

# The Nightmare Before Bedtime

By: Shivani/Grazhir

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**Pairings:** Harry/OC

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**Edited:** edited

**Spoilers:** (Anything that might be relevant.)

**Warnings:** (Nope, not telling.)

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**Summary:** In which the author parodies herself in a self-insertion masterpiece after spending too much time reading over at Live Journal's [babb\\_chronicles](#), [deleterius](#), and [pottersues](#).

**Notes:** It is a sad, sad thing for a mind to go to waste. Likewise, occasionally an idea erupts from the bog and demands to be paid attention to. So, in a masterful combination of current (as of 14 Aug 2006) entries into my own Live Journal (sorted by the tag "idiocy") and a great deal of fanciful exploratory trips into the imagination, a story is born, not unlike many seen at various archives around the internet.

(Oh, and I admit, I sort of feel like I'm channeling Mina de Malfois in some instances, but that's probably just because we're so much alike. Well, except for the less than self-aware bits.)

The title comes from the fact that I thought up the original scene just prior to an attempt at sleeping (an activity I failed at for hours due to a delicate stomach).

I may have to commit psecicide before this is all over. Pray for me.

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## 1 : NIMBY SAYS....

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Our story begins as I was sitting on the front porch enjoying my breakfast cigarette. Yes, I know, it's a nasty habit, going outside and inhaling what Floridians claim is fresh air, but one must make sacrifices in life.

And so there I was, innocently enjoying the morning (approximately 2.40pm) when I noticed movement round about my tummy area where there ought not to have been any.

I confess, my first impulse was to shriek like a little girl and leap to my feet, then slap at my clothing while squealing, "Get it off! Get it off!" And yet, I screwed up my courage and bravely dropped my gaze to meet the eyes of my foe.

And there he was, brazenly occupying territory belonging strictly to me, a silky piece of dandelion fluff. So I reached down with a sure hand and a firm pincer grip and snatched the bastard up off my shirt, then tossed him into the air where a passing breeze caught him and swept him off to the hinterlands.

And lo, evil was vanquished once again and the front porch made moderately safe (if you don't count all the bugs and flying roaches that seem to appear at this time of year). And so I sat back, basking in the glory of victory, and finished my cigarette.

Thus, our story ends, with the triumph of good over evil, as it should be.

. . . .Or rather, that would be the case had it not been for a short side trip via an especially weird dream I had to the Fountain of Youth in Xanth, where I magically (and dare I say it, conveniently) was stripped of a few decades of time, but only in body.

Obviously, I retained all my knowledge, confidence, talent, and other sorts of things that actually mattered. Well, and it is true that I looked, before that fortunate occurrence, far younger than my chronological age, but at least I managed to lose that odd quirk with my right knee.

Anyhoo, it was shortly after that when I realized that I had, in fact, magical powers. Another side effect, perhaps, of my unscheduled trip? The silver in my hair remained, but I decided that was perfectly all right and gave me a certain sort of *je ne sais quoi*. I thought it went splendidly with the vivid blue streak in my hair, not to mention the mermaid-ish blue-green ends I was sporting.

Mind you, I might not have realized I had magical powers were it not for the interesting coincidence of receiving a letter from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, all the way from Scotland! Why, in all the times I had visited family in England, I'd never managed to touch base in that particular country.

This, I must confess, was an unparalleled opportunity for me, so naturally I packed up a few small suitcases. I discovered almost immediately that I could bend space (and possibly even time) and make them much, much larger on the inside, which was handy for fitting in those larger items, such as my several computers, desk, queen-sized waterbed, favorite lamp, and any number of items I could not bear to part with, like the blanket I've had since I was eight years old.

Now, having read any number of novels in the science fiction/fantasy genres, I was well prepared to assume that literally anything was possible in the world of magic. Rules, I must believe, were meant for science, not flights of fancy. And so, with my suitcases on (they made for lovely, if peculiar earrings once shrunk with a wave of my hand) and cat carriers in hand, I hied off to the nearest ATM and proceeded to loot it for cash.

Yes, I know, that's a terrible thing to do, but really, how could they catch me when I had magic on my side? After I had divested any number of said machines of their funds, I thought for a moment about how Belgarath and company handled the issue of travel, and promptly turned myself into an albatross and flew across the Atlantic, landing somewhere in London that I only vaguely recognized.

It was then that I realized I only had American currency on me, and felt the need to sigh heavily.

Much, much later on, after a good night's sleep at a hotel near Charing Cross Road, I had my breakfast cigarette while I strolled to that 'Leaky Cauldron' place mentioned in the helpful informational package I had received along with my invitation to Hogwarts, and entered, finding it necessary to pause just inside the door to let my eyes adjust to the dim light.

Shockingly, it was even dimmer than the atmosphere outside, which is saying a lot considering I was in frequently rainy England.

The man in charge was an odd duck, his appearance changing every so often from a visage that was vaguely within the realm of normality to something I think I once saw in a Disney interpretation of '*The Hunchback of Notre Dame*'. Frankly, it was quite nearly frightening, and definitely disturbing. Still, I am terribly brave (except when it comes to bugs), so I asked him politely for assistance on accessing Diagon Alley.

Naturally, he was immediately charmed by my quaint accent and escorted me to the entrance to that fabled place. I watched with sharp eyes as he tapped the odd brick or three and memorized the positioning and sequence, then thanked him prettily before I skipped through the arch that had formed.

This . . . this was the part I dreaded. After all, shopping is *not* for the faint of heart, or for those with a delicate constitution, which I assuredly had. But I said to myself, "Self, onward Christian soldiers," totally overlooking the fact that I'm hardly the religious sort, and marched off toward a Leaning Tower of Pisa-type building that I had been told was the bank.

I ignored the words carved into the edifice, being very accustomed to banks splashing all sorts of nonsense anywhere possible, and marched on in through the ginormous double doors, and then through a second set. I wondered, idly, what the deal was with redundancy.

Luckily, it did not take long to exchange all my ill-gotten gains from ATM raids into wizarding coin, and I promptly opened a vault and secured myself a debit card so I wouldn't have the inconvenience of carrying around the equivalent of Fort Knox in gold on my person.

The only real interesting thing I noticed during the entire transactory period was that the goblins would have been fired from a Bank of America within the first five minutes of employment. Back outside I sighed once more, still dreading enormously the idea of having to shop.

Hours and hours and hours later (most of which was admittedly spent at Flourish & Blotts), I was sinking wearily onto my hotel bed, pausing long enough to order room service before hauling open the several trunks of books I had purchased so I could acquaint myself with my new environment—magic and the wizarding world, not the UK.

I was shocked—shocked, I tell you—to realize that electronics did not actually work in magic-saturated areas. This called for desperate measures! There was no way in hell I would be living isolated from my beloved computer, and I would most assuredly die were I to be denied internet access. *Hogwarts: A History* be damned, this sort of thing was not acceptable.

So, I dug out my ginormous tome of ancient-long-since-lost-to-the-known-universe potions and magic (it's amazing what you can find in the shed when your father comes from a family of dedicated packrats of the Downeast variety) and flipped through it until I found a number of interesting pages which seemed to address my needs.

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*(Weeks later . . . or perhaps days. . . . Time, wither thou goest?)*

I was escorted to the school by an overly large man of dubious lineage two weeks early in order to sit my exams and handed off into the care of the deputy headmistress, a woman I immediately dubbed the Lady of Tartan. She showed me to the room I would be inhabiting for the duration so I could drop off my things, and then to the Great Hall so I could have lunch.

What followed was a plethora of tests designed to plunder the depths of my self-taught knowledge. I found them all to be alarmingly easy, but given the fact that I had years of useless bits of information floating around in my memory cells (when I could access them, that is), that didn't come as any particular surprise, and I was hardly astonished when I was then invited to sit the exams for something called OWLs.

In the end it was determined that I would enter Hogwarts as a seventh year, which coincided nicely with my present age of seventeen. Ministry laws aside, that was convenient should I be

required to use the wand I had been forced to waste money on, a rather lovely specimen of ebony with a phoenix feather core, at 9<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches and rather springy in nature.

The Lady of Tartan then informed me that I would need to return to my previous lodgings to await the train ride to the school with the rest of the students.

“Let me get this straight,” I said, one brow arched incredulously. “I need to return to London so I can take the train tomorrow, back here to Scotland, where I already am?” I belatedly added, “Ma’am.”

She nodded and said briskly, “That is correct, Miss Brown. All students must ride the Hogwarts Express. It’s in the school charter.”

“I see,” I replied, even though I thought it was the stupidest thing I’d heard of since Bush got re-elected. “Very well. Rules are meant to be made, after all. May I ask how I’ll be getting back to London, ma’am?”

She handed me another portkey at that point and explained how to trigger it, then wished me a safe trip before bustling off to do whatever it was deputy headmistresses did. I suspected, given the faint, lingering scent of catnip, that it was more likely to be a rollicking good night for her last evening of freedom.

The next day, after sleeping in the dubious comforts of a room at the Leaky Cauldron, I arrived at the station fairly early and was lucky enough to catch which specific instance of the barrier between platforms 9 and 10 I needed to slip through (in an oh-so casual manner), and found myself an empty compartment that didn’t smell and had clean windows.

I’m a people watcher, you see, so clean windows are important for watching people, assuming you’re even in the mood to watch people, because it’s a good way to learn things about them, especially when they don’t realize you’re people watching in the first place.

I immediately whipped out something to read, that being a selection of stories at any one of a number of fanfiction archives thanks to my laptop, which had a magically boosted wireless network card in it, not to mention a tweaked power supply. That book from the shed had been enormously helpful, and could double as a blunt weapon in times of extreme stress.

Shortly thereafter I was joined by several people I had never met before, all of whom had that typically ‘English’ look about them, something that is, I confess, extremely difficult to put into words. No, not the teeth thing, but that might have been part of it. In any case, the trip north was largely untroubled by time-wasting activities such as having a conversation, so I happily endured, pausing only long enough to purchase a few treats from the trolley when it trundled by mid-way through the journey.

Thank heavens there wasn’t something that might have been convenient, like a buffet bar in one of the cars. And that reminded me of that one train ride with my mother and aunt,

wherein we were all confused for a time when an announcement came over the PA stating, “The buffet bar will be open in ten minutes.” The problem was that the anonymous voice pronounced it more like ‘boofy bar’, and that made absolutely no sense whatsoever to those of us too long away from the more esoteric of English accents.

And then there was the bee that flew in the open window. . . . But really, I digress.

About the only thing I managed to pick up in the way of information prior to our arrival at a place called Hogsmeade was that I was . . . a surprise of sorts. Not only was I an American (half English, actually, which surely counts for something), but I was transferring in rather than starting as a first year. Come to think of it, I was quite sure I’d read something along those lines in *Hogwarts: A History*, so I supposed I should feel quite special.

I was spared the indignity of a ride across the lake with the puny first years and was able to hitch a ride in one of the carriages. They were drawn by creatures that strongly reminded me of the amduusias from *Final Fantasy IX*, but I knew from my perusal of *Hogwarts: A History* that they were, in fact, called thestrals, and could only be seen by those who had witnessed death.

That was rather peculiar in my opinion, since I couldn’t recall having that particular fortune, but brushed off the anomaly as having watched a movie in which an actual death occurred, but was passed off as the work of an excellent special effects crew. It was likely a stunt person, and everyone knows those sorts are a dime a dozen, right? I wouldn’t be surprised if they all came from China, in an effort to do something about the horrendous population problem over there.

At any rate, it was raining (surprise) as my carriage came to a halt, and I blessed the fact that I had already researched and cast a spell to repel water. It already took ages for my hair to air-dry given the fact that it flowed down my back in a waterfall of silky chestnut to nearly reach the tops of my thighs. It was simply asking for trouble to let it get wet in such a damp climate.

Inside the castle I was politely requested by the Lady of Tartan to wait with the first years. Something about being sorted, she said, before disappearing through a set of doors. The children around me were a noisy bunch, their high-pitched chattering a definite cause for mass murder in my opinion. I could feel my headache worsening by the second, but I would have to wait until I could unobtrusively knock back a swig of a potion I’d made recently while bored.

The Lady of Tartan reappeared and gestured for silence, then gave a simplistic speech loaded with propaganda about houses or something—I couldn’t honestly be bothered to listen—then bid us all to form a line and follow her into the Great Hall. So we did.

Thankfully, I was called early on given my surname’s delightful position in the Alphabet Race, and I sat on the uncomfortable stool provided and prayed as the hat slipped onto my head

that nobody before me suffered from lice. And then, a voice I did not recognize as either me, myself, or I, spoke into my head.

*'Well, well, well. You are a puzzle, aren't you.'*

I arched one brow and mourned the fact that another of my fingernails had torn. Perhaps there was a spell to fix things of that nature? I had always been disgusted by the fact that they were weak and prone to splitting.

*'You, my dear girl, are definitely a puzzle, and incredibly hard to place. An excellent mind, though a touch lazy, definitely sly and cunning, though a touch lacking in ambition, and quite loyal, assuming you interact with the real world long enough to form any friendships. However, those are minor issues, and I can see that you really need your bravery bolstered, so after rolling the imaginary dice and fixing the outcome, you'd better be . . .'*

Then it shouted for all to hear, "GRYFFINDOR!" I winced; all this shouting was making my head hurt even worse. And then I winced again, though mentally, feeling rather outraged that I hadn't been placed in Ravenclaw. Was a fear of bugs such an important thing to overcome in the wizarding world? Should I expect to be swarmed in the near future? I wanted to protest, but the Lady of Tartan was already removing the hat and giving me a firmly stern look.

So I rose gracefully, making my way to a spot at the indicated table. I was crushed when I realized that I couldn't self-medicate yet, not having the preferred drink of some sort to use as a chaser, and settled myself (bad posture a given) to endure the remainder of the sorting process, stealthily turning my iPod back on so I could listen to my favorite music instead of sporking myself.

And then, my depression lifted. The last sprog had been sorted, the headmaster made some short speech I didn't pay attention to, and food, blessed food, appeared at the table, along with a selection of beverages, none of which resembled chocolate milk. Water it was, then. I quickly had a sip of my potion, chased it with water and filled my plate, then began to eat, glancing up briefly when an older girl pushed a first year over and slipped onto the bench beside me.

"Hi!" she chirped and aimed a smile at me that could have blinded an Alaskan.

"Yo," I replied.

She blinked at me in mild confusion; apparently that was not a proper sort of greeting in her worldview. Then she said, "I'm Lavender, a seventh year. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Likewise," I said, feeling it was only polite to lie. "Also a seventh year, apparently." She struck me as the type of girl who would chatter at a piece of statuary for hours if she had bad enough eyesight to not realize it wasn't a person. "So tell me, what can I expect from Hogwarts?" I inquired lazily.

That set her off on a long, rambling discourse about everything under the sun that pertained to her beloved school, giving me a chance to satisfy my hunger. I listened as she gushed, nodding every so often and faking a look of interest. But really, I was mourning the fact that there was no such thing as a chip buttie on the many platters of food, though I did have to admit that the roast potatoes gave my Uncle Stephen's version a run for its money.

It was when she started waxing eloquent about the house system that I paid more than passing interest to her verbosity, and began to muse on just how much trouble members outside Gryffindor would be, and was delighted to learn that Slytherin house was, happily, our natural enemy, due to some silly bigot back in the dark ages. Joy. Colour me thrilled beyond coherent speech.

The first years sitting around us were enthralled to the point of barely eating, but that might have been due to nerves, I suppose. And then, dinner was declared to be over, and the headmaster gave another speech before sending us all off to bed.

I could tell this was going to be a right pain in the tuckas what with being expected to wake up in the morning, something no sane person would consider a good idea, as opposed to morning being the correct time to go to bed. I trailed along behind Lavender, climbing the many staircases necessary in order to arrive at our destination, the entrance to Gryffindor tower, and by then I was lost in horrified contemplation of the fact that I would have to indulge in exercise whether I wanted to or not.

One of the girls made a big production of speaking a password to a portrait of a fat lady who seemed to have delusions of grandeur, ostensibly for the purpose of educating the first years on the correct way to gain entrance to one's house area. I tucked away the password in a safe corner of memory and filed in along with everyone else, quite nearly reeling back in shock at the hideous display of bad taste when it came to colour selections in terms of decoration.

I watched as the children were instructed on where things were within the tower, making note of which staircase led to where I might find my dormitory, then slumped into a chair to recover from the excessively fatiguing journey. Truth be told, at that point I was having flashbacks of a sinister kind to all those Enid Blyton stories about boarding school.

Lavender dropped into a nearby chair with a perky smile (I cringed inwardly) and a moment later another girl did as well. Her hair was quite bushy, making me think she wasn't the sort to care all that much about girly things, and also making me think she might possibly, just maybe, be a decent sort when it came to the female gender. It was already glaringly obvious that Lavender was not.

The brunette smiled at me and said, "Hello, my name is Hermione Granger. I'm head girl this year. It's quite nice that we have a new addition to the house. You're a seventh year, I'm told?"

I nodded, resigning myself to a round of Let's Get to Know One Another, and wondering if I'd taken a big enough swig earlier given the prospects for the next space of time. "It's very nice to meet you," I said with as much sincerity as I could fake.

Lavender immediately jumped on the split second of silence following my statement and in a bizarre change of topic said, "You've got such interesting hair, but I notice you don't seem to wear makeup, Nicole."

"Yes, that would be correct."

"But you're a girl," Lavender protested.

I glanced over, then said, "Oh?"

"A girl," she repeated. "Cosmetics are your friend!"

I nodded in an agreeable fashion and said, "Yes, I suppose I am." And then I launched into a long, rambling story about how I was allergic to many brands of makeup and liable to not only develop a rash or a migraine, but also made sure to point out that I had a marked tendency to rub my eyes frequently, which was certain death for eye shadow and liner, not to mention many brands of mascara.

To top things off, I then divulged (in confidence, naturally) that terribly embarrassing story from my childhood, wherein a boy had made rude references to my lips (the sort of lips Angelina Jolie might have had if she hadn't succumbed to collagen injections), and how since then, I simply couldn't bear to wear lipstick and bring attention to them. After all, such comments had persisted for years, and a girl can only take so much, right?

I could see that I had met my goal after taking another look at her face, which bore a mixture of heavy sympathy and glazed eyes. Hermione, on the other hand, bore an expression of impatience, so I dipped a hand into my abnormally small purse and yanked out a bottle. After flipping the top open in a practiced, one-handed move, I knocked back a sip, then casually closed the bottle and tucked it away. Sort of like how I put on ChapStick®, but not.

"What on earth was that?" Hermione inquired, obviously annoyed that she hadn't recognized on sight what the mystery mixture was.

I shot her a vaguely coy smile and replied, "Pain potion. I suffer from chronic headaches, you see, in addition to the migraines. And, well, after I learned that I could inexplicably do magic—perhaps it had something to do with all those fantasy books I tend to read—I decided it was far cheaper to mix up a few potions on my own so as not to bother the medics so much.

"As it is, they all seem to think I'm some sort of hypochondriac, which is ridiculous at best. It's so much easier to carry about a mini-pharmacy, don't you think? I also suffer from a delicate stomach, and you can never be too careful about that sort of thing.

“At any rate, I made a few improvements to the standard formulas. You know, it was horribly inconvenient to have to worry about addiction, and I am quite nearly a genius according to the last few IQ tests I took online, so it stood to reason I could fix that little problem. I mean really, I’m certain you understand. I’m sure you could do the same if you wanted to, right?”

Hermione nodded weakly and began fidgeting. I got the distinct impression she was itching to dive headfirst into a complex tome of truly humongous proportions just to do some research and prove that she could, in fact, duplicate such a feat. She was, by reputation, the smartest witch of her age, after all. How I knew that was quite a mystery, though.

Lavender seemed to snap out of whatever dream world she’d been in up to that moment and aimed a bright smile at me. “Have you considered using all-natural products?”

For a moment, I was strongly tempted to use my likewise inexplicable powers of wandless magic to summon a large, blunt object and test it out against her head. After all, it wasn’t like she was storing a brain in there or anything. Instead, I stifled a sigh and shook my head lazily. “No, don’t think so. It’s just too much trouble.”

I could almost hear the voices echoing in her head, saying, “Beauty is pain”, over and over like some demented mantra much favored by a bizarre cult of female socialization. Apparently, I’d never received that memo, but she had.

Really, I was almost annoyed. The next thing you knew she’d be criticizing my choice of apparel. And everyone knows that timeless fashion in my home state translated to Levi’s, oversized black t-shirts with witty sayings splashed across the front of a geek-humor nature (such as “SELECT \* FROM users WHERE clue > 0. 0 rows returned”), a flannel overshirt (from L.L. Bean, of course), and Bass loafers, right?

However, that line of thought made me remember the time I was sitting at a bus terminal somewhere in England, and was asked by a fellow sufferer of the unseasonably hot weather, “Where are you from?”

And I had replied automatically, “Maine,” because at the time I was living there.

She, with all the innocence of one who had failed world geography, said, “Oh, is that in Canada?”

It was about then that I realized I was dying for a smoke and pushed myself out of the sinfully squashy chair I had been inhabiting. “Right, is there a smoker’s lounge in this travesty of red and gold, or do I have to haul my cookies all the way down and out the castle?”

The looks of horrified shock I received were priceless. For a split second I thought it might have something to do with the truly heinous price of cigarettes in the UK, but then realized they were concerned for my health. Or, perhaps, my dislike of the house colours? I simply didn’t dare ask.

Hermione saved me from my ignorance when she said, “But it’s nearly curfew!”

‘In a few hours,’ I thought to myself, ‘and I can tell I’ll be needing a sleeping potion a bit later on.’ I aimed a casual sort of smile in her direction and said, “Well, that depends on how you define nearly, correct? Should I crack open a window instead and sit on the sill?”

Her eyes went enormously wide as she shook her head, so I continued, “It didn’t take all that long to get up here, so I can’t imagine it’ll be an issue to walk down, indulge, and get back well before curfew. I’ll see you two a bit later, okay? Great.” And before anyone could protest I strode swiftly to the portrait entrance and slipped out, breathing a sigh of relief before wending my way toward temporary bliss.

While I was down there it occurred to me that with my good fortune at having been reduced in bodily age, I now weighed in at -3 years of being a smoker . . . or something like that. After all, I had started smoking at twenty, and I was now seventeen, so. . . .

Forty-five minutes later I was back and immediately noticed that Lavender had gone off in search of a like-minded *induh*vidual, and Hermione was sitting with two boys, one with messy black hair and one with a striking shade of red often found in the hair dye section of the local drugstore. I wandered over and took a seat when she invited me with a gesture, and suffered to be introduced to yet more new people.

“This is Harry,” she said with a nod in the green-eyed boy’s direction, “and this is Ron.”

We murmured greetings to each other, and I found it faintly odd when Harry seemed surprised about something. I was then questioned about the classes I was enrolled in. I could tell Hermione was desperately hoping I was an intellectual sort of person, so I was kind and told her, “Defense, Charms, Transfiguration, Potions, Arithmancy, and Ancient Runes. I considered Muggle Studies as a soft option, but figured I was good to go as it was.”

She beamed at me and launched into an excited discourse about said classes, to which I nodded politely every so often, much like the boys did, in fact. This did not bode well; she seemed to be a babbler. Eventually she gasped and declared it time to go to sleep, so after she ordered the boys up to bed I followed her to the seventh year girls’ dorm.

The next morning, after a harrowing experience in group showering, we trooped down to breakfast, after which I was given a tour by the apparent trio, which ended somewhere out on the grounds. I was grateful, actually, given that my feet were aching and I was desperately considering the merits of whipping up a pair of arch supports for my shoes.

I was then treated to another long, tedious session of Let’s Get to Know One Another. It almost felt like the very air was being sucked out of the space around me, and I was, for a moment, worried that I might be stuck in a state of mind-numbing boredom. However, there was the odd good point about the entire experience. I learned plenty of gossip about my new housemates, which gave me some very naughty ideas indeed.

I confess, it was somewhat difficult to know just how much to say about myself under the circumstances. Perhaps if I slipped up they could be foisted off with a fib about a time turner accident of truly mind-boggling proportions?

The next morning we went down to eat and receive our schedules. As luck would have it, I shared every class with Hermione, and most with the boys. I was mildly confused by the huge amount of pained groaning that was going on around me until a quiet question to the head girl revealed that it was like a curse of some kind, always ending up with Potions as the first class of the day on Mondays.

I shrugged and gathered up my stylish leather satchel, slung it over my shoulder, and joined the small group of people headed down to the dungeons. Along the way I sidled up to the boy named Neville and gave him a friendly smile. I had heard things about him, interesting things.

“Neville,” I said as we got closer to supposed doom, “I’d like you to be my potions partner.”

He blushed and stammered out some kind of reply I didn’t quite catch, then tried again with a touch more success, seemingly overcome with . . . something.

“Really, I think it’d be fun,” I assured him, wondering what sort of accident he might cause, and if it would save me research time as regards the naughty little fantasy that had popped into my head during a dream the night before. After all, efficiency is intelligent laziness. <sup>1</sup>

I’d had those sorts of dreams in the past, and I really wanted to investigate for real. Neville seemed okay with the idea, though he wouldn’t quite meet my eyes, so we chose a table together once inside and waited for the professor to arrive and attempt to pound knowledge into us.

Snape arrived like a violent gust of wind, slamming the door closed behind him, and came to an abrupt stop in front of his desk, a magnificent sneer twisting his lips. I privately wondered if he was an Elvis fan, but kept my amusement at the idea largely to myself. A mental pause interposed itself, followed by the question of whether or not Elvis going home actually meant returning to the wizarding world, then shook it off as being an incredibly silly notion.

I could tell within moments of the man beginning to speak that he would be ‘that’ sort of teacher, and resolved to become the Ravenclaw of Gryffindor on the spot. Why the sorting hat thought I need work in the bravery section was totally beyond me. After all, bugs aren’t that big of a deal, are they?

Thankfully, Snape stopped talking at us and flicked his wand at the chalkboard, revealing to all the day’s work. Why we were launching into a complex potion on the first day was another bewildering matter, but that was all right, as it might work out nicely for me. Naturally, I ignored the detailed instructions provided by my textbook, having been assured repeatedly by my examiners that I was what was called an ‘intuitive brewer’.

Instead, I glanced at the potion name and ingredients, then gathered up what I would need and began to work, sparing the occasional glance toward Neville, who was already trembling and shooting me anxious looks when he thought my attention was otherwise occupied. It might have been that he was confused by my seemingly haphazard approach to potion making, but I didn't feel any pressing need to ask.

And sure enough, not long after I had bottled my perfectly brewed potion and delivered it up to the professor's desk in a neatly labeled vial spelled to be unbreakable, Neville struck with devastating accuracy. His potion exploded in a fountain of rainbow colours, drenching me from head to toe, but thankfully missing any orifices in the direct line of fire.

I shot Neville a reassuring look and turned my gaze on Snape, who looked to be just shy of committing murder. He was headed in our direction, and quite thoughtfully spelled away the mess as he gave Neville a brutal tongue-lashing, then barked out to all and sundry that class was over, and so on and so forth.

"Don't worry about it," I told Neville in a low voice as we exited the room. "Accidents happen to everyone."

He attempted to smile at my understanding nature, but was pushed violently to the side by a blond fellow I vaguely recalled as being in Slytherin.

"Filthy little mudblood," Draco said at his scathing best, which wasn't much, really, when you thought about it. Of course, my lack of experience with his nature wasn't helping at that point, but I had a feeling.

I studied at him for a moment, catching a few glimpses of information for some strange reason from staring into his eyes, then said calmly, "I would call you a ferret, Malfoy, but I shouldn't like to mimic your complete lack of creativity when it comes to insults. So, instead, I shall call you an elitist son of a bitch with more money than taste, and who obviously has a closet full of kinks dealing with such gems as BDSM, D/s, and a raging 'O' complex. You might even be a misogynist, but I haven't spent enough time around you to decide yet."

There, I had slayed him with acronyms, one of which was quite difficult to pronounce. Go me! As expected, his brow puckered in confusion, but it quickly smoothed as a sneer twisted his lips. Then, as though he had somehow won the confrontation, he flounced off with his muscle-bound sidekicks in the general direction of the Great Hall. I suspect he fled in the face of a better vocabulary, but it wasn't the right time to inquire about such things.

So, being the quiet sort of person I am, I merely buffed my nails on my robes and exhaled softly, only to glance up and see a look of near awe on Harry's face; he was still holding a red-faced Ron away from the now ended action. "Snippy little ferret, isn't he," I stated, and was rewarded with much head nodding.

Hermione spoke up then, insisting that we needed to get to our next class, which was Arithmancy. She grabbed my arm in a way I considered to be downright pushy, not to mention being an invasion of my personal space, and dragged me off down the hall. The class was fine—math-type activities always are—and completely lacking in drama. Unless, that is, you get overly excited by numbers, in which case, try not to squee all over my personal space.

Lunch rolled around and I found myself sitting next to Harry, with Ron and Hermione across the table from us. I wasn't quite sure how I had managed to become associated with these three so quickly, but perhaps they could keep the airheads off me in exchange. Lavender was blessedly at a distance, nodding like a bobblehead doll at something another girl was saying.

I once again mourned the lack of chip butties in the food selection, but bravely managed to carry on, and was quite nearly finished when I felt an extremely odd sensation overcome me. It was . . . not like the usual dizzy spells that frequently hindered my existence, and not like the onset of a migraine, either. I simply couldn't describe it, though it did bring to mind that time I watched a film in Psychology class at college and had to leave midway through owing to a scene I would rather not have seen, and ended up unconscious in the hallway mere seconds later.

And then, sharp stabbing pains assaulted me, causing me to drop my fork, and I slid off the bench helplessly into obscuring darkness.

When I awoke it was to the sight of bright green eyes staring at me. I then spied sets of blue and brown; for some reason, the trio of friends was sitting at my bedside, and oddly enough, they each seemed to bear rather shocked expressions. It was then that I noticed that something felt . . . different. A quick check revealed a rather interesting turn of events, and I rejoiced (for the moment, at least, diagnosis pending) in having hit the potion accident lottery on my first try.

Somewhat belatedly I realized that I really ought to trim back my nails, as they were probably unfashionable at the moment. "Hello," I said calmly.

Hermione took that as a cue to rush off, revealing Neville, whose face was a study in anxious misery.

"How long have I been out?" I noticed at that point that my voice had become curiously androgynous. Fitting, I'm sure.

"Two days," said Harry.

I nodded and sighed slightly. "I hope someone will be able to catch me up on what I've missed."

Hermione rushed back in time to overhear and nodded firmly. "That's not a problem. You can look over my notes a bit later."

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“Great,” was all I managed to say before the school nurse sailed in and descended on me in all her antiseptic glory.

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<sup>1</sup> “Efficiency is intelligent laziness.” — Anonymous; [The Quotations Page](#)

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## 2: UNVEILING

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I was reminded for some odd reason of the Authenticity Nazis frequently stirring up trouble at SCA events I had attended in the past. I guess it was the way she moved. Her expression was firm, faintly annoyed, and ever so slightly amused. “Well,” she said to me, omitting any sort of form of address, “I suppose you’d like to know how you’re doing.”

I had a damn good idea already, but I nodded for show.

“It seems the potion accident had a rather peculiar effect on you—something that’s never happened before in recorded history—essentially turning you into the male version of yourself.” She paused, possibly to see if I would either pass out or throw a tantrum, then continued when I simply stared at her, “There is no known way to reverse the effect.”

The corner of my mouth quirked up as I tried to decide how to play this. “So, does anyone know offhand the proper way to legally change one’s name?” I asked.

Dead silence ensued until Pomfrey said, “The headmaster has decided to move you into the unused Gryffindor head boy room. You can’t very well continue to share facilities with the girls, and you might be incredibly uncomfortable sharing with the boys. Your new room has its own bathroom.”

I shrugged. “Works for me.” Internally I was cheering over the fact that I could properly set up my waterbed and other possessions without having to worry about upsetting the other people in a shared dorm. “When may I leave the infirmary?”

“After you get dressed,” she said, then glanced at my fellow Gryffindors. “I’m sure this lot will wait for you, and Miss Granger can show you to your new room once you’re back at the tower.”

I flashed a smile at Hermione and returned the nod she gave me. “In that case, let me get dressed.”

It was necessary to do a tiny bit of magical adjustment on my clothes considering that certain aspects of my body had changed. For instance, my hips had narrowed. As I rejoined the others I noticed that Harry kept staring at me in a fascinated sort of way, but decided not to comment on that just yet. Instead I asked, “I sincerely hope that someone kept an eye on my cats?”

It took me most of the remainder of the day to settle into my new digs. I even found the time to swap out the network card in my desktop while I was setting it up on my desk. By then I was feeling quite exhausted—putting sheets on a waterbed is truly a difficult task, though thankfully I had the beauty of a non-permanent sticking charm on my side—so I sprawled on my bed to ponder something that was quite possibly the most important question concerning my changed existence.

Should I learn to go commando, or should I acquire a load of boxer briefs?

At that point I decided I really ought to have a shower and investigate more closely my new body. Wouldn't anyone in my situation? I'm sure they would. I noticed almost immediately that something wasn't quite right. Either Neville's blunders were truly unsurpassed or there was something about him I hadn't been informed of. His potion explosion had given me an appendage of the Jewish variety.

But that was all right, so I continued to wash up, briefly debating the merits of cutting my hair shorter (and dismissing the idea almost as quickly), only to become very distracted once I began soaping a certain part of my anatomy. You know the one. I very quickly became convinced that men, at least of the magical variety, had it much, much better when it came to certain activities.

A bit later on I was back in my bedroom, transfiguring my existing wardrobe into clothing that fit more comfortably, and musing on new names for myself, when a knock sounded at my door. It was the trio, ostensibly come to see how I was doing, and probably to see if I'd had a nervous breakdown yet over my changed circumstances.

Once again I noticed the aura of fascination Harry seemed to have for me, and the idea popped into my head that the boy might be gay. I would have to try flirting with him; he wasn't bad looking, so it shouldn't be a chore. Ron, on the other hand, was staring at my bed with a startling lack of intelligence in his expression.

"What kind of bed is that?" he asked, and I decided that the vapid look on his face was probably quite the norm for him.

"It's a waterbed. Go ahead and sit down on it, but please, don't bounce. If you break it, I'll be very annoyed."

While he was investigating that, having dragged Harry over with him, Hermione was gaping at the copious amount of electronics I had set up. "How on earth. . . ?" she sort of questioned.

I shrugged a shoulder and moved closer. "I would have refused to come here if I hadn't managed to get them converted over so they'd work properly." I think I caught a distinct flicker of jealousy cross her face, but then it was all about quiet resolve and determination.

"Oh, I nearly forgot," she said, looking mildly chagrined. "The headmaster would like to see you in his office. I'll escort you if you like since you've never been there."

I nodded and grabbed a set of robes to toss on over my clothes as Hermione chivvied the boys away from the bed and then herded us all out like ducklings. She led, and we walked, and I could sense that there were a million questions she was dying to ask.

What eventually came out was, "Are you coping well?"

“I seem to be. I’m rather more concerned about the fact that I’ve missed two days of opportunity when it comes to socialization with my peer group.”

Her expression told me immediately that the sarcasm went right over her head. She compounded that by replying, “Oh, well you have all year. You might want to go to Hogsmeade this coming weekend. That is, if you need to, er. . . .”

“I do,” I assured her. “I’ve already made alterations to most of my clothing, but there are a few things I’d like to purchase to round things out. Assuming they sell muggle-style clothing there, that is.”

She nodded and asked, “I hope you’re not too terribly upset with Neville.”

I shook my head, and was grateful to see we had reached our destination. Hermione spoke the password, making me feel quite hungry as a result, then led me up to the office and waved me through the door after she had announced our presence with a knock.

My first thought as I stepped inside was that the headmaster obviously had the same kind of relatives I did. I left that thought unvoiced, though, and took a seat when he indicated I should do so.

He stared at me for a moment, seemingly at a loss for words, then said in a dry, dusty voice, “Mr Brown, I have here paperwork from the Ministry so that you might have your name changed.”

“Fantastic,” I said, “that’s very kind of you, sir.” And really, I was thrilled to death that someone had been proactive on my behalf, sparing me the tedium of doing the work myself.

Dumbledore aimed a faint smile at me and pushed some papers in my direction, as well as a quill and an inkpot. I wanted to sigh at the sight of them; why on earth these people couldn’t move even an inch into modern times and learn how to use a ballpoint pen was beyond my ken. Were they all secretly masochists?

I carefully read the document, nodded, and dipped the quill into the pot, then filled in the applicable blanks. The headmaster then signed as a witness—apparently he could function as some sort of magical notary public—and the deed was done.

I was now officially Nick Varian Brown. My former middle name had always been a source of annoyance to me, so I was happy to be rid of it. And besides, the new one was witty if you had the knowledge to appreciate it.

“Is that all, sir?”

“Unless you have any questions or concerns you would like to voice, you may leave,” he said.

I rose to my feet and smiled, then said, "I just wanted to thank you for your consideration. The room change, I mean." He nodded an acknowledgment, so I hastened off, heading down rather than up in order that I might have a cigarette. More than two days without one tended to make me a bit snippy, truth be told.

Harry found me midway through my first, an accident I'm sure given that he was carrying a broom in one hand. As he spotted me his cheeks pinked slightly. "I was just going to have a fly," he said.

I smiled. Innocently, that is.

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Time, as it is wont to do, passed. A number of days, in fact. And during that time Harry, for some inexplicable reason, had taken me into his confidence and explained all about the psychotic whackjob that had repeatedly tried to end his life, and continued to.

Personally, I thought this Voldemort fellow could learn a lot from the leaders of certain countries, and even from the multitude of terrorist cells around the world, but I wasn't about to be helpful and send the guy a letter on the subject.

Things had been going quite swimmingly. In an effort to maintain peace and keep Hermione's jealousy at bay, I had even pointed her in the right direction the odd time or three, though I drew the line at ever letting her get her hands on books from my private library. For all I knew, in the magical world the term 'bookworm' had sinister connotations of the damaging kind.

Ron seemed to be a fairly oblivious sort, so it was no real surprise that he never caught on to the fact that Harry was becoming quite fond of me. His sister, however, was not quite so disconnected from reality. A quidditch fanatic she might be, but not to such extremes that she was unaware of Harry's fascination with me.

In point of fact, I had been graced with more than one look of jealousy from the girl. I would generally shake my head slightly, feel a dash of pity, and brush it off. I knew from the many things I had heard that Ginny aspired to be more than she was, but could tell she would never quite reach those heights, especially when she was willfully blind to the fact that the object of her desire was quite clearly a homosexual.

Naturally, that made him perfect for my own nefarious plans, and besides, I was becoming rather fond of him myself. No amount of Sparklypoo™ cosmetics borrowed from Lavender was going to help the poor dear, and Ginny was probably better off with someone like Neville.

So, after a weekend of the usual sort of thing, we awoke the next day and trooped down for breakfast, then hustled off to the dungeons for another thrilling Potions class; I had long since managed to secure Harry as my partner. On Snape's arrival, he of the violent movements and theoretically intimidating mien, we were informed that we would be brewing a heritage

potion, and after a short, but ultimately boring lecture on how it was a pure-blood custom, we were allowed to begin.

Several hours later I stared into my cauldron and smiled in satisfaction, then prepared a sample for marking and set it aside. Harry had also managed to properly brew his, which was the sort of thing to set Snape's teeth permanently on edge.

The procedure was simple enough once we were allowed to continue. A shallow tray, a piece of parchment, a ladleful of potion poured in, plus several minutes of waiting, and everyone was graced with the magical equivalent of a family tree, complete with spiffy colours that denoted things like blood impurities. I assumed pure-blood families used this sort of thing to decide who to disinherit or disown (and possibly arrange an accidental death for).

Unfortunately, we did not have enough time to investigate them, and were barked at and ordered to turn in our samples and get the hell out. Most people did so gladly, though that twitchy little ferret seemed to take great pleasure in how members of houses other than Slytherin tended to flinch a lot as they passed by the professor's desk.

In fact, it wasn't until after dinner that I had a chance to look at my own. The trio had been invited into my room since I was feeling uncommonly kind, and once there each of us whipped out our parchments and started fiddling with them. The first to gasp in shock was Harry, who looked up and around with wide eyes before jabbing a finger at his parchment.

"Gryffindor," he said to no one in particular.

"What do you mean, Harry?" asked Hermione, then took the parchment when it was offered. After a quick glance she too gasped and shot him a look of wonder, then quickly got a hold of herself and said casually, "Well, it's no wonder you were placed in Gryffindor, right?"

"Wha?" contributed a confused Ron, looking back and forth between Harry and Hermione like they were playing tennis.

"Harry is a descendant of Godric Gryffindor," Hermione supplied.

And, miracle of miracles, Ron did not immediately blow a gasket and rail about the unfairness of it all. Instead he asked, "So, do you think there's a vault involved?"

"Ron!" Hermione shrieked.

While they were bickering I shot a slight smile at Harry and went back to perusing my own parchment, jotting down notes as I went along. Truth be told, I was finding some rather peculiar things as I progressed. The bed lurched up and down as Harry took a seat next to me so he could be nosy, shortly followed by a strangled sound as he got a look at my notes.

"How is that possible?" he asked in a whisper.

“Hm?” I responded in an absent way.

“You’re related to everyone.”

“We are all brothers and sisters in this world,” I said piously.

He appeared to be momentarily taken aback by that, then shook his head. “You’re Snape’s kid? Related to Dumbledore? Oh my god, you’re descended from all four founders? And Merlin!”

Hermione went dead silent and her head whipped around like a vicious beast that just caught the scent of prey. “I’m sorry, what did you just say, Harry?”

I passed her my notes and snatched Harry’s parchment out of her hand; further investigation showed that Harry was also related to the Slytherins. Funny, though, he looked ready to pass out when I showed that bit to him.

“I’m sure it’s nothing special,” I said to the room at large, then paused. “Though, how Professor Snape is my father. . . .” Even I couldn’t quite figure that one out. My mother was simply *not* the sort to carouse with strange men of the tall, dark, and broody type. Somehow, I didn’t think I could slip a question like that into casual conversation, and besides, she would never believe I was her offspring at that point.

I shrugged.

“Nick, I really think you ought to show this to the headmaster,” Hermione advised. She really could be overbearing at times. Still, she might have a point. If I was related to Dumbledore, I might be able to score some serious points with the man. Such as, a hefty addition to my vault and perhaps a nice little house in Hogsmeade for the holiday and after.

And that made me wonder if I had been a changeling child and under a mysterious enchantment for my entire life. Were my eyes really that odd shade of blue-grey I had always assumed came from my maternal grandfather? Was my hair really brown?

Deciding to be generous I looked at Hermione and asked, “Don’t suppose you happen to know of any spells to detect the presence of a glamour, do you?”

She thought for a moment, her brow furrowed in concentration, then brightened and nodded. Her wand appeared a moment later and after a nod from me she cast. “Yes, you’re under a glamour,” she stated. “Should we remove it?”

I considered, then shook my head. “No, or at least, not just yet. It would help if I looked the same when I go to see the headmaster.”

“Let’s go!” she enthused as she leapt to her feet.

To be honest I was mildly shocked. I would have expected her to suggest things wait until the next day, with me writing a proper little note requesting a moment of the headmaster's time. I mentally shrugged and went with it.

"Would you two like to come?" I asked the boys.

"What if he's not in his office?" Ron queried, for once asking a sensible question.

"I'll check the map." Harry dashed off and was back a few minutes later. "He's there."

So we all trooped off to the headmaster's office, were invited in, and waved to seats. "To what do I owe this pleasure?" the man inquired.

"Professor," Hermione said breathlessly, "you'll never believe what we found out!" She snatched the parchment and notes out of my hand and planted them on the desk as though she had just presented him with the Holy Grail.

My eyes wandered around the office in an attempt to stave off the desire to nap as the headmaster checked out the documentation. Eventually he looked up, eyes twinkling madly in what I suspected was a drug-induced manner, and said, "How very interesting."

Really.

"And look, professor," Hermione said, then brandished her wand in my general direction. A quick cast and I knew I had taken on my true guise.

"Fascinating, simply fascinating. I shall have to speak with Professor Snape," he added. "For the time being, you may all go."

I didn't hear another word about it for several weeks, though it ought to be noted that Snape kept eyeing me strangely, quite possibly in an attempt to figure out where in his past he had managed to get lucky. He was not, after all, GQ cover material.

Harry and I were roaming the halls talking quietly when he flitted around a corner, his robes billowing behind him. On spotting us he swooped closer, a sneer twisting his lips and a glare being directed at my companion.

"Brown," he barked, "follow me. Potter, find something else to do."

I think the man was a mite upset that I was chummy with a boy he despised, but that wasn't my problem. I shot Harry a reassuring smile, then murmured, "Sir."

Snape stalked off like an actor in a B vampire movie, so I followed, but not before rolling my eyes for Harry's benefit. We ended up in the man's office and I was not invited to take a seat.

And then he said something totally uncharacteristic. “Thank Merlin you didn’t get my nose.”

I smirked. As it was, I must have inherited my mother’s nose, and indeed, her eyes, for they were like finest blue Ceylon sapphires. My hair was now a waterfall of blue-black and dead straight. I was, dare I say it, quite a stud, especially when you considered the rest of the package.

“The results of that potion show that your mother’s name is Serena Winters.”

I thought back for a moment, then nodded. “I’ve never heard of her before, sir. I suppose I must have been adopted by a muggle couple.”

After eyeing me up and down for a few seconds he launched into a tirade about the indignity of having a child in Gryffindor. I suffered through it patiently enough; again, it wasn’t my problem. My mind had long since drifted off into an induced daydream when something he said snapped me back to internal attention.

“A name change, sir? Is that wise?”

Snape snapped his mouth closed and gave me a penetrating look, then said, “Explain.”

I shrugged one shoulder. “I mean no offense, sir, but rumor has it that you are, or at least were, a Death Eater. If that is the case, a son suddenly popping up is the sort of thing to get back to the Dark Tossler, right? Isn’t it possible that he might think it’s a spiffy idea for *your* son to join his merry band of malicious miscreants?”

His eyes narrowed and his lips compressed, probably at my less than respectful demeanor and phraseology. “Possibly,” he eventually admitted. “The Dark Lord is rather keen on such displays of . . . family togetherness.”

I let out a snort of laughter. “The family that plays together slays together?”

Snape shot me a dark look, but I could tell he was morbidly amused. “Perhaps we might consider revisiting this topic at a later time.”

“Of course, sir.”

“Dismissed,” he said, then turned away as though indifferent.

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My next kerfuffle with Hermione was over something I considered to be a rather odd issue. I had maintained from the get-go that using quill and ink was bothersome in the extreme, and had been using muggle writing implements to take notes in class, and had for those same notes forsaken parchment in favor of spiral-bound notebooks.

To add to the issue, I had very quickly created a custom font that mimicked my handwriting for use on my computers, and was in the habit of using a good old fashioned text editor for my homework. After all, it was extremely tedious to have to line things out when one made a mistake, or even start over. Spell check was my friend, and this method allowed me to revise without major and undue effort.

The final blow came when she caught me loading up sheets of parchment into one of the paper trays of my laser printer and printing out my completed essays. The end result was a document that looked handwritten, but wasn't.

For some strange reason, she tried to convince me I was cheating.

I scoffed in her general direction and said, "And if you decide to bring a laptop to school for next term, I'll be happy to fix it up for you, show you how to create a font based off your own handwriting, and let you connect to my network so you can use my printer."

She had to be satisfied with that; really, there was no other choice. It wasn't my fault that she wasn't as smart as she thought she was, and I was never one to hide my own intelligence under a basket somewhere in fear of offending some poor sod who had delusions of being the next candidate for inclusion to Mensa.

Aside from that things were once again moving along swimmingly. So swimmingly, it seemed, that not only was Harry spending hours in my private room (he called it studying, but I called it a game of Red Light-Green Light given the number of semi-covert glances he kept shooting my way), but Halloween was nearly upon us!

And I knew what that meant insofar as my current interest went; we would have to be on the lookout for something nasty to occur, in keeping with a tradition that psychotic whackjob kept. Personally, I thought that level of predictability should have clued someone in to the man being in serious need of help by those dictatorships and terrorists I had thought about previously, but once again I maintained silence on the subject.

Dumbledore (call me "Alby") had decided, in his infinite wisdom, to host a costume party on that hallowed eve. Naturally, that announcement sent most of the female population into a frenzy of planning. The males, on the other hand, were quietly contemplating falling off a broom at an auspicious moment so that they might safely hide out in the infirmary.

Ron and Harry never stood a chance what with Hermione and Ginny nipping at their heels, and we all soon found ourselves traipsing around Hogsmeade at the weekend, looking for costume ideas. Ron, having spotted the quidditch shop, quickly declared he was going as a member of the Chudley Cannons and would hear no more about it.

Privately, I wondered if the horrendous clash of colours to be anticipated when it came to his hair and orange was part of some devious plot to blind people who attempted to look at him,

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thus sparing the young man from attempts by anyone to ask him to dance, or even recognize him.

Harry, however. . . .

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### 3 : DASTARDLY PLANS

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Once I got tired of Ginny pestering Harry to wear a costume that would match hers I yanked Neville aside for a little chat. “Neville,” I said quietly, “do you by chance hold any interest in Ginny?”

He blushed, which I took to be an affirmative. “All right, then how about this?” I spent the next few minutes whispering my plan into his ear with an end result of a rather enthusiastic Neville.

I then rescued Harry from the redhead’s clutches and likewise explained the plan to him. He was also all for it, so he outwardly expressed his agreement to Ginny as regards her desire. She was thrilled, as evidenced by the shriek of joy she emitted, causing me to ponder unsolvable crimes again.

So it was that when that happy occasion arrived, a number of us trooped down to the Great Hall in anticipation (really) of a fantastic evening. I was only mildly concerned about the possible threat of Voldemort, and Harry had seemingly cast the man out of his mind for the time being. The headmaster had arranged for the house tables to be removed, instead providing a number of smaller, round ones, which allowed for a more intimate setting.

He had also taken my suggestion on a costume, though no one could actually see him properly due to the curtain which hid him from view up at the head table. Ginny, poor Ginny, was smiling in what she thought was a seductive manner at the person she thought was Harry, but was in reality Neville.

They were dressed as Dorothy and the Cowardly Lion from the *Wizard of Oz*, though why the girl had chosen that particular costume for her supposed love was a mystery I would not soon be inquiring about. I could, actually, think of a number of reasons, but. . . . And then I snorted to myself. Perhaps she secretly had fantasies about bestiality?

At any rate, she seemed to have no clue that her date for the evening was not, in fact, Harry Potter. That young man was masquerading as Neville, dressed up as a mandrake, with purplish green skin and a tufty bit of leaves sprouting up from his head. I, of course, was dressed as a feline humanoid known in certain circles as a Prydaen.

I smirked as, “Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain,” wafted over from the head table, and turned my attention back to my choice activity of people watching. Hermione was standing nearby, chatting with Ron, who was adamant about not being a good dancer.

A pure-blood Slytherin student passed by, then paused and backed up a few steps to give Hermione a once-over. After giving a disdainful sniff he inquired of her, “And what, pray tell, are you?”

She glanced at him, gave her own sniff of disdain, and replied, “Why, a pure-blood, of course.”

The young man looked absolutely outraged at her response, and probably also due to her perfect mimicry of his snooty tone. He flounced off in a way often seen in *The Birdcage*, leaving behind a viciously triumphant Hermione.

Things continued to go well, if you can count being trapped at a party as a good thing, until two things happened almost simultaneously. Fawkes arrived in the Great Hall in a burst of flame, trilling a mournful melody, and one of the students shrieked and thrust a finger upward, drawing the attention of all and sundry to the floating malevolence of the Dark Mark in the sky overhead.

While the students were showing just how well they could panic, Fawkes was urging Dumbledore out from behind his curtain and off toward the doors. Being the nosy person that I am, and being a relative of the man, naturally I followed, and Harry was hot on my heels. Fawkes led us, not outside, but up to the headmaster's office, and we all hastened to follow his lead, eventually ending up exactly there.

I pulled the door shut behind me, not wishing for too many people to be privy to whatever had befallen us, and was absently pleased to hear a grunt of pain as someone impacted the closed entrance. A second later the door opened and Ginny stepped through, a scowl on her reddening face, followed by Ron, Hermione, and Neville.

Fawkes had alighted on the desk, bringing attention to a piece of parchment there. The headmaster read it, then sat heavily in his chair as though lost, so I scooted over to read it myself, and gasped in surprise at the sheer maliciousness of the contents.

And then, I witnessed something that struck terror in my heart. Then again, it might have been indigestion. Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts, Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, and leader of the Order of the Phoenix, broke down and wept over the theft of his sherbet lemon stash.

'Really,' I thought to myself. 'A man his age sobbing over sweets? I bet he really does lace them with something.'

"Sir," I began, but realized almost immediately that he hadn't heard me. So I sidled over and gave him an awkward pat on the back, trying to approximate a comforting gesture. "Alby, you can get more," I reassured him. "Surely he can't have wiped out the entire supply in the United Kingdom."

That only made him more weepy.

I stifled a sigh at great personal cost to myself and shot a helpless look at Hermione, who immediately turned and exited the office. She was back within minutes with the Lady of Tartan, who took over once she saw the state Dumbledore was in. Frankly, I was grateful to get out of there, though certain members of our party had more than a passing interest (morbid, I say) in the headmaster's condition.

“Voldemort strikes again,” Harry said as we walked back toward Gryffindor tower.

Ginny’s head whipped around from her simpering treatment of Neville and stared at Harry in shock. “Neville, you never normally speak that name!”

Harry smiled a bit sheepishly and exchanged a look with Neville, then produced his wand and vanished his glamour, and Neville’s. Ginny inhaled sharply, her eyes going quite wide before narrowing. She looked at Neville, back at Harry, and threw in a few more repetitions for good measure before puffing up like an irritated cat.

“Great costumes, huh?” I said casually. “They fooled damn near everyone. Well, except people like you, Ginny. You’re far too good a friend to both Harry and Neville to ever have been taken in by such a transparent ruse.”

Ginny looked briefly poleaxed at my ostensible praise, then subsided into a thoughtful (and blessedly silent) mien.

It was then that Neville asked, “So, does anyone know why the headmaster’s costume was green and scaly?”

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We were nearly through November when the blinding light of realization hit me. Something I had always previously passed off as the warning signs of an impending migraine was, in fact, a magical ability. I could see magic in its rawest, most pure form. And that, I was immediately convinced, was one sort of ticket to brownie points, and possibly even a bigger vault.

I considered mentioning it to Alby, but decided in favor of dear old dad instead, and so sauntered down to his office in the dungeons. Almost immediately I could tell he was amused by my shirt, which read “Honesty is the best policy, but insanity is a better defense” but the expression he aimed at me was the usual sneer. <sup>1</sup>

“Heyo, sir,” I said cheerfully.

“What is it, Brown.” He tried to be intimidating, but really, it just wasn’t working.

“Well, I’ve recently had a bit of a brainstorm, though not the type to cause dain bramage, and I was wondering, would you like that tacky Dark Mark removed from your arm? After all, I don’t really think you want to still be sporting that puppy when the Dark Tosser buys the farm.”

His mouth opened in what might be construed as a miniature act of gaping. Then again, it might have been that I confused him. Eventually he arched a brow and replied, “And what makes you think you can do that?”

“Oh, that’s simple, sir. I’ve discovered that I can see magic. Actually, if I’m not careful, it can blind me for short periods of time,” I rambled. “In any case, not only can I see it, I can directly manipulate it. It’s like pulling threads on a bed sheet. Or something like that. Well, and I’ve had some success with the odd potion idea or two.”

Snape narrowed his obsidian eyes at me. He was either thinking furiously or suspicious, I couldn’t tell which. Apparently that odd little eye contact thingie that worked on others did not work on him. It was quite nearly dreadfully boring and tedious to have to wait for him to make up his mind.

“And have you tested this?” he inquired.

I shrugged carelessly. “Not yet, no. But I’m open to suggestions.”

“I suppose I could lure Lucius here on the pretext of an issue with Draco, and then obliviate him afterward, assuming he lived through the process,” Snape mused.

“You could,” I said, “but do we really want Lucius Malfoy to be running around sans Dark Mark if it works?”

I was moderately shocked to see a coy look flicker across the man’s face.

“Oh my god,” I breathed. “You’re harboring an inappropriate lust for the Dark Wanker’s right hand man?”

“Silence!” he thundered, his face transforming into something that would no doubt scare first years into a coma. On me, however, it had no effect. “You will not speak to me that way, Nicholas!”

I inhaled sharply. How dare the man? “Nope, nuh uh, no way in hell. I don’t care how much pure-blood propaganda you were forced to suck up over the past few decades, there is no way on god’s green earth you are getting away with calling me Nicholas. My name is Nick, so get used to it.”

“You will watch your tongue around me, young man!” he bellowed. “You are not too old to be spanked!”

My eyes widened dramatically, then narrowed. “Oh, I see. Is that how it is with Slytherins? I didn’t realize you were into the kinky stuff, daddykins. Corporal punishment in the dungeons for those stressful days, hm?”

As I expected, that little dig set him off like a roman candle. After we yelled at each other for a good half hour we staggered back around to the actual point of my visit.

“About that experiment,” I said, aiming a tired glare at tall, dark, and broody.

He snorted and conjured up two squashy chairs for us to recline in, then said, “Fine. Lucius is the only person I can think of who would be appropriate under the circumstances. Should the experiment work, he would no doubt be thrilled to finally be able to denounce the Dark Lord, cast off that bitch of a wife, and enjoy freedom for the first time in his life.”

“And how sure are you that he wouldn’t actually run squealing back to snakeface and tattle?”

Snape tossed his hair back and stuck his considerable nose up in the air. “He loves me.”

I sighed heavily and looked down at my hands. “Why,” I mused softly, “do I get the feeling I was the result of an attempt on your part to figure out which way you swung? Maybe you were just drunk? Performed so badly the woman obliterated you?”

And to forestall any comments on his part I said at a normal volume, “All right. So you’re willing to use the love of your life in an experiment that could kill him, is that correct?”

He scowled at me. “I never said I loved him.”

“Oh, right,” I replied airily. “You harbor an inappropriate lust. Well, you need to figure it out and get back to me. If you want to kidnap a lesser known follower and stash him in the dungeons here, okay. We can experiment and keep an eye on the poor sap to check for deleterious effects.”

Snape looked thoughtful for a short while, then nodded sharply. “I’m sure no one will notice if a few of the younger and stupider Death Eaters mysteriously vanish after a meeting. What’s the shelf life on this creation of yours?”

“Not long,” I said. “A week or so at most. Around then it turns this really alarming shade of sparkly pink, and that’s almost enough to put me off potion making.”

Dear old dad snorted and shot a smirk my way. “Hazards of the profession, Brown. Get used to it. Fine, I’ll get back to you, so for now stop breathing my air.”

I made myself scarce, quite happy about the fact that he hadn’t bothered to ask for a formula. After all, I knew he would try to hoot me out of his dungeons in hysterical laughter if I let that slip.

As it turned out, Snape did not get back to me until Christmas break was about to start. I had signed up to stay not having an actual home to go to, and I was pleased that Harry also chose to remain at the castle. Perhaps I could finally make a decent move on the young man. We had, however, been invited over to the Weasley home for Christmas day.

Daddykins hailed me as I was attempting to leave the Great Hall after breakfast, so I told Harry I would find him a bit later on and asked if he would say good-bye to our mutual friends for me, then followed Snape like the obedient son I wasn’t.

“What’s up?” I asked once in the privacy of his office.

That earned me a scowl. “I have secured two subjects at great personal risk so I suggest you get started on that potion. As soon as you have it done we can commence testing.”

“Fantabulous!” I enthused. “I’m right on top of that, Rose.”<sup>2</sup>

Snape shot me one of his patented glares.

“I can have a batch ready by tonight,” I assured him. “I assume you don’t want to do anything until after the students have left anyway.”

“Correct. Find me when you’re ready,” he ordered, then impatiently shooed me out.

I found Harry lounging around in the common room, but he attached himself to me immediately and followed me to my room. “What are you doing?” he asked as I began to set up my personal station for my task.

I gave him an innocent smile before saying, “A project with daddykins. After I whip up a potion I created, we’re going to test it out on a couple of volunteers he found.”

He nodded and came a bit closer, dragging a spare stool with him to sit on, then tapped a container of Oxyclean I had placed on the worktop. “And this fits in how?”

“Well,” I said, “I had this idea a while back on ways to remove the Dark Mark. I mean, I’ve already improved a number of potions I use frequently. I call it self defense given that no one else seemed smart enough or motivated enough to tackle the issue. You know that. Anyway, that Oxyclean is a key component of the formula I devised for this Dark Mark problem that dad has.”

Harry’s face was adorably clueless.

“It’s a muggle cleaning product,” I explained. “Likewise, this stuff”—I indicated a tube of Firming Lift Serum by Juicy—“is muggle, and has some interesting properties when introduced to the mix. The base for the whole idea is Mrs Scower’s Magical Mess Remover.”

My soon to be paramour looked appropriately impressed, so I blathered on for a while about how the ingredients needed to go together and how each would affect the end result. “And so,” I concluded, “this will not only break the magical bonds the Dark Mark creates, but also lift that nasty tattoo out of the skin and clean up any of the aftermath. In theory, at least.”

“And Snape found volunteers for this?” Harry looked understandably skeptical.

“Well,” I admitted, “Snape has no idea what’s in this stuff or he might not have been so helpful in finding people. And besides, I think he may have intimidated them into it. He certainly wasn’t going to be the guinea pig.” I shrugged and went back to adding and stirring.

“And if this works,” he said slowly, “does that mean it might work on this?” Harry tapped his forehead meaningfully.

I paused and gave him a thoughtful look. “You know, it just might. There are a lot of similarities between that scar and the Dark Mark. We’ll have to discuss it after this has been tested. I’m not about to risk your health. You’d better not mention this to anyone, though. Alby would probably pitch a fit.”

Harry laughed softly and nodded, but I could see that a certain kind of restlessness had taken hold of him.

“And anyway,” I added slyly, “we would have to discuss a price.”

“A price?”

“Of course,” I said casually. “I don’t do this sort of thing for the joy of creation, you know. A philanthropist I am not.”

Harry coughed a bit uncomfortably, then asked, “And what exactly do you plan to get as payment from Snape?”

I shot him a naughty grin. “If this works, and he wants to be free, he’s going to have to agree to not bug me about you.”

A wide smile broke out on Harry’s face, which boded well for me. “And from me?”

I arched a brow and pretended to check him out. “I don’t know. I was thinking maybe a kiss.”

And as surely as the sun sets each day, Harry blushed. I thought it was downright cute.

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“So, these are the victims?”

Snape had thoughtfully stripped off their robes and upper garments, bound them up, and bespelled them to stay asleep. “Yes.”

“Spiffy,” I said, then turned to Snape in mild confusion. “How is it that this house has a basement? Isn’t that a bit odd, even for Hogsmeade?”

He gave me a curiously blank look before saying, “The previous owner was a bit mad.”

Well, that explained absolutely nothing at all. I shrugged it off and let my satchel slip down off my shoulder so I could park it on a nearby wobbly table. Inside was my potion, neatly divided into several non-breakable containers, and several variants on cleaning implements, like face flannels and steel wool.

After I had everything out and ready I took a vial and a flannel and approached the first victim, a rather unfortunate fellow who snored and had really bad teeth. Snape looked on curiously as I dumped half the vial on the guy's Dark Mark, let it sit for a number of minutes, then began scrubbing.

"See?" I said, pointing a finger at one section of the mark. "It's already starting to lift." And indeed, not only was the hideous brand being removed, I could also see with my other-sense that the bonds incorporated into it were dissolving all over the place as the mixture continued to soak in.

"His aura is changing," Snape stated, causing me to snap my head around in shock. His expression was somewhere between avid interest in the victim's arm and a smirk for my surprise.

"You sly dog, hiding stuff like that. Well, whatever. It's just additional confirmation, and in a way I suspect is different from my own." As I turned back to continue working I asked, "Are you seeing anything alarming or suspicious?"

"No."

So I kept on, eventually finishing up. I couldn't see anything left behind, and Snape was in agreement.

"I plan to check in frequently. We should give this a few days before we attempt the same with the second."

I nodded. "Possible side effects and all that."

"Once we are sure this is a viable solution, I will oblivate these two dunderheads and arrange for a portkey to somewhere unexpected."

Soft laughter escaped me at that and I nodded in appreciation.

When nothing untoward had happened after several days had gone by the other fellow was scrubbed clean as well. Eventually daddykins shipped them off to Greenland or Venezuela or something—I really wasn't paying attention—and we settled down to have a chat about his personal welfare.

We argued for about a half hour rather than doing the sensible thing and negotiating, but I won out in the end by getting him to agree to leave poor Harry alone and to not give me any

grief about our relationship, whatever it might evolve to be. It was at that point I asked, as innocently as possible, “Could I get that in writing?”

I stood my ground when he erupted like Mount Vesuvius; why that pesky sorting hat thought I needed to work on bravery was totally beyond my ken. Bugs? Piffle. Snape eventually settled down and grudgingly signed off on his promise, so I went ahead and fixed him up good, at which point I inquired about his thoughts on the formula’s effect on Harry’s scar.

“Dumbledore may not be pleased that his best information source has been cut off.”

I scoffed. “Oh, please. Harry doesn’t have visions any longer. Between a combination of Occlumency and my personal blend of sleeping potions, he hasn’t had one in forever.”

Snape eyed me sharply. “Oh? Pray tell, what other miracles have you accomplished in the field of Potions that you have not seen fit to share with me?”

“Well, I thought that whole addiction thing for painkillers and sleeping potions was a real downer, so I fixed them,” I replied blithely, and was rewarded when his whole face tightened up.

“And were you going to share these formulae with me, your father, a Potions Master?”

“That would be a whole different set of negotiations,” I pointed out, pleased that I had annoyed him so easily. “It’s not like I care about taking credit, after all. I was considering tackling that whole lycanthropy thing next.”

I swear, he growled.

“But I’m not so sure I’d want credit on that, either, should it work out. I’m not a huge fan of being mobbed in the streets for my accomplishments, you know?”

“And is this because of your little friend’s pet werewolf?” he asked snidely.

“You’re going to hold a bi-annual dance on Voldemort’s grave, aren’t you, once he’s dead. Boy, you sure can hold a grudge. Anyway, this is beside the point. I want to know about Harry’s scar, and you should be thinking of what Lucius might be willing to pony up as his fee for freedom, eh? You know, like a no-holds-barred exposé on the Dark Wanker and his plans for the future?”

He sneered at me and said, “And I suppose you have a plan for the Dark Lord’s defeat up your sleeve as well.”

“Actually,” I said, “I do.”

The Nightmare Before Bedtime

<sup>1</sup> [Think Geek](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Don't Tell Mom the Babysitter's Dead](#) — 7 June 1991: Warner Bros., HBO Films

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#### 4 : SUNSET

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I managed to get away from Snape without spilling my idea on the Dark Tossler's death, though it was quite a challenge to distract the man. I finally pointed out that he was dodging the issue of Harry's scar, as though he had no answer, and that sent him off down the appropriate line of thought as I had hoped.

By the time I was able to leave Snape was back to muttering about ways to convince his potential paramour to pony up, and I was grateful to slip outside in order to knock back a few cigarettes; fighting always did make me nervy. I was hardly surprised when Harry appeared as I was finishing up the first of them. I expect he had been keeping an eye on me with his map and had sought me out at the first safe opportunity.

"How did it go?" he asked a bit breathlessly.

"Fine," I assured him. "He's agreed to back off for one thing, and I did eventually trick him into giving me his unvarnished opinion about your scar and my little potion."

Harry's face pinked from more than just the cold as I paused to light a second cigarette and take a drag.

"He thinks it should be fine," I said after exhaling, then shot him a penetrating look. "But it's your decision, Harry. I can't guarantee that it won't hurt you in some fashion."

And like the brave Gryffindor that he was Harry immediately responded with, "I'm willing to take the risk. I want to be free."

I nodded and had another drag, exhaling the smoke lazily afterward. "All right," I said, then changed the subject. "I'll have you know I already have all my Christmas shopping done. Do you?"

He looked a bit dismayed at that news and shook his head.

"Do you want to go to Hogsmeade, then? Perhaps this evening we can take care of that scar, with all night ahead of us just in case, though I don't really expect any problems."

And as we walked toward the village, scuffing our feet playfully through the snow, he asked, "Do you think the scar will disappear?"

It was hours later that we returned to my room and I was kind enough to avert my gaze when Harry went to wrap a certain gift, though I helped him with the others. He jittered nervously all the way through dinner, and I suppose I couldn't blame him, but eventually we were back in my room and I had my supplies out.

Harry glanced them over, then looked at me with an odd expression. “Do you want payment now or after?” he asked.

I laughed softly and shook my head. “Later is fine. After all, if that kiss is half as good as I hope it will be, I won’t be interested in that scar for quite some time, and perhaps neither will you.”

Harry flushed and nodded as he looked for and found a stool to sit on. I went ahead and began making a new batch of the potion, not wishing to trust what was left over from earlier. It was much too close to the period when it would turn all sparkly pink, and I didn’t think I could handle that. That sort of colour really ought to be banned from the spectrum.

When it was ready I had him lie down on a slant so that his feet were higher than his head. If the potion was to drip, I would rather have to figure out how to fix his hair than panic over any damage to his eyes. Obviously, it hadn’t mattered so much with the test subjects; no one would care if they lost the hair on their arms, right?

By the time I was done scrubbing Harry was a bundle of nerves and completely tense, despite the fact that he had never once complained of any pain, nor even moved in such a way as to denote it felt even if not voiced. I chucked my supplies into a handy bucket and smiled at Harry. “All done.”

“That’s it?” he asked rather tentatively.

I nodded and added, “My senses are telling me that nasty bit of work is gone now, but I’ll goad Snape into checking as well in the morning. In any case, I think you should probably spend the night in here, or me in your dorm, so I can keep an eye on you.”

He tried to get up, but I pushed him back down. “Wait a few more minutes before you go wash your forehead the normal way, okay? Or take a shower, whichever. I’d offer to let you borrow some of my clothes rather than make the trip, but. . . .” I snorted. “It’s not like anything but the shirts would fit.”

Harry grinned at me and said in a not unkindly way, “You are short for a boy.”

“Yeah, but that’s okay. I’d feel really strange being taller, and I’m already used to my limitations at this height. Besides, I somehow don’t think you mind all that much.”

His cheeks pinked again.

“All right, you can get up, but be careful when you wash your face. I got off as much as possible when I was done, but keep your eyes protected.”

Harry disappeared into my bathroom for a couple of minutes, reemerged, then wandered off to his own dorm briefly before ending up back in my room, obviously freshly showered. I had

taken the opportunity myself to wash up while he was gone and was presently running a comb through my hair to get out any tangles.

“I don’t understand how you can handle all that,” Harry commented.

“I’ve had long hair for what seems like decades. You get used to it,” I replied, then set the comb aside so I could twist the length and tie it into a knot to keep it out of my way. “You still feel okay, right?”

He nodded and took a seat on the sofa so I decided to be bold and advanced, sliding on so that my legs straddled his. “About that payment,” I breathed and lowered my head slightly, waiting to see if he would attempt to meet me halfway.

Harry did, so I brushed my lips against his and came back for a second, more pressing turn, then asked for entrance by gliding my tongue between his lips. He seemed a bit confused by that action, and I had to think that those rumors about Harry and girls must be true. I, however, could fix that.

I entreated again, more firmly, and Harry’s lips parted, so I slid my tongue within and explored his mouth with languorous movements. His arms came up to clutch at my back, then pull me closer, and I felt a great deal like smiling. I must be doing something right—I should bloody well hope so, at least. I didn’t pull back until a good five minutes had passed, finally saying, “I think that about covers payment.”

“That’s good,” he rasped, then yanked me back in for more.

Well, I could not say I wasn’t delighted that he was feeling quite frisky. Still, as we continued to kiss the desire to shift against him became more and more appealing. Arousal felt quite a bit different in a male body, not that it worried me personally. I was more concerned with what might happen if I lost control and how Harry would react.

So I pulled away again, my breathing somewhat ragged. “I’m going to make a wild guess and say you enjoy that,” I said dryly.

Harry licked his lips and nodded, a faintly predatory gleam in his eyes.

“It doesn’t bother you that I used to be female?” I inquired curiously.

He shook his head. “Not really. And Madam Pomfrey said it couldn’t be reversed, so why worry about it?”

“And am I fascinating to you because of my circumstances, or on my own merits?” I asked bluntly.

Harry tilted his head to one side before responding, a slight furrow marring his now flawless brow. “You’re different. Unlike the usual sort around here, you don’t seem to care about all this Voldemort stuff. You aren’t nice to me because I’m Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived.”

I shrugged and smiled. “It’s not like I had a clue when I came here, and it wouldn’t have mattered much anyway. I either like a person or I don’t. The most bearing fame might have is if it swelled your head, and it doesn’t seem to have.”

“Well, I like the fact that you’re smart,” he said, “but you don’t feel like you have to show it off constantly. And I like that you don’t seem to care what others think, and you aren’t intimidated by people like Snape or Malfoy. You aren’t even intimidated by Dumbledore.”

I gave him another shrug. “The worst that could happen is I got expelled, and I am an adult, so who cares? It wouldn’t prevent me from taking the NEWTs, anyway. At any rate, I think I can safely say that I like you for you, not for a bizarre accident that happened when you were barely a toddler. If I didn’t enjoy your company, we wouldn’t be here right now.”

He gave me a smile that was just shy of . . . well, shy, then asked, “Can I kiss you again?”

I nodded, so he did.

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The next morning I arranged for a succinct note to appear at Snape’s place setting just prior to him taking a seat. He read it quickly and scowled, then gave a tiny nod. I kept a surreptitious eye on him during breakfast, eventually pleased when he conveyed to me that all appeared to be well, and finished my meal with a certain sense of additional relief after whispering the good news in Harry’s ear.

I was not able to escape easily, though. Daddykins held me back in order to inform me that he had sent a vague message to Lucius, and would let me know when I was needed for that particular exchange. I gave Snape a bright smile, which predictably annoyed him, then skipped off quickly before he could manufacture a reason to keep me any longer.

He did track me down on Christmas Eve to let me know that Lucius was due to slip into the castle the next day. Apparently, the Malfoys didn’t bother with the façade of family togetherness if no one was there to witness it, so I suppose it could hardly be considered surprising that Lucius would decide to favor his desired lover with his time on that occasion.

Harry thought it was all very amusing when I told him, but promised to keep it to himself, even from Ron and Hermione. We would already have enough trouble once they got around to noticing that his scar had disappeared. A great deal of time in the interim was spent snogging in my room, away from prying eyes, and Harry had been sleeping in my bed since the first kiss, though that would have to stop once the new term began lest we be deluged with impertinent questions about our relationship.

On Christmas morning we brought all our presents to my room and settled in to open them. I had, of course, purchased myself a gift, that being a new mug that read, "RTFM."

Harry was thrilled with his Levitating Galileo Gravitator. An ultimately useless gift, I am forced to admit, but fun to play with and observe. Naturally, I had spelled it to run off magic rather than electricity, so there was no problem with it at Hogwarts.

I nearly laughed when I realized that Dumbledore had worn my gift to breakfast, his new pair of Monty Python Killer Rabbit Slippers peeking out from under the table, and I had to pinch Harry after I pointed them out to prevent his own descent into open amusement.

Snape cast me a glance at one point, his eyes glittering, so I knew that not only did he appreciate my t-shirt, which read, "Cluelessness: There are no stupid questions, but there are a lot of inquisitive idiots," but also my gift to him of a Voodoo knife set.

He held me back again to remind me of our meeting and give me the password to his quarters, then let me go. Harry was keen to know what I'd got for the others so I showed him the website once we were back in my room. For some reason, it tickled me pink the idea of having purchased an LED binary clock for the oh-so smart Hermione. I had to wonder just what she'd make of it.

For Ron I had picked up a wavy wand, for Neville all three colours of Luminglass, and for Ginny a Mathmos Space Projector. And of course, every last gift had been wrapped with geek paper from the same company, which I thought was vastly appropriate. <sup>1</sup>

I spent the first part of the morning making another batch of the potion, then Harry and I went outside to play in the snow, somehow ending up kissing to "keep warm" after a game of chase through tunnels we made ended in him capturing me. In truth, I was giving serious thought to seducing the boy into my bed for real, but I wasn't sure I should push. It was with great reluctance that I ended our little tryst and made him follow me back inside so I could change and fetch my supplies in anticipation of my meeting.

I left him there, curled up on my bed and snoozing, and went down to the dungeons. Snape's rooms weren't hard to find and I spoke the password quietly to gain entrance. I was, dare I say it, precisely on time, so my father would have no reason to criticize.

As it was my entrance went unnoticed, but I certainly did pay attention to the fact that Snape and Malfoy were indulging in . . . well . . . wild sex on the sofa. Honestly. What point was there in punctuality if one's parental unit was so rude as to not keep an eye on the clock? I watched them for several minutes, deciding that an object lesson was never to be wasted, and noticed as I did that there was a journal, or something like it, sitting on the side table.

I made no move toward it, though, preferring to wait until they were finished with their assignation. After all, this was the sort of thing I could hold over their heads, and I saw no

point in wasting the opportunity. In truth, it was all rather educational, and I hadn't realized that Snape was quite so flexible.

Lucius finally stiffened and let out a prolonged and guttural moan; I could clearly see the results of his delight. Daddykins quickly followed, grunting in time with his, er, movements. It wasn't for several minutes that one of them finally noticed me standing there, my arms akimbo and one foot tapping the floor patiently.

"Hello," I chirped, then smiled broadly at them. "Are you done now?"

Lucius nearly managed to get his wand in hand when Snape stopped him. "Don't be a fool," he said harshly.

"Who is this impertinent whelp?" Lucius demanded to know, glaring at me quite fiercely.

I blinked. "Why, daddykins, didn't you fill him in? I think I'm hurt." I clutched my chest with one hand before dropping heavily into a chair.

"Daddykins?" Lucius said it as though the word dripped filth, his gaze turning back to Snape.

"Isn't it great?" I chirped before my father could speak. "And really, it doesn't matter all that much, Mr Malfoy. And anyway, I rather think you need to curb your tongue and be civil, or I might forget exactly how to remove a Dark Mark."

Lucius snarled and Snape lost his composure enough to roll his eyes heavenward. "Now would be a good time to get dressed," he said redundantly.

"Don't mind me," I said with annoying cheerfulness. "It's nothing I've not seen before."

I heard a faint growl as they untangled themselves, but ignored it, instead glancing around the room curiously. It was a bit of a shame; Snape's rooms were really quite bland, with almost no personality whatsoever. It made me wonder if his bedroom was as boring, or if that's where he hid the manacles and other naughty toys.

"Brown!" Snape snapped.

I looked back over with a faint smile. "So, do we have a deal? Or did you get distracted before you had a chance to check out that journal?"

Daddykins aimed a glare at me, forgetting that they had no effect, then said, "Yes, I had time, you insolent brat. Lucius also consented to questioning under veritaserum, so I feel no qualms in proceeding."

"All right," I said agreeably. "I brought the stuff. Shall we get started?"

Lucius was directed to strip his shirt back off; I'm not sure why he bothered to put it on in the first place. He didn't seem too keen on me pulling up a chair next to him, but that was his problem. If he wanted my father, the circumstances of my birth and my personality were rather beside the point.

I fetched out a vial and a flannel and set to work, occasionally glancing at Snape to note his reaction. I figured he would speak up if something didn't look right, so I didn't press for conversation, and I couldn't see anything out of the ordinary myself. Everything seemed to be going exactly as it had the previous four times.

I cleaned off Lucius's arm once I was done, not knowing the long-term effects of the potion should it remain on the skin, then sat back and put away my things. "That pretty much does it," I remarked as I stood up and slung my satchel over one shoulder. "Would you like me to take that information to Dumbledore, or. . . ?"

Snape scowled at me. "Fine. But don't delay. Drop it off and don't stick around for him to question you."

"Sure!" I had no intention of telling him that I planned to duplicate the journal before I made myself useful. After securing it in my satchel I gave them a mock salute, then turned smartly and got the hell out of there before either one could change their mind or object. Then again, I wouldn't be surprised if they went in for round two the second I was gone.

I headed straight for my room and unloaded my satchel, then made a copy before concentrating. It was surely a coincidence when I had learned that Fawkes would answer my call, and he was happy enough to flash into the room and take the original to the headmaster as a favor to me. I thought it was the wisest course of action; that way Alby couldn't delay me long enough to formulate any nosy queries about where the information had come from.

Harry continued to sleep as I speed-read my way through Lucius's words. I was delighted to find out that the Dark Tossler hadn't set foot in the muggle world from the moment he was able to leave it. That is to say, with the exception of putting a toe over the line every so often in order to kill off a few dozen people here and there as whim or fancy struck him.

As far as I was concerned, that meant it was pretty damn likely he'd never know what hit him when I got around to leading him to his death. And I figured I was the best person to handle it. Harry had enough on his mind without having to deal with the man (if you could call him one) face to face. Really, all that stress was bad for a person, and if I could spare my snoozing paramour the hassle, then why not?

Besides, I had an advantage he did not, though it wasn't the sort of thing I would dream of revealing to anyone. They all just thought I was exceptionally gifted at Defense. And that's not to say I wasn't, but the underlying reason was a definite secret of the first order. I could dodge and deflect with the best of them, though I admit I found it rather tedious, but it was better

not to rely so much on my secret ability. Efficiency might be intelligent laziness, but being totally lazy was always a bad idea.

At that point, it was simply a matter of setting up a scenario and enticing the Dark Wanker to fall into it, and my clutches.

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It took a while, I admit. I spent days sneaking out of castle, planting clues and red herrings for the Dark Tosser to find. After all, I really wanted to be present when he met his well deserved end. And, of course, it would really help if there was a witness to his demise. I'm sure Alby would like a memory of the event in order to tidy things up, right?

Of course, by then nobody could get too righteously upset with me for taking the risk. It would be a done deal. So I furthered my scheme as best I could while under the restraint of being a student. Nearly the entire thing hinged on one very salient fact. Harry's recounting of the past had set my mind working on it, and Lucius's contribution to the cause cemented the idea.

So it was that when Easter rolled around—more specifically, the Feast of the Resurrection—I had slipped off the grounds on a quasi-mission. In truth, I had every expectation that that Dark Wanker would follow my trail of breadcrumbs just like those poor children that the Grimm brothers wrote about. Except, Voldemort wouldn't get eaten. I doubt he'd taste very good, even to a cannibal. A Texan? Maybe. They did strange things to snakes.

I had a horrible time holding back my amusement when I finally caught him shadowing me. Someone really ought to have brought him up to speed on muggle fashions. He might not have looked out of place in New York City or parts of California, but in England? The poor man was a laughing stock and didn't even realize it.

In any case, he followed me all the way along a convoluted path, and was close enough to hear me muttering to myself, "You can't get there from here." Eventually we ended up at the Sears Tower in Chicago. It really didn't matter much that I'd never been there before except for an overnighter for research purposes.

I paused at the base to check out a street vendor who was selling seafood. It wasn't that I was hungry, I just wanted to make sure he wasn't trying to pass off inferior lobster as the good stuff. Everybody knew that the only good lobster was from Maine, right? Once I'd vetted the man and given my seal of approval (my actions seemed to confuse the Dark Tosser), I nipped into the building and made a beeline for the bank of elevators.

It was busy despite the date, but that wouldn't interfere with my plans. I made sure he was right behind me as I boarded the first available lift, smirking to myself as he slipped in behind me. It struck me, for a brief moment, that most people would not have had the nerve to do what I was so nobly doing. It made me want to kick the sorting hat around again given its rather narrow views on what I supposedly needed work on. Bravery? Puh-lease.

A ding brought my attention back to focus on my immediate surroundings, and it was then that I settled in to wait and watch. You see, he had no natural or acquired defenses against one of the most horrifying and devastating weapons known to man. Most of the civilized world had been given fleeting tastes, eventually inuring themselves against the threat—but him? No such luck I'm afraid. His strict avoidance of the muggle world was about to be his downfall.

The elevator car began to trundle upwards and the sickly sweet sounds of Muzak piped in through the speakers abruptly intensified; it was impossible to escape. Only seconds had passed and I could see his eyes already glazing over thanks to the helpfully polished inner metal doors. By the time we had ascended ten floors he was completely lost to his surroundings.

The muggles entering and exiting the car paid him no mind; they probably assumed he was just another druggie, only in more expensive clothes, no matter how inappropriate they might be. At the twentieth floor he was sagging against the wall, faint moans emitting from his slightly open mouth. When we hit the thirtieth I decided it was time to begin repelling the muggles just in case.

I mean, I must believe, it cannot be a pretty site for anyone to witness a soul being systematically sucked out of a living being. Muzak could do that to the unprotected. I was fairly certain it was on nearly the same level as being Kissed by a dementor, except I could hardly get in trouble for using such an innovative technique. As it stood, he simply didn't stand a chance. There were over one hundred floors total, and we were only just reaching forty.

And so it went. I hummed along with the sadistically chirpy renditions of popular heavy metal tunes while Voldemort sagged lower and lower, eventually ending with a thump on the well-trodden carpet. By the time we reached the top floor he was drooling rather copiously, which I thought was disgusting, but I did my best to ignore it as I thumbed the button for the ground floor.

Even if his soul hadn't been sucked out by what passed for music, he would have lost his will to live, so it was all good in the end. We were just approaching the end of the ride when I sprang into action, whipping a portkey out of my pocket that I had purchased some time back, not wishing to get into the issue of illegalities. The Ministries could be so nardly about that sort of thing.

I hit him with it, activating it for us both, and wobbled when we landed. I might have spent ten years taking ballet lessons, but no one could ever claim, least of all me, that my sense of balance in everyday life was perfection itself. At that point I whipped out my wand and cast an invisibility spell on the Dark Tossler before levitating him; there was no sense dragging him all the way up to the castle if it meant the students would see him and demonstrate again just how well they could panic.

Harry joined me just inside the main doors, giving me a rather odd look. I shot him a flirty little grin and kept right on walking, Voldemort floating along behind me innocently, continuing toward the entrance to the headmaster's office. Harry, the dear, began the sweets guessing game, but I motioned with my free hand for him to stop and used the override password Alby had given me.

Then I gestured for Harry to go first, and followed him, making sure that my cargo made it inside before the gargoyle resumed its place. It did not take long to reach our final destination for the moment, and we were shortly ensconced in seats and being plied with tea and sherbet lemons despite the unexpectedness of our visit.

Neither of them had a clue about the bombshell I was about to drop, and I thought it was best to delay a bit. "Sir, do you think you could summon Professor Snape before I get into the reason for my visit?" I asked.

Dumbledore looked up from his search for the perfect sweet and replied, "If you think it's necessary." He then dashed off a short note and sent it with Fawkes, so I innocently drank my tea while we waited, ostensibly ignoring the questioning looks Harry kept shooting my way.

Snape arrived after a short delay, his expression darkening when he saw both myself and Harry sitting there. To forestall any snide comments on his part I set down my cup and swished my wand. Everyone started at the sound of a thud, their heads turning toward the sound.

"I brought everyone a present," I said brightly, then waved my wand again, removing the charm I had cast earlier. Three jaws gaped open in surprise, and Harry knocked his chair over as he pushed to his feet and got into a defensive stance. "He's harmless," I assured them.

Once Snape got his jaw back into place he quite nearly minced over to the Dark Wanker's body, obviously reluctant to go anywhere near him, and yet knowing that someone had to be brave enough to check him over.

"Really, it's okay," I said. "He couldn't magic his way out of a wet paper bag at this point."

Snape turned a penetrating look on me, but only briefly. His head snapped back around to stare at Voldemort as though the man might leap up at any moment and yell, "Die!"

"Perhaps," Dumbledore said, having finally found his voice, "you might share with us what happened? I think we would all be interested to know."

"Oh sure," I chirped. "It was really quite simple when you get right down to it. Are any of you familiar with"—I paused to artificially heighten the tension—"Muzak?"

After a moment of startled silence, Dumbledore burst into peals of laughter.

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I stood there waiting, taking the time to think back over the past few months. Once the pesky details had been gotten out of the way, Voldemort had been paraded up and down the streets of Hogsmeade like a prize cow at a local 4-H club before being carted off to Azkaban. The wizarding public celebrated for what seemed like weeks, and during that time the Dark Tosser slowly slipped away to his final rest.

After all, his base autonomic functions, such as breathing and sleeping, carried on without outside intervention, but not one of the guards at the island prison was willing to visit his cell on a daily basis to force food and water down his gullet. He died, alone and unaware, covered in his own filth. Such an ignominious way to go, but fitting, I'm sure.

And I was pleased to note that my suspicions about his Death Eaters were correct; with his death, they died as well, every last one of them. It all worked out rather conveniently if I do say so myself. Still, for a while there, one never knew when one might stumble over the stinking corpse of a Death Eater while gadding about the countryside or trying to fit in an afternoon of shopping.

Snape had become rather insistent since then about my future career options. He was pressing for me to enter a Potions apprenticeship, hoping for me to follow in his footsteps and become a Potions Master. I supposed I was talented enough, and had the knack, but I've always been a mite rebellious when it comes to people trying to tell me what to do. Time would tell.

A touch at my arm brought me out of my contemplative mood, and I looked up to see my father staring at me with frightening intensity. "Are you absolutely certain you wish to do this?" he asked for the millionth time.

I smiled and nodded. "Of course."

There had been a bit of a kerfuffle over things once Harry and I revealed our plans. Snape and Dumbledore both tried to claim the honor of standing up with me, but my father won in the end, so Alby had to be content with the role of a grandfatherly type. It was a bit surprising, but I suppose that Snape had become, over time, rather reluctantly fond of me in some small way. Then again, it might have been that he felt he had no choice. I was the only child he saw in his foreseeable future, and it was clear that I didn't give a flying fig if he accepted me fully or not.

Remus Lupin had been drafted in for Harry. That was hardly a surprise, and I had charmed the socks off the man almost directly I met him, which pleased Harry to no end. I confess, I'm not generally the sort to make the effort, but I did actually want to make him happy, and Lupin didn't seem to be such a bad sort.

Snape sighed heavily and nodded. "In that case, it's time," he said, then snatched my arm and positioned it just so. Somehow—perhaps due to my former life on the other side of the fence and my continuing short stature—I ended up playing the more girly role in this little joining.

Snape led me out as the music swelled. Harry was emerging as well, Remus at his side, and we all converged at the center of the dais. They stepped back a pace and faced forward, and after Harry and I exchanged a smile we also faced front, to gaze at the priestess that had been engaged for our wedding. Her name, I had been informed, was Bats Mondai.

She was barely taller than I was, truth be told, but that's a generally acceptable thing in a female, and her eyes were rather like mine used to be under glamour, an odd melding of grey and blue. Her skin was classically pale, her hair a striking shade of auburn, and she was, I could say from a purely aesthetic viewpoint, rather well put together.

Her formal robes were of a flowing silvery-blue with wide sleeves and a low neckline, and a dark green sash accentuated her waist, the ends hanging down to draw the eye to her delightfully bare feet. Thank goodness it was the summer, else she might have been a skosh uncomfortable. I couldn't really blame her; I frequently went without shoes if I could get away with it.

The only true accessory she had was a staff fashioned from dark wood, topped by a sphere of clear crystal. I'm not quite sure what its purpose was, but I figured she could use it as a weapon if she couldn't reach her wand in time.

And then she smiled and spread her arms, a gentle and nonverbal request for the guests to shut the hell up and pay attention, which they did with only a minimum of fuss. The ceremony itself went along just fine, but I rather figured that our audience was behaving so well in order that they might speed things along to where they got to feast themselves into a stupor.

That was fine, as it meant not only were there no problems for us in terms of hearing and responding to our cues, but I knew very well that Mrs Weasley had placed certain children of hers under a full body bind to ensure proper behavior during these most sacred moments. Of course, she bawled her eyes out the entire time, along with many others of the female persuasion, but I simply ignored them as being predictable.

Eventually, at long last, Harry and I were married. And that, my friends, is the end of this particular tale. (For real this time. I mean it.)

— The End —

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<sup>1</sup> [Think Geek](#)