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Enslavement

Chapter 1

It only took eleven words to bring everything crashing down. Words from Hermione, who everyone knew was the smartest witch of her generation, to the Gryffindors, who everyone knew that while headstrong, brave and courageous, weren't rivalling Ravenclaw when it came to intelligence.

"I bet you think he faked the Chamber to fool everyone!" Hermione said, glaring daggers at Ron.

The sarcasm should have been obvious to even the most ignorant, and for all his faults, Ron Weasley was not ignorant. Which was what made his next statement far more painful; whether it was jealousy, anger, or maliciousness, Harry would never know.

"Exactly, I'm glad you say it publically now, after all the conversations we've had about it."

Hermione had looked shocked, and unable to form a coherent reply. To the other Gryffindors, that silence had been the equivalent of her shouting "He's guilty."

"In which case, he's more of a snake than a lion," Weasley continued. And Harry's mental referral to him with his surname was as conscious as it was permanent. "I call for expulsion. His fraud, entering the Triwizard Tournament has dragged the name of Gryffindor through the mud."

Harry opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

"The accused cannot defend themselves," A seventh year announced piously in a way that made Harry want to punch him. The boy then made a show of putting his wand away.

Harry looked around, and saw the glares; he saw that some students were scared, that others were following. Then he felt his magic start to build.

"Stupefy ."

When he awoke, he was alone, outside the Common Room, draped on top of his trunk. After swearing a few times, he headed to McGonagall's office.

"Mr Potter?" the Head of House asked, as she opened the door to her office.

"I think I've been chucked out of Gryffindor."

"You think?" McGonagall said, using the prim tone she reserved for wrong answers in class.

"One moment I was being put on some sort of trial where I couldn't even defend myself, the next I was unconscious out of the door."

McGonagall sighed. "Wait here, Mr Potter."

Harry shrugged, dragged his trunk in to her office, and sat on it. And as he did, he realised his school Quidditch career was over, and that he still had to take part in this utterly ridiculous tournament. He sighed and waited. And waited.

After half an hour, the door opened. McGonagall entered, along with Professor Dumbledore.

“Well, I’m sorry, Mr Potter, but the Gryffindors have voted to expel you.”

“Really? For what?” Harry asked, keeping a firm grasp of his temper.

“For bringing the House into disrespect,” McGonagall said weakly.

“Let me get this straight,” Harry replied, trying to keep his voice level. “Through no fault of my own I have been entered into this tournament against my will, and with no way of defending myself, I have been chucked out of the house that was supposed to be my family?”

McGonagall looked away as she nodded.

“And where, exactly, am I going to stay now?”

“Unfortunately, the rules require that you stay in the castle. We will find a room somewhere.”

“Wonderful,” Harry said. “And you, of course, agree with this, Professor Dumbledore?”

The headmaster sighed. “Mistakes are often made, Mr Potter. What matters is how you respond to them.”

Harry looked at him for a long moment. “I see,” he said slowly. “I should be grateful, I suppose, that at least I have my stuff. Who, in future, do I take any problems to?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I can hardly take them to you, Professor,” Harry said, looking at his ex-Head of House. “I am no longer a Gryffindor, am I?”

“I-I don’t know,” McGonagall replied.

It took every ounce of Harry’s will power to not to say something sarcastic. Instead, he picked up one end of his trunk and started to drag it out of the office. Dumbledore waved his wand, and it started to float, which allowed him to move it easier. McGonagall lead him to a small unmarked room with no window. It did have an en-suite bathroom, though.

It was bigger than a cupboard.

“What about my lessons?” he asked.

“What about them?”

“Do I get a new timetable, now that I’m not a traitorous cowardly lion?”

McGonagall winced, and then shook her head.

“And I presume this means that I will get zero help in this competition?”

“I am afraid so.”

Harry nodded, and shut the door in her face. She had been as useless as he had expected. Just like Dumbledore.

Every time he turned around, humans were letting him down. They always called him a freak, yet, he had never done anything wrong. It was them that acted freakishly, even letting him defend himself was supposedly against the rules that these humans lived by.

But when had rules applied to him? When had he been rescued? Once, when he was in a bedroom rather than all the times he had been in his cupboard. So perhaps he was the freak after all. And maybe, seriously, that was a good thing, given how humans acted.

He kicked the bed, but all that did was make his foot hurt. He took his wand out to blast it, but managed to stop himself. He somehow just knew that no replacement would be given him if he did destroy it.

Instead, he punched the wooden door, and while that felt good for half a second, the subsequent pain had him trying out some swear words he’d never said before. And that led to a tear filled rant that he’d never admit too.

In the morning, he woke up late, determined not to let the humans get him down. But, before he could leave for breakfast, a plate of food turned up on the room’s small desk.

“Great,” he muttered. “Not even welcome for food, eh?”

He ate, and then showered and got ready for the day. He also checked his trunk, and was relieved that everything was in place. Whether that was down to the lock or the latent goodness of the Gryffindors, he didn’t know. He suspected the former.

The day went as well as he could expect. He was shunned by most, and taunted by the rest. He ignored them as much as he could, if only to avoid issues. Hermione gave him some apologetic looks, but that was it. And honestly, looks were about as useful as they were valuable.

Clearly, the peer pressure had worked – and why would he expect a human to stand up to other humans for a freak like him?

His first class was Potions, and as soon as it started Snape deducted fifteen points which suddenly made Harry realise something very interesting. Points were no longer relevant to him. So it was with a sense of pleasure that he stood and turned off the flame under his cauldron, and packed everything away.

“Potter, twenty points from Gryffindor!” Snape yelled.

“Yeah, well fuck you, bitch,” Harry replied cheerfully. He walked out, ignoring the yells of more point deductions and detentions.

It was petty and childish, but felt good. He headed up to the library and borrowed a bunch of books, and then retreated to his room.

The room wasn't that bad; it had more space than he'd grown up in, he actually had food now, and he had a shower and a toilet that he didn't have to share. He didn't really need that much more. It even had a convenient small table by the door, where he could empty his pockets.

So, he swallowed some of his anger, and started to read. It had been a long time since he had read because he had nothing better to do, not since before he had started Hogwarts, and in a way, it was like revisiting an old friend. He'd read a lot of books in the cupboard under the stairs, using a “borrowed” flashlight.

Hermione, no, Granger, now, had kinda put him off books once he arrived at Hogwarts, what with her incessant reading and referencing and nagging. But now that he was on his own, he couldn't rely on humans. And that was fine.

He ate dinner – it was edible, and he didn't have to make it himself, so it was enough.

After he finished, he settled down on the bed, and continued to read. He'd picked up a second year book on charms that he hadn't actually read during that year. He was stunned to find out how much that he'd missed.

But that was what humans did. Humans were lazy or obsessed. He didn't know what freaks were; he'd been trying not to be a freak for so long.

Doing as the Dursleys seemed wrong, just on a personal level, having such a lack of respect for his own body. Doing as Weasley and Granger did hadn't worked either, he'd saved people's lives, but still been thrown away out of ... he guessed jealousy. He concluded that the why didn't matter. What mattered was that they'd turned on him and cast him out.

So, he was going to have to find his own way, and take care of himself, although he had to be cautious as he was currently surrounded by humans and locked into a human contract.

There was a knock on his door. He stood and opened it, to see Dumbledore and Snape. He shrugged, and shut the door again.

The door was forcibly opened. “Harry,” Dumbledore started.

“It was Mr Potter earlier,” Harry pointed out.

“Harry,” Dumbledore said again. “Care to explain what happened earlier?”

“I told Snape to “fuck off, bitch,” because I really wanted him to stop being a bitch and for him to go away. I wasn’t going to waste anymore words on him.”

“See,” Snape growled. “Arrogant, just like his father.”

“Ugly, just like his mother,” Harry retorted.

Snape growled and raised his wand. Harry raised his own only to have Dumbledore slap the wand away from him.

“See, just like a bitch,” Harry said cheerfully. “He can insult me, but if someone turns it around, he goes for a curse.”

“Harry, you can be expelled...”

“Okay,” Harry said cheerfully. “Should I pack now?” He offered his wand to the Headmaster. “I believe you want to snap that, right?”

The Headmaster took his wand, and held it up.

“Go on,” Harry encouraged. “If I’m expelled, losing my magic won’t matter, and then I won’t have to compete.”

Dumbledore sighed and put the wand down on his table. “This is the wrong way to go about things, Harry.”

Harry shrugged. “I am happier with things the way they are now, but don’t worry, I won’t be going anywhere near Snape, so we shouldn’t have any more problems. Good evening.” He walked forwards crowding both men out of his room, and then shut the door.

That had been fun.

Acting like a freak and not like a human had got him out of Potions, and had probably ruined Gryffindor’s chances of the House Cup. Far more success than he had seen before.

The next day was the same, only with new books from the library and more glares from the Gryffindors. Instead of History of Magic, he practised shield spells in his room. It never hurt to be prepared, and he knew that the traitor Weasley had a short fuse, and that sooner or later the curses would come.

Just before he was going to go to bed there was a scratch at his door, and he opened it. Hedwig flapped in, and took a stand at the foot of his bed. She barked and looked around, before she nodded, and settled down for nap.

“Oh, no,” Harry said firmly. “You are locked up with me during the summer. You shouldn’t be here now, as well.”

Hedwig barked stubbornly. Harry sat near her, and gently stroked her head. “Hed,” he said softly, “I’m scared what would happen if people saw you flying in Hogwarts.”

Hedwig puffed out her chest and barked derisively.

Harry laughed softly, “Yeah, you are great,” he agreed. “But, what I need is to know that you are safe, and free, and you know that I will be dreaming of you flying, waiting for the time when I can fly with you.”

Hedwig’s amber eyes stared at him, and she barked softly.

“Yeah, I’m sure,” he agreed. “This is a human school, Hed, and humans suck.”

Hedwig’s bark of agreement was immediate.

“So, a lot of these books are to help me find a place to go where there are hardly any humans, you know?”

Hedwig nodded.

“I will come and see you when I can,” he promised, “and as soon as I have a plan, I’ll tell you it.”

Hedwig barked a few times, and then closed her eyes.

“Okay, in the morning, then.”

The next few days flew by quickly, and without Potions and History of Magic, he had a lot more time to study things that interested him, which was basically magic. Runes, as effective as they looked, were not going to help him that much. Arithmancy was just weird, and he had yet to see why it mattered. The idea that spells could be broken down was ludicrous, and the book listed thousands of exceptions to rules that made no sense in the first place.

So he studied spells and the theory behind them, so that he could actually master them. He had only managed two spells so far, but that was two more than he had mastered before.

As he was walking to the library, a note appeared in front of him, calling for the first part of the Tri-Wizard tournament, a weighing of wands.

He sighed, as much as he didn’t want to participate, he also didn’t want to lose his magic if he wasn’t in control of the situation,

He headed into the room, to see Dumbledore, Ollivander, the other three champions, a photographer and what he presumed was a journalist, if only by the way she held a pad and a quill. “Finally,” the woman said.

Harry bit his tongue to stop himself from swearing at her.

“Well,” Dumbledore said, “Let us begin.”

“Where are the scales?” Harry asked.

“It’s not a literal weighing,” Dumbledore replied, “it’s more Ollivander checking that your wand is working.”

“Oh,” Harry said, and handed his over immediately.

Ollivander sighed, and looked at it. “Ho...”

“Does it work?” Harry interrupted.

Ollivander looked at him, and he waved it. A spray of dark red liquid came out the end.

Harry reached over and took it back. He nodded at the older wizard and walked out. He headed back to his original destination. He actually liked the library now, if only because the librarian hated everyone equally, and no one dared to do anything to him when he was there.

The days blurred together as the first task approached. The weekends just meant a bit more time to read up. He was now up to his third year in his studies, but had yet to look at anything that might help. Because he really didn’t care about the tournament, he was determined to understand the fundamentals before learning more advanced spells.

Only humans jumped forward without understanding.

On the day of the first task, he made his way into the tent, and soon found out that they were rescuing an egg from a dragon. “Ahh,” he said, as he noticed the expression on the faces of the others. “Hypocrites.”

“What?” Diggory asked.

“You lot were happy to castigate me for entering this competition, and yet you all cheated to find out what we had for the first task. That makes you hypocrites, or maybe just human.” He shrugged and headed to the corner. Both were just as bad, as far as he was concerned.

He had one idea, and that was it. If it didn’t work, he should at least have done enough not to receive any punishment from the cup.

He was the last one out, and he appeared to a few boos from the audience. He ignored them. At the signal to the start, he walked toward the angry dragon. “Can I have the fake gold egg, please? I have zero interest in your real eggs,” he asked, hissing the words in Parseltongue.

The dragon paused, and then looked at its nest. It looked a little embarrassed, before it picked up the fake egg in its jaws, and lobbed it to him. “Thank you,” he hissed.

The dragon nodded, and curled up around its eggs and went to sleep; which, Harry thought,

entirely proved his point. The dragon was not human, and upon realising that a mistake had been made, she rectified it. The dragon was logical.

The crowd were now booing louder, and then his scores came out. A four from the half human, ones and twos from the others. He shrugged, that was typical. Now that he had the egg, he threw it at Dumbledore, and walked away.

It had been a pleasant day; a nice break from the library, but he had some transfiguration to catch up on, and that was more important.

“Potter!”

Harry sighed. The Weasley. He ignored him, and continued to walk. Ron ran up and got in his way. Harry walked around him. Ron moved, so Harry walked around the other way. Ron moved again. Harry could tell his actions were getting to Ron, so he kept them up. Every time Ron moved into his way, Harry would simply move to the side to walk around them.

Eventually, Ron lost his temper and swung his fist.

Harry moved to one side and kept on walking. Ron overbalanced and fell to the floor. Harry raised his shield behind him, and sure enough, a curse flashed into it seconds later.

“Mr Weasley!” Filius Flitwick shouted. “Detention!”

Another half-human doing something positive. Harry bet that if the charms professor was a full creature, he'd have pushed for Ron to be expelled, as he should have been. But what could you expect from someone that was tainted with humanity?

With breakfast the next morning, there was a paper. Which was full of lies. Harry spent some of the morning writing out letters to the Ministry, the Prophet, and the Goblins. He had no idea why bankers would be able to help, but at least he'd try them.

Over the next week, he got a letter back from the Goblins saying that they were bankers; and perhaps he might try a solicitor's office, although the wizards' world didn't have any libel laws. It was a helpful message, and Harry appreciated that.

He heard nothing at all back from the others.

Typical.

A week after the challenge, there was a knock on his door. He opened it, to find the egg, with a message saying that he had to decode it.

Harry looked at it for a second, before he stuffed it in the foot of the cupboard and got on with his life.

After transfiguration the next day, he was informed, with the rest of the class, that there was to be

a Yule Ball.

As far as he knew, there were no full creatures in Hogwarts, and he also knew with certainty that he did not want to go with a human. He was walking past as Weasley asked the part-Veela out. That made Harry pause. She was a part-Veela, which meant that there were full Veela. With a nod to himself, he made a note to study Veela; maybe they had any answers to his problems.

Delacour's refusal was overly harsh, but then, she seemed to aspire to humanity, and what better way was there to achieve that than to be an utter bitch?

When it was time for the Yule Ball, Harry was on top of the Astronomy tower, practicing his warming charms, and spending the evening with the only creature he cared about. He had his broom, and it was good to be on it again, flying with Hedwig.

Hedwig was in a silly mood, and she danced for him, and then with him. Her flying was extraordinary, as she used the heat rising from the castle to launch herself high, and then dive down. After watching her for a while, he flew with her, playing tag first, and then follow the leader.

It was a great night. The best he had enjoyed for a very long time. He even had some chocolate he'd been saving for a special night that he shared with a grateful Hedwig. Honestly, it was the best ball he could imagine. He had a gorgeous partner and some great dances with someone he utterly adored.

He hadn't received a single present for Christmas. And he wasn't surprised. He'd been upset earlier in the day that he'd heard nothing from Sirius. But what had he expected from a human? Now that his desperation to escape the Dursleys had changed into determination to remove himself from the human world, he wasn't as depressed as he might once have been.

Humans had taught him again and again that they sucked.

"Go on," he encouraged. "Just be safe, okay?"

Hedwig hopped over to him and nuzzled his face, before she launched herself into the sky, and then spiralled into the distance.

Harry donned his invisibility cloak, and then added some of the third year spells he'd learnt. One muffled all the sound around him, rendering him silent. The next, matched his temperature to the ambient temperature. The final one removed all scent.

He walked down and saw Dumbledore up ahead, near one of the corridors leading to his room. He walked up to the old man, wondering about his charms' effectiveness. Dumbledore didn't give any sign that he had noticed Harry.

On a whim, Harry hung around, and waited. Less than five minutes later, McGonagall hurried up to Dumbledore.

“Have you seen Harry?”

“Not at all, I’m afraid. He’s in the school.”

“He should have been at the Ball!”

“He should have,” Albus agreed. “I will wait here until he returns. I have the elves looking for him as well. None of them will help him.”

“Good.”

Harry rolled his eyes and made his way to his room. A clever wizard would have guarded his door, not the corridor. He shrugged, and then headed to bed.

And he dreamt of his beautiful owl dancing in the moonlight.

Life returned to normal for the next few weeks. He studied, he went to some of the classes, he ignored the humans as much as he could, and shielded when he couldn’t.

He was proud that despite his opposition to jumping ahead in his self-enforced re-learning of the basics, he had pushed forward with shielding spells, and could now block most spells, certainly the ones that anyone at school could cast.

His contempt for everyone else in the school had grown. As he had not responded as they had demanded, their hatred of him was at an all time high. If he kowtowed to them, if he showed any bit of remorse, most of them would have been happy to forget about him.

But he refused; he used his anger to give him the strength to ignore all of them. He wasn’t going to play by their rules.

The morning of the day before the second task, he received an anonymous note that the second task involved being underwater for long periods of time.

Gillyweed was an answer. That was found in the second year Herbology book recommended as supplementary reading. He’d not read it in the second year.

It was child’s play to sneak into Snape’s storeroom and steal some. While he was there, he changed the labels on some of the other ingredients. He wasn’t taking Potions, so it wouldn’t affect him. Small acts of revenge kept him warm at night.

He walked out to the task. “So, everyone decode their egg?” Ludo Bagman asked, his manner was cheerful, irritatingly so.

“Nope,” Harry replied, mimicking the cheerfulness.

“Oh,” Bagman said. “Well, never mind. As you know, something important to you has been taken by the merpeople, and is under the water, waiting for you to rescue, and you have an hour to do

so.”

Harry frowned; the only thing they could have taken that he cared about was Hedwig! “You are a fucking bastard,” Harry said flatly. “An unmitigated fuck-whit, and when you’re wearing your ill fitting uniform, you look like a fat paedophile.” Without waiting for comment, he walked briskly to the edge of the pier. He cast tempus first, then pushed a wad of Gillyweed into his mouth, and then jumped into the water, swimming to the centre of the lake.

He suspected that he was causing chaos in his wake, but he wasn’t going to wait for some human who had put his owl in danger. As far as he was concerned, humanity was the worst monster in existence.

He swam down, following the shape of the lake to the deepest part. Logically, that would be where the merpeople would be. The first year book on creatures said that they preferred the pressure of deep water.

He soon found their village, and there floating above it, tied down with ropes, were four people. None of them were Hedwig.

Harry stopped. He was confused and relieved. Hermione was there, as was Cho Chang, a small blond girl, and Ron Weasley.

Who was he supposed to rescue? Chang? He’d had a bit of a crush on her, but she was human. All of them were human. He didn’t care for any humans, and certainly didn’t think of any one of them as being important.

He sighed. As he was here, he figured he’d wait, just to see who the others took, so he knew who he was supposed to rescue.

He swam over to the merpeople, and waved at them. One of them shrugged, and offered him something. The merman mimed eating it. Harry did so; it was a bit like something he’d had on a pizza once. Dudley had bitched about it for hours, so Harry had been forced to eat it. It wasn’t exactly a hardship.

He gave the merman a thumbs-up, and munched another as it was offered. He pointed to the four and shrugged exaggeratedly.

The mermen and woman looked surprised. One of the mermaids swam over to him, and offered him a steaming red goblet. Ignoring the part of his brain that knew some basic physics, he took it and drank some, before offering it to her back. He looked at the mermaid, she had long dark red hair that floated around her head, and a red top that hid her boobs, if not their rather attractive shape.

Her eyes were further apart than a human’s, and her teeth looked sharp as she grinned at him. Her face was shaped differently, but, all in all, he found her pretty damn cute.

His entire body flooded with warmth as the effect of the potion kicked in.

He grinned and then leaned forward and kissed the mermaid on the cheek.

The maid, who, if he was going by human standards, was around his age, blushed and flicked her long tail away to her friends, where she shot him little looks.

The merman who had given him the snack laughed and punched him lightly on the shoulder. Harry gave him another thumbs-up, and then mimed his heart beating fast.

Some of the other merpeople started to laugh as well, which caused bubbles to float out of their mouths in a fascinating display.

A half transfigured shark headed toward the centre, snapping and snarling. Harry was pretty sure it was Krum. It headed toward some of the mermaids. Harry instantly snapped off a spell that smacked straight into the shark's nose. The part-shark shook itself, and then headed back to the statue, where it bit the rope that held Hermione, and headed away with her.

Harry was surprised at that. He had no idea that they even knew each other – but then, why would he? He cast tempus again, and took some more gillyweed as it was getting close to an hour. The group of mermaids – what was the collective noun for a group of mermaids he wondered, a sexy? – swam over to him, and the one he had kissed before mimed a thank you.

Harry bowed, as well as he could in water, and smiled at her. He was quite comfortable here in the depths with these non-humans.

The girl looked at him shyly before she swam a little closer. Hoping that he was reading it right, Harry slid forward and kissed her on the lips. Her brown eyes widened, and she kissed him back for a few seconds, her webbed hands stroked his back, before she giggled, and retreated to her friends.

Harry clutched his heart dramatically, and floated around so that was on his back. He could see the merpeople laughing hard. He'd had his first kiss, and it had been better than anything he could have imagined with a human.

Diggory appeared and took Chang, which left Weasley and the girl, who he presumed was related to Delacour.

He pouted and headed toward the two slowly. He pointed to one of the mermen's tridents, and then at Weasley, and put a pleading look on his face. The merman shook his head. Harry pouted, and cast a light cutting spell to free the young girl. He smirked at the merpeople, and bowed, before he carried the child away.

He could see the amusement on their faces.

As he broke the surface, the girl started to move, so Harry stunned her, just to be safe. He swam with her, and then dumped her on the nearest person he found, before he cast a third year drying

charm on himself before he headed back to the school.

“Harry,” Dumbledore’s voice rang out. “You rescued the wrong hostage. Gabrielle was Fleur’s hostage.”

Harry half-turned. “There was no hostage for me down there,” he said blankly, and headed back. From behind him, he heard Delacour cry out that her sister was safe.

Back in his room, he had a long shower, before he settled down to read his book on creatures. And the more he read, the more he felt his eyes open. It was as close to perfect as he could imagine. He picked up another book, on magical bonds, and read that.

His act of charity looked like it was going to pay off, big time. If, and it was a big if, he could go through with it. His good mood from the merpeople vanished, as the cold hard light of what he would have to do became clear.

If he did this, it would cut him off from humanity forever. He would have to act like the most despicable human to attain it. He would have to lose any of his remaining morals.

He took a deep breath and let his anger flow.

So, fine, those morals were gone. All that mattered now was leaving the humans.

He didn’t worry about the cost to his soul. Creatures didn’t have souls and he was pretty sure that freaks didn’t either.

He quickly wrote down a plan. He’d need to do some reconnaissance this evening, and hopefully put his plan into action tomorrow.

He grabbed his cloak, applied his spells, and headed down to where the French were staying. He stood still and waited, until he had seen everything he needed. He then headed to the Owlery, and explained everything to Hedwig, including her part.

Hedwig puffed up her chest and barked her acceptance.

With that done, he headed back to his room, and packed everything he had; leaving out only the clothes he would wear tomorrow.

He felt no guilt from stealing some of his favourite books from the library. He wasn’t going to be getting a refund in tuition, so the books were in lieu of that.

Sleep didn’t come easily, but he eventually drifted off. The next day was torture, as he was determined to act as normal as he had been. At least he didn’t have to speak to anyone, so no one would be able to tell he was uneasy from his voice.

He headed back to his room, and realised that he was going to miss it. It had been one of the nicest places he’d ever stayed. He double checked that he had everything before he shrunk his

possessions and placed them in his pocket.

He had one more look, to see if there was anything at all that he wanted, before he nodded and picked up the book on bonds, and pocketed that as well. The last thing he picked up was the letter on his small desk. He took a deep breath and put on his invisibility cloak, and then headed out.

His first stop was the Owlery, where Hedwig was waiting for him. She hopped eagerly on her perch the second he removed the hood of his cloak, sticking her leg out. He attached his letter. “Good luck,” he said softly. “Wait for my signal.”

Hedwig bobbed her agreement, and took off eagerly. She spiralled high, and he watched her, before she faded into the night, but he knew she was there, watching.

With his hood back up, he headed outside, and as he did, he allowed his anger to burn. He’d held it in for so long that it felt good. One way or another, he would be free by tomorrow. Because if his plan didn’t work, he was going to have to fight for his freedom. He didn’t think he’d win, but he’d take as many with him as he could.

No more would he allow himself to be chained up like he had been these last few months. As fun as they were, he had been essentially a prisoner, for a crime he had not committed.

He used his anger to fuel his determination and his will.

He headed over to the carriage. The carriage had numerous doors. His reconnaissance yesterday had showed him which one he needed.

He took a deep breath, and knocked on the door with a sharp staccato beat. He removed his cloak, and placed it in his pocket. He’d copied the knock from the Beauxbatons’ Headmistress.

The door opened, and Harry stunned Fleur Delacour with a Stupefy as she answered. He stepped inside, shut the door firmly behind him and cast a truth charm on her, before waking her up. “Is this true?” he demanded, shoving the book on bonds in her face. They were in a small entrance hall, with doors leading to either side. The decoration was classical French, with a grandfather clock against the far wall, the lights, if there were any, weren’t on, leaving it quite dark.

Her face paled, and with a great reluctance, she said, “Oui.”

“Then I, Harry James Potter, cla...”

“Wait,” she hissed, keeping her voice down.

He looked at her. “I am owed a debt, I will collect it.”

“You will enslave an eight year old?” she demanded. “What sort of monster are you?”

“Freak,” he corrected. “Not a monster, just a freak.”

The answer seemed to throw her. “What sort of freak are you?”

He gave her a smile with no humour in it. “The one I was born to be and the one I was moulded into,” he replied.

“Claiming ‘er, means you will ‘ave to sleep with ‘er. You will have to fuck ‘er. She is eight, a child.”

Those words would have affected him before all of this, but not now. But it was time to play his second card. “That’s a price I’m willing to pay.”

“What?”

“A price I’m willing to pay,” he repeated.

“For what?”

“Veela following the old traditions are automatically accepted into the Veela Enclave of their continent of birth.”

She looked absolutely horrified as his words sank in. “You’d rape my sister, and zen take ‘er away for life?”

“It is not rape,” he replied, “It is payment for a debt. Surely that’s better than death?”

She shook herself. “But once in, you can nevair leave,” she said, changing her angle of attack like he suspected she would.

“Yes, I’d forever be locked up in a city of marble, only able to leave with permission from the high council, my magic forever sworn to the defence of the city with my life. I’d never be able to see the rest of the world, see anybody I cared about, or even communicate with them. The magic the oath requires is very clear.” The words were not for his benefit, but for hers. The Enclave was his goal.

“She will ‘ate you.”

“Does it matter?” he asked. “She’s pretty enough for what I’ll be doing.”

Fleur reeled back, as if struck. Suddenly she smiled. It was a soft smile, a gentle one. “Come, ‘Arry, you ‘ave not thought this through,” she whispered. Her arms went back, as she emphasised her chest from her position on the floor. Her face glowed softly in the darkness of the hallway, the only real light reflecting from the cracks in the doorways out of the hallway. He wanted to listen to her more, agree with what she said. He raised his wand and stunned her again. The feeling vanished. When he woke her, she scowled.

“I saved her life, it’s now mine to do with as I see fit,” he continued their earlier conversation, allowing a small hint of cheerfulness to creep into his words. “I’m sure she’ll get used to it

eventually,” he added with an uncaring shrug.

Fleur went for her wand, but his was already in his hand, held loosely, and then he was holding two wands. “Would you like to be awake for her screams?” he asked politely. “Because I can stun you again, so you won’t have to hear them.”

Her look was full of hate, and her hands started to glow. He took a step forward and kicked her in the stomach, stopping the transformation into her avian form in its tracks. How she could think that he wouldn’t have found out everything he could about Veela beforehand? He guessed she had listened to the rumours about him and believed them.

But then, the rumours also said he was evil, dark, and that helped too. He couldn’t blame her for listening to them; he’d seen how she’d wanted to give up her best side, to be more human.

“I, Harry James Potter, hereby cla...”

“Wait,” Fleur begged.

He paused and looked at her.

“You will take me, instead.”

“You’re a bitch,” he said simply. “I have no interest in you.”

Her eyes widened in surprise, and she reeled back again.

“Please,” she said. She moved to her knees, the arrogance and superiority he had seen earlier was gone. Now she was just a girl, desperate to protect her younger sister. Once, he would have moved the earth for her – for anyone in her position, but now he wouldn’t exhale in her favour. “Please,” she begged once more. “Do not force my seester into slavery, do not take away ‘er freedom. Take me instead, I am ze bitch, I deserve it, she does not. Please!”

She shifted on to her knees and started to undo the buttons of her blue blouse, revealing the lace of her white bra, when he stopped her. He shrugged. “You will swear the oath I was going to make Gabrielle swear, once she was under my control?”

“I will,” she said, her hands pausing, as she looked at him with something like hope. He thought she was a pretty good actress, but not great, because he could see the passion in her eyes, the absolute hatred of what he was doing.

He pulled out a piece of paper and floated it over to her. He wasn’t getting near her, not yet. She looked at him, and her act failed. The paper had Gabrielle’s name on it. She looked at him with utter loathing and contempt.

He rolled his eyes, and summoned it back. The clock struck eleven. The space between each chime seemed eternal.

With a hateful look, she started to speak. “I, Fleur Isabelle Delacour, do ‘ereby pledge my eternal servitude to ‘arry James Potter, for as long as ‘e so desires. I vow, under penalty of death, zat my words are true.” She paused, having read the full sentence printed on the paper, before she glared and added her own. “I do zis of my own free will, in payment for zee life debt incurred by my seester at ze Second Task.”

“I accept,” Harry said, and he could immediately feel Fleur’s magic bond to his, her Veela nature ensuring she followed through on her magical promise.

“Now what?” she asked, with another hate filled look. “Master?” The last word was said with such contempt that it was almost visible.

“Now, you will contact the Enclave, and arrange for us to leave tomorrow.”

“But ze third task, we are bound to compete,” she pointed out.

“You will explain that as well. You will write to the best of your ability, explain everything honestly, and cite the relevant laws pertaining to our access.” He placed the second of his books down, with the bookmark in place. “This is a command,” he added, for emphasis. “If you do not do so, I will consider your vow broken; the price refunded, and I will then claim your sister.”

She looked like she wanted to jump him and claw his eyes out, but her vow kept her from doing so.

“Be happy, little Veela,” he hissed, “I could take you now, but I will give you the rest of the night and the morning to say your goodbyes. Freaks are not completely without mercy.”

He backed away slowly, once out of the door, he threw her wand back to her. As she grabbed for it, he closed the door and pulled on his cloak. He refreshed his charms, and stood still.

Fleur opened the door, and scowled as she saw no sign of him, her wand in his hand. He watched her face, as anger gave way to despair, and she started to shake. He hoped it was the effect of her not following a command.

As she shut the door, he placed his hand out of the cloak and waved it. There was a soft bark from the distance that made him smile. He headed out, not back to the school, but into the Forbidden forest. He was too nervous to sleep, so he just walked. And as he did, he passed Acromantulas; he passed centaurs, and loads of other creatures that would hopefully soon be his brethren.

It was glorious.

As dawn broke, he headed back to the French camp, and watched patiently. At nine thirty, Fleur and Olympe Maxime met with an older couple who arrived from the gates of Hogwarts. The man looked ready to spit fire, while the woman was crying and hugging her daughter.

Fleur had a family, a family that had never had his life. Maybe that was why she wanted to betray the good thing about her and be fully human.

Gabrielle appeared, dressed in jeans, trainers and a coat. She clung to her sister, crying and begging.

It was a heart-breaking scene. Or it would be if Harry had a heart to break.

Other students appeared, and he listened as they were told the truth, it was exaggerated, but all the salient facts were there.

The students looked angry and dispersed. Half an hour later, the small group of five headed into Hogwarts. He followed them, finding chaos inside. It seemed like most, if not all, of the student corpus were there, and from the noise, they were all looking for him. The names they called him as they reported failure were amazing. He hadn't known that so many of them had such an extensive vocabulary of maledicta.

He cursed to himself, as the crowd closed after the group of five. He spotted Hermione, who looked incensed, he guessed, at the idea of slavery. She arranged the students so he couldn't get through. It seemed the students wanted to persuade him to release Fleur.

And as expected, the authority figures were doing nothing at all. He spotted Malfoy and Weasley talking to that reporter, and shook his head. He vaguely remembered a quote about politics making strange bed fellows. Clearly hate worked too.

Instead of risking it, he went outside and waited.

Two hours later, a large wooden gate appeared outside the wards of Hogwarts, it opened to reveal a swirling blue vortex. Two Veela appeared, and then two more, until a column of Veela guards marched forwards. They were two wide, and twenty deep, and moved in absolutely perfect unison. They were all in the same uniform, a blue body suit under what looked like golden armour. The boots included knee protectors, with an almost shovel like end. Harry shuddered at the thought of the damage a simple knee strike could do. The rest of their legs were protected by ringlets of the same material. Harry could just make out a faint inlay of a haze of runes on them – presumably to give them strength and protection. The golden cuirass they wore on their chests were sculpted to be feminine, and generously so, and their helmets appeared to have their own hair coming out of the top.

In their left hands they each had a rectangular shield. Their faces were as beautiful as the Veela he'd seen at the world cup, but each had a fierce and unyielding expression.

He moved in front of them, aware of students exiting Hogwarts behind him, and removed his cloak as they were ten foot away. They continued to march, stopping two foot from him. "You are the one who has enslaved a part-Veela?" the lead Veela demanded. Up close, he could see that her armour was more ornate, and that she had an emblem embossed on her right shoulder. Her eyes were a strange pale powder blue colour.

"I am."

“Why are you not inside?”

“Many humans disagree with my actions.”

“Understandably,” the Veela murmured. “As the law dictates, so we will follow.” She took a deep breath, and looked at him directly.

It felt like someone had taken a pickaxe to his skull; she was the most perfect creature he had ever seen; she was fabulous, amazing, and so utterly inhuman. All the pressure was on him to do what she wanted, and he would do anything for her.

“You want to stop all this, don’t you?” she asked, with a foreign accent he couldn’t place; it almost sounded like she had sung the question, and his mind flickered to TV performances of girls singing solo in front of large choirs in churches.

“Just say the word,” she continued, “and we’ll forget all about it, no harm done.”

“No,” he blurted, and metaphorically forced the pickaxe out of his head. He panted from effort, and glared at the Veela. Grudging respect flashed in her eyes for a second.

“Move,” she ordered her companions. They moved, and he found himself surrounded by them, almost swallowed up. This close, they gave off an air of otherness, of not being human, and the first time in months, he allowed himself a tiny bit of hope.

They marched into Hogwarts, and everything and everyone went silent. “There he is,” one of students shouted, raising his wand. The boy, Anthony Goldstein, was stunned before he could go any further.

“Acts of aggression will not be tolerated,” the lead Veela intoned, the lyrical accent gone, replaced only with a dull monotone. “Any further attempts of aggression at Enclave soldiers will be met with deadly force.”

The gathered students swayed backwards at the monotone delivery, and the certainty of the words.

“We just want a chat with Potter,” the youngest male Weasley cried.

“This is an Enclave mission,” The Veela replied evenly. “We do not have the time or the desire for your input, human.”

That last word resonated with Harry, more than anything. It was the biggest insult he could dream of, aimed directly at his former friend – even if the boy didn’t recognise it as such.

They were left to march up to Dumbledore’s office. Looking over his shoulder, he could see the trailing Veela take guard positions on the stairs.

They entered Dumbledore’s office. McGonagall and Snape were to the left of Dumbledore’s desk, the man himself seated behind his desk. To the right, where Fawkes’ perch was usually, the

Delacour family stood in front of the half-giant headmistress.

“I am Colonel Sophia Adler, charged by the European Enclave to accept Harry James Potter and Fleur Isabelle Delacour into said Enclave,” she said in the same monotone she’d used so far.

“I’m afraid,” Dumbledore replied, “That will not be possible.”

“Magical Britain is breaking its treaties with the International Confederation of Wizards and European Law,” Sophia said. “I will let the Enclave Council know.” She turned on her heel, and made to march away.

“No,” Dumbledore yelped. Harry kept his face emotionless. Clearly, Dumbledore hadn’t expected Sophia to immediately simply accept his words for what they were – an attempt to subvert a treaty.

She paused, and turned. “What did you mean then?”

“The champions need to fulfil the third task.” Harry could see the frustration on Dumbledore’s face. He knew Dumbledore liked to talk, but he could see that Sophia didn’t, and he himself had hidden away until this moment, to avoid anything the headmaster might say to him.

“We are aware of this,” Sophia returned. “Special permission has already been granted for that day.”

He could feel Snape stare at him, but Harry avoided meeting his eyes. Harry knew he had no skill in the mind arts. He knew some sort of mind reading existed, and that eye contact made it easier, so he took the simple way out.

Before anyone else could say anything, Sophia continued, still in her monotone voice. “Under the law of the International Confederation of Wizards, a Veela, regardless of purity may apply to join the Enclave. A class two bond is the minimum required. A slavery bond formed in payment is still a class two bond. As such, the application has been granted.”

Fleur started to cry, sobbing silently, while Gabrielle looked at Harry and spat what was probably a vile imprecation. Harry didn’t speak French, a fact he was pleased with for once.

There were looks of futile fury on the faces of Fleur’s parents; and a matching one on the face of Olympe Maxime. He could see the disappointment on the faces of Dumbledore, McGonagall, and the contempt and anger on Snape’s face.

“I told you he was just like his father,” Snape sneered.

Harry ignored him. As much as he wanted to insult Snape’s mother again, this was not the time.

Sophia turned. “Harry James Potter, do you swear your life to the Enclave, do you swear your magic to her defence, to uphold her laws. Do you acknowledge that the magic that protects you also binds you? Do you swear to follow the Council’s guidance? Do you abandon your English

heritage, your citizenship, and all claims to this country? Do you pledge any and all of your wealth to the Enclave?"

He smiled. He held out his right hand, his wand in it. "On my magic, I so swear."

He closed his eyes as he felt a new bond form, not a weak one, influenced by humanity, like with Fleur, but a pure one, with a city that would be his home for the rest of his life.

Sophia turned. "Fleur Isabelle Delacour."

Harry moved slightly, and put his hand on Sophia's shoulder. She didn't jump, but she did turn to him. "Oh, yes, a class two bond," she spat softly, her eyes hard. "Go ahead, order her participation."

He saw the traces of hope vanish from the eyes of the beautiful family of four facing him. He allowed his hand to drop from Sophia's shoulder. "Fleur Isabelle Delacour," he said his voice emotionless. "I release you from your vow, and I accept your actions as full payment for the debt of your sister's life."

His words hung in the air, as if they had been transfigured into stone.

"Well played, Harry James Potter. Extremely well played." Sophia was the first to respond, the lyrical tone back in her voice, she swivelled to look at him, and her eyes turned warm. She reached out and put her hand on his shoulder, squeezing lightly. "Our business here is concluded." The tone was dropped once more.

"Wait," Dumbledore called desperately.

"What?"

"Harry, he stays, now?"

"Harry is a member of the Enclave," Sophia replied dismissively.

"But he has no bond."

"He does not need one, for he is a member."

"But, why?" Fleur demanded.

Harry looked at her, over his shoulder. "It was never about you," he said, "or your sister. You are a b--, you are unpleasant, and she is eight. I would not want to spend time with you, nor force a child to do anything." He moderated his language only because a child was present.

Fleur again rocked backwards, as if he had slapped her. He wondered if anyone had ever said these things to her before – because her reactions suggested she was unused to anyone talking back to her.

The mother met his eyes, and she smiled and nodded. “Thank you, and good luck.”

He nodded at her. She wasn't fully human, more so than her daughter. So he respected her more for that.

He didn't look at anyone else, he simply turned, and followed the two guards who were behind him and were now in front of him.

There was a rustle, and a spell cast. He looked, to see the guard to the left of Sophia had blocked the attack aimed at him with her shield, allowing Sophia to wield her sword against the attacker. She moved with incredible speed, sliding past the guards in the way. Snape staggered back, and then his head fell to the floor, followed shortly by the rest of the now headless body. Sophia wiped her sword and returned it to its sheath.

“Attacking a member of the Enclave is against the treaty with the International Confederation of Wizards,” she said evenly. “Punishment has been dispensed.”

Harry shot a look at Dumbledore, who was now looking at Snape in horror, and turned away. Once again, they moved, down the stairs, the other Veela falling in with them. A command, in a language Harry didn't understand, had them move, so that as they cleared a space at the bottom of the stairs, they took a formation four abreast, with him in the centre. Sophia said a few more words in the same lyrical language, and the body language of the Veela around him changed. It was inclusive, not exclusive.

In absolute silence, they marched out, and Harry was aware that he still had a smile on his face. The murmurs started, as no one could see Fleur, and he could see the confusion on some of their faces, but he didn't care.

They stepped out of Hogwarts, and his smile grew. They continued to march down toward the magical gate.

Up ahead, he could see some Aurors, five or six, accompanying the Minister for Magic. They stopped, directly in the way, the Minister's chest swelling as he prepared himself. The Veela didn't pause, they didn't slow down; they just kept marching. At the last second, Fudge squeaked and threw himself to the ground, rolling out of the way. The Aurors followed him.

Harry felt his smile grow even bigger. His guards hadn't acted like humans.

The first of the guards entered the gate and vanished. He felt a hand take his, and he looked at the grinning face of Sophia, and held on to her. They entered, and it felt like he was thrown through space and time, tumbling each way, before with a suddenness that almost made him sick, they arrived in a small clearing in a forest.

The Veela, almost as one, removed their helms. They were still inhumanly perfect, and he loved it. None of them suffered from helmet hair, their bright blonde reflected the sun, causing them to glow.

Each of them removed their cuirasses, and as they shook themselves, genuine, amazing, awesome white wings appeared on their backs, with many sighs of relief. He looked at Sophia, to see that her powder blue eyes were now a bright yellow. He was looking at a woman who had hair that was more silver than blonde, eyes that were yellow, and had genuine wings. He was looking at a woman who had an absolutely perfect face. He was looking at a woman who quite definitively was not human.

“Come on, Harry,” Sophia said brightly. “Let’s go see your new home!”

Harry felt his smile grow even bigger.

“You are the first person to enter as a single male, ever,” she continued, “and we’re all really impressed now that we understand what you’ve done.”

“Thanks,” he said shyly.

“I’ve got a niece you’ll love to meet,” Sophia added.

“Oi, don’t poach Green Eyes,” another one called, “I’ve got a younger sister!”

Harry allowed himself a giggle, as quite a few of the guards started to bicker and squabble. They guided him up a path, and he had his first sight of the humongous gates of the Veela enclave. It made the security he’d seen at Gringotts look provincial and immature. But then, it was designed to protect a race of physically perfect females. The gate protected something far more important than mere gold.

The gates were made of stone, with wooden lattices. Above the gates two marble guard towers stood, each lined with guards, all with weapons. And while only some of the weapons looked up to the task, having seen Sophia deal with Snape, he wasn’t counting anything out.

“Halt,” a guard called in a magically enhanced voice. Harry was surprised they were talking English.

“Colonel Sophia Adler, returning from Enclave Mission eight-zero-zero-five-three at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.”

“Colonel Adler, your mission appears incomplete,” the guard called down.

“Target A swore the oath, then released target B.”

There was a hush from the top of the gate and then a muttered “damn.” Then the guard, in a much warmer voice, called, “Welcome home, Colonel Adler. Welcome home, Harry James Potter.”

Harry felt a tear run down his cheek, as he offered the most honoured bow of his life.

“The English was for you,” Sophia whispered, as the huge gates slowly opened. They were completely silent, and Harry was able to see that they were at least six foot thick.

Next to him, opposite Sophia, another of the guards was humming. He looked at her, "Hotel California?" he asked.

"You can check out any time you like, but you can never leave."

"Who wants to leave home?" Harry asked her.

The guard reached out and hugged him, to his surprise. As his arms went around her, he found he was touching her wings. He couldn't help himself, and stroked them. The guard giggled, and pulled away. He didn't try and stop her.

As he stepped through the gate, he stumbled. The bond he'd thought was strong before increased in intensity a thousand percent, more, maybe. It felt like everything he had was now bonded with the city, and with the walls. He knew with certainty if they were attacked, he would defend with everything he had. It was his home, it was bright, and it was everything he wanted.

Pain erupted in his forehead; he fell to his knees, vomiting. It felt like something was fighting him, but after dealing with Sophia's attack earlier, it was easy to force it away. He wasn't going to fail, not this close to freedom. He felt the skin over his scar split, and as he looked up, he saw a thick black mist pour out of it. The pain vanished. The bond seemed to hum in a satisfied manner. It didn't accept anything else having a hold on him.

"Harry?" Sophia called his name; when he managed to focus on her, she was on her knees next to him, holding him tightly.

"The bond, it didn't like my scar," he gasped. "But it's gone, isn't it! My scar?"

"It is," she agreed.

He smiled at her, "That's brilliant! And the bond, it's so amazing, so powerful!"

She smiled back, and took his arm, helping him up. He was hit with a couple of spells, and his mouth felt clean and the splattering from his vomit was removed from his clothes. He looked down, to see no signs at all of what had just happened. "Thanks," he said once more to the guards.

Sophie started to tug gently on his arm, guiding him down the path. "When I swore the oath as an adult, I felt exactly the same way. It's amazing, isn't it?"

"It's the most non-human thing I've ever felt, and I love it," he replied.

Through the gates, and inside the enclave, he saw that the interior was in a humongous bowl, so he had a great view of as much as he could see. It wasn't just a city, he could see farms in the distance, some growing crops, others herding cattle. He could not see the wall on the far side. His eyes swung over to the right of centre, he smiled in delight. He could see a beach and the ocean. He'd never seen the ocean before!

The city itself gleamed in the sunlight, and for a second, he thought it was made of gold.

“Eldorado,” he whispered.

His eyes cleared, and he realised it was just the reflection of the sun on the marble.

“Not quite,” Sophia said with a soft laugh.

There was something off about the city, maybe in the angles of the corners, or the height of the buildings. He almost bounced in happiness, it wasn't human! It was almost freakish! It was amazing.

Harry removed his robes, as he realised just how hot it was here. He presumed they were in the Mediterranean somewhere, but he found he really didn't care where. He didn't need to know where it was to help defend it.

And defend it he would, he would study, push himself, train his magic like never before, because this ... this Enclave, this place that was home, it deserved everything he could offer, and so much more.

He focused down on the city, trying to make out the population, and found that the people tended to be wearing white linen, in simple fashion, with sandals. But only a few actually had wings on show.

“We do dress up for balls,” Sophia said, “but for every day, it's too hot to dress in anything other than cool linen.”

Harry took his trunk, broom, and other possessions out of the pockets of his Hogwarts robes, before he threw the robes in the air. “Incendio.” They burnt, quickly, and he grinned as he heard the chuckles of his guards. He went to jam his stuff in his pockets, when he was stopped by another of his guards. She held out a small bag for him, that he put everything in. “Thank you.”

The words she said in reply in what he hoped was their language, because it was identical to how Sophia had spoken earlier.

“Come on,” Sophia said, “we'll go meet the council, and then we can show you your home.”

“My home?”

“Of course,” the guard who had hummed earlier said, “Where else are you going to live?”

“I've spent a lot of my life living in a cupboard, and then this year, a little, tiny room, frankly, I'd be happy with anything with a window.”

“Well, you're just going to have to settle for a nice house,” Sophia said.

There was a bark, and Harry smiled, “Hedwig,” he called, lifting his hand. His owl swooped down, landed on his arm, and she immediately head butted him gently. “Do you like it here?”

She barked again, softly. “I’m so pleased,” he told her. She was looking at him, and he could feel her pride and happiness.

“No more Dursleys, no more Hogwarts, just endless fields of mice, and the occasional slice of bacon as a treat. And soon, we’ll go for a fly again and really explore.”

Hedwig barked her agreement, and hopped up his arm, to sit firmly on his shoulder. One of her wings wrapped around his head for a second, in an avian hug, before she settled down.

“I have never seen anything even close to that before,” the guard who had hummed earlier stated.

“Hed’s my greatest friend, by such a huge way,” Harry said enthusiastically. “She’s always been there, always been on my side, even when no one else was. She’s the best, and made the Yule Ball a really great night.”

Hedwig barked in agreement, and Harry laughed. He reached up and scratched her chest. Her feathers were always so soft, better to touch than even the Veela’s wings and he always liked that he could feel her heart beat, far faster than any human’s could beat.

“Come on, the council is waiting,” Sophia ordered gently.

“We’ll see you later, Harry,” one of the other guards called. Harry turned to them. “Thank you, so much,” he said, and bowed in respect. He felt Hedwig move, expanding her wings, as she did a little curtsy, thanking them as well.

There were various calls of them being welcome, before he was carefully tugged away. The road was made of a yellow stone that looked golden in the sunlight. And although it was a mile, he enjoyed the warmth and the clear air.

They arrived in front of the first building, a Roman style villa, complete with four columns in front. They entered into the cool interior and walked on top of an amazing mosaic floor. He paused, to look at it closely.

“You can examine it later,” Sophia promised.

He nodded and scurried after her.

They were allowed through a guarded doorway, one of the guards giving him a wink as he went through. Harry grinned back at her.

Inside, to his surprise, was a pretty modern room, with a long table stretching along the far wall. He could see computers with green displays on the monitors on desks around the edges of the room.

At the table sat eight people, seven of which were female. They were all older than Sophia, but he couldn’t take a guess to their real age. They were all inhumanly perfect, and he felt right at home – if a little self-conscious.

“Take a seat, you two,” they were told. He did, and sat with his hands on his lap, as he looked along the line, not afraid to meet their eyes. They were sat in the middle, looking directly across at two members of the council.

One of them rolled out a piece of paper. Harry glanced at it, and saw that it was the letter he had written to them yesterday. “I take it your plan worked?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he replied politely.

There were some soft chuckles.

“Wait,” Sophia interrupted, “Plan?”

“Sorry, Soph,” the other lady councillor in the middle, said, “but we wanted to do this by the book.”

“So Harry planned this all in advance?”

“Yes, we were pretty shocked when his owl breached our defences.”

“Hedwig’s awesome,” Harry interrupted, “she knew she held our future in her talons, and she wasn’t going to let either of us down.”

Hedwig barked her agreement.

“Quite,” the lady on the left continued. “So when we received the Delacour petition to join this morning, we decided to go along with Harry’s plan.”

“I nearly gutted him on sight,” Sophia pointed him out.

“But you didn’t, and we know you are professional enough to do the mission first, and take personal actions later.”

Harry smiled. “Of which I’m grateful. I did half expect to be gutted on sight.”

“And,” Sophia added, sounding a little guilty this time, “I might have hit him with a level zero Allure blast, not the level four required for joining.”

“A zero?” the only male councillor gasped, he was sitting at the far end. “And he passed?”

“He did.”

There was a round of awed silence. “Right, welcome to the Enclave, Mr Potter. Three thousand generations have built our little place, and the magic that protects us also binds us.”

Harry nodded. “It’s great.”

“I don’t know if you know, but you were quite a wealthy young man in your former world.”

Harry shook his head. He hadn’t known that. “I’m glad I won’t be a drain on the Enclave.”

More smiles were aimed at him. “Your first jobs will be to improve your physical ability, and to learn our language.”

“I really appreciate the honour you have shown me by using my language,” he said.

“I’ve got a niece who would be perfect to help teach him,” Sophia added eagerly.

“We’ve all got nieces, daughters, cousins, Colonel,” the woman to the left said dryly. “No hogging the first independent male, ever.”

The female council member to the right in front of him spoke. “When our children reach majority, they are given the choice to swear the oath to become full citizens, to leave, and find a partner and return, or to leave and never come back. That is how we increase the population and ensure we suffer no ill effect from inbreeding.”

“The purebloods have that problem, they are rigid in their beliefs, so human,” he spat the last word, “so I’m delighted to hear that logic and practicality is treated sensibly here!”

“Welcome, indeed, Harry Potter, to the last home of your life.”

“People keep saying that like it’s a bad thing,” Harry pointed out.

There was another round of chuckles.

“Soph will show you to your house, we’ll have a timetable dropped off. When you can speak our language, we’ll introduce ourselves properly.”

Harry nodded, and swore to himself that he’d learn as fast as possible. Apart from Sophia, not one single person had introduced themselves, and it was with another little burst of pleasure that he realised that it wasn’t polite, well, polite as defined by humans. He couldn’t wait for real introductions, when he had earned that privilege.

They were dismissed, and soon back in the sunlight. They started to walk, down a street lined with detached buildings on each side, and the amount of people on the street increased as they walked.

The population appeared to be extremely female dominated, and so inhumanly perfect. Everything was clean and bright, and he could see people scrubbing walls and cleaning windows. They seemed to take great pride, a little like humans, but willing to put in the work themselves to keep it that way, unlike humans.

Sophia was greeted many times by name and small phrases, and she often replied in their musical language. It intensified his desire to learn it.

They moved through a bustling market place. He could see the indications of charms to keep meat cold, and vegetable fresh on the stalls. The produce looked brilliant, varied, and he started to imagine some of the meals he could cook for himself. After so many years cooking for others or not being allowed to cook at all, the prospect of cooking for himself was uplifting.

He realised he was hungry as his stomach growled. Sophia giggled, and approached a vendor. She handed over some money and received two sandwiches. It was a simple, crusty baguette filled with ham, and plenty of salad, cut in half. Without hesitation, he bit into it, and was delighted at the taste of the ham.

“Jamon Iberico,” Sophia said, “imported from Barcelona.”

“It’s incredible.”

She smiled, and they continue to walk, before they stopped. In front of them was a small townhouse, although small was only in relation to the earlier houses he’d seen. Sophia unlocked the door, and then gave him the key.

They entered a high ceilinged living room that was nice and cool after the warmth of outside. A fan spun lazily and silently on the ceiling, creating a cooling breeze and where there would normally be a fireplace was a water feature that filled the air with a gentle tinkling sound.

The furniture was minimal, just a couple of chairs in the large room, and several mis-matched bookshelves. The floor was polished marble with a rug in front of the chairs.

Sophia took him around a fully featured kitchen, and showed him that the fridge was stocked with food and drink. Up marble stairs were two large bedrooms, again with marble flooring. One bedroom was empty; the other just had a bed and a wooden wardrobe. To the right of the room, was a good sized bathroom, complete with roll top bath, a mirror on top of a marble counter, and a separate shower unit.

A shelf in the shower was stocked with products for him to clean himself, and white fluffy towels were piled on the counter.

To the left, back in the bedroom, was a large window looking out at the bustling street.

“This is brilliant,” he said, awed. “It’s for me?”

“Yes,” Sophia said with a sad little smile. “It’s empty though, you shouldn’t be so happy.”

“Why not?” he demanded. He pulled out Hedwig’s perch and placed it by his bed. Hedwig drifted over from his shoulder, and immediately closed her eyes and went to sleep. “It’s brilliant.”

“Because you’ve yet to choose the furniture you want, this is just temporary stuff.”

“Oh, this will do, honest; I don’t want to be a burden.”

“My niece, and probably a lot of people who are curious about someone who managed to get in on their own, will be around later to take you shopping. For now, I suggest you get clean, eat a bit more, and then sleep. You looked like you’ve not slept in days.”

Harry lurched forward and hugged her. “Thank you!” He tried, and succeeded, in not giving in to the urge to stroke her beautiful wings.

“You’re very welcome, Harry,” Sophia said, giving him a hug back, before she walked out, and left him alone.

Harry smiled. He looked around happily. He couldn’t wait to meet people; no one here had stared at his forehead, or referred to what he did as a child, and more, they seemed impressed by what he had done on his own, not something his parents had done, or with a skill that he’d inherited from his family.

He laughed as he looked around the bedroom.

It was *his* bedroom.

He was free.

He was home.

Enslavement

The Penance of Albus Dumbledore

Albus Dumbledore looked at the man in the mirror. Over his shoulder he could see two bright green eyes, messy hair, and a clear complexion. And he wished, more than anything, that the boy was actually behind him, teasing him about his robes and his love of thick woollen socks.

But as Albus looked at himself directly in the eye, he could feel nothing but guilt. Something was dramatically wrong; with him, and with Hogwarts.

He walked over to his wardrobe, and pulled out a simple brown robe. He didn't deserve to wear his favourite ones. He needed to pay penance, and this was the first step of many that he needed to take.

He couldn't bear what he saw in the mirror - because all he saw was a monster.

His first stop was the Goblet of Fire. His very first charm, a simple detection spell, showed that it had been hit with a Confundus charm. How had Alastor missed that? The ex-Auror had promised Albus that he had looked into it.

Fear settled into his stomach like a lead lemon drop. He cast another spell, cursed, and then headed up to the Great Hall. He barged straight in casting a series of spells at Moody. The man, whoever he was, had no time to react. Albus growled, and sent off a Patronus to the department of Magical Law Enforcement.

As the man flew through the air he started to choke and then changed into the form of Bartemius Crouch Junior. Albus heard the horrified gasps from the students as he stunned Crouch.

"Minerva," he said distantly, "I'm going to have to ask you to check the room assigned to this person."

"Yes, Headmaster" Minerva replied. She scurried off.

Albus looked at him, and then his flask. He opened it and sniffed. Badly made Polyjuice potion, it smelled like the man had got some ingredients wrong – and would have revealed himself eventually.

"Professor Dumbledore?" the voice calling his name had a sickening distress to it, as if the owner had just put together a bunch of clues and reached a conclusion she was desperate wasn't true.

Albus sighed. "I personally investigated the Goblet of Fire ten minutes ago. It had been hit with an extremely powerful charm to confuse it. The magical signature matched the person in front of me. It appears that Bartemius Crouch Junior, a Death Eater, was responsible for Harry Potter's entrance in to the tri-wizard tournament."

The silence was absolute, as if he had cast the most powerful silencing charm in existence.

"You ignorant, foul, ugly, twisted, jealous, bigoted, obnoxious," with each word, Hermione's voice rose, until she was shouting, her magic rattling the cutlery on the table, "arrogant, offensive, illiterate, Neanderthalic, loathsome cockroach!" She paused, as she stared at Ronald Weasley. "Do not ever talk to me again, do not come near me, do not attempt to communicate with me. The only reason I am not cursing you is because I am a coward and guilty as well," she finished with a wail, before she slumped down, put her head on her hands, and started to sob.

Albus sighed, and wished he wasn't too old to do that.

The doors opened and Kingsley Shacklebolt entered, flanked by Amelia Bones and ten other Aurors. "Barty Crouch Junior, not in Azkaban," Albus said abruptly. "He has been posing as Alastor Moody, and is responsible for Harry Potter's entrance in to the tournament."

"What?" Amelia demanded.

Albus repeated himself word for word.

"When the press gets a hold of this, people are going to get lynched," she muttered.

Albus nodded in agreement.

Minerva entered in a hurry. "Alastor is alive, and is in the infirmary," she reported quickly. "He'd been kept unconscious since the summer."

Albus groaned under his breath.

"Use Veritaserum on Crouch," he said to Amelia.

"I will," she agreed. "What about Potter?"

"I'll write a report," he promised.

Amelia nodded, before she turned. Shacklebolt stunned Crouch again, and levitated him, pulling him out of the Great Hall.

Albus sighed, and quickly explained to Minerva, in a soft voice, what had just happened. She paled dramatically and swayed.

Guilt was unique, in that sharing it with someone did not halve what you felt, Albus mused in sadness.

He turned and walked out. He still had plenty that needed doing. He headed to his desk, and picked up his quill.

On headed parchment, he wrote out a resignation letter, sealed it and then passed it to Fawkes to take to the International Confederation of Wizards.

Surprisingly, he actually felt a little lighter as that burden was lifted from his shoulders. He wondered if that was one of the reasons he'd made so many mistakes this year.

With that done, he headed out of his office. Back in the Great Hall, it was very quiet, with just the noise of people eating. "Minerva," he called, "I am heading out for a bit. Please cancel lessons today. I will be wanting to speak with each House later."

"Yes, headmaster," she responded, from where she was sat with Hermione, who was still crying.

He nodded, and headed out. He didn't particularly care what the other schools felt about this at moment. Olympe's strident declarations of what she would do to Harry were still fresh in his mind, and that allowed him to avoid a bit of his own guilt.

Once outside the school wards he Apparated to Horace Slughorn's house. He knocked on the door and it was opened immediately. Horace waved his arm in a gesture for him to enter the room.

"I am calling in the favour you owe me," Albus said without hesitation.

"You need me to replace Snape for the rest of the year," Horace sighed. "And try and help deal with this mess with Potter leaving?"

"I discovered this morning that a Death Eater entered him in the tournament."

"Oh, bad form, Albus, bad form," Horace said. "Innocent as well."

"I know. Believe me, I know."

"I think you do. I will help."

"Thank you."

"It is the right thing to do," Slughorn said. He looked down at his feet. "You're not the only who hasn't done enough of that. I will be at Hogwarts within the hour."

Albus nodded, and headed back to Hogwarts himself.

Once he arrived, he was stopped by Irma Prince. "Albus," she said. "I performed the annotation charm on some of the books Potter had borrowed. I wanted to know how he could vanish as completely as reported."

"Oh?"

She passed him a list of spells. Albus looked at them, and thought for a second. "If I could give points to staff, you would be getting plenty," he said to the librarian.

She blushed, a little. "I do believe that Potter re-taught himself all the first four years of Hogwarts," she said. "But these three charms stuck out."

Albus nodded. "Thank you, very much,"

"It doesn't matter now, but he did take some books with him."

"Please give me a list, I will replace them."

Irma looked embarrassed. "I've already done so myself," she said in a small voice. "It was the least I could do."

Albus nodded. "I do not mean this as criticism, as I have far more to be guilty about than you, but I can't help wonder what would have happened if we had been more like this beforehand."

"I know," she said. She bowed slightly, and shuffled off slowly.

Albus took a deep breath and headed to the Ravenclaw dorms. He entered. Filius had them all sat in neat rows, facing the front. Albus nodded to his colleague.

"Over the years, Professor Flitwick has informed me about bullying that has gone on in this house. In the past, I have preached about forgiveness and turning the other cheek. No more. In future, the punishment will not be detention and points removed, it will be either suspension or expulsion. Is that in anyway unclear?"

"It is perfectly clear, headmaster," Filius said. "Are you wiping the slate clean, now?"

"No," he said. "Is there anything I should be aware off?"

"Yes."

Albus felt his heart sink a little. "Please gather the culprits, and arrange a conference with their parents this evening."

Filius' eyes gleamed, and he nodded.

"Before I go, a pop quiz. How would you detect someone with an invisibility cloak?"

"You can't," a fourth year said.

"Not visibly," Albus agreed.

"Heat?" a voice from the back asked.

Albus nodded. “Any more?”

“Sound?” Another suggested.

Albus nodded. “And the third?” He let the silence build for a minute. “Filius?”

Filius looked thoughtful. “Smell?”

“Exactly. Some food for thought. Harry had an invisibility cloak. He used the ambient temperature spell, and two others to fix these vulnerabilities. It allowed him the freedom to move through Hogwarts completely undetected.

“A fourth year with mediocre marks managed to outthink every single member of staff, and each of you as well.” Albus nodded, and then left the Ravenclaws. He hoped he’d managed, in some small way, to restore a bit of Harry’s reputation.

Albus was very aware that Harry would not care, but he had to do something, even if it was only for his own benefit.

He headed into the Hufflepuff common room. They were not as regimented as the Ravenclaws, sitting in small groups. He scanned the room, and saw many red eyes, especially from the girls.

“As I have told the Ravenclaws, bullying in any shape will now be treated either with suspension or expulsion. I have not heard anything specific from your Head of House, but I am giving the same warning to everyone.”

“Professor Dumbledore?”

“Mr Diggory?”

“Is there any way that I can withdraw from the tournament?” the Hufflepuff champion asked.

“Why?”

“Because I behaved abominably. I showed no loyalty to a young boy when I listened to rumours; I did not live up to Hufflepuff standards, never mind Hogwarts standards. And even when Potter justifiably called me a hypocrite, I fell back on my pride and hubris, because he was a cheat and I knew I was right. That is the action of a bully, not a representative at an international tournament.”

Albus was impressed by the firm voice Cedric used, as well as his vocabulary. “I am afraid not, Mr Diggory. While I can offer no succour, I will say that your guilt is shared by all the professors of Hogwarts. All I will ask is that you learn from this lesson, as we all are.”

Cedric looked disappointed as he nodded. “I understand professor.” He paused. “Do you think there is any way we can apologise?”

“I don’t think so. The Enclave is, for all intents and purposes, sealed. All communications to Enclave members are filtered heavily.”

Several of the girls sobbed, and the headmaster could see more tears appear.

“Thank you, Albus,” Pomona said. Albus took that as his cue to leave.

His next destination was the Gryffindors. He was not looking forward to seeing them, as he was angry with them. He knew the anger was not truly justified, not when he balanced their actions against his own.

He entered the tower; Minerva was on her own, sitting at the front. Hermione, looking haunted, sat next to her. Other Gryffindors were not even looking at him, as if he might go away if they couldn’t see him. He was hardly a Ravenous Bugblatter.

“As I have told the other houses, bullying is not acceptable behaviour. It will be met with either expulsion or suspension.

“I do congratulate you, though.” The light sarcasm in his voice caused everyone to look at him. “You are responsible for the first rule change in the Hogwarts’ charter since the time of the Founders. The charter does not say anything about the right of a student defending themselves from expulsion. Why? Because for more than a thousand years it was deemed self-evident. You followed the letter of the law, and completely ignored the spirit of it. The right to self-defence is now enshrined in the charter. Future students will see the law, and they will know why it is now in place. Your generation will be remembered for a very long time.

“You were completely within your rights to expel a member from your house. As per the Hogwarts charter, which I too, have read, I have removed the expelled member’s points from Gryffindor.

“The result of this is that Gryffindor no longer have the points needed to win the House Cup for the last three years. The results have been expunged from the record books, and Gryffindor can no longer call themselves House Champions. The last three years will remain empty in the annals.

“As I am sure you all know,” he continued. “Expulsion is retroactive. An expelled student can never claim to have been a Gryffindor.” Albus knew he was being petty, he knew that this was, in some small way, revenge, but honestly, he didn’t care. They had followed the rules exactly, with no room for interpretation, so he was doing exactly the same. “As such, I have had no choice but to declare null every Quidditch match that Gryffindor played with an ineligible player. You are no longer Quidditch champions. You are, of course, welcome to play next year, with your new seeker.”

Albus peered over his glasses at the Gryffindors. “I will re-iterate that we no longer accept any form of bullying, and Messrs Weasley, I do classify most pranks within that. Hogwarts is a place for learning, not a place for fear.”

He nodded to them, and headed out. He actually allowed himself a small chuckle that soon soured into a sob, as the view of the shocked, stunned, and ashamed faces would be another burden he would carry for the rest of his life.

The wards told him that Horace had just entered the gates of Hogwarts. He met him at the entrance, and together they headed to the dungeons.

They entered; Septima Vector was supervising the students.

“Thank you,” he said to her, and gave her a small smile. She nodded. Albus turned to face the Slytherins. “As you are aware, Professor Snape interfered with an Enclave mission at the cost of his life.”

There was very little reaction, no one actually seemed that upset, and that worried Albus. “Besides me is Professor Horace Slughorn a Slytherin alumni who was Professor Snape’s predecessor. He has agreed to come out of retirement to take Professor Snape’s classes until the end of year. He has also agreed to be your Head of House.” There were some smiles and a polite round of applause.

“I have already told the other three houses what I am now telling you. Bullying at Hogwarts is not acceptable. The punishment will be either suspension or expulsion. Is that understood?”

All the children nodded obediently.

“To clear up any rumours, Harry Potter has indeed become the first unbound male to gain entry into a Veela enclave, ever. It is quite possible that he will also be the last, as they have adjusted their policies to match. I asked the Sorting Hat his opinion of all this and he told me that he had wanted to put Mr Potter into Slytherin, but accepted Harry’s pleas not to, because of the bigotry he had already encountered with his interactions with Slytherin. Interactions that continued well into his Hogwarts career.

“I do wonder how it is cunning to alienate all your colleagues. I do wonder how it is cunning to have turned Slytherin house into a negative label that you will carry for the rest of your lives. But, I presume that this lack of understanding into the nature of cunning is why I was not sorted into Slytherin. I do know that it is not too late to change.”

He nodded at Horace and walked out. He had been harsh, but he truly hoped it was for the best.

He headed back to his office, and did his job for a few hours. He looked at the corner of his table and sighed. Another sign of his penance. He’d thrown his lemon drops into the toilet. He didn’t deserve them at the moment.

He sighed yet again as the guardian sent him a message. He opened used his wand to open his door and allow the guests in. Filius was first, with Marietta Edgecombe, Alanis Morris and Rebecca Mocklock followed him. After that, two men and three women appeared.

Albus created several more seats, and invited them to sit down. Two of the three girls, Alanis and Rebecca looked terrified. The other, Marietta, seemed completely unconcerned. "Thank you for coming," Albus started. "We are here to discuss some troubling issues with your daughters."

The parents, as one, seemed to go stiff.

Albus picked up the sheet on his desk that Filius had sent him earlier. "Above the low-level bullying, I'm afraid we have a case of sexual assault."

There was a horrified silence.

"We didn't do that!" Marietta blurted.

"Oh, what would you call locking a twelve year old girl out of the dorms clad only with a sheet?"

Mariette didn't say anything, as she looked down. The woman behind her smiled. "I'm sure it's just an honest mistake."

Albus looked at the woman, a ministry employee working at the Floo Department, if he remembered correctly.

"An honest mistake," Albus replied, "No, I don't think so. The fault, is of course, entirely mine, for not dealing with this properly. It is a mistake I am now rectifying. In every other situation the three of you would be expelled, with your wands snapped. However, as my inaction could have been seen as some form of tacit approval, I am being lenient.

"You are all suspended until September."

"What!" Madam Edgecombe yelled, her voice drowning out the parents and the protests of the other students.

Albus allowed his magic to build up. "Would you like to go through, incident by incident, what has led me to this decision? Shall we talk about the minor punishments we have given out to try and turn them from the path of the bully? Shall we talk about a girl so terrified she has not complained once, a girl we have failed?"

"No, we shall not. My decision is final."

"What about their OWLs?"

"They may either self-study at home, or repeat the fifth year," he said. "You are, of course, also entitled to remove them from Hogwarts altogether."

Mrs Morris took a deep breath. "Thank you for your time, headmaster. I assure you that this is not how we raised Alanis. She will be repeating the fifth year, and will spend every summer working and saving up money to pay for this year's tuition she has wasted." She stood. "Come," she ordered her daughter. The girl left, her head down and tears running from her eyes. Her mother

and father followed her.

Rebecca's father looked at him. "I agree. Thank you, headmaster." He, along with his wife, preceded Rebecca out of his office.

"How is this fitting punishment? How dare you slander my daughter," Madam Edgecombe yelled. "I will not stand for this. I want the whore who is the supposed victim brought here immediately so she can explain that she is a liar." Behind her, Marietta had a smug look on her face.

"You are right," Albus said softly. "It is not a fitting punishment." He raised his hand, and summoned Marietta's wand. Without hesitation, he snapped it. "Mariette Edgecombe, as the ring leader of your little gang of bullies, and for showing absolutely no remorse, you are hereby permanently excluded from Hogwarts School of Wizardry and Witchcraft. You will leave now, because in five minutes the wards will evict you."

Marietta looked stunned, as did her mother. "But..."

"But nothing," Albus said.

"I work for the Ministry!"

"And I ate porridge this morning for breakfast; I fail to see how either fact is relevant. I am the Headmaster of Hogwarts. I have the final say."

"I'll take it to the press!"

"I have already written a statement," he bluffed, "explaining everything. I do not think that the Wizards and Witches of Britain will look kindly on a bully."

The woman paused, before she grabbed Marietta's arm, and dragged her out.

Albus sighed and looked at Filius.

"No, I'm not happy about any of this," the Ravenclaw answered his unasked question, "but I am happy that you are taking a firm stand."

"This is just the beginning," Albus promised.

"I will see you later, Albus. I am going to express my displeasure at my prefects for not doing more to stop what happened."

"Thank you, Filius."

Albus settled back and looked at the ceiling. He decided to eat lunch at his desk. He still had a lot of work to do, and every decision seemed to create more.

He almost groaned as his guardian moved aside for Horace.

“I won’t keep you long,” the new potions professor announced as he walked in. “I can fix Slytherin.”

“That is good news,” Albus confessed.

“All it will take is you following a single student for the morning.”

“Excuse me?”

“I want you to follow a student from the moment he wakes up until lunchtime.”

“What will I see?”

Horace shrugged. “I certainly wouldn’t want to prejudice anything you might find.”

“Which student?”

“Draco Malfoy.”

Albus nodded. “I will do so,” he promised. He actually approved of Horace’s Slytherin behaviour. If there was a problem, it would be the headmaster who made the decision, not the Head of house. And there were not many people who could stand up to Lucius Malfoy.

After Horace left, Albus allowed himself an early night.

Dawn found him concealed under several spells in the Slytherin common room.

It all seemed pretty normal, until the younger Malfoy emerged. He strutted in to the common room, barging past people without a care in the world.

He headed over to one group and ordered them to move. When the one of the group demurred, Crabbe and Goyle moved from behind him, and pushed the student to the floor.

Draco smirked. “Soon, the Dark Lord will be back, and you will pay. My father is his right hand man!”

The student on the floor glared at impotently. Draco took a step forward and kicked him, before laughing sharply. He strolled out of the Common Room, and Albus followed. He wanted to see what else would happen.

“Oi, Mudblood,” Draco yelled at Hermione. Albus noticed that Draco had checked that there weren’t any teachers in sight, “Still sad that Potty ran away? Now that he’s gone, I rule this school, and Mudbloods like you will get what you deserve, death!”

Albus petrified the little shit before his mind caught up. “Crabbe, Goyle, my office, now,” he roared, dropping the spells covering him. He raised his wand and levitated the young Malfoy. The other two boys he left in his waiting room, while he took Draco into his office.

He opened his Floo, and called Lucius's home address. Narcissa answered. "Is Lucius with you?" he asked frostily, not even giving the basics of politeness. Narcissa nodded. "I have opened the Floo, please come through immediately, as we must discuss your son's expulsion from Hogwarts."

Narcissa's eyes widened. Her face vanished from the fire. Albus took his seat. He was actually looking forward to this.

Lucius and Narcissa entered, and looked at Draco, who was still immobilised.

"Lucius, Narcissa," Albus greeted them. "Yesterday, I gave personal notice to every student at Hogwarts that bullying would not be accepted. Last night, I suspended two Ravenclaws and expelled another. This morning, your son barged past several students, bullied some more into getting out of his way, ordered another student pushed to the floor, threatened him, and then kicked him when he was down. He then used the foul pejorative 'Mudblood,' before claiming that he ruled the school and threatened every 'Mudblood' with death. Because of this, I have no option but to expel him."

"Headmaster, I must ask, who reported these baseless accusations? I am sure that there is a simple answer to all of this."

Albus smiled politely. "Why, I witnessed it myself, and, of course, I will be supply a Pensieve memory to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement."

Lucius paled slightly. "Now, look, as the chairman of the Board of Governors..."

"As chairman you have zero right to interfere with school disciplinary procedures," Albus interrupted. "Draco Lucius Malfoy, you are expelled from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry," he said formally. He snapped the little shit's wand, and felt a small amount of pleasure. "Lucius, on your behalf, I will convene a meeting of the Board of governors to discuss your replacement."

"Headmaster?"

"The charter does state that all governors of the school must have a child attending. As you no longer have a child attending, you may no longer serve. I thank you for your efforts over the past four years. Do see yourself out."

"This is not the last of this," Lucius snarled.

"I should not think myself so lucky," Albus agreed. "You have two minutes before the wards eject you."

Lucius glared, and Albus released the petrification on the younger Malfoy. The boy in question looked like his entire world had just been shaken upside down. Narcissa dragged him out by the arm.

Albus took a deep breath, and then headed to his fireplace. There were still plenty of things that

needed doing to ensure that the expulsion stuck. He had, however, been playing politics longer than Lucius had been alive.

His first stop was the Auror office, where he placed the memory of Draco claiming that his father was the Dark Lord's right hand man in Amelia's care.

He then headed to the Daily Prophet and shared his experiences with them. If there was one thing the press loved, it was tearing down the mighty. And it didn't get much bigger than the Malfoy family with an attack led by the Chief Warlock.

Finally, Albus headed back to the Ministry. Lucius should have had the time to start his fight back now, and Albus wanted to nip that in the bud.

He wandered towards Fudge's office, and to his complete lack of surprise, Fudge was hurrying to meet him.

"Albus," Fudge said. "What is this silliness I've just heard?"

"I can't claim to know what irrelevant things you're dealing with, I've been dealing with real problems."

Fudge paused and glared. "I mean about Lucius' boy being expelled."

"Do you disagree with the action, Minister?"

"I do, I think it would be better if he expulsion was quashed instantly."

"So you think that what he did was acceptable behaviour?"

Fudge nodded eagerly.

"Excellent, well, as I have been passing memories all day, I shall go and share this one."

Fudge blinked, and pulled off his hat. "Sharing memories?"

"You'll see tomorrow," he said cheerfully. "Do have a good day, Cornelius." He almost whistled, until his guilt returned. It didn't take long before he was back in the Daily Prophet's office. Once there, he called for Fawkes, and politely asked his phoenix to take a note to Minerva, and then return with his paperwork.

He was given a desk in the office, and he settled down to work. It was at seven o'clock that a particularly unpleasant Ministry Official appeared and entered the office of the Editor.

"I hear that you are going to be publishing some things that are not true about the Minister," she said with a child-like voice that had always grated on him. "I'm sure you don't want to do that."

"Are you calling me a liar, Delores?"

Delores jumped, and turned. She opened her mouth, but shut it as she saw him. He stared at her allowing his dislike to show. “Well? Are you?”

“I think you’ll agree that stability is important,” Delores simpered.

“No, I don’t,” he said blankly. “I think that the truth is important. We are where we are because we have valued stability over truth. So, I repeat, Undersecretary, are you accusing the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot of falsifying legal documents? The memories I have supplied to Barnabas are identical to the ones I have given Amelia.”

Delores paled. “You’ll pay,” she said. Her voice was so cold it could have chilled butterbeer.

“I’ll be giving this memory to Amelia as well,” he replied. As she paled further, he looked at Barnabas, “I think a feature on the Undersecretary’s attempt to subjugate the press would be a good idea?”

The editor smiled. “Indeed, Chief Warlock. Indeed.”

“I would start running, Delores,” Albus said. “I have many more pertinent memories.” He didn’t, but he figured it would be a good test of seeing how guilty she was. If she actually turned up at work, he’d know that she was either innocent, or delusional.

She looked at him in impotent fury, and then actually ran out of the office.

“Chief Warlock,” Barnabas said slowly, “What do I need to do to avoid your rampage?”

Albus looked at him innocently.

“Don’t give me that. You’ve stopped playing games.”

“I have,” Albus agreed. “Perhaps, not for tomorrow’s paper, but soon, an honest report on how we are all responsible for Harry Potter being forced out of his home country would be in order.”

The editor winced and nodded. “Yes. Time to pay the piper and all that. Do you know that I got a letter from Potter?”

Albus closed his eyes. “May I read it?” he asked, really, truly, hoping that Barnabas had destroyed it. There was a rustling, and a piece of parchment was placed in his hand. Reluctantly, Albus opened it.

“Sir,

I am confused as to how your reporter acquired the quotes I reportedly said in your Tuesday edition of the Daily Prophet, considering as I have never given a single interview in my life.

This appears to be a case of libel, one I am eager to deal with.

Please respond as soon as possible.

Sincerely,

Harry James Potter”

“I asked Rita, and she said that she had an interview with him at the Weighing of the Wands.”

“She lied; there was no interview. Harry was only there for thirty seconds at the most.”

Barnabas nodded. “Then I guess I need to do my job. Rita will be fired tomorrow. I will make it clear that she fabricated the entire thing.”

“Good. If anything else happens, call me immediately.”

“Yes, Chief Warlock.”

Albus borrowed his Floo to head back to his office, where he sat down and called for a sandwich.

It had been a productive day, but not it was over, now he had nothing to distract him from the overwhelming guilt.

He ate the sandwich without really tasting it, before he lowered his head into his hands. He had no idea how long it was before he retreated to bed, where he stared at his ceiling for a long time.

The next morning started with a thorough read of the Daily Prophet, which gave him a small smile. There were only three headlines. “Malfoy Expelled”, “Fudge condones the death of all non Pure-Bloods” and “Prophet Reporter Skeeter fired for fabricating interviews – Potter libelled”.

He read the articles carefully, and was pleased with them. They were factual, above all else, and had direct quotes taken from his memories.

At exactly nine o’clock, his gargoyle notified him on the arrival of his appointment. He opened his door. To his surprise, Fleur Delacour entered alone.

He frowned. “I did say that you could bring someone with you.”

She shook her head. “You did, ‘Eadmaster,” she agreed.

“I do speak French,” Albus interrupted in that language. He wasn’t in the mood for dropped consonants and the butchering of his name that seemed to follow.

“Oh, great. My family has taken my sister back to France. Gabrielle is currently vexed with me.”

“May I enquire why?”

Fleur shrugged. “I did not tell her the full story of what happened that night. I did not think it wise

to tell her of Harry's threats to her. I was quite happy to have her think that it was I that was being blackmailed.

"Unfortunately, after I realised how easily I'd been played, I told her, and my parents, the full story. Gabrielle was utterly furious."

"Why?"

"Well, she has desired to live in the Veela enclave herself, ever since we visited it three years ago, and this would have been her ticket." Fleur rolled her eyes. "And of course, as soon as she heard that Harry Potter of the beautiful green eyes had wanted her, well, she was convinced that once Harry had experienced her 'talents as a Veela' that he would have quite fallen in love with her, and they would have lived happily ever after, in the Enclave, with two cats, a goldfish and a dog named Poppy."

Albus laughed softly. "Poppy?"

"She is eight," Fleur explained with a shrug. "Despite her heritage, she is still under the impression that sex is a special cuddle – and she knows that Veela are good at cuddling. And of course, the rescue at the Second Task was instantly re-written, with Harry as her hero in shining armour. So, my darling sister now thinks that I deliberately stopped her from achieving her dreams." The blonde witch spread her arms and shrugged once more. "I am sure that she is, right now, dreaming of the curtains in which she would decorate their kitchen." There was a small pause. "And, of course, the one word of English she picked up from all of this was," she switched to English and said "bitch."

Albus found himself nodding. "I would expect no less of an eight year old. They unerringly repeat the words we don't want them to use."

"Anyway, amusing anecdotes about a little Veela's crush aside, what can I do for you, Headmaster?"

"I just wanted to ask if there was anything that stood out that night that might give any further clues as to his behaviour?"

"You mean apart from him being the butt of three schools ire, and being completely isolated?"

"Yes, apart from that."

"There was one thing. I asked him what sort of monster he was, and he replied that he was a freak, not a monster."

Albus allowed his head to fall back for a second, that word, it was not a common word, and then with a terrifying flash of insight he suddenly had a dreadful thought.

"Thank you, Miss Delacour."

“You recognised something to do with that word,” she pointed out.

He nodded. “Yes, but I do believe that it will be personal,” he said, to avoid her follow up question. “Now, I have already learnt that my inaction has been appalling recently. As such, I would like your permission to cast a charm on you. It will ensure that your allure does not reach more than six inches from you.”

The French woman gasped. “Please, yes!”

Albus took out the Elder wand and cast the charm.

“Could you send that spell to my father?”

“I will,” he promised.

“Thank you, very much.”

“You are welcome.”

“Did you know that he planned it?”

“Planned what?” Albus asked.

“Harry, he planned everything. He sent a letter to the Enclave explaining how he was going to trick me. They didn’t tell Colonel Adler, by the way.”

Albus settled back. “That is impressive,” he said.

“Extremely. He is the talk of Europe, my father has had to tell the story many times, and Harry is becoming a legend already.” She pouted and exhaled, blowing a lock of her hair out of her face.

“You sound a lot less antagonistic toward him.”

She nodded. “Finding out that you were played so well will do that to you,” she agreed. “I was mad to start with, but, well, a child, alone in the world, he managed to win his own freedom with everything and everyone against him. It shows the sort of maturity and intellect that I find attractive. And it strikes me that if I had been more aware, and less of a bitch, I could have handled the whole thing far better, and I could quite possibly be living in a house of marble in the gorgeous Enclave.”

“Thank you for explaining.”

She stood, and curtsied politely to him, before she exited. Albus watched her go, and then stared at the door for a few moments, before he drew himself together and walked out of his office, and out towards the edge of Hogwarts’ wards.

He Apparated to Privet Drive and knocked on Petunia’s door. She opened it, and stared at him.

“What’s the freak done now?” she sighed.

Albus closed his eyes as once again his nice sane world crashed down around his feet. Without thinking, he walked past the petrified Petunia and opened his senses. He felt a tear roll down his cheek, as he paused by the stairs. There was a cupboard, and it screamed of loneliness, of terror and despair. He opened it, and let the emotions rush through him.

He did nothing to protect his mind, as he let the years of sadness soak through him. He didn’t need to know anymore, he didn’t care what excuses Petunia would give. He stood, and took control of the wards, destroying them.

He paused, as he exited the house, not even looking at her. “I will be giving an anonymous tip to the Police that Harry is missing. Good luck explaining where he is.”

He Apparated away, admitting to himself that he could have just sent the tip immediately, but he wanted her to feel some of the despair that Harry had felt.

That Harry had felt, because Albus “The Bloody Great Champion of the Light” Dumbledore had placed Harry there and then practically forgotten about him.

Back at Hogwarts, he entered the infirmary. “Headmaster,” Poppy Pomfrey greeted him. “You look bad.”

He nodded his agreement. “What potions did you give Harry when he first came to school?”

“You didn’t look at the record book?”

He shook his head. “I rarely do.”

Poppy nodded. “As per standard protocol, I looked at his entrance scan from the boats, and then I had the elves give him all his immunity shots, and fixed some problems with his diet. He wasn’t the worse I’d seen, and wasn’t near the threshold for a deeper check.”

Albus nodded. “Raise the threshold, so that if anyone is at all similar, they get the full inspection. I have a feeling our standards of acceptable for the Muggle raised is too low.”

“Of course, Headmaster,” Poppy said. She looked worried. “Did I miss something?”

“I have no idea,” he said with a sigh, “but in light of all the things that I’ve missed it’s better to be safe, than sorry.”

“Quite right. I’ll send you the new standards for a full check.”

“Can you talk to your colleagues at St Mungos, and ask to borrow as many doctors as you can. We’ll do a full sweep of the students, and then make sure every new pupil gets a full personal check-up in the first few weeks of school.”

“Albus, what is this about?”

Albus stroked his beard. “It’s about my legacy,” he eventually admitted, before he said his goodbyes and walked out.

Every single thing that he found out seemed to be worse than the one before. He headed back to his office, feeling every single year that he had lived. Once there, he took out a biro from his drawer, and then some paper – items that he used to communicate with some of the Muggle parents when required – and wrote a note regard Harry and the Dursleys with his left hand. When it was done, he placed it in an envelope, and asked Fawkes to take it to the police station nearest to Privet Drive that night.

As it was lunch time, his food appeared next to him. He ate without tasting it, and started his latest batch of paperwork.

His next interruption was an urgent summon for him to attend an extraordinary meeting of the Wizengamot.

Normally, he would rush down and start politicking; instead, he got on with his real job, before he made his way there. He entered the court room with thirty seconds to spare, and took the nearest seat.

Amelia Bones was sat alone in the Judge’s chair. The Wizengamot members were in the traditional red or black robes, depending on their status. Opposite them, Albus could see members of the press, and representatives from different parts of society.

Albus was still dressed in his brown robes. Fudge entered, looking visible distressed. He took his seat. “What is going on?” he demanded.

Amelia ignored him.

“I have requested this emergency meeting, as we are going to question a captured Death Eater who escaped from Azkaban. Normally, he would be Kissed on sight, but instead, he will be questioned. Please note, this is not a trial, and there will not be a sentence at the end. If deemed necessary, we will hold a full trial at a later date.”

There were gasps, as Bartemius Crouch Junior was lead in. He was wearing a grey and black striped jump suit, and had chains joining his legs, and arms, and then another chain joining them. He was placed in a chair that instantly moved iron bars around his arms and legs.

The person, who had led him in, was wearing black robes with the hood up. Whoever it was, immediately pulled Crouch’s head back, and dropped three drops of a potion into his mouth. Albus presumed it was Veritaserum.

“Crouch has spent the last twenty four hours under close guard,” Amelia announced. “During that time, he has only had bread and water. He has also ingested two purging potions, and undergone a

thorough magical scan from a member of the Department of Mysteries. He was pronounced clean.” She looked at the prisoner.

“State your name.”

“Bartemius Crouch Junior,” the man said in an unfocused voice.

“Did you place Harry James Potter’s name in the Goblet of Fire.”

“Yes.”

There was a hush from the crowd, as once again, Harry’s innocence was proven.

“Why?”

“My job was to enter Potter, and help him win. The final task would take him to a graveyard, where My Lord would be waiting to perform a ritual to bring him back to full corporeal life.”

There was a horrified silence.

“Who is your lord?”

“Lord Voldemort.”

There was an explosion of noise. Amelia’s wand let off a huge bang, silencing everyone.

“Nonsense, this man is delusion, I won’t have it!” Fudge yelled.

With a blindingly fast draw, Madam Bones hit Fudge with a stinging spell. “You will be silent, or I will have you removed,” Amelia said in measured tones. She addressed the Wizengamot. “We asked these questions yesterday. A squad of Aurors were dispatched to the location given. Once they arrived, there was a fight, and while the entire squad saw the Dark Lord’s current form, he managed to escape.”

Amelia waved her hand, and a second prisoner entered.

“They did capture Peter Pettigrew.”

Fudge had a totally horrified look on his face, and Albus remembered what had happened only a few months previously.

He stared at Fudge until the Minister met his eyes. Albus smiled coldly, before he tapped his head. “I have the memories,” he mouthed.

Fudge deflated.

A new chair arose from the floor, and Pettigrew was placed in it.

“As Peter Pettigrew is looking very alive for a man reported dead, we have decided to question him as well.”

It took nearly five hours, and more doses of Veritaserum for the whole sordid affair to come out. Toward the end, Albus asked permission to ask one question of each wizard.

Amelia allowed it.

“Name all the Death Eaters that you know were willing participants, but later lied about being under the Imperious curse.”

“Objection,” Fudge called, “Hearsay.”

“You are not a counsel for the defence and this is not a trial, but an investigation,” Amelia pointed out. “Any person named will simply have to state, under Veritaserum, having been checked for counter potions, that they were telling the truth, and they will be allowed to continue their lives as the honourable members of society that they are.”

The very first name Crouch droned out was Lucius Malfoy.

Albus twisted, to see where Malfoy was sitting, and he smiled coldly. Malfoy was looking at him with absolute hatred, but under that, was a slice of fear; the fear that his life was about to change.

Albus bowed his head and turned his back. He turned his senses on full, just in case, and listened to the rest of the names.

When he had finished, it was Pettigrew’s turn, and he listed the same names.

“Every person who has been named is advised not to leave the country,” Amelia said. “And will report here tomorrow at ten am for us to clear their names.”

She addressed the members of the press. “Please ensure that everyone knows that we now have very serious doubts as to the guilt of Sirius Black, and that the Kiss on sight order has been revoked. He is invited to attend the Wizengamot for a trial he didn’t seem to have the first time around.”

“All rise,” the clerk shouted.

Albus stood, and as Amelia left, he stood and walked over to the Minister. “I think,” he said cheerfully, “that we need to have a meeting.”

Fudge looked at him. “Yes, of course,” he said, and Albus could see the hope in his eyes; the hope that Albus was willing to do a deal.

They walked out of the court room, in to the elevator, and rode it down to the bottom floor, where they entered Fudge’s office. Albus immediately order some food and drink, telling the secretary to go home when she had finished, as it would be a long meeting.

He was silent until the food arrived, and they were alone.

“Well?” Fudge asked.

Dumbledore summoned his phoenix, who brought all the paper work he was currently working on.

“Well, what?”

“What’s the deal?”

Albus chuckled. “No deal,” he explained. “I’m not letting you out of my sight until tomorrow. You have a history of not listening to people who don’t line your pockets with gold.”

“You can’t do this!”

“I assure you that I can,” Albus corrected. He waved his wand, and created a bronze bucket in the corner, and added a wooden partition. He then locked the door, and cancelled all the other spells in the room. He settled down on the couch, and got to work.

Fudge spluttered, threatened, blagged, and went on and on. Albus ignored him completely. No one was going to make a donation to get out of this easily.

When he finished his paperwork, he sighed. He was caught up on everything, how was he going to distract himself now?

He made himself comfortable, cast several wards on himself, summoned Fudge’s wand, and sent himself to sleep.

He awoke at 9:40, with his bladder full. It was a pleasure to relieve it. What wasn’t a pleasure were the aches and pains that came from his uncomfortable sleeping arrangement. He was far too old to sleep on a couch, but he took it as another form of penance.

He cast several charms on himself, and the snoring Minister who was on the carpet behind his desk, before waking Fudge up. “Chop chop,” he said, “time for the meeting.”

They arrived bang on time, and Albus kept the Minister next to him. The chamber was full to the brink, with more members of the public and journalists. Albus thought he recognised some officials from the I.C.W.

Lucius was the first person called.

“He’s clean,” the man in the cloak announced. Albus frowned, as the voice was different from the day before.

Instinctively, he sent a spell at the Unspeakable, tipping back the hood to find it was actually Baron James Nott that had been hidden under the hood.

If he’d had some sense, Nott might have been able to talk himself out of it. Instead, he paled and

looked guilty.

“Order,” Amelia’s voice rang out. “This is most peculiar. As Head of the Magical Law Enforcement, I can hereby state that Lord Nott is not a member of the Unspeakables.” Albus blinked, he didn’t know that. It grated for a second that someone else had knowledge that he didn’t.

“Also, I note that Lord Nott is on today’s list. This looks very suspicious. Chief Warlock, can I ask you to check each person?”

“I’d be delighted,” Albus said, as he headed down, and met Lucius’s eyes calmly. He was looking desperate now. Albus cast the revealing spell, and Lucius lit up like a Christmas tree.

The crowd hissed, in their eyes, Lucius was already guilty.

“Ahh,” Albus mumbled. “I recognise this.” He cast a powerful purging spell on the man. Lucius dropped and vomited, and kept doing so. When he had finished, Albus cleaned up the mess, and used the detection spell again. This time nothing happened.

As Lucius was weakened, he gave no real resistance as Albus put him in the chair. Before he continued, he cast an identification spell on the vial on the table. “It is water,” he sighed.

Amelia growled. “Shacklebolt, arrest the Aurors who were in charge of the Veritaserum, and the ones who were guarding the prisoners.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Shacklebolt snapped to attention.

“Proudfoot, fetch a new batch, immediately.”

“Yes, ma’am,” the Auror said, as he ran out at full speed.

“We will get to the bottom of this,” Amelia stated, a terrifyingly fierce expression on her face.

“While we have the time, I can’t help but think that our usual jailors could easily be swayed by the promise of more souls, and as such, perhaps we should use the Ministry dungeons to keep anyone suspected of a crime?” Albus questioned.

“Good point,” Amelia nodded. “We’ll go a step further, and cast the Fidelius charm over it.”

“My history with that charm is not good,” Albus sighed. “Perhaps a member of the Unspeakables would be a good person to cast the charm.”

Amelia nodded, as Proudfoot dashed back in carrying a vial.

It was with a degree of pleasure that Albus verified the potion and then used three drops on Lucius. Amelia started with an easy question.

“Did you join the Dark Lord willingly and lie about being under the Imperious curse?”

“Yes.”

The outcry was huge, and it took several minutes for Amelia to regain control. And from there, she went for the jugular. Every dirty deal was laid bare, to the horror of most people. In a way, the trial that would follow would be meaningless. Lucius was being tried on the court of public opinion and being found guilty.

To Albus' pleased surprise, there were a couple of people who were genuinely innocent, and the crowd seemed appreciative of that too.

At the end of the long day, Albus was happy to leave things in Amelia's hands, as he headed back to Hogwarts.

He was quite proud of what he'd achieved, when another shaming thought struck him.

Why hadn't he done that years ago?

He'd destroyed practically all of Voldemort's support in less than two days, and he could have done it years ago, and then Harry wouldn't have had to be protected, and could have grown up in a loving home.

He groaned as his guilt returned with a vengeance.

Albus returned to his desk and spent the next few days being the Headmaster as much as he could, and the Chief Warlock when he couldn't get out of it.

It was a week later that Hagrid rushed in to the Great Hall. “Perfesser?”

“Professor Hagrid?”

“The Merpeople, they want to talk to you!”

Albus nodded. He excused himself from the table, and followed the half-giant out.

“I didn' know,” Hagrid mumbled. “Not that it were that bad, yeh know?”

“I think I was wilfully ignorant,” Albus confessed.

“Mebbe we all were,” Hagrid said. He gave a large sigh. “At least he'll be okay there, see some cracking beasties.”

Albus chuckled. “That he will, Hagrid. That he will.”

Mmuuurtar, the chieftain of the Merpeople and Murcus' partner and equal was bobbing about. He screeched a greeting. Albus cast the bubblehead charm and a warming charm, and walked straight

into the water. He then had to shrink the charm, so that only his mouth and nose were covered. He needed the difference in water pressure to understand the merman.

“Black haired boy, can we speak to him?”

“Harry, the smallest one?” Albus asked, to clarify.

The Merman gave him a thumbs-up and nodded. Albus blinked in surprise, he’d never seen that before.

The Merman laughed. “Harry taught us, it has caught on,” Mmuuurtar explained.

“I’m afraid that Harry has gone,” Albus confessed.

Mmuuurtar frowned. “Why, where?”

“Why? Many failings on my part. As to where, he has managed to join the European Veela Enclave, without a bond.”

Mmuuurtar grinned and gave him two thumbs up. “I knew that kid was awesome!”

“Might I enquire as to why you wanted to talk to him?”

“Oh, we wanted to invite him to dinner. My daughter’s got a bit of a crush on him. He even kissed her; it was her first kiss as well.”

Albus chuckled. “So she’ll be sad.”

“What? Oh, no, of course not. We need a holiday, so we’ll visit our friends who hang out in the Enclave Ocean.”

“I don’t suppose…”

“Don’t ask, respected one,” Mmuuurtar interrupted. “There are many vows we have to make to see our cousins, and we will not break them.”

“Of course not,” Albus said. “Sorry, the need to apologise is large.”

The chieftain nodded. “Thank you for your time.” He flicked his tail, and dived away.

Albus shook his head, and walked out. As he hit the air, he cancelled the charm, and started to cast drying charms.

“Everything alright, professor?”

“It seems that Harry made some friends while down there. They are going to visit him.”

“Can we send a message?”

“No. They have oaths.”

Hagrid visibly deflated.

“I let him down.”

“All we can do is learn our lessons, and not do it again.”

“Aye,” Hagrid agreed. “I’ve got to feed the horsies.” Hagrid said his goodbye and walked off, allowing Albus to head back to school.

In his office, he sat with his feet up, and looked at the timetable. Maybe it was time for a few new classes, and maybe he should take one himself. Then, perhaps, he wouldn’t be so out of touch.

In order to keep himself busy, Albus decided he would conduct a surprise audit on all the classes. He sat at the back of each class, disillusioned, and was delighted with the standard of the teaching. Or he was, until he entered the History class room, with the sixth year Gryffindors.

He wondered why some students were carrying pillows. As they entered, Fred and George transfigured their desks in to actual hammocks that hung from the ceiling, and they settled down.

Cuthbert entered. Albus awaited his reaction to the amusing prank; this was the sort of thing he liked – it didn’t harm anyone, and gave everyone a bit of a laugh. “Blacktooth turned to his neighbour in the council meeting and discussed his health, before he switched and talked to Sharpfang,” the ghost droned.

Albus blinked. What council meeting? Who was Blacktooth? The students with pillows were already napping. Other students appeared to be doing homework for other subjects. Fred and George were completely asleep, as they swayed in their hammocks.

Albus took a deep breath. He allowed his power to flare, and dropped his invisibility. The children jumped, Fred and George actually fell out of their hammocks.

“Has it always been like this?” he demanded.

All the students nodded as one.

Cuthbert continued to drone.

“And exams?”

“Self-study. Some of the enterprising Ravenclaws put together a cheat sheet for the exams, and have passed it down, cost two gallons for an O. The exam has never changed.” Fred said.

Albus winced. “I hope you can get a refund,” he said. He looked at the droning ghost, and wondered what had happened to the teacher he remembered; the one who would tell the most fabulous stories of goblin wars.

“Cuthbert,” Albus said loudly. “Why didn’t you tell me you were bored of teaching?”

“I tried,” the ghost said, “But Armando didn’t care.”

“You didn’t tell me?”

The ghost shrugged. “Didn’t realise you were the headmaster until recently, and I didn’t care then.”

“You can move on,” Albus suggested.

The ghost didn’t even say thank you, he just vanished.

“Well,” Albus said, as he turned to the class. “I guess I know how I am going to keep busy,” he said. He clapped his hands, and all the pillows vanished. “Now, let’s discuss the events that lead to the Knights of Walpurgis.”

After the lesson, Albus found himself in the most positive mood he’d been for a while; which was the sign for something bad to happen. And the wards told him that indeed, something bad was about to happen.

He opened the doors; there was no point in playing games as he sat on one of the chairs next to the fireplace. He had no right to hide behind a desk.

Sirius Black and Remus Lupin entered. They paused, and then sat opposite him. Sirius immediately jumped up and started to pace, before he threw himself back down. Remus opened his mouth, and then shut it.

Albus decided to get the conversation started. “It is true,” he said, “After being isolated, bullied and failed by every authority figure, he plotted his escape from Hogwarts, wherein he joined the European Veela Enclave as an unbound male, and as such, has already become a legend.”

In a hollow voice, Sirius asked, “I don’t suppose you mentioned to Harry that you’d asked us to go to Russia on a mission for you, to get me out of the country and doing something productive, and that we were incommunicado?”

“No.”

“Fuck.”

Remus leaned forward; his movement was jerky, angry. “His friends, Ron, Hermione?”

“Mr Weasley, well, he was the ringleader in expelling Harry from the Gryffindor House for dishonouring them in his entrance to the Tri-wizard tournament. The whole house bullied Miss Granger into staying away from Harry.”

“Fuck,” Sirius said again.

Albus inclined his head.

“And since then, you’ve cleaned house?” Remus asked.

“Guilt is an incredible motivator,” he agreed.

“It is impossible to get in to the Enclave,” Sirius sighed.

“Yeah,” Remus agreed. Albus raised his eyebrows. “We spent the summer of our sixth year trying,” the werewolf added.

Sirius gave a harsh chuckle. “Is there anything we can say to you that you’ve not already thought yourself?”

“Probably. I honestly rate this as my greatest mistake. And I am terrified that I will never gain absolution. I put a child in a hostile environment; I believed totally in my own infallibility, I forgot that I am not a deity, I didn’t notice how bad my own school was, and I allowed a fourteen year old to face a dragon without a word of support or help.” He shook his head. “What sort of person does that make me?”

Neither of the two had an answer.

“A bad one,” he murmured, in his own damnation.

Sirius gave a laugh that turned into a sob. “It’s okay,” he said in a voice that was full of self-mocking, “Oh, no, Moony, we don’t need to go back, Harry’ll understand – he’s got his friends, and we’ve not had a Christmas Eve party in decades, Moony, decades. And my god, look at the brunette.”

“They’re all brunettes, Padfoot,” Moody continued, his voice unnaturally upbeat. “This is Russia.”

“Little sister routine?” Sirius continued. He dropped the upbeat voice. “So, yeah, we didn’t contact Harry because we were recovering from some Russian level drinking followed by some Russian level fornication.”

Albus winced.

“And of course, after we finished, we were late for the contact, and were soon incommunicado tracking down your book.” He pulled a black book out of his pocket and chucked it on Albus’ desk casually.

Albus hid a wince; he knew how rare that book was. Honestly, it didn’t matter now.

“At least I can be proud,” Sirius murmured, “A Veela Enclave, and unbound as well. There will be young Veela queuing up a mile long to grab a boy who managed that.”

“And at least one mermaid,” Albus added.

“Oh?”

“He shared the Merchieftain’s daughter’s first kiss during the second task.”

A shallow grin appeared on Sirius’ face. “Damn, that’s two things I’ve failed that he’s scored.” He took a deep breath. “This is really fucked up.”

“It is.”

“We’re not going to be able to work for the Order anymore.”

“We have to get to him, or at least try,” Remus agreed. He gave a shallow laugh. “Can you imagine us telling James and Lily that we lost the last chance to talk to him, at Christmas, because we were screwing a couple of Muggles?”

Albus sighed. “One mistake is nothing compared to the catalogue of mistakes I made,” he said. “I am responsible.”

“I appreciate that you are trying, Albus,” Sirius said wearily, “But you are talking to someone who got himself locked up and a werewolf that hid for eleven years.”

“We do guilt really well,” Remus agreed.

“I can’t stay here,” Sirius said abruptly, and tore out of the room.

“Sirius,” Albus barked. The man stopped, facing away. “Go and see Amelia, get your freedom, it will be easier for you to do what you have to do without a price on your head.”

Sirius nodded briefly, and left.

Remus stood. “I’m sorry, Albus.”

“We all are.”

Remus ran his fingers through his hair abruptly. “I’ll be in touch, in case anything urgent comes up.”

“Thank you. One more thing,” Albus asked. “What’s the ‘little sister routine’?”

“Oh, we approach two girls, and Sirius says, ‘Excuse me, but it’s my little sister’s birthday soon, and she’s a little too old for cuddly toys now, and we’re running out of ideas of what to get her.’” Remus replied.

“And that works?”

Remus looked away. “It establishes family connections, that we’re caring men, discussing something like that on a night out, and it gets them talking.” He smiled bitterly. “Surprisingly, we

didn't say, 'we're planning on getting you drunk and shagging you, and thereby screwing up the one link we have to our best friends who died all those years ago.'"

"Thank you for assuaging my curiosity."

"I think we're going to get drunk for a while."

"Good luck." Albus watched the two defeated men walk out of Hogwarts.

Somehow, watching Sirius and Remus drowning in guilt was worse than his own. They had made one small mistake, one that was somewhat understandable, his own mistakes were far worse.

He ignored the book on his desk.

He had no idea how long he sat there; until he looked up as the wards notified him of Minerva's entrance.

She sat in front of him. "I need your help."

He sat up a little. "Go ahead."

"Miss Granger, she wants to leave Gryffindor."

"And go where?"

Minerva winced. "Nowhere, she wants to be on her own, she wants to live in the same small room we gave Harry." She took a deep breath. "I'm scared that she'll soon force the house to expel her."

"I'll talk to her," he promised. "What I will say, I don't know, but I'll try."

"Thank you, Albus. I'll send her up immediately."

Albus didn't move, he called for a tray of sandwiches and some tea, which arrived on a small stool next to him, away from the fire.

"Come in," he called, as he heard the footsteps. Hermione walked in, her brown eyes were haunted and her hair far more unruly than he could remember. He wondered when the last time she ate was.

"You are going to eat," he said. "As am I, and then we are going to have a chat."

She looked at him briefly, before seeming to find her hands a far more important source of inspiration and interest.

"That was not a request, Miss Granger."

Her eyes flashed at him for a second, before she reluctantly took a single sandwich and nibbled at

it. He took one as well, and ate it at the same speed as his guest.

She finished it, and then looked at him for a second. “Not until they are all gone.”

It took close to half an hour for them to finish the sandwiches, and then drink the tea. He had thought that her hunger would have demanded she ate more, once she started, but she had not given in to it.

Hermione, her eyes still locked on her hands, started to speak in a wavering voice. “All my life I trusted adults, they protected me when I was bullied, they educated me, fed my need to learn, they tried to help me, even if I did not always take their advice.

“When I came to Hogwarts it was rough at first, but a boy, a runt of a hero, jumped on the back of a troll to save me, and with that, he became the best friend I had.

“We argued, we fought occasionally, we fell out, but we always came back together. And then, this year – it all happened so fast - Weasley twisted something I said, and I was stunned at his betrayal; and then all the house agreed, and it was done.

“I was threatened, nothing overt or direct, but it was made clear that I had to shun Harry or I would suffer – that it would be back to how it was when I was younger, alienated and alone.

“And in that moment, I caved, I forgot my friend, I was scared, so I gave in. And then things happened and I couldn’t change my mind.

“I turned on my true friend. I accepted my role; others were talking to me, and surely the professors would have said something if we were wrong. And more, he got lower scores in the tournament, despite doing better than the other contestants, so we had official notice that we were right, I had notice that I was right.

“And then, rumour swept the school; Harry had enslaved the Veela and I had anger, self-righteous anger. I was still right, everyone said so. We tried to find him, but Harry was far cleverer than us – maybe not in school work, but in cunning and real life usage of intelligence, he was far above us.

“He emerged from your office, alone, looking more relaxed than I could ever remember, and all my doubt came back; my anger vanished, as did my best friend.

“But I still had an illusion that needed shattering, and it was soon shattered. Harry was innocent, of course, as I knew all along. And every single person had turned on him.

“So, please, Headmaster, having betrayed my best friend, having betrayed every single thing my parents taught me, having watched as the people I trusted betrayed my best friend, please explain why I should stay in Gryffindor. You are paying your penance, why should I not pay mine?”

Every word she said reverberated deep inside him; somehow it was worse because she had not changed her pitch or tone throughout her entire recital.

“I will let you leave Gryffindor,” he said. “But only for another House. I am learning lessons; I have already put into place procedures so that that the railroading Harry received cannot happen again, and also, if someone is expelled from a house, they have options. The room Harry was in has been sealed, and will not be re-used.

“I simply will not allow another child to be isolated like that.”

Hermione looked up slowly, her pain filled eyes stared at him. “I need to be out of Gryffindor.”

“Might I suggest Ravenclaw?”

She shrugged.

Albus summoned Filius.

“Hermione, I am sorry that we let Harry down, and I am sorry that we let you down. Unfortunately, we are still human, and make human mistakes.”

He stood, as Hermione barrelled into him, crying her heart out.

He patted the back of her head, and allowed her to cry. Actually making a direct apology made him feel a little better himself.

Filius entered and waited patiently.

“Filius,” Albus said, as Hermione pulled away. “I have accepted Miss Granger’s request to leave Gryffindor.”

Filius nodded, and Albus knew he had read between the lines. “Come on, Miss Granger,” he said, his manner polite and gentle, “we’ll show you the Common Room, and get your stuff moved. We’ve got a group discussion tonight, on House Elves, and their place in the Wizarding society.”

Hermione looked up and smiled a little. She nodded, and they headed out.

Albus followed them out and walked straight to Minerva’s office. He knocked and was welcomed in. It was never pleasant to tell people bad news.

“Hermione is now a Ravenclaw.”

Minerva pressed her face into her hands. “Perhaps it’s for the best.”

“I think it might be,” he agreed.

Minerva sighed. “Well, there is nothing more to be done. I am going to need to take some time away from being Deputy Headmistress. I need to fix Gryffindor, it is broken.”

He nodded. “I shall ask Filius to share some of your responsibilities.”

“Thank you. If you’ll excuse me, I shall go and talk to them, explain the changes I will be making.”

Albus returned to his office, and got on with his work. He did feel a bit better, and resolved to keep the standard up.

The next few weeks passed swiftly, with teaching on top of his normal duties, he was as busy as always, but it felt far more focused. He knew some of the students now, and he could see some differences in the school. Students were mixing with more freedom; he just wished the cost hadn’t been so high.

He sent, out of hope more than anything else, a missive to the Veela Enclave, and received a polite reply that yes; Harry would be attending the last task.

The day of the tournament started well. The sun was out, he had some splendid kippers, and he’d get to see Harry today.

The good start lasted until the Daily Prophet arrived. “Fudge finds answer,” the banner headline read, “Potter Destined One.”

What followed was practically a press release, stating how Fudge had discovered the prophecy Sybil had given to Albus all those years ago, and that it said that Harry would be the one to kill Voldemort. It continued with the ‘news’ that Fudge would be personally attending the final task of the Tri-Wizard tournament where he would ensure that Potter did his duty.

His Floo opened, and Barnabas appeared in the emerald flames. “I had no choice, Albus, the Minister ordered it printed verbatim.”

“You had a choice,” Albus said softly, “what you should have done is gone to prison for the night; one night in a soft ministry jail, and you would have emerged a hero, and the Minister would have been destroyed by tomorrow morning. Instead, you have painted a huge target on Harry’s head.”

The editor of the Prophet winced. “There will be an emergency issue this evening.”

Albus nodded, as Barnabas left. The headmaster slowly walked down to breakfast, he was walking slowly because he wanted to hear the scuttlebutt.

Children were in small groups, discussing it, and to his relief, some were defending Harry. Ravenclaw was even having a debate at their table, with Hermione in the middle, looking more animated than he had seen her for a long time. And more, she was passionately expressing her opinion that Harry should be left the hell alone, and not get the weight of a country dumped on him.

Others were not so enlightened. He looked up as Ronald Weasley expressed his viewpoint that Harry was a coward for not dealing with the prophecy.

He was about to interrupt, when Ron was tapped on his shoulder, and he turned into a punch that

knocked him out. Albus sighed. “Longbottom, that’s detention.”

“Yes, sir,” Neville agreed. There was zero remorse on his face, and Albus just couldn’t bring himself to punish the boy anymore.

“You might find that Mr Weasley is hiding from his guilt,” Albus suggested.

Neville shrugged.

Albus turned, and as he was sure that no one could see his face, he let himself grin briefly. By the time he sat down, evidence of his amusement had vanished.

He would never remember what he ate for breakfast that morning, as despite everything, he was incredibly looking forward to being able to see, if only from a distance, how Harry was doing now.

The other champions were all looking distant. Fleur had a slightly soft smile on her face, as she sat and chatted with a few of her year-mates from Beauxbatons. Viktor was alone in the chaos around him; it was a rare ability to be so self-assured in one so young. Cedric was with the other Hufflepuffs, who were trying to distract him, but anyone could see that he wasn’t really there.

After breakfast, Albus walked over to the maze that had been grown on the Quidditch pitch. Hagrid was working with some animal keepers to get creatures into the maze. Some members of the public were already wandering around and watching. And as he walked past, he kept hearing the same words “duty”, “hero”, “responsibility,” and for the first time, he wondered just why he was working so hard for these people.

He had always tried to protect them, and even after cutting off the chimera’s tail, rendering it practically powerless, they still refused to stand up and do something about it themselves. He stopped as a thought shot through him like lightning.

Perhaps the problem wasn’t them, per se. Perhaps he was the problem. He’d been the leader of the light – the most vainglorious title ever bestowed on him – for so long, that perhaps everyone thought that even as he approached retirement, some other idiot would come and take his place.

Maybe that was the problem; maybe all his work had coddled them for too long – given them a sense of entitlement. Well, enough was enough. He was the Headmaster of Hogwarts, and that was what he wanted on his tomb, not useless titles in useless governments. Not sitting on the hard wooden benches at the Wizengamot listening to people who were as old as him whine like they were toddlers seemed a wonderful idea.

With that decision made, he realised he felt even lighter, and the guilt he still felt loosened even more. Oh, it was still there, and he would live with it for the rest of his life, but he felt like he had finally learned the lesson, and eventually he would be able to move past it.

And that hope was worth more than anything.

An hour before the ceremony, the so-called important people started to arrive. Fudge,

accompanied by fifty Aurors and Amelia Bones arrived, the latter looking more than irritated.

They set up shop near the stands, and the journalists soon arrived. Albus cast a charm so that he could listen. Fudge was setting himself up so neatly, that Albus had a strange sense of comfort with the thought that he was doomed. Because Harry was returning to the Veela Enclave, even if Albus had to fight Aurors on his own.

But honestly, had these people done no research at all? Without very specific permission from the Enclave council, Harry simply could not leave without dying.

And that wasn't to mention the sheer futility of anyone trying to remove him by force. There were tens of thousands of Veela, humans, and other creatures in the Enclave, all dedicated with everything they had to protect themselves, and that was if someone actually knew where the Enclave was!

And that thought gave him some comfort. Voldemort would have to know that attacking Harry now would be suicide. He was sure that Voldemort would spend far more time worrying about Harry than anything else.

He took his seat at the judging table, and quite rudely ignored his colleagues. Despite knowing the full story, neither had attempted an apology for their actions, and he was quite disgusted with both of them.

He was starting to get a little concerned, as the competition was due to start in five minutes, and Harry was still absent.

He looked up, as he felt a massive spike of energy that announced one of the Veela portals. He cast a spell, and watched as the first of the Veela squad emerged from their wonderful transportation spell. He recognised Colonel Adler in the lead and his mind flickered back to the almost insolently easy way she had killed Severus.

Just why Severus had chosen to attack them, he would never know. All he did know was that it was incredibly stupid and the man had paid for it with his life.

To his surprise, the Veela kept coming, spreading out behind Colonel Adler, until he realised that they had sent a phalanx, 120 warriors, with Mr Potter.

He allowed himself a smile. Fudge had failed already. In perfect and inhuman unison, the Veela marched, until they came to a stop near to the entrance to the maze. There was a slight shift, and he could just make out Harry as he walked to the front, to stand next to Colonel Adler.

The Veela Colonel gave a command, and her soldiers moved into parade rest.

Albus looked at Harry, and relaxed. The boy had grown a few inches, and looked tanned and fit. His hair was spiked up, showing that his scar was gone, and he was not wearing glasses.

The best thing Albus could see was the small smile of confidence on his face.

He was dressed in a male version of the Veela armour. Thick blue and gold boots were partially hidden by a deep blue robe, with white fur accents. He had gold wrist guards, a decorative gold cuirass, and an honest to goodness sword on his left hip.

He watched as Ludo Bagman approached them nervously. The phalanx did not move at all, but somehow were suddenly a lot more intimidating. “W-welcome back, Harry,” his voice broke as he said it.

Harry said something in the true language of the Veela; none of the Veela responded, but Harry didn’t seem bothered by that in the slightest. Albus flicked his eyes to Fleur, to see if she had caught it, but her expression was slightly confused.

“The object is to get to the centre of the maze,” Bagman explained; he was visibly shaking with nerves. With his voice amplified, he continued, “The first person to touch the cup wins.”

“Rules, are there any? Penalised, I do not want to be, knowledge not knowing the required.” It wasn’t only the verbal grammar that was wrong with Harry’s speech, his inflections were in the wrong place. Albus had the distinct feeling that Harry hadn’t spoken any English, at all, since he had left. And more, that he didn’t want to.

Albus was amused by the stubbornness of the teenager. He hoped that, when he was older, he’d be able to at least appreciate his heritage.

“N-no, there are no rules. Krum will be first, Diggory one minute later, and Delacour thirty seconds after that. You will be another minute later. There was a plot to do with the trophy, so we will warn you that the trophy is in no way enchanted.”

Harry nodded sharply. “Leave, you may.”

Bagman scuttled off, and sounded the bang that had Krum enter in a hurry. He immediately turned left and headed toward his first challenge. Upon entry, Diggory went straight on, and Delacour took the right.

Albus didn’t bother watching their progress, because he truly didn’t care.

There was another bang, and Harry stepped forward five steps. None of the Veela offered him support; and he did not look at them for it either.

Harry stood in front of the entrance. “Honour, I reclaim from First Task performance,” he stated loudly. But nothing appeared to happen. Albus had to concentrate hard, but soon he was able to detect the phenomenal power Harry was calling up.

There was no leakage, no pyrotechnic display, and despite the fact that he knew that the Veela could sense the power, they didn’t move a single iota.

The crowd shifted restlessly as they looked at him, some of the more perceptive were looking worried.

Harry's voice suddenly rang out, in his native English.

“By the light of the stars powered above,
By the earth of my ancestors, honoured by love.
From the place I live, the home I desire;
By the loss of humanity, cleansed in my fire.
Let all in my way be destroyed.
Reducto!”

The last word was roared out.

The blue flash that poured from his wand was not the expected bolt of magic, but a veritable torrent of magic. The massive beam of power hit the start of the maze and blasted through the heavily enchanted branches as if they were made of tissue paper. The hedge the spell touched simply disintegrated and every other hedge the spell came in to contact with.

There was complete and utter silence. Albus could see that there was now a direct path straight through the maze, and remarkably, impossibly, almost, the trophy was untouched. Behind it, there was another straight line of nothing leading to a newly formed cave in a hill in the distance.

Harry jogged forward, at a reasonably fast pace, and reached the cup in less than fifteen seconds. He cast a spell at it, nodded, and grabbed it.

Fireworks were supposed to have been let off by Bagman when the first champion touched the trophy.

Harry jogged back, and as he crossed the entrance line, Albus could see the three heads of the other champions peer carefully around the edges of the new path.

Harry tossed the cup carelessly at Bagman, and re-entered the Veela phalanx. As one, they turned, and started to march away.

“W-wait,” Cornelius Fudge yelled. “I am the British Minister for Magic!”

The Veela phalanx stopped, and Colonel Adler looked at him. “Well, Minister?” she asked in her command voice. “Why are you interrupting an Enclave Mission?”

“The boy, we need him back.”

“There is no boy here.”

Fudge blinked at the immediate response, and Albus allowed himself a chuckle under his breath. Watching the Colonel was a lot more fun when you were not the target.

“Harry Potter,” Fudge clarified.

“Requests for Enclave citizens must be submitted to the Enclave Council.”

Fudge glowered. "Look, we need him, he's ours; you don't want to start something here."

Albus suddenly felt like he'd been hit in the head with a pickaxe.

And it was only due to the fact that the Colonel was female that Albus did nothing when Colonel Adler asked nicely if people would stun the Aurors.

The Aurors themselves appeared most eager to stun each other, and less than ten seconds later, the pickaxe was removed, and Albus had to suppress a giggle at every single Auror being unconscious and that Fudge himself had helped stun them.

The Veela phalanx turned as one, and with Harry safely in the middle, they marched away, ignoring the Minister, the Ministry officials, and absolutely everyone else. Albus sighed as Sirius, Remus and Hermione dashed toward the phalanx. They were stunned before they could shout a single word.

And then the Veela and the boy once known as Harry James Potter were gone.

And all that was left were three scared looking champions, an obliterated path through a maze, fifty unconscious Aurors, a shocked and fuming Minister and three people who would be devastated when they were brought around.

Albus allowed himself a small chuckle as he looked once more at the devastation. He walked over to the maze and examined the edges of the new path. The branches had been cut so perfectly that they were actually sharp.

"ProfezzorDumblydoor?" Fleur called. "What 'appened? What spell could do zis?" The three champions moved over to him.

Shaking his head in awe, Albus replied, "Reducto, my dear."

"One spell?" Cedric asked. "A blasting curse?"

"Indeed."

"But ze power, 'ow?"

"I have no idea," Albus admitted freely. "It was quite marvellous to watch. A feeling of tightly controlled magic, a cantrip, and then the spell was released."

"I didn't think cantrips were used anymore?" Cedric asked. Albus noted that Krum was listening, but not participating.

"Indeed, I shall put a request in to the Enclave Council to find out more."

"Albus?" Ludo called. "What now?"

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Well, the champion has left, what about the money? The awarding of the trophy?”

“I believe that the award is meaningless to Harry. And as for the money, it should be sent to the Enclave.”

“Oh, yes. I guess.”

“Zis ‘as been one fucked up tournament,” Fleur sighed.

“Yes, it rather has,” Albus agreed, hiding his amusement as she swore in front of him. “I don’t think the tournament shall be repeated. Not while I am at Hogwarts, it rather brought out the worst in us.”

“Professor, as we’re being honest,” Cedric said, “On a scale of one to ten, how screwed are we, with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named back, and Harry Potter completely gone?”

Albus allowed himself a small laugh. “We have a Minister that tries to order around a phalanx of Veela Enclave soldiers to force a child to fight for us. I think that anything that happens to a society that elects him as their representative doesn’t need Voldemort to be in trouble.”

“I’m really quite scared now,” Cedric said in a small voice.

“So am I,” Albus agreed.

“What are we going to do, Albus?” Fudge called. Albus turned to face him; the officials had managed to get the Aurors awake, although they were looking sheepish and angry. Next to Fudge were some journalists. Albus almost smiled, the set up was perfect from him.

“Surely your advisors could advise you?” Albus replied. “That is what they draw a ministerial salary for.”

Fudge shook his head. “That’s not important right now.”

“No,” he agreed sadly, “Your corruption and incompetence rarely is important. It doesn’t really matter what I say to you Cornelius, you’ll simply go back to your office, and take the advice of whatever bigot has the biggest purse. I’m certainly not going to waste my time giving advice that you will ignore again.”

“But... But, Albus, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is out there, trying to get a body back, and Potter is the only one who can stop him!”

“Indeed, he is,” Albus replied, as the answer applied to both statements. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I shall accompany the champions back, and ensure that everyone leaves the school grounds safely.”

“Blast it, Albus, you’re still Chief Warlock.”

“Not for much longer, I’m resigning that post as well. I will be dedicating my energies to ensuring my legacy at Hogwarts somehow offsets the bad decisions I have made in the last fifteen years. While I cannot make up for my actions, I can at least ensure it can never happen again.”

“Albus?” Madame Bones said, speaking for the first time. “For old time’s sake, what would your plan be?”

“Why I’d put every single Auror on to the job of hunting Voldemort down, capturing him, and then very politely asking the Enclave how much it would cost for Harry to pop back and put a curse through his head.”

Amelia nodded. “A logical plan. We will discuss it at the next meeting of the Wizengamot.”

“Good luck with that,” Albus replied. He doubted she’d be able to get the plan through. Dark times were coming, and he wanted to batten down Hogwarts’ hatches. He might not be able to protect the country, but he could at least protect the children.

And maybe he could ask the Enclave nicely how much it would cost for them to deal with Voldemort themselves. He was pretty sure he could get the public to support anything, and there were some historical defences that Hogwarts had that would certainly be of value to the Enclave. It could be his semi-retirement present to himself.

He headed to the castle, so he could start removing the visitors who didn’t belong at his school.

And as he walked, he was consoled by how happy and content Harry had seemed.

Maybe there was redemption after all.