of his promise to Narcissa, so I decided to take all three out of the game."

"Where are they?" he asks.

"Hidden," I reply.

"Harry," he says reproachfully.

I shrug at him. “No one else knows. No one else will ever know.” I conveniently forget Dobby, as he’s not really relevant, and he would never betray me. His fanatical loyalty means a lot to me.

Dumbledore fixes with me a long stare. “You have taken some very direct actions over the last few days.”

“I woke up with a bad case of Gryffindor-itus,” I agree. Unlike Snape, he does actually show his amusement.

“Do you have any ideas?”

I look at him. “I’ve made the school safer for now. Without the figurehead, the other supporters will fade away. Lucius will blame Snape, as will Voldemort, and anyone else they try and promote to run Slytherin at school will fail. We have some time.”

“Why are you taking his advice?” Cho asks Dumbledore directly.

Dumbledore’s eyes twinkle again as he looks at her. “Harry has grown,” he says slowly. “And circumstances have led to the understanding that we need to work together.”

She looks at me for a second. “What circumstances?” she demands.

I shrug at Dumbledore’s glance. His call.

“Harry is the only one who can kill Voldemort.”

Cho gasps and turns to me.

I half-smile at her. “It’s the price of being the Golden Boy,” I offer. “But, you do have to keep what you’ve learnt quiet.”

“Why?” she asks.

“Why what?” I reply.

She looks at me, as if she’s trying to read my soul. I don’t let her; there are things I don’t want her to know.

“What really happened?” she asks.

I know what she means, she’s talking about Cedric. I look at Dumbledore and then his cupboard.

He nods slowly and waves his wand. I walk over to his Pensieve and take the memory out of my mind. I look at Dumbledore and nod toward Cho. He takes her hand, and they look into the device.

I walk back and sit down. I have relived that day far too many times already. I absently help myself to a lemon drop while I’m waiting for them.

I’m a little surprised that she isn’t crying as she sits back down next to me. I walk over and retrieve the memory. I don’t hide from what has happened to me.

Dumbledore looks at his watch. “You’ve had a busy day. Might I suggest we adjourn for dinner?”

“Sure,” I agree and walk ahead of them as we all leave the office.

I nod at them both and go to sit at my normal spot. Ron and Hermione are sitting closer together than they have been. It’s not much, but it’s another sign. It’s almost a little disturbing – I’m going to have to work on that.

“How’s your day been?” Hermione asks happily.

I smile slightly. “Not bad,” I say. “Quiet, really.”

I hear a loud snort behind me and turn to see Cho looking at me in disbelief. “This was quiet?”

I nod.

“You need a P.R. person, Harry,” she says, “because your image sucks.”

“And?” I ask curiously.

“Don’t you care?”

“Not really,” I admit.

Cho nods, as if I’ve confirmed something. “First,” she says, “I think we need to fix your school reputation.”

“Why?”

“Because they need to know the truth. They need to know what they have been doing and thinking.”

Again, why?"

"To stop the things they say about you behind your back."

"That I'm an attention seeking child?" I ask. "Or that I killed Cedric? Or that I work for Voldemort? Or that I'm mad, bad, and dangerous to know?"

"Yes," she says.

"They can think that. It doesn't affect me."

"But they're wrong," she says, sounding upset.

"It doesn't matter," I point out quietly.

"It does to me!" she says firmly. "And even if you're not going to do anything about it, I am."

I look at her and shake my head. "I'm sorry," I say in genuine regret, as I reach for my wand, only to be hit by a curse.

I can see Cho turn to look at the Headmaster.

"Please," Dumbledore says, "continue, Miss Chang."

"Thank you," Cho says in surprise. She walks, and I find myself turning so I can continue to watch her. She stands in front of the Professors' table and looks out over the Great Hall.

"This afternoon," she says clearly, in her Head Girl mode, "Harry showed me his memories of what happened at the Triwizard Tournament when Cedric died. It was in a Pensieve. As I'm sure most of you know, you can not fake a Pensieve memory.

I close my eyes and start to fight the spell. There must be a way to break it.

"Harry had a chance to get the trophy on his own. Cedric had fallen foul of one of the traps, and Harry had victory in sight. But he stopped and went back to help Cedric out."

I gather my magic, reaching deep inside myself, searching for everything that I've got.

"Cedric told Harry to take it on his own, as Harry deserved it. But Harry demurred; he didn't want to even be in the tournament, never mind win that damn thing. He offered the share it with Cedric, knowing that everyone would presume that Cedric was the real winner.

"They took it, and were Portkeyed to a graveyard. Out of nowhere, a voice rang out, 'kill the spare' and Cedric was dead, killed by a henchman, before he, or Harry, could do anything."

I gather all this magic together and get to work on the spell. I can almost feel it as it holds me in place; I can see it going back to Dumbledore. I start to prepare to break it. I'm not paying attention to what she is saying any more. I know what happened. I was there.

When I next open my eyes, ready, I can hear her finish with, "And he summoned the Portkey and returned Cedric's body to us. And now that you know what really happened, if I hear anyone making up stories about Harry, I will personally remove a hundred points and ensure that you spend the rest of your year in detention with our caretaker."

I release the magic and break the spell. It rockets away from me and hits Dumbledore square, throwing him back against the wall.

He twists, landing on his feet with that same agility he shows when duelling and stares at me in surprise.

"Don't ever do that again," I snarl at him. I hate having control taken away from me.

I turn and storm out. They say that no good deed ever goes unpunished. I'm living proof of the fact that they are right – at least about that.

I call for my broom, and as soon as it arrives, I jump on it and fly out, heading toward the Forbidden Forest. I want to be alone.

Why does everyone have to make decisions for me? I am happy with what I am. Sure, it might not be perfect, but what is? At least I get left alone if they think I'm mad or dangerous. I don't want their attention; I don't want their adulation; I just want to be me.

I sit down and relax, using a warming charm. I'll wait here until it's dark and then go back. Hopefully this will have blown over by tomorrow.

"May I sit?" a voice asks, and I jerk into full alertness, my wand in my hand, a curse on my lips.

She doesn't flinch, although she does look a little nervous, "I didn't mean to surprise you," she says.

I put my wand away and wave a hand airily. Me and Cho, alone, in a romantic setting – how many fantasies have I logged over the past two years that started just like this? Of course, the fact that it's Valentine's Weekend adds a certain amusement to my thoughts.

She sits in front of me, kneeling and resting on her heels, her back straight. "I'm sorry."

I look at her and let it go. It's done; I can't change it, much as I might want to.

"It's okay," I say.

"Why didn't you ever tell me how you felt?" she asks me directly.

"What?" I gasp, suddenly feeling my chest constrict.

She repeats her question evenly, her eyes never leaving mine.

"I don't know what you are talking about," I say, slamming my Occlumency shields in place and taking control of my emotions.

"Liar," she whispers.

I look at her and reply, "I don't know what you're talking about."

She moves, pointing her wand at me. "Tell me," she demands.

I look at her wand and then at her, and almost smile. "What are you going to do with that?"

She looks down at her wand and then at me and sighs. "It's not fair," she whispers.

"Life rarely is," I agree.

"Harry," she calls softly. "Please, just tell me the truth. No spells, no magic, nothing. Just tell me, as a friend, as a colleague. If you care anything at all for me, tell me. Even if it's not true, I'll promise I'll leave you alone and never talk to you again."

And so I have a choice. To tell her the truth or not.

"Please," she continues.

"I like you," I say, and like a torrent, once I've started I can't stop. "I never stopped. I've done everything I can to stop it, but I can't. And it's not like before. It's bigger, deeper, but I can't feel anything for you. I'm not allowed. I shouldn't. You'd be in danger, more, and I can't do it to him, I won't do it to him."

"To Cedric?" she asks.

I nod.

"Cedric died nearly two years ago," she says quietly. "I have mourned him, and I have let him go. I did that last year. Cedric is a fond memory now."

"But," I begin to argue.

"No," she interrupts. "It's time you listened to me. Someone has been watching me for the last year. And I've never known who. At first I was a little freaked about it, but then I started to be reassured. Someone was watching over me, like a guardian angel. I seemed to have good luck where ever I went. I almost fall down the stairs and land on a cushion that wasn't there a minute before."

I blush. I didn't realise that she'd noticed that.

"I get trapped by Draco and the others, and they suddenly get distracted and leave. I didn't know what was going on, so I started to pay very close attention. I wrote down every time it happened, every time I felt like I was being watched, like I was being loved."

Damn.

"I then started to work out who it was. It's taken me a very long time, but I'm a Ravenclaw, I'm patient, and I managed to narrow it down. I had it down to two people out of a school of over a thousand. And then you eliminated the only other person."

Damn. I told you she was smart.

"But I didn't know what to do about it. Anyone who goes to that much effort obviously doesn't want to come out and admit things, and to be honest, I wasn't even sure if I was right.

"Then Professor Snape came to me. Which was unusual, he said, 'I'm going to be giving Potter a detention. You might want to get one as well.' I was surprised - well, who wouldn't be? But I was curious. Everyone knows that Snape hates you, so I cancelled my plans for today, and when you got that detention, I made sure I interfered.

"Before you got there, Snape told me to do whatever you said, and not to panic, no matter what happened. So that's what I did."

She paused, as if mentally reliving what had happened earlier.

"What do you think I want in a boyfriend?"

"Cedric," I said, using him as shorthand for everything the boy had stood for.

"Cedric was a crush," she admits. "A deep crush, but he was two years older than me, and my first boyfriend. I was devastated that he died, and it

took a long time to realise this. He was warm, safe, noble. We kissed a few times, but he never pushed me; he never drove me to do anything. He was a wonderful man, but not right for me. I would have realised that eventually. I didn't have that choice - it was taken away from me.

"So I'll tell you what I want. I want someone who is respected by the people that count. I want someone who can learn - who isn't trapped in a single mindset. I want someone who knows the difference between right and wrong, and respects himself enough to make that decision. I want someone who will change the world, not for himself, but for everyone else."

I swallow and look at her; she's amazing when she's passionate about something.

"I demand the right to see if you can be that person for me," she finishes.

I wish it was that easy. "Voldemort," I sigh. "Even your little display earlier is going to make you more of a target."

"I know," she says. "Professor Dumbledore warned me before I did it."

"Then why did you? That wasn't clever."

"Because you don't defeat a big evil by committing a small evil."

"What?" I ask.

"I know that people are spreading lies about you and accepting that small lie because it's the easy first step to accepting the big lies. I won't lie anymore."

I don't know what to say.

She moved forward and hands me her wand. I look at her, confused.

"I am defenceless," she says quietly.

"You are never defenceless," I point out quietly.

She flashes me a quick smile. "You could do anything to me now," she points out, "and I can't attack you."

"With magic," I agree.

"You have to make things difficult don't you?" she sighs.

I smile at her, genuinely. "A lot of people have said that."

She moves closer to me and places her hands on my legs for balance. Without hesitation, she kisses me and my mind goes blank.

I can feel her lips against mine, and not knowing what to do, I mirror her movements, opening mine and pressing back against her. As her tongue touches mine, conscious thought becomes difficult.

I gasp for breath as she pulls back, a curious expression on her face, "Who taught you to kiss?"

I blink. "You just did."

She looks surprised for a second, but then the expression turns to one I don't recognise, before it finishes with her decision face.

"Tell me you do not want to date me," she demands.

"I don't want to date you," I lie. Well, it's almost a lie; I want to do a lot more than date her.

"Liar," she says, nodding to herself. She looks at me and waits.

It takes me a second but I soon realise what she is doing. She's not going to make it easy for me. If I want her, I'm going to have to ask for her, again.

So I think about it. I think about what I know about her, and how I think she'll react to certain situations. I think about what she's said and the way she's said it. And I think about what I want.

But then I think about Voldemort and the advice Dumbledore has given me. I think about my friends.

"Cho," I say softly, my heart pounding in my chest. "I've liked you for a very long time. Are you interested in seeing if we can make a go of it?"

I wait; my palms feel damp as I hold my breath.

"Of course," she smiles.

I exhale in relief.

"But," she continues. "I'm not hiding, I am going to fix your reputation, and you are going to have to live with that."

"Okay," I agree. "And if anyone threatens you, I'm going to be cursing first and asking questions later."

She freezes and looks at me. I return her look. She nods slowly. "How are you so strong?"

"What do you mean?" I ask, confused.

"No one ever stands up to me," she confesses, "even Zach will do as I tell him, and he's the Head Boy."

I smile slightly, "I'm a Gryffindor," I remind her. "I'm supposed to be fearlessly brave."

She laughs. "So, if I promise not to run roughshod over you, you'll at least try and check the threat before cursing."

"How about," I bargain, "if I make my curses match the threat."

"That'll do," she says cheerfully. "Now, how do I learn to block the Cruciatus?"

I sigh deeply. "I don't think you can," I explain as gently as I can. "I wish you could, for my sake of mind more than anything else. You have to have experience the curse a lot, and when you're under it, you have to realise that it's pain, you have to match it to pain you've felt before and accept it, glorify in it. You have to take everything and ask for more."

Cho's looking horrified, and then she looks torn. Eventually she jumps to her feet. "Do not move," she orders me and grabs my broom. She mounts it in a way that makes me jealous of the broom, and I watch her speed off.

I can't *believe* she took my broom.

I do as I'm told, actually quite happy to wait and enjoy the sunset. It takes her ten minutes to return.

"I'm going to like being your girlfriend," she says, about as happily as I've ever seen her.

"Oh?" I ask.

"Yep," she nods. "I walked into Hogwarts, and Professor Flitwick and Professor McGonagall were there. I went and got the blanket I went for, and I was about to leave again, when Professor Flitwick called and asked where I was going. He was looking at the clock.

"I told him that I was going to see my boyfriend, and they both looked disappointed in me. Professor McGonagall pointed out that as Head Girl, I should be setting an example, not abusing my position by having a late night Valentine's Weekend tryst - and that my boyfriend should be returning to school.

"For the first time, I laughed at an authority figure and told her that you had never followed the rules.

"Professor Dumbledore then seemed to appear from nowhere."

"He does that," I agree.

"And he asked, 'Harry, Miss Chang?' I nodded and told them why I was coming back out to you. Things changed rather dramatically then, and before I knew it, I had this in my hands," she held up a picnic basket, "and the advice to stay with you and not take any risks, so here I am."

"And why are you here?" I ask.

A few seconds later the food is unloaded - there's enough of it to feed an army - and she is filling a plate. She hands it to me and tells me to eat, ignoring my question.

I do as I'm told; amused at the way that she's apparently decided to take charge of my life; and that I've accepted it.

We eat in silence, but I am enjoying it more than anything I can remember. The silence is natural and refreshing.

When we've finished, she re-appropriates her wand and cleans up the mess, banishing the lot back to Hogwarts.

She walks over to me and settles down comfortably between my legs, wrapping the blanket around us both, and leans her back against my chest. This is the first time I've ever been close to a girl like this, and I can't help the reaction.

Cho giggles and wiggles a bit, causing me to groan. She pulls my arms around her and relaxes.

"Talk," she orders.

"About what?" I ask.

She twists slightly. "Tell me how you can understand the pain," she says, but it's not an order like before - she's asking.

The past. A wonderful way to kill the mood, but I guess if we're dating, she has the right to know. So I start to talk.

And for the first time, I find it a bit easier to tell someone about it; perhaps because she's in my arms, perhaps because it's dark and intimate, and I feel like we're the only people in the world.

When I finish, finally, she turns and whispers “*Lumos*.” Her wand bursts into light, illuminating our faces. She’s been crying, but she is smiling at me.

“Thank you,” she whispers and kisses me. This kiss is different from the ones we’ve shared before, it’s a lot wetter because I can taste her tears, but I find that I don’t mind this time. It’s strangely reassuring in a way, because it means she cares about me.

She pulls back and sniffs through her smile. “Thank you,” she says.

I feel strangely empty, as if I’ve let go of a lot of things.

“Thank *you*,” I whisper back.

She smiles me again, and I could get used to this. It’s now very late, early morning actually.

“We should get back,” I suggest. “We’ll do this again, but next time you can tell me about your childhood.”

She nods happily; she seems to have accepted why she can’t learn what I have learned to do with the Cruciatus. I do wonder if I’ll still be able to do it in the future, but I’ll leave that for now. It’s not as if it matters that much, really.

I can always take more pain.

I sit on my broom and look at her. “I can’t believe you *took* my broom.”

Even in the low light provided by her wand, I can tell she’s blushing. “Sorry,” she says, walking over to me. “I didn’t even think about it.”

“I guess it’s got to be one of those girlfriend privileges, right?”

She sits behind me and hugs me tightly. “Can I borrow it when we play Slytherin?” she asks.

I laugh softly. “Maybe,” I say evasively. Of course, if anyone had asked me yesterday if I was going to allow anyone to even touch my broom – especially after it had been confiscated last year – I would have cursed first and asked questions later. Much later.

I start to fly, not really pushing it, just liking the feeling of the way she feels cuddled against me.

We enter through the main door, and I can’t remember ever being here this late. The House Elves are up and about, polishing the floor and the statues, but apart from that, it is deserted.

“I better get to bed,” Cho says as she climbs off the broom and looks at me with a reluctant expression.

I nod; I don’t want the evening to end either.

She looks at me, waiting, and I realise that she wants to be kissed. She’s kissed me twice and now it’s my turn.

I reach up and slide my fingers over her jaw. Her skin is so smooth, I can always feel the stubble when I touch my own, but there’s nothing like that here. I don’t know why I’m surprised, but I am. I lean down and kiss her. I’d forgotten how small she really is.

She loops her arms around my neck and holds on tight as she kisses me back. I can feel my hands exploring her back, the feeling of her robes playing over her skin.

I break the kiss and move to pull back, but she doesn’t let me, she’s hanging around my neck, she’s smiling at me in a mysterious fashion.

“Don’t even think of hiding this,” she says firmly. “You’ve got exactly the same chance of becoming a dwarf.”

I laugh softly. “You don’t think I’d do a good job as singing greeter?”

She shakes her head and kisses me quickly. “Nope, the only singing I better hear from you is to me.”

“Possessive, aren’t we.”

“Extremely,” she agrees. “Now, go to bed, sleep, and think of a way of showing everyone that I’m yours tomorrow.”

I laugh. “Bossy, too.”

She nods and gives me one more quick kiss, before releasing me, and walking down to the Ravenclaw common room. She pauses and turns to look back at me. “Professor Snape did give me one last message for you,” she said, sounding a little confused.

“Oh?”

“He said, ‘he still needs to improve his Occlumency’.”

I laugh softly. That explains how Snape knew – he got more out of me than I’d planned when I showed him my memories of growing up. I’ll have to work on that, and Cho might be the person to do it with.

“Thanks,” I reply.

She smiles at me and vanishes, and I turn to go to bed.

“Harry?” Dumbledore asks from behind me.

I sigh. “I’ve not forgiven you yet.” I’m not looking at him.

“Please?” he asks.

I close my eyes tiredly. It’s been a long day, and I really don’t want to spend any more of it with him. Wordlessly, I turn and follow him to his office. The headmaster is a man who badly needs a woman.

Because no man who has a woman would wear lime green pyjamas and purple socks.

The only thing I can think is that he’s deliberately trying to ensure he never gets possessed, because not even Voldemort would take him dressed like that.

I slump down on the couch in front of his desk and raise my legs to the side.

“I’m sorry,” he says simply.

I try and glare at him but I’m too damn tired. “Why?” I ask instead.

He sighs deeply and looks like he’d rather I was angry with him.

“Because I thought it would be good for you,” he admits.

“And?” I prompt.

“And I did it again,” he continues, “took away your choice in the matter.”

“Exactly,” I agree. We both go silent.

“It’s hard for me,” he eventually continues. “I am used to making decisions.”

“I’m not yours to order,” I remind him. “I’m a person, not a toy, nor a weapon. What I do, or don’t do is up to me. You have the right to make suggestions, to offer advice, but at the end of the day it’s me who will be there facing Voldemort. And then, it will be down to the decisions I can make and the choices I choose. How do you think I’m going to be able to do that if every time I make a decision, you second guess me?”

Silence again.

“I hadn’t looked at it quite like that.”

Nor had I, but I don’t think now’s the time to admit that. “What time is it?” As much as I want to stay mad at him, that nagging voice in the back of my mind points out that I did the same to Cho earlier – and for a similar reason – I thought it would be for the best.

“Four in the morning, Harry.”

I groan. “In that case, I’m going to bed. I’m going to sleep for a few hours and then I’m going to try and be awake for my girlfriend.”

“Might I just say congratulations?”

I stand and walk to the door. “Thanks,” I whisper. “And a suggestion back for you?”

“Oh?”

“Hire someone to coordinate your wardrobe.”

He looks shocked for a second before he starts to laugh.

Rather than walk to the Gryffindor Tower, I collapse onto my broom and fly. It’s a lot quicker, and there is something fun about the whole flying indoors thing.

I say the password and float in – easier than climbing, actually – and stumble to bed.

And before I’ve even closed my eyes, or so it seems, Ron is shaking me awake.

I groan and stumble into the bathroom, standing under the hot water until I’m feeling a little more awake. I make a mental note to never combine a spell like the *Fidelius* with anything else in the same day.

I make my way down to the Great Hall, alone, and last. Not that it matters; with Snape and Malfoy out of the picture, no one else is going to cause me much trouble.

I move over to my seat and look around, until I meet Cho’s eyes. She looks gorgeous this morning. She’s wearing a lot of blue, and she has an expectant expression in her eyes. Damn it, I’d forgotten she wanted me to make a statement.

I warily climb to my feet, standing on the bench. The whole school quiets to look at me; Cho is smiling now, waiting for whatever I'm about to say.

Me? Give a speech? Right. Is that before or after Voldemort releases a hit single with the Chasers from the Hollyhead Harpies?

I pull out my wand and brace myself. "Accio Girlfriend!"

Cho squeaks as she flies out of her seat and across the hall, and into my arms. It's a good thing she isn't any bigger than she is, because I nearly go flying, and that would have really put me in the doghouse.

"Harry James Potter!" she calls, smacking me firmly on the arm as she scowls at me.

I sit with her on my lap. "Yes, dear?" I ask.

"You are incorrigible," she says, a smile appearing through the scowl.

"You told me to think of a way," I point out. I'm aware that everyone is listening to us at the moment, and wish they bloody wouldn't. Can't a guy get a bit of privacy?

"I did," she agrees. "Admittedly, I was thinking of a nice speech or something like that."

"And you're saying that summoning you across the room isn't nice?"

"Well, it might not have been, but you did catch me, and you did use the right words in the spell, so I'll forgive you."

"How generous of you."

She laughs happily and drops a kiss on my cheek.

"Once you lend me your firebolt *again* for the Slytherin match," she adds a moment later.

"Again?" Ron gasps loudly – the first sound from anyone else.

Cho looks at him and smiles prettily. "He let me borrow it last night so I could get us a snack."

Ron's chin looks like it's about to hit his plate. "But touching Harry's broom is the most dangerous thing to do in the school! Seamus did it once, and he's only just got rid of the boils!"

"Girlfriend privileges," Cho says perkily. "Not only do I get to ride his broom, I get to go flying with him too."

Ron, Hermione, and half the school seem to go red at the double entendre, while the other half giggles.

Me? I just groan and blush furiously. She knows *exactly* what she is saying. She's far too smart not to. Just when did I decide that she was the one for me, anyway?

She tilts her head and kisses me. When she's finished, I've remembered exactly why, and I admit to myself that it a good idea – possibly the best one I've ever made.

"So," she says, as if she hadn't just snogged the life out of me. "Are you going to introduce me?"

"Ron, Hermione, this is my girlfriend, Cho Chang," I say and fight the silly grin that threatens to erupt on my face at the statement. "Cho, these are my two best friends, Ron and Hermione."

"Hi," Cho greets them with another bright smile. "When are you two going to admit that you like each other?"

I freeze; I can't believe she just said that.

"Yesterday, actually," Hermione replies calmly. The two girls in my life stare at each other for a brief second, and I'm positive that they exchanged enough information in that stare to fill an encyclopaedia.

"Wait," I finally say, as I catch up. "Yesterday?"

"Yep," Ron says, blushing, "you're not mad, are you?"

"Mad?" I ask, tightening my arms around my new girlfriend. "I've done everything but hit you two over the head with it. I mean, I can't get more obvious than sending you two on a date on Valentine's Weekend, can I? And might I just add... Finally!"

Ron and Hermione both blush and laugh. "So, Harry, exactly when did you get a girlfriend?"

I'm hoping that if we act like everything is normal, everyone else will stop staring at us and go back to eating breakfast, and waiting for the Owl post to deliver their cards and presents.

"It was after Draco Malfoy tried to kill Harry, and Harry persuaded Draco to abandon He-who-must-not-be-named," Cho replies.

And that statement's definitely screwed up the chance of that happening.

Ron, who was about to continue eating his breakfast, drops his fork.

"What!?" Hermione demands.

"Harry convinced Draco to leave You-know-who," Cho says, reminding me that I'm going to have to work with her on saying *Voldemort*, "and ferret-boy went into hiding."

"How in the name of Merlin did you do that?" Ron asks.

"It was just a quiet word or two," I say, ducking my head.

"Right," Cho snorts. "I was there," she explains to my friends. "Draco ambushed Harry and cast the Cruciatu curse on him." There's a gasp, and the sound of many people shifting closer so that they can listen to this supposedly private conversation.

"What he didn't expect," Cho continues, "is that Harry can now break the curse, like he can the Killing Curse and the *Imperio* us."

I groan, and she pats my back gently. I bury my face in her neck and notice that she smells really nice. I'm not looking forward to the conversation I'm going to have to have with her about discretion; we can't let Voldemort know some of this stuff!

"So Harry took the curse and used some rather inspired words to persuade Draco that following Voldemort would leave Draco facing Harry – and that would end with Draco suffering from an extended case of Death. The snivelling coward decided that he would rather face Voldemort's wrath than Harry's and dropped out of the game and the school."

"You mean Malfoy's gone?" Ron asks. He's never one to miss stating the obvious.

"The ferret has left the building," Cho confirms cheerfully. "He's gone for good, Snape too."

A second later, Ron's standing on the table doing a dance, the like of which has not been seen at breakfast, since, well, ever. It looks like a cross between a bad Russian Cozaki Dance and an Egyptian Belly Dance, and it's making my eyes hurt.

"Can you please stop him?" I beg Hermione.

She looks at me, then at Cho, and then at her boyfriend. She gives me a slight smile and shakes her head. She turns back to Cho, "Kiss him for me?" she asks. "I can't think of one person our age that I hate more than Draco, and he's finally gone!"

A second later, Hermione – Prefect, goody-two-shoes Hermione – is on the table, joining her boyfriend in a dance that contravenes all the conventions of good taste and decency. As I start to protest, Cho squirms in my lap and gives me the sort of kiss that I hadn't even dreamed of.

When she finally breaks it, it looks like a minor party has kicked off, as the rest of the school rejoice – including about half of Slytherin house who are talking excitedly – some even going as far to doing their own impromptu dance of celebration. And I thought it was just me that didn't like them.

Cho squirms against me again, deliberately, aware of the reaction she's provoking. She puts her arms around my neck again and looks at me deeply. "You're mad at me," she pouts.

"A little," I sigh. "There are some things that Voldemort doesn't need to know and shouldn't know!"

She smiles at me sweetly. "Harry, you are the most amazing boy I've ever met, but you're also far too innocent. You have no idea how to fight a successful public war, nor does Professor Dumbledore."

"Huh?"

"For the past few years the press has been full of stories about You-know-who and the Death Eaters, and occasionally you and Professor Dumbledore. As a result of that all they have seen is that the bad guys are powerful and can operate with impunity, and that the good guys, when they are seen, are arguing with the Ministry.

"They are more afraid of Voldemort and therefore, more willing to capitulate.

"We have to have a figurehead for our side. He has to be big and strong, he has to have good teeth and good hair, he has to have nobility coming out of every pore, and he has to be able to scare the bad guys.

"And like it or not, you're it, Harry. You are that figurehead we need. By tomorrow, everyone in the country will know that you can defeat the Cruciatu curse. Yes, that includes the Death Eaters, but inside everyone else it will awaken that little spark of hope that Harry Potter is back in the game, that Harry Potter will save them. They don't need to know or want to know that you're also an amazing man and my boyfriend. All they need to know is that their hero is here.

"And the next time someone tries to badmouth you, people won't believe it. Next time the Ministry gets in the way, the people will get the Ministry out of your way. No one wants to be under Death Eater rule, but with nothing for them to grab onto, to hope for, people have been accepting it as their destiny. We've changed that, Harry, but this is only the first step. We will change how people view you, the Ministry, and the Death Eaters, so that when you finally go to him, you will not be alone. You will have overwhelming numbers."

I think that my jaw is about to hit the floor as I gape at her.

She reaches out and gently shuts my mouth.

Did I mention that she's really smart? I mean really, really smart?

"I love you," I blurt and then feel mortified. I didn't mean to say that. Not yet.

Her face changes expression rapidly, as she looks at me, and it looks like I've surprised her, which is somehow reassuring. She opens her mouth to say something, but I kiss her instead. I try and give her the same sort of kiss that she gave me a few minutes ago. I try and pour everything I feel about her, and have done for the past two years, into that kiss.

Her expression changes again, and I can't decide if I'm pleased that we're in public, or disappointed; because I recognise that expression now. It's hunger.

"If I can have your attention for a moment," Professor Dumbledore calls. The students slowly settle down, and I can see some of the Slytherins looking at me with a mixture of hate and fear. The fear is new; the hate isn't.

Dumbledore pauses and looks at me, and I lower my Occlumency shields so that we can have a quick conversation. This is new; he's actually asking my opinion. I think for a second and then reply with a 'yes'. It's a good idea.

"With Professor Snape's resignation, we have a vacancy for the Defence Against the Dark Arts position. The Professors and I have talked this through, and we have decided that we will each take the class on a rotational basis. But, to ensure that we keep the highest possible standard, Harry has agreed to reopen the informal club known as the Defence Association. Only this year, it will be fully supported by the faculty and open to everyone."

"All right!" Ron yells at the top of his lungs.

His cheer is taken up by the Gryffindors, and then the Hufflepuffs. The Ravenclaws seem to look at Cho, and realise that she's going to be heavily involved, and then they join in as well.

I look over to the Slytherin table, and some of them are clapping along. I can see Pansy, with Crabbe and Goyle backing her up, trying to stop them, so I glare at her until she meets my eyes.

Once she does, she pales dramatically and sits down, placing her head in her hands. A lot of the younger Slytherins start to cheer.

I'm surprised, but I'm starting to see what Cho means. So what if these people think of me as Harry 'the boy who's going to kick Voldemort's arse' Potter. In a lot of ways, it's no different, really. From the days when they were thinking of me as a dangerous trouble maker, but this is actually useful – they can use me as a totem for their defiance.

I hug her again. She kisses me again.

I like her being so demonstrative; sure, she's probably sending a message, but what do I care?

I get kisses, and at the same time, get to send my own message; Cho Chang – claimed by Harry Potter.

I was right earlier.

No good deed does go unpunished!