

Once More

As Harry casually leaned back to avoid his opponent's wild punch, he was surprised to see a boot rocket past his shoulder, catching his opponent straight in his mask.

The mask shattered, the Death Eater sentry flew back against a wall, slumping to the ground, unconscious. The owner of the boot rebounded from the flying kick and landed lightly at his side. Raising his wand, Harry cast a spell at the fallen Death Eater, pulling five small objects from the Death Eater's pockets.

Slowly, Harry turned and ran his eyes from the size five black boots up a leg that had most of its shape hidden behind light grey combat trousers, to hips that suggested the owner of the leg was female. He continued up, past a chest that looked promising under the multi-pocketed grey shirt, and up to bright blue eyes and long white-blond hair in a tightly braided ponytail, peeking out the back of a matching grey baseball cap.

She looked at him, a challenging expression on her face.

"Lady Gabrielle Anne Delacour, youngest Commander in the French Auror Corps, two-time recipient of the Charlemagne Medallion for bravery, responsible for removing Voldemort's operatives in France, nicknamed the White Witch because of your ruthlessness with the enemy, and your more obvious physical attributes," Harry said slowly. "I didn't expect to see you here."

"Lord Baron Harry James Potter-Black, youngest Colonel in the English Auror Corps, Order of Merlin, second class, awarded twice Order of Merlin, first class, Deputy Warlock of the Wizengamot, De-facto Chief of the English Auror Corps, Mugwump, Tri-Wizard Champion and Bane of Voldemort," Gabrielle replied, mimicking his intonation completely. "Nicknamed the Paladin because of your unending pursuit of Voldemort. I did expect to see you here."

"It's good to see you again," Harry said lightly.

"Indeed. I hope that your powers of observation have improved since last time."

"Quite," Harry said, "I can now tell an eleven-year-old from an eight-year-old." He turned around to find his men on their knees. Wizards wearing French Auror uniforms stood behind them, their wands against the back of his men's heads.

"Report," he barked.

"Sorry, Boss," a lanky man with short brown hair said. "They got the drop on us – we didn't check our six, and they moved like ghosts."

"I'm so disappointed in you," Harry said softly.

All his men looked down at the floor.

He clicked his fingers, and bright light burst from his hand. As each of the French Aurors looked up in reflex, his men moved in unison, grabbing and twisting the wrists of their captors. One violent twist later, the positions were reversed, with the French Aurors held captive by their own wands.

Harry smiled faintly. "Better."

"Yeah, thanks Boss – it won't happen again."

"Make sure it doesn't," Harry said softly. "You're better than that, Matt."

"Yeah," Matt replied. "We are."

Harry nodded once, his men took a step back and offered the wands back to the French.

"What may I do for you?" Harry asked Gabrielle.

"We're here to help," Gabrielle replied, looking at her men sourly. "We needed a bit of a challenge, as France is now empty of threat."

"Your reputation precedes you," he said slowly. "Can you take orders?"

"I have no problem obeying a superior officer. For the duration of this operation, we have been seconded to your Auror corps." She handed him a piece of paper.

Harry read it slowly; it was full of the florid sort of bullshit he expected from his superiors, but it was signed by Amelia, so it was genuine. "Listen up," Harry said abruptly as he stared at the combined forces in front of him. "From now until Voldemort is room temperature, you've just met your best friends. We've heard their stories, they've heard ours; we both know that we're not blowing smoke here."

"The mission is simple. Between us and Voldemort are several hundred of Voldemort's best Death Eaters. Simple arithmetic means that there are at least five Death Eaters for each of you. Miss Delacour and I will take twenty apiece.

"I expect you all to keep count, as the person with the highest body count wins an all expense paid vacation to the destination of choice. Understand?"

The cheer that was his response was a mixture of French and English.

"Once we go through these doors there will be the usual traps, ambushes, and fun things we've come to expect from the Death Eaters.

"If you are injured, stay down and wait. Take your emergency stasis pills and sit it out. No one will be able to come in and get you, nor will you be able to get out.

"For the benefit of our new French comrades, we're currently in a warded area, just outside the main entrance to Voldemort's fortress. The plan is relatively simple. We go through the front doors, and keep going until we get to the keep in the middle. Once we're in, we will no longer be able to hide, and they will be expecting us.

"The Anti-Portkey and Anti-Apparating wards are going up shortly, and not even Voldemort will be able to break them in the time that he has left.

"His arrogance will be his downfall. He believes himself impregnable, believing that no one would dare attack this fortress."

"No one except the White Witch or the Paladin," one of the French Aurors shouted.

Harry smiled slightly and his voice changed as he looked at each of his own men. "As always, guys, this is the last chance to pull out. You've all gone way above and beyond the call of duty; you don't have to do this."

"Bugger that," Matt said, obviously speaking for all of them, "we're with you to the end, Boss, you know that."

Harry smiled proudly at them.

The Death Eater against the wall slowly started to wake; he opened his eyes and looked on in terror. He got to his feet and reached into his pockets, a look of horror appeared as he didn't find what he was looking for – Harry having removed his spare wand, alarm triggers and emergency Portkey earlier.

"You made a bad choice," Harry said gently to him. "When Voldemort asked if you wanted to join, you should have said no."

"I was under the Imperius," the Death Eater said quickly. "I didn't have a choice."

Harry nodded to Gabrielle.

"I don't believe you," he said quietly, as he watched the young woman approach the Death Eater.

She was smiling softly, her face radiating trust and forgiveness. The Death Eater's eyes started to calm as he looked at the girl approaching him.

"Do you believe me?" he asked Gabrielle.

"No," Gabrielle said softly. "I don't believe you, but I do forgive you."

"You do?" the Death Eater asked hopefully.

She reached out slowly and cupped his face with both hands. Her face was aglow with a soft, silver light. "I do," she said gently. "May you find forgiveness in the next life as well." She took a step forward, twisting her hands violently. A solid crunch came from the Death Eater's neck before he dropped to the floor, his eyes unseeing.

Harry nodded slowly. "Charming," he said professionally.

"I try," Gabrielle replied with a shrug.

"Matt, Adam, get ready to open the gates please."

His second in command and one of the others moved to the front.

"Harry?" Hermione's voice came through clearly on the portable radio he was carrying.

"In person," Harry drawled.

"You've met the reinforcements?"

"Indeed. You should've said we were going to have guests. I'd've baked a cake,"

"We didn't know until the last second. And I've tasted your cooking. It was better you didn't know. Seriously, though, I thought you'd rather have help than a call-back to rework the plans. Thirty seconds. Stay alive, all of you," Hermione commanded.

"Yes Ma'am," his men shouted.

“Harry,” Hermione’s voice was softer now.

“Hermione?”

“No prisoners.”

“I wasn’t planning on it,” he said softly.

“Remember those who aren’t here helping,” Hermione whispered. “Today, their deaths will be avenged.”

“I know. Look after her, Nev.”

“Always, Harry, you already know that,” Neville Longbottom’s disembodied voice joined the conversation.

“Harry, I’m disabled, not an invalid. I’m fine,” Hermione protested.

Harry laughed softly. “Ten seconds,” he said.

“Good luck, mate.”

“It’s taken us five long years to get here,” Harry said, his eyes surveying the huge doors a few hundred yards ahead of them. “And far too many deaths. Now? Luck has no place - it’s us against them, and we won’t lose!”

“Wards are up, Harry.”

“Catch you on the flip side. Paladin out.” Harry said, before he put his emotions to one side. “Open the doors.”

Matt and Adam cast a spell together and the doors exploded backward, ripping into the large foyer behind it, leaving a cloud of smoke.

Harry tensed for a second, took a deep breath, and yelled, “Now!” as he started to run. He could feel Gabrielle matching him stride for stride as they ran up to the smoking hole, and then through it and into the room that was Voldemort’s first layer of protection, fifteen Death Eaters, all relatively junior, flanked by two Manticores.

He didn’t bother with the Death Eaters, heading straight toward the beast on the left. Gabrielle went right, towards the other.

The Manticores were creatures of nightmare, with human-esque heads, the bodies of lions, and scorpion-style tails with stingers oozing venom. They were highly resistant to spells, making them even more deadly for magic-dependant wizards. He had no idea how Voldemort had persuaded them to work for him, but they were here.

Harry’s chosen Manticore seemed shocked that anyone would dare attack it; Harry was counting on that. His sword appeared in his right hand. He darted in low, ducking a snap of the razor-sharp teeth and a swipe of a massive front paw. His sword licked out like a tongue of cold flame, its magically sharpened edge slicing through the matted mane and slashing the beast’s throat open. The beast turned to protect its wounded head, bringing its tail stinger into play, and viciously stabbing down at Harry. A second stroke of his sword cut the tail half-way up and the stinger fell to the floor, where it twitched spasmodically, jabbing itself into the carpet. Before the mortally-wounded beast could claw its way through his Aurors in a futile attempt to escape, Harry struck again, decapitating it cleanly.

He glanced about as the head tumbled to the ground. Gabrielle was still dealing with her Manticore, and there was a pitched battle between the Death Eaters and the combined English and French Aurors.

He grinned and let loose a yell as he attacked them from the side.

From that point the fight was decidedly one-sided. Harry, sword in one hand and wand in the other, was in the thick of things, dealing death with both hands. What had been a fight became a slaughter. A few Death Eaters tried to surrender, but the surrender was not accepted.

Harry bent to wipe his sword on the black robes of a fallen foe before banishing the sword into the hidden dimension that he kept it in. He walked over to Gabrielle, looking down at the bloody corpse of her Manticore.

“I didn’t have a sword,” she said, a hint of embarrassment in her voice as she wiped her hands on the black robes of a fallen Death Eater. She’d used her veela claws to tear through the Manticore’s ribcage and pulled out its heart with her hands.

“Your way was much more impressive,” Harry said slowly and looked at her again. “Fancy a wager?”

“On what?”

“Body count.”

“You’re already ahead of me,” she pointed out.

“We’ll start afresh.”

“What do you want to bet?” she asked.

He looked into her eyes. “You.”

She looked shocked for a second, before she cloaked her emotions. “Oh?”

“You and a suite at the Burj Al Arab in Dubai for at least two weeks.”

“That’s a big prize,” she said slowly.

“It’s a big fight,” he replied.

“Okay,” she agreed slowly. “And when I win, I want the suite for a month.” She paused, letting loose one of her more devastating smiles. “Alone.”

Harry offered his hand. She took it. The contact was almost electric, as he stared into the cold blue eyes of the woman he had heard so much about over the past few years and yet not met since he had pulled her, wet, shivering, and looking younger than she was, from the lake at Hogwarts.

Her own record came close to matching his as she had seemed to explode from Beauxbatons, taking the French Auror Corps by storm. Her ruthlessness and ability in a fight soon had her racing up the ranks, as the French people started to consider her a national icon. The fact that she was part-Veela was ignored, as people concentrated first on her amazing ability in a fight and then on her almost ethereal beauty.

Part of him sensed a kindred spirit inside her – someone who could understand what he had gone through, and would still go through.

“Is the next door open yet?” he called.

“One minute Boss, it’s warded,” Matt responded.

He reluctantly moved his eyes away from her, and turned to find that his own men were ostensibly ignoring him, while the French were paying very close attention.

He raised an eyebrow at them and they all looked away, checking their shields and wands.

“You’ve changed,” Gabrielle said quietly.

“From the shy boy I was eight years ago?” he asked. “I’d think so. Five years of war will do that to a person.”

“So you’re not with the skinny red-head I heard rumours about?”

“Ginny? No. She’s history, ancient history, and really, apart from the odd fling, nothing serious since then. Too much time spent keeping myself alive.”

“Door’s open, Boss.”

Harry walked over and looked into the black and white chequered court-yard. “Tell me,” he said to Gabrielle. “Do you dance?”

“But of course,” she responded.

“Then let’s do so,” he said, taking her into his arms and slowly starting to waltz her around the chequered floor in the apparently empty room beyond.

“The floor is booby trapped?” Gabrielle asked.

“Indeed,” he said.

“How can you tell?”

“Enchanted glasses; just follow my lead and you’ll be fine.”

Matt groaned as he watched the Boss and the blonde witch dance through the enchanted door. “There are bloody *two* of them, now.”

“Two of what?” one of the French Aurors asked.

“Lunatics.”

“The White Witch is *not* a lunatic,” the French man said proudly, puffing his chest up. “She is our leader; we would follow her into Hell itself.”

“Yeah, well, we’ve already done that,” Matt said dryly. “It’s not a nice place; I wouldn’t recommend it.”

The French Auror paused. “My name is Marcel,” he said. “When did you go to Hell?”

“I’m Matt,” he said, watching the couple continue to dance as if they were in the middle of a ballroom. “Voldemort hid the last of his Horcruxes behind the gates of Hell, figuring no one would dare go there voluntarily. Of course, the little bastard didn’t put it there personally, he attached it to the body of a monk he killed. Voldemort didn’t expect the Boss to actually go there and retrieve it, of course.”

“The Boss?”

“Harry, the Paladin. The Paladin’s his official nickname; the Boss is the one we gave him. Never seen anyone fight like him, ever, and I’ve been in

the Corps for fifteen years, been all over the world.

"He got some kick-ass training before he came to us, rumour has it he played with some chrono-magic to do so. Death Eaters killed his best mate and most of his friends, so it's personal with him. He'll do anything to stop them, as they've been finding out.

"The Boss took us into Hell, and he got us all out of there as well. This?" he asked rhetorically, as he looked around the foyer of Voldemort's base. "This is a walk in the park."

"I did not believe the stories, really," Marcel said. "I thought they were exaggerated, but then he killed the Manticore like it was a puppy."

"The Boss would never kill a puppy," Matt replied. "But really, the stories don't come close to him. He's dedicated everything he has to this. He grew up in this war and made the decision that he was going to end it.

"I've been with him since the start, when he was a snot-nosed kid that had somehow managed to bypass the Auror training scheme. I was ready to show him what he had missed out on, only, before I knew it I was on the floor, my wand was in his hand, and those cold green eyes of his were staring down at me.

"That was when I knew that I had finally found the leader I'd been looking for, and I've been with him every step of the way."

"A good boss then?"

"The best. He cares about us, and doesn't give a shit about rules. Every one of us is a hell of a lot richer than when we started – when we took over Malfoy Manor, he claimed it as spoils of war – the Ministry gave it to him – and then he sold it to some Muggles for a fortune, and gave each of us an equal share of the cash.

"The Minister threw a fit, but the Boss just ignored him – and a year later, did the same with Parkinson Manor. But enough about the Boss; how's the White Witch?"

"A lot like your Boss," Marcel said. "I wouldn't be surprised if she's played games with time as well. She came from nowhere to be the best fighter in France. It was shortly after her sister was killed. Before that, the reports said she was pretty normal, but then that happened, she went underground, and came out with a deep desire to make every Death Eater in the world pay.

"She doesn't break any rules, but only because the French Ministry doesn't actually give her any. They recognized the benefits of giving her command and letting her go. We don't have Death Eaters in France any more. When she heard through the grapevine that you English were planning something big, she asked for volunteers, and here we are."

Matt watched as the Boss dipped the White Witch, who reached out and touched her wand to the wall. There was a series of flashing lights before a strange silence, as if something they hadn't been able to hear had stopped.

"Floor's clear," Harry shouted.

"What do you think about them?"

"Together?"

"Yeah."

"The White Witch will someday need to find her heart."

Matt nodded slowly. "The Boss, too," he agreed. "Perhaps they'll be good for each other."

"And if not, they'll have a lot of fun finding out," Marcel responded with a chuckle.

"I like you," Matt said, pounding his new friend on the back.

"And I you," Marcel replied. "Let us agree to avoid the inconvenience called death and waste some of that fortune of yours on as much alcohol as we can get our hands on."

"I won't need to use mine," Matt said cheerfully. "The Boss always pays for the parties. We'll get drunk and practice the stories that we'll bore our grandkids with."

"I don't think," Marcel said in a whisper as they came up to Harry and Gabrielle, "that any child would ever get bored with the stories we could tell about these two."

"Can you use a sword?" Harry asked.

Gabrielle nodded.

Harry pulled his sword back out from nowhere and handed it to her. She looked at it, examining it closely. "Nice."

Harry smiled faintly. "Indeed," he murmured. "I can't have an unfair advantage, and I think it's time I got my first sword back." He closed his eyes and concentrated hard, forcing his magic down a specific path, sending out a call.

With a squawk, Fawkes appeared; in his claws was the same short sword that Harry had used almost ten years ago.

"Thanks," Harry said to the Phoenix, who looked around, singing a bright tune, before he vanished again. "It's somehow fitting that I use this," Harry continued, "I used it to defeat Voldemort's first Horcrux, made when he was younger, and I'll use it now to kill the last bit." He concentrated on the sword, extending it slightly, the shape changing to one that fitted his more adult physique.

"Enough talk. Ready to dance?"

Gabrielle grinned at him. "Always," she promised.

Harry looked around at the others. "Beyond this door, we're on our own. Our intelligence has run out. There could be all of them, there could be none of them. Everyone stay on guard, avoid dying if you can help it, and remember your training! The Death Eaters know we're here, now it's time for us to show that their knowledge is useless."

Harry pointed the Sword of Gryffindor at the doors in front of him, "*Reducto!*" he shouted, forcing his magic down the sword.

The spell came out a different colour than expected, as the sword bucked in his hand. The doors disintegrated, and the yells of pain from behind it implied that spell hadn't been stopped by doors.

"Once more into the breach, dear friends," Gabrielle yelled as she started to run.

Harry shook his head in bemusement and followed her. Inside the large room were about fifty Death Eaters, and he slowed for a second to watch as Gabrielle took them on, launching herself into the fray. Spells flashed out of her wand, while her sword cut through limbs and torsos with devastating affect.

He met her eyes for a brief second, and smiled as she mouthed, "Five."

He wasn't excited, his heart wasn't pounding. He was cold, no thoughts of revenge or making people pay; he was just a soldier doing his job, removing the people who stood in the way of society's safety.

And he was ready to dance.

He slid to the left to avoid a barrage of curses and put his wand away. He snapped his sword up and saluted the opposition. Then he attacked.

"What exactly are we here for?" Marcel demanded as he casually drove his fist into the throat of a Death Eater, ignoring the choking sounds the Death Eater made as he fell to the floor, desperately clutching his throat.

"Comic relief?" Matt offered, as his blasting curse created a large hole in the stomach of another Death Eater.

"I'm serious," Marcel muttered. "They don't seem to need us. It doesn't seem right; he's showing less emotion than our White Witch."

"He once told me that emotions get people killed, so he wouldn't allow them to himself in a fight. It makes him scarier than anything you can imagine, because no matter what happens, you won't get to him, and he's just doing a job – pest control."

Marcel smiled and threw a curse over Matt's shoulder.

"Thanks," Matt said, removing a knife from his side pocket and returning the favour. "Fancy a side bet on the Boss' wager?"

"Pride demands that I say yes," Marcel replied, "but logic suggests that it is too close to call. And I'm afraid that I'm going with logic."

"Spoilsport," Matt complained. "Still, I'll admit to being slightly impressed. I didn't think anyone could keep up with the Boss."

"Same stuff, different package," Marcel grunted as he conjured a heavy piece of wood to stop a Killing Curse. "How about a different wager?"

"I'm listening," Matt said, a little distractedly as he concentrated on aiming a cutting curse. The curse hit where he wanted it to – removing a Death Eater's arm and stopping him from cursing Harry in the back.

"Two kids," Marcel said. "I'll offer a bottle of Chateau d'Yquem Sauternes from 1787 that I picked up in a Death Eater raid."

"Four," Matt said, having no idea to the value of the wine, but betting it was worth something, "and I'll offer a case of Glen Garioch, 1958. The Boss gave it to me after I won a competition he set up."

"Of course," Marcel said, "we shall have to drink together."

"Of course," Matt agreed. "Adam," he roared as he turned. "Stop pissing about!"

"Sorry, Matt," Adam called.

"Kids," Matt muttered.

Marcel just laughed.

"Fifteen," Harry said as he cleaned his sword.

"Sixteen," Gabrielle returned with a smile. "I will be charging many purchases to my room."

"It's not over until the lizard-face is dead."

"And by then, I shall have an insurmountable lead," Gabrielle said as she looked at her men. They were chatting quietly with their English counterparts, each as eager to fight as the other.

She was under no real illusions that she stood alongside him in the scheme of things. She was the White Witch after all – she had cleared France of the dark invaders, making her a hero to the people – but he had been fighting in Voldemort's homeland, fighting the Dark Lord himself.

And even though she had received many favourable comparisons to another French legend, Joan of Arc, she knew that all along she been fighting the second string.

But even the stories about the Paladin hadn't managed to convey the ability in a fight that he carried. The Manticore had been dispatched in less time than it had taken her to reach hers. And when he had started to fight on foot, it was almost as if he didn't need magic, that his sword could break any shield, divert any curse – not that it was used that way, curses were always aimed at where he had been, not where he was going.

It was pride that forced her to accept the bet, and it was pride that was going to force her to win. But there was something in the way that he looked at her, the way he seemed to look straight into her core and understand what she was about.

It was his eyes; they spoke the same language as her soul. He knew what it was like to lose people closer than your heart, to know that the only way to stop it was to put your tender feelings to one side, and to treat the enemy like they treated those they captured.

She often thought about the first time she had met him, and the few years afterward, when she'd been nothing more than a bright, cute schoolgirl.

She had seen him at Bill and Fleur's wedding, standing at the back of the crowd, a boy with too much weight on his shoulders and no idea how to handle it. She hadn't approached him, and he hadn't seen her.

But then, a year later, the Death Eaters struck. Her brother-in-law and her sister had been ambushed. He had been the fortunate one; he died instantly. They had taken her sister. She still remembered the coldness that settled around her heart as she heard that it had taken two days for Fleur to die.

She knew who killed her sister. Fleur left a message in blood on her own corpse. Every time she saw the Mask of a Death Eater, it was *his* face that she saw. And every one of them that she killed, brought her a little closer to *him*.

She would make him pay – for her sister – for her brother-in-law – for herself.

She had studied. She had broken the laws of time, using the same magic that Harry was rumoured to have used. She had sacrificed everything that had meant anything to her for revenge; it was a price she would pay even if it was tripled.

The spell was powered by her life force. It threw her into the past, into fights and battles, and allowed her to learn the art of death. She had spent fifteen years inside the spell, and yet had returned to the same body she had left. In return, her expected lifespan was fifty years less than it had been; she would be lucky to live to a hundred.

She had found *him* once, but he had escaped with a sneer on his face as he triggered a Portkey.

She had heard the rumours, that the White Witch had no heart, rumours spread by men she had turned down. None willing to accept that she had turned them down because they were butterflies. Because they had never stared into the face of death. Because they could never understand what drove her.

She had a heart.

It was wrapped in a transparent cage of anger and hatred, driven by revenge.

When it was over, then she would feel.

Then she would regret some of the things she had done.

Then she would cry.

But now was not that time.

Now was the time for dispensing death. Now was the time for her revenge. The White Witch was coming, and this time she had the Paladin with her. *He* would not get away from her again.

"How's the next door coming along?"

"A few minutes yet. Tom has very little imagination."

"Why do you call him by his name?"

Professional respect, I guess," Harry said slowly. "He said subtly. He corrupted most of the people he was supposed to be fighting, and because of that, a lot of good people died and my job was a lot harder. As a professional, I'm supposed to respect that sort of thing."

She nodded. "How old are you?"

He smiled at her faintly and lowered his voice. "Twenty two, going on thirty five."

"Nineteen, going on thirty four," she admitted. "Lonely, isn't it."

"Years of fighting in wars that aren't your own, learning how to kill people and how to survive, and knowing that when you're finished and you leave, you will be starting all over again somewhere – somewhen else? Yeah." He paused and shot a lopsided grin at her. "At least I came back to an eighteen year old's body."

She smiled faintly. "Would it have mattered otherwise?"

"Of course not," he admitted. "What are years when your friends are dying?"

"Pointless," she whispered.

He reached out and touched her face. "Maybe," he whispered. "Maybe not."

In her normal life, with a handsome man touching her intimately for the first time, she would be excited. She would be blushing, or using her Veela power, maybe even giggling.

This was not her normal life. Her normal life had been ended years ago and the chance of a normal relationship had ended with it.

The flicker of attraction she felt was nice, but nothing more. It couldn't be anything more while her heart was locked up. But it did give a slight feeling of hope, that when it was over, when Fleur's killer was dying at her feet, when she could feel again, just maybe she'd have someone to hold onto when the dreams of revenge turned into nightmares of regret.

"Boss," Matt called. "Door open in three, two, one."

Another explosion, another dust cloud.

His fingers left her cheek, and she felt the loss.

He winked at her and turned, running into the unknown again. "The game's afoot! Follow your spirit; and upon this charge. Cry 'God for Harry! England and Saint George!'"

She was right behind him, thinking that if Henry the Fifth had had this Harry, he wouldn't have needed a deity's help, because this Harry was not going to lose.

"Has anyone been keeping track?" Harry asked, as he looked around at the carnage they had caused.

"We're down eleven, two dead; the rest should make it," Matt said.

"Who?"

"Chris and Kyle."

Harry nodded and bent his head for a second. It helped him regain his breath as he said goodbye to two loyal soldiers.

The only thing he could do for them now was to ensure that their families would never have financial problems to match the emotional one they were going to go through.

"Gabrielle," he called.

She walked up to him, a single bandage around her right bicep the only visible sign of injury on her blood splattered uniform.

"Turn around."

She smirked at him and did so. He reached up and gently ran his fingers over her hair, stopping as he felt the cold metal.

He parted her hair and looked what he had found. It was a nasty pointed contraption; each point glistened with a mixture of blood and poison.

"You turned a weakness into a strength."

She turned and looked at him. "Fleur always loved my hair. I can't get rid of it. I had to do something."

Harry nodded. He'd watched a Death Eater grab her hair, and he'd been prepared to intervene, when the Death Eater had dropped to the floor, convulsing hard.

The fight had been long and hard, as if Voldemort had decided that the small battles were pointless, and that everything should be ended in one go.

They had been outnumbered by the Death Eaters as they had fought in a huge courtyard, between the outer walls and the keep. And it hadn't mattered a bit. His men were too good, too well trained. And he'd been taking out their best for over a year before getting to this stage. Gabrielle had been doing the same in France.

There was a curious tension when the Death Eaters met the Paladin or the White Witch.

The Death Eaters did not want to die.

The Paladin didn't care; neither did the White Witch.

The Death Eaters guarding Voldemort were now in Hell, while the Paladin and the White Witch fought on among the living.

The price he would pay for his training didn't bother him. He had never been afraid of death, and would welcome the peace, when it finally came. Next year, next decade, next century. It didn't matter, as long as Voldemort was dead.

He could hardly remember what had happened when he was in the past, who he had killed; all he could remember was the training, the continuous fighting and learning, the honing of the skills that allowed him to kill as necessary.

He had been gone less than a second, and when he had returned, it had been the start of the change. There was no more stumbling, acting in response to Voldemort. Instead, he gathered the very best fighters and started hunting both the Death Eaters and the remaining Horcruxes.

It was during the destruction of one of Voldemort's Horcruxes that something had gone wrong; instead of dissolving into cold mist, it had exploded.

Harry had thrown up the most powerful shield that he could, and it had been enough to save their lives, but he would have a permanent scar on his back, and Hermione had lost both legs below the knee.

It had taken them both some time to get over their guilt, both blaming themselves for the other's injuries.

With Harry back on his feet, he had upped the hunting of Voldemort's men.

Voldemort had ignored them to start with, then started to mock them, leaving them taunting message as the Death Eaters raided Muggles and Squibs alike. But the Death Eater casualties began to add up.

Voldemort had changed tactics then, going after their supporters and families, but Harry had been expecting that, and he'd used his immense wealth and power to counter the Dark Lord.

It had taken another year of this cat-and-mouse behaviour before they had found Voldemort's base, and then another two months for them to get the resources necessary to make sure that Voldemort would not be able to escape.

Everyone they trusted was under Hermione's command, reinforcing the wards, giving them the time they needed.

He looked up as Matt and a few of the others started to prepare the ward-busting spells -bubbles that would open the door to Voldemort's inner sanctum.

"Matt," he called.

"Boss?"

"Go through the wall, not the door."

Matt paused and the saluted with a large grin. "Good plan."

Gabrielle looked at him curiously.

"Rule one; never do what the enemy expects if you can help it."

Gabrielle nodded.

"Rule two," Harry continued with a slight smile. "Sometimes, do what is expected. It gives your opponents the idea that you are predictable, so that you can surprise them later."

She smiled faintly, only it didn't really reach her eyes. Not much seemed to.

"My men know what to do," he said softly. "I was going to take care of *him* personally, but I'll pass that for you."

"Thank you," she whispered.

"Don't worry about the others, just go for *him* ."

She nodded.

"And Gabrielle."

“Yes, Harry?”

“Make *him* suffer.”

“I’ve planned his death a million times,” she whispered. “It’s been my dream and my nightmare for so very long.”

“We’re ready, Boss,” Matt shouted.

Harry stood and looked around. The English and French Aurors seemed almost indistinguishable now, as they mingled with each other, all focused on the task ahead. Some were practising spells, others playing with knives and other weapons.

“Gabrielle started something,” Harry said, attracting their attention with ease. “And I think I’ll finish it now, because the words Shakespeare said then are as true today as when he wrote them.

“We few, we happy few, we band of brothers; for he to-day that sheds his blood with me, shall be my brother.” He paused as he met every single person’s eyes, one after the other. “This is it, my friends; this is what we’ve worked so hard for. Behind this wall is Voldemort and his inner circle. You know that Gabrielle and I have some debts to pay, and we will do so. Don’t worry so much about Voldemort himself, he’s mine.

“You have worked so hard to get here, and this is the end. One more glorious fight, one more glorious effort, and we will have achieved what no one else has – we will have defeated the most powerful Dark Lord in history. And when we’re done, when we’ve won, you will be able to look everyone in the eye and know that you did what you had to do, you stood up to be counted when so many fled. I am proud of all of you, and you have my word that this friendship will never end.

“I have seen you all fight, and I have been in awe of your skills, and I can say without doubt that if I had access to the heroes of legend, I would not replace a single one of you with them. You are the heroes of today, and soon, you will have proved it.

“Now, are you ready for immortality?”

The roar he received gave no doubt that his people were ready.

He met Gabrielle’s eyes.

She nodded.

He turned, his wand in his left hand, his sword in his right, and prepared himself for the fight of his life.

“Blow it,” he whispered.

Matt nodded and activated the spells. There was a huge bang as the wall disintegrated. Without hesitation, he started to run, straight through the dust clouds, the first one into Voldemort’s throne room.

He smiled; the Death Eaters were only just turning toward him, having been focused on the door. The first thing he did was to cast a spell that flung all the Death Eater masks into a corner, so that everyone could see who was who.

The Malfoys, Nott, Parkinson, two generations of Crabbes and Goyles, all the Lestranges, Snape, and others that weren’t as familiar. Behind them, on a tacky looking golden throne, sat Lord Voldemort with a smirk on his snake-like face.

Harry veered to the left, going after Severus Snape first. The greasy-haired ex-professor sneered and raised his wand, going into an advanced duelling stance.

Snape fired a curse at Harry – who dodged easily – and foregoing magic, Harry used the Sword of Gryffindor. Snape screamed as Harry swiped the sword though his wand arm – the limb dropped neatly to the floor as the Death Eater looked at it in horror.

Harry finished by slicing Snape’s stomach, then kicking him in the face. Snape stumbled backward and dropped to the floor, his remaining hand desperately trying to keep his internals internal.

Already forgetting him, Harry turned to his next target – she was where he expected her to be, guarding Voldemort and duelling with a few of his people.

“Bellatrix,” he yelled.

“Potty,” she said with a manic laugh, sending two killing curses at his men – both of whom dropped to the floor to avoid the curse. “Today’s a good day for you to die.”

Harry didn’t bother answering; he just launched a volley of curses at her. Bella blinked in surprise and cast a shield on herself as she dodged to the left.

Voldemort was watching them, a smile on his face and his confidence in his Inner Circle obvious.

“*Expelliarmus!*” Bellatrix yelled, catching Harry with the spell.

Harry deliberately let his wand go.

"Aww, poor Potty, not got a wand? I killed little Ronald like this, and now I'll kill you, and after that, it will be that little Muddbitch bitch."

"You forget one thing," Harry said with a smirk.

"Oh?" Bellatrix sneered.

"I don't need a wand. *Reducto!*" As it had before, the spell came out a different colour than expected.

Bellatrix smirked as the spell hit her shield, and that was the final expression of her life as the curse crashed through the shield and blasted a hole in her chest.

"*Accio* wand," Harry called as he turned to Voldemort. "Let's dance," he snarled at his nemesis, and started a barrage of offensive spells.

Gabrielle followed Harry into the throne room, a small smile on her face as she watched him swat Snape as if he wasn't important.

But as she looked around, she spotted *him*, and every thought vanished from her mind.

She ran toward *him*, cutting and slashing as Death Eaters stood in her way, not even bothering with her wand. She didn't hear their screams or acknowledge their pain; she was completely focused on the one person who above all others had destroyed her life.

His father stepped in front of her and she decapitated him. That was when *his* sneer vanished and a look of shock and fear appeared on *his* face.

"Wait," he said, raising his hands.

She didn't wait, didn't slow down as she leapt, twisting in the air, her foot catching him on the jaw.

He landed awkwardly, half-crouched, and she pounced, kicking his hand as hard as she could. He yelped and his wand went flying into the corner.

"I..." he started.

She wasn't listening; he obviously thought that his death was negotiable, and it wasn't. This wasn't a battle, it wasn't a fight, it was an execution – and it was going to be as painful as she could make it. She jumped forward and kicked him in the face, knocking him onto his back on the hard wooden floor.

She moved in front of him and cast a spell on her right boot. The boot changed shape, so that it had a smooth flat edge to it.

She took one step forward and kicked him as hard as she could, her foot arcing up through his groin.

His squeal was so high-pitched that it was almost inaudible as bits of cloth and important body parts flew into the air.

She cast another spell, lowering the pain slightly and cauterising the wound – it wouldn't do for him to die before she had finished.

His hands were on his now-missing crotch, tears in his eyes.

She kicked his hands away and knelt on his chest.

"Please," he whimpered. "I can give you anything."

"Can you change the past?" she whispered hatefully as she stared into his eyes. She didn't wait for him to respond, as she cast a simple spell that blocked his windpipe.

His eyes went wide and his hands moved to his throat as he fought for breath.

She watched him, not looking away, as he turned purple and struggled, before he went limp. It was with a curious sense of emptiness that she stood, grabbed her sword, and went to help the others defeat the final Death Eaters.

It didn't take them long. Their ruthlessness was an intimidating fact against people long assured of their own superiority. Like most bullies when faced with a superior force, they collapsed, and with their collapse their chance of survival vanished.

With the last one dead, a bitch with an ugly pug-nose, she turned, along with all their men, to watch the final fight.

Harry against Voldemort.

She smiled faintly. It was obvious who was going to win. Voldemort wanted above all else to live. Harry didn't care if he lived or died, so long as Tom Riddle was dead at the end of the day.

Voldemort was powerful, knowledgeable, and dedicated.

Harry didn't seem to care. He floated in and out of range, avoiding being cursed as he sent curses back. Each was throwing the blackest of spells, spells designed to rend flesh, to destroy minds. But they seemed to have little effect, as each gave everything to their ideals, to their beliefs – one for freedom, one for tyranny.

Spell met spell and the wands locked. Voldemort smirked. Harry simply dropped his wand and dived forward, his sword extended, crashing into Voldemort's wand. Splinters of yew flew everywhere, and a phoenix feather flashed into flame.

Voldemort screamed with rage, but didn't stop fighting, his wandless magic as devastating as his wand-based magic.

Harry rolled back; picking up his wand, he launched a new set of curses back at Voldemort.

"*Avada Kedavra!*," Voldemort yelled, throwing the curse at Harry.

Harry knelt, braced, and swung the sword of Gryffindor up, almost in a salute to Voldemort.

The spell hit the flat of the sword and bounced off, snapping the blade in two and reflecting back into a shocked Voldemort.

Harry leapt to his feet and followed the killing curse up with a thrust of the broken sword straight into Voldemort's stomach.

The Dark Lord's face was one of complete agony, the Killing Curse having merely distracted him. The sword blade in his gut, however, had his full attention.

Harry pointed his wand at the floor and yelled some words in a language she didn't understand, never wanted to understand. A hole appeared, darker than anything she had ever seen.

He looked into Voldemort's eyes, but there were no words, no taunts, just a whispered blasting curse that consigned Voldemort's immortal soul into Hell as he was thrown off of the blade and plunged into the blackness.

Voldemort's scream echoed through the chamber before the hole snapped shut and it was cut off with a soul chilling suddenness.

Harry looked sadly at the once-bright Sword of Gryffindor, before it vanished with a wave of his hand.

He looked around slowly, at the death and destruction of what had once been Voldemort's inner circle.

A faint sound attracted his attention, and he moved over to Snape, who was still twitching in the middle of a spreading pool of blood.

"You're just like your father." Snape spat out a glob of blood and mucus at Harry's feet.

"No," Harry said softly. "He once saved your life." He crouched down. "I am ending yours," he finished, as he made a couple of sharp movements with a knife he pulled from his hip pocket.

Seconds later, Severus Snape was dead.

The silence in the room was broken now only by the pants of the exhausted victors. No one said anything. No one knew what could be said. So much of their lives had been geared to this point, and now that it had been achieved, there was a feeling of unease, as if they couldn't be at the end.

Harry reached into his pocket and pulled out the radio. "Hermione?"

"Harry!?"

"It's over."

"Thank you," she whispered. "Snape?"

"Disembowelled."

"Lucius Malfoy?"

"Decapitated as an incidental."

"Good." Hermione's voice had an amused cast to it. "Draco Malfoy."

"Fleur can rest in peace," Harry said simply.

"Bellatrix?"

"Literally heart-less," was Harry's laconic reply.

"And Voldemort?"

"In Hell."

There was the sound of soft crying over the radio.

"Good work, Harry," Neville's voice said, his voice choked with emotion.

"Are the preparations ready?"

"Of course. Voldemort's wards have fallen and we're taking down our own. The clean-up crew is on its way."

"Thanks. Paladin out."

Harry looked around the room once more.

"I want you all to get anyone you want and report to Headquarters," Harry said. "You'll find enough material for a party that likes of which will go down in history, and then when you're done, I want every single one of you to pick a vacation spot. You deserve it, every last one of you."

Slow smiles started to appear on the faces of the Aurors.

"Get drunk," Harry continued, "and enjoy yourselves. You've achieved what so many people, Voldemort included, thought impossible."

There was a ragged cheer from the Aurors, one that grew louder as the clean-up crew arrived. There were Healers to take away the wounded and Aurors to take away the dead.

Gabrielle felt lost. Everything she had worked for, had sacrificed for was over, and she didn't know what to do now. All her dreams had been about ending the Death Eater's life, none about what she would do afterward.

She wanted to cheer, to celebrate, but she couldn't. Her sister was still dead. Her brother-in-law was still dead. She didn't know what she was going to do now. She'd won the war, but lost the bet; Harry's body count exceeded hers by five.

Harry walked over and looked at her, his eyes searching hers.

"Why did you offer that ridiculous bet?" she asked.

Harry smiled. "Because I knew I'd win. Do you want out?" he asked.

Gabrielle shook her head. He moved forward and took her into his arms. There was a rush, a feeling of disorientation, as the scenery changed dramatically.

They were on a bridge. The sound of the ocean gently lapping on a nearby beach was the only noise as she stared up at the huge sail-shaped building before her. It was night, and the stars seemed incredibly bright as they shone down on her.

Harry looked at her for a second, and then gently eased the sword out of her hand and vanished it. He cast a clean-up charm on them both, removing the obvious signs of the battle they had fought only a few minutes ago.

He took her arm and walked her into the building through the glass revolving doors. A rich, plush carpet muffled the sounds of their boots on the floor as they approached a check-in desk manned by a single woman.

She looked at Harry, then at Gabrielle and back at Harry.

"Welcome to Burj Al Arab," she said in flawless English.

To the left, a door opened, and an immaculately dressed man appeared. "Lord Baron Potter-Black," he said, inclining his head.

Harry frowned at him.

"Harry," the man added with a slight smile, relaxing his rigid formality.

Harry smiled tiredly back at him.

"May I take it that you have successfully concluded your business?"

Harry looked at him for a long moment. "You may, Zayed" he said softly. "In the end, it wasn't even much of a competition. It was a takeover, and the old board members handed in their retirement *en masse*, so they will never be taking up positions again in this, or any other company."

Zayed smiled – the expression looking a little strange on his face. He bowed to them both deeply. "It is a delight to welcome you back, sir," he said to Harry. "And to welcome you to our humble establishment, my Lady."

Gabrielle tried to smile at him, but it didn't come out correctly.

"We came as soon as we finished," Harry said. "It's been an emotional day."

"Indeed," the man agreed, nodding his head firmly. "On behalf of a grateful Dubai and Jumeirah, we insist that your stay with us is at our cost."

"Thank you," Harry said, inclining his head.

"I do have one favour to ask," Zayed added with an embarrassed looking shrug.

"Name it, Zayed."

Zayed nodded. "His Highness requests an audience at your convenience."

The receptionist gasped, causing Zayed to glare at her. Gabrielle got the feeling that while guests might be invited to meet the ruler of Dubai, it was unheard of for him to request a meeting at a guest's convenience.

"Please convey my utmost respect to his Highness," Harry said formally, "and assure him that we shall avail ourselves at the earliest opportunity. However, Lady Delacour and I have been awake for rather a long time, and it will take us a few days to recover."

"His Highness will be most grateful," Zayed said, before walking behind the desk and picking up a small bit of plastic. "I will escort you to the Royal Suite myself."

Gabrielle felt a sense of complete unreality take over here as she walked over to the discreet elevators, not really taking in her surroundings.

"Congratulations, Harry," Zayed said, as the doors closed. Gabrielle could barely feel the elevator move. "I can tell you that there will be some celebrations tonight, all around the world."

Harry smiled faintly. "People have lived under threat from Voldemort for far too long," he agreed. "However, it will take some time for Gabrielle and me to recover and feel like celebrating ourselves. We've been on a war footing for a little too long." The elevator doors slid open silently, to reveal a lavish private foyer with a single door opposite the elevator.

"Of course," Zayed said, as he ushered them into the foyer and handed Harry the door card.

"Can you do me a favour and bring something for Gabrielle to sleep in?"

Zayed looked at her for a moment and then nodded.

"And some food. We're going to have decent wash."

"I'll have one of the chefs whip up something light for you both."

"Thanks," Harry said opening the door.

"It truly is our pleasure," Zayed said. "May I ask for one more thing before I leave you in peace?"

Harry nodded.

"A quote for the press, because I don't think you'll be able to hide here for long."

Harry groaned. "Just make something up about us being thrilled that Voldemort is dead, and that we'd like a few weeks to recover from the battle."

Zayed nodded, bowed, and stepped back into the elevator.

Gabrielle looked around the huge entry parlour and almost managed to smile. It looked like a Gryffindor paradise, with furnishings colour coordinated in red and gold.

Harry gently took her elbow and moved her forward, past a clock that announced that it was just past four in the morning, down a hall, through a lavish bedroom suite, and into a luxurious walk-in bathroom bigger than some apartments she had lived in. It had a deep tub that would easily fit three or four people, a separate shower area with multiple shower heads, a vanity with two sinks, and a lavish supply of towels and toiletries. The toilets, she noted absently, were completely out of sight.

He moved over to the bath and set both taps running at full before he eased her down on to a bench suspended from the ceiling. He sat next to her and removed her baseball cap from her head. She tried to look at him, but he gently made her look away so that he could unbraided her hair.

She had braided her hair the day she heard that Fleur had died, and had only un-braided it once – to add the razor-sharp poison-dipped discs. She had kept her hair clean and unbroken with magic ever since then.

With a tenderness that she didn't know he possessed, he unravelled her hair, carefully removing the discs and the thin silver chain that linked them, until her hair flowed loose around her shoulders.

He stood and placed the deadly hair accessory on the counter.

"Stand," he whispered.

She stood, passively obeying his command.

He moved closer to her and started to unbutton her shirt. His hands danced confidently down her front, showing no hesitation. He eased the shirt off her shoulders and down her arms before throwing it in the corner casually. With no visible hesitation, he reached around her and pulled the bottom of her sports bra up. She raised her hands, allowing him to remove it completely.

She had never been topless in front of a man before, but she couldn't find it in herself to be embarrassed, or shocked, or even excited. That would take energy she didn't have.

He dropped to his knees in front of her, and undid the laces on her boots. She raised one leg, then the other, allowing him to remove them. She didn't need to touch him for balance. Fighting was as much about balance as anything else, and she had mastered that.

His hand went to her waist, undoing her trousers, quickly pulling them down her legs, along with her knickers, leaving her completely naked in front

of him – another first.

He stood up and stepped back, removing his own clothes with the same efficiency and lack of feeling. She watched him, mentally noting the lithe muscles and the raw power behind his movements, the small scars that covered his chest.

He leaned over, more muscles shifting in a fascinating display as he turned the taps of the bath off. Heaters in the tub would keep it at just the right temperature. He turned on the shower, three jets of water streaming down, and took her hand, moving her into the hot water.

This was more familiar. She had taken many showers recently, never having the time or the inclination for a longer bath.

She couldn't take her eyes from him, as if she was bewitched by his movements, by his eyes. She felt like if she stopped looking at him she would fall apart, that everything would come crashing down, leaving her emotionally devastated.

He started to wash her, his hands gently, but firmly, rubbing the soap against her. She moved for him, allowing his hands total access to her body. She had never experienced male hands touching her so intimately, but she wasn't scared, wasn't upset. His eyes were warm and caring; he was doing a job and taking care of her, not taking advantage of her.

The hot water pounded down on her, and she could feel it on her face, mingling with her tears, and she realised she had no idea when exactly she'd started crying.

He moved around her and started to wash her hair. His hands were digging into her scalp, massaging her, and the tears stopped as she closed her eyes and remembered. Fleur had washed her hair when she was younger. She would be in the bath and giggle, trying to get Fleur with the bubbles as she washed her hair.

It was a good memory. One that she had not thought of in a long time.

She had no idea how long she stood there, as the hot water seemed to be unlimited.

Harry's hands moved away from her. She turned and watched as he washed himself quickly – a contrast to the time and care he had taken over her.

It was the scar on his back that gained her attention. It looked angry and raw, even though she knew it was nearly two years old. A scar caused by the foulest of magic, a constant reminder of what he had been through, of how he had suffered as much, if not more, than she.

At least she had good memories of her loved one. He didn't have any memories of his parents.

He finished and turned the taps off, taking her hand and pulling her out of the shower.

She followed him into the bath and relaxed, letting the hot water ease her muscles.

She wanted to do something about her hair. She wanted to say something to him, but she couldn't. Her sanity was hanging by a single thread, and if she did anything, if she said anything, it would snap and she would be destroyed.

Fleur had liked baths, long baths, using her wand to keep the water at the same temperature. Gabrielle would yell for her sister to stop hogging the tub, but Fleur would ignore her.

She missed the arguments as much as the love.

Time passed, in a void, as she watched Harry's face. His eyes were closed and his head was back, his arms outstretched.

He was defenceless.

Eventually he moved, sliding out of the bath with the grace evident in every movement he made.

He dried himself with a flick of his wand and shrugged on a thick white robe, then returned to her.

The silence between them was not oppressive; it was the silence of understanding, of respect.

She rose, stepped out of the bath, and stood quietly again as he dried her with his wand before holding a robe for her as well.

They padded silently into the bedroom, where a trolley stood next to a neatly set table and a pair of chairs. There was a silver box on the lower tray on the trolley. He pulled out one chair for her and she sat down.

Harry picked up the silver cover on the trolley. The smell rising from the warming dishes made her realise that she was, in fact, hungry.

He filled her plate and set it before her. She tried to eat, but couldn't seem to make her hands stop shaking. She didn't know why they were shaking; she was pretty sure they hadn't been doing that before.

He gently took her hands and placed them down in her lap, and then, as if she was a child, fed her.

Fleur had done this when she was little. "Here comes the broomstick" her sister would tell her, then make a whooshing noise. She'd not open her mouth until the last second, just as happy to get mucky as to eat.

Fleur had always laughed.

She ate as he directed, eating more than she would have on her own, and then watched as he wolfed his down. She started to feel guilty, that he was putting her first when he so obviously needed someone to look after him as well.

They sat in silence for a time that could have been eternity, before he slowly reached out and touched her cheek, forcing her to look at him.

“Gabrielle,” he whispered.

And the thread broke.

She dived forward, burying her face in his neck as she cried. She cried for Fleur, she cried for Bill, she cried for everyone who had died, and she cried for the child that she once was and the killer that she had become. She cried because she had been forced to become the White Witch so that no one else would lose their loved ones. She cried because the White Witch was a fraud, a frightened girl who didn't know any other way to handle the death of her sister, apart from avenging her.

The last time she had cried had been at Bill and Fleur's wedding, when she had been so happy. She hadn't cried when Fleur had gone missing, nor had she cried when she had identified Fleur's ravaged body.

She had looked down at her beloved sister and sworn vengeance on the name that Fleur had written in blood on her own skin. But she had not cried.

Now she cried until she had no tears left. All the time she was aware that Harry's hands were slowly stroking up and down her back, and that he was whispering to her, words of comfort and hope.

She sniffled and wiped her nose on his shoulder gracelessly, like a little girl, and pulled back to look at him. She opened her mouth to ask the question, but the words wouldn't come out.

She tried again, but his index finger touched her lips, silencing her.

His eyes grew distant as he looked at her. “I had help – I had Hermione,” he said softly. “I didn't cry when Remus was killed, nor Tonks. But then they got Ron. He died when he was on an Auror training course. Ron knew he couldn't match me in a fight, and he wanted to learn the skills properly so he could at least hold his own.

“Hermione was doing research. We were all going to meet up for dinner that night. Voldemort himself lead the attack. It was aimed at Ron, but we lost almost the entire class and Mad-Eye Moody too.

“Ron managed to get a few of them, but there were too many, and it was Bellatrix who executed him.

“Hermione and I went, with Ginny, Molly, and Arthur, and identified his body. They broke down. Hermione and I didn't. We left them to their grief. And we swore vengeance. Despite who the Death Eaters had killed before, this was different, this was more personal.

“Hermione threw herself into the research. She set up a bed in the library and lived there, house-elves bringing her food.

“I went on missions, every mission, throwing myself carelessly into the fight.” He paused and opened his robe a little, showing a scar a few inches above his heart. “This was a cutting curse that only missed because I stumbled.

“I was in hospital when Hermione visited me. We argued. We shouted, and we yelled at each other. She accused me of wanting to go die with Ron, and I think I did. Her friendship was the only thing keeping me from that, I guess.

“We tried to get past it, but we couldn't. There was this barrier between us, and this feeling that my sanity was hanging by a single thread, and even mentioning Ron would break it.

“Then, on another mission, one of the Death Eaters taunted me about Ron. I tore him apart, and Apparated to Hermione.

“She looked at me, and hugged me, and we both cried. We held each other and cried for everything that had happened, and the people we were becoming. We cried for the people we wanted to be.

“And we finally admitted that Ron was gone and he wouldn't be coming back, no matter what we did.

“And when we were empty we started to talk. For the first time since Ron's death we sat back and looked at the war effort, at how we and the Aurors were failing.

“That was when Hermione told me about the Chrono-magic spell. She told me that it was my decision, that she would support me if I decided to do it or not. I looked at it and agreed instantly. Sixty odd years of my total life expectancy for Voldemort's death? At that stage, I would have sacrificed my life in total for his demise.

“But we had a plan, we had a focus. And I started to feel better, I accepted that I was a killer, that I would kill again, and Hermione and I started to rebuild our lives.

“When she was hurt by that damn Horcrux, Neville stepped in and took care of her. We all knew that I couldn't. She needed more than I could give, and she understood, never making me feel guilty for it.”

His hand reached up and traced her cheek softly. “You had no one,” he whispered. “No one to share the burden, no one who could understand you,

no one who could still make you smile, no matter what was going on in your life.”

She nodded in agreement. Only, she had him now. He understood, he had helped her when no one else would have been able to come close to comprehending what she was going through.

He stood up slowly and pushed the trolley out of the bedroom, and returned with just the large silver box. “Do you think you can get dressed?”

She could. She didn’t want to. She wanted him to continue to look after her for just a little bit longer. She shook her head.

He smiled tenderly at her. “Stand.”

She stood, absently shrugging the gown off her shoulders. She was feeling warmer now. Her tears had started to melt the ice around her heart.

He opened the box and rummaged through it. She could see that there was an array of outfits in there.

He pulled out a voluminous t-shirt, a pair of plain knickers, and a pair of men’s boxer shorts. Two things were obvious from his choice. That he had definitely spent time with another woman, and they would not be making love tonight.

She appreciated the subtle reminder, but hadn’t needed it.

He dressed her quickly; she was able to help more this time.

“To bed.”

She followed him, sliding in next to him, and settling onto her back, staring at the ceiling. Her apartment in Paris had a cracked ceiling, and she had spent too many hours staring at it when she couldn’t sleep. She found she missed the crack.

He moved, reaching over her, and grabbed her shoulder, pulling her so that she was draped over him, her head on his shoulder, his arm around her, and her leg over his waist.

“Sleep,” he whispered.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. An unfamiliar feeling drifted over her, a memory of a time long forgotten. She tried to place it as she drifted toward sleep.

She would sleep with Fleur when she was young. She would curl up with her big sister, and her sister would tell her a story and then curl up around her.

Fleur was her big sister, her hero, her role model, her teacher and her confidant. Fleur had always been there for her, so much so that when Fleur was gone, it felt like everything that mattered in her life had gone.

‘I’ll never forget you, Fleur,’ she thought. ‘I’ve avenged you, but now I need to move on.’

She smiled as sleep took her, the frown of puzzlement leaving her face.

She recognised the feeling now. She hadn’t felt it since Fleur had died.

She was safe.

Fin.