A wand for Skitter

by ShayneT

Summary

Waking in the body of a murdered child, Taylor Hebert, once a super villain and later a super hero must discover who has been killing muggleborns while being forced to go to Hogwarts, among groups who are the most likely suspects.
“It's almost too easy,” I heard a voice mutter.

I woke suddenly, but experience told me to keep quiet and pretend to still be unconscious. I tried to reach out and see through any insects nearby, but there was a horrible emptiness where those senses had been.

I struggled to remember what had happened; we were fighting Scion, and then the sounds of two shots and then nothingness.

“Killing muggleborns before they get their letters,” the voice continued. “Why didn't anybody else ever think of doing this?”

“Because Hogwarts keeps the book locked up tighter than a Gringotts bank vault. Even our man inside only got a look at a few names, or we'd be making a clean sweep this year.”

There was silence for a moment, and the sound of a shoe kicking soft flesh.

“Won't this alert the Dark Lord's enemies?”

“A few muggle deaths? Muggles die all the time; they murder each other, hit each other with cars... it's a wonder that they haven't all killed themselves off already.”

“Nobody is that lucky,” the other man muttered.

“Besides, we've got people in the muggle police department who will swear that this is the result of ordinary muggle crime.”

“Police?”

“Like aurors, but stupider.”

I could hear the sounds of the two men moving around.

“Well, we've got three more to take care of tonight, and then we'll call it for the evening. You want to go get a cruller in Hogsmeade?”

“Sounds good.”

A moment later there was a strange popping sound, one that repeated itself a moment later.

I knew better than to simply assume that they were gone; I waited five more minutes before I cautiously opened my eyes.

I was in a dingy alley that wouldn't have been out of place in Brockton Bay. There were two people lying on the ground less than ten feet from me; their faces had expression of pain and terror. I grimaced as I stood up. It wasn't until I pushed myself up that I realized that I had both of my arms.

Looking down, there wasn't the stump that I had expected. Instead there were thin, twig like arms that had none of the toned muscle I was used to; hard earned by my years first as a super villain and then as a super hero.

“What the hell?” I muttered.
My voice was high pitched and childish, and it didn't sound at all like my own. I walked over to the woman and dug through her purse. I found a compact soon enough and flipping it open, I grimaced.

I didn't recognize the face that stared back at me. I was still a brunette, but that was as far as it went. My new face was actually better looking than my old one, although whether that would survive puberty was anyone's guess.

Somehow I was in the body of a child.

The last thing I remembered was killing Scion and then the sound of two gunshots, followed by blinding pain to the back of my head.

I reached back, and there were no injuries, not in this body.

Was I actually a child who had fantasized a life as a super hero? I certainly couldn't feel any of the insects around me, and the one thing I'd learned in my former life was that there were always insects everywhere.

It didn't matter.

People had tried to kill me, and they claimed to have people in the police force, who would presumably be watching if they made any mistakes and missed anyone.

I dug through the woman's bag after rolling the man over with some difficulty and pulling out his wallet.

The couple was Nigel and Camilla Scrivner. They were the right age to be the parents of this body; younger than my Dad, and handsome and good looking respectively. I could even see a resemblance between them and the face I'd seen in the mirror.

Neither had a cell phone.

I rifled their wallets for money, and all I found were pound notes. A check of their addresses showed addresses in Great Britain.

A quick check and I found that they had four hundred pounds between the two of them. I pulled the rings off the woman's fingers and the earrings out of her ears. It was ghoulish, but without my powers I didn't have a lot in the way of assets to help me survive in this new world.

I was assuming this was a new world because the dates on the driver's licenses were wrong. These people were far too young to be born in the nineteen sixties, so either I'd gone back in time, or I was somewhere that hadn't quite caught up to the twenty tens.

Taking the man's keys, I cautiously made my way to the alleyway. It was nighttime, but there weren't many people around. There were only a couple of cars on the street, and checking showed me that the key fit into one of them.

It was a Volkswagon Rabbit, a tiny car, and the steering wheel was on the wrong side.

There weren't any cell phones in the car, but there was a map. Looking at the addresses on the people's driver's licenses, I checked the street signs and tried to figure out a route. If the map was right, we were in London, and it looked like we lived five miles away.

I could walk that; in training I'd done that all the time. However, that had been in my old body, with weapons, and with my powers. I had none of that, and a nine or ten year old child walking through
the city in the middle of the night was a good way for me to get killed... again.

Grimacing, I slipped into the driver's seat, and I put the key in the ignition. The car turned over just fine, but my feet barely reached the pedals, and only if I scooted forward to the end of the seat. It was awkward as hell, and as I shifted the car into gear, I had to remind myself to drive on the wrong side of the street.

I was careful to avoid major highways, and yet by the time I reached the apparent location of our home, I was drenched with sweat.

We apparently lived in a first floor flat. The keys worked just fine, and I let myself in.

I ransacked the place. As much as I was tempted to stay here, it would only be a matter of time before the people who had attacked this bodies family would realized that only two bodies had been found. They'd come looking here first, and then they'd check child services.

Child services wasn't really meant to prevent assassinations.

This was going to be hellishly difficult.

In my old life, even at the beginning of my career I'd been fifteen. I'd been old enough that I could get an under the table job, and I'd been able to move around without raising a lot of questions.

Here, I wouldn't be able to rent a hotel room, use most services and if it was part of the school year, I'd have to watch out for truant officer. I wasn't sure how much four hundred pounds was, but I suspected that it wasn't that much.

In some ways it was worse that I was in London than in Brockton Bay. Brockton Bay had been full of abandoned warehouses, and other spots where it was easy to find places to sleep. London was a lot more financially successful, which meant fewer places to hide.

I needed to somehow find out who was coming after me, and what they wanted. Why were they murdering children, and what were muggles?

Was I in the past of my own world?

Newspapers piled up by the door suggested that either it was some time in August 1991 or these people were terrible housekeepers. I couldn't find anything in the house dated after that time, so my working theory was that I was some time in the past.

There were no references to parahumans in any of the newspapers either. There should have been; Scion had first been seen in 1982. Parahumans had been a major fixture of life since that time, and I couldn't remember ever seeing a newspaper that didn't have at least one story about them.

Here, even with a week of newspapers there was nothing.

So I loaded up the biggest backpack I could find; it was a hiking backpack apparently owned by the father. It had a sleeping bag, and other things that I thought I might need.

In some ways, this was going to be the hardest thing I'd ever done. No powers, no allies, only a little money and a few pieces of equipment. Of course, I'd faced the biggest monsters my world had to offer, and I'd come out on top.

I set out into the night.
It had been a long night.

Finding a place to sleep and hole up had been my first priority, but it hadn't been easy. The girl's parents had lived in a strictly middle class area, and I'd had to drive around for a while before I found a neighborhood that had parks that were overgrown and not well maintained.

I'd have to ditch the car soon; while I had the credit cards from the wallets, I didn't know whatever pass codes they used, and it didn't look like very many gas stations let you pay at the pump.

I spent three hours searching the area before I found an abandoned storm drain. It looked as though the drain hadn't seen any water in a long time, and the back of it was blocked off. The grate in front of it was loose, and I managed to pry it off with my tools, enough to make my way inside so I could set up my camp and sleep.

This wouldn't be a good place to stay once the weather got cold; I'd have to find some place more secure by then. But it was the best I could do for the moment.

It was an uncomfortable night, and I had nightmares about the fight against Scion.

I woke to feel something crawling on my hand. It was a ladybug.

Staring at it, I couldn't feel a sense of loss at the thought that I would never be able to feel the swarm again. I'd been the master of insects, and now my mind felt empty.

I focused; it was a fantasy, but part of me hoped that I could somehow will my power back into being.

For two minutes I strained, but despite all my efforts, I couldn't feel anything. It was like trying to lift something with an arm I no longer had.

The ironic thing was that I would have rather kept my power and not had the arm. I felt a moment of crushing depression.

If I really was in another world, and in another body, the odds were that I would never see anyone I had ever known again. I wouldn't see Rachel or Lisa or Dinah or Brian again. I'd be forced to relive life from the time I was a child, and until I found out who had killed me, I wouldn't ever be able to rest of relax.

I let myself stare at the metal sides of the culvert blankly for ten minutes. However, my stomach growled, and I realized that ruminating over things I couldn't control wasn't going to help me.

Peeing behind a bush wasn't ideal; if I was going to do this for long, I needed to find a better solution. For the moment it was all I could think of.

Next was breakfast.

I couldn't risk cooking anything; people's senses of smell weren't good, but they could detect fire easily enough. Fortunately I'd brought food with me.

It had taken a couple of trips from the car to carry what I'd brought from the flat; it didn't amount to much. It was just canned foods that I could eat without heating. I'd brought a hand can opener
too. Opening the can, I tipped the beans into my mouth and grimaced.

Bottled water wasn't all that good warm, but I had known better than to bring milk or anything that could spoil. Finishing the can, I gulped down half a bottle of water, and then I carefully slipped out of the storm drain.

I checked the outside carefully before I slipped out. The sun was high in the sky already. I moved underbrush behind me, and I slipped the grate back into position. From here no one could see any of my stuff.

Half my money I kept on my person, and the other half was hidden in the backpack. That way if I was mugged, or if the pack was found I wouldn't lose everything.

I was carrying a Swiss army knife. I'd have preferred a switchblade, but there hadn't been any that I could find in the dead people's flat. I hadn't found any mace or pepper spray either, and I wasn't even sure whether they'd been invented yet, or whether they were even legal on this side of the pond.

It was summertime, which meant I probably didn't have to worry much about truant officers. The one advantage I had was that this wasn't 2013. It was 1991, and if Dad was to be believed, parents had been more lenient about letting their children out to play alone.

In my day, no parent would have allowed their kids out until they were at least a teenager. Of course, given that the streets of Brockton bay were filled with murderous gangs that made a lot of sense. But in most places in the United States parents pulled their kids in and didn't let them out.

This was an earlier, more innocent time, and I could use that to my advantage.

I had no idea how to find the people who were trying to kill me. They'd used some unfamiliar terms, talking about muggles, aurors and Hogsmeade. I couldn't be certain whether these were Britishisms that I didn't know, or whether they were something more sinister.

My best bet would be to hit the library. There probably wasn't an Internet I could check, but if there was, maybe I could find something there.

I'd seen a hotel nearby, and a library. Their proximity had been part of the reason I'd settled here.

It was too late to get breakfast at the hotel, but tomorrow morning, I'd try to slip in and mingle with the groups of tourists getting the free continental breakfast, or whatever it was called over here. No one would expect a child to be homeless, and they wouldn't notice me slipping food into my pack for later. Even if it was just cereal it would help to extend my food.

It was farther to the library than I'd realized while I was driving. One of the first things I was going to have to do was figure out some method to transport myself around the city. Walking would take up all my time and it would expose me to more danger. Even something as small as a skateboard might help, but I really needed a bicycle.

I slipped inside the library, and to my relief there were other children there. I blended in quickly, and I quickly found the British dictionaries.

There were no mentions of mudbloods, or Hogwarts or Hogsmeade. The latter two sounded more like places than names.

“Miss,” I began, talking to a librarian.
“An American?” she asked.

Apparently my accent hasn't changed with my body. I don't know why I thought it might.

“My parents are visiting here from Boston,” I said. “And I heard somebody talking about a couple of towns...Hogsmeade and Hogwarts. Have you ever heard of them?”

She frowned. “No, I haven't.”

What followed was thirty minutes of frustration as we searched through maps and reference books. In the Internet age it was a search that could have been done with a few clicks of a keyboard. Ultimately we found nothing.

“I'm sorry dear. Someone must have been having you on, or maybe you misheard them.”

“That must be it,” I said. “I must have misheard them.”

Either I really had misheard, or these places were secrets. Where was I going to get more information? I didn't have anything to go on.

They had people in the police department, but I had no idea whether those people were coroners, beat cops, or the police chief... or maybe all three. I hadn't gotten a look at either of the two men, and they hadn't dropped any convenient clues.

I was at a dead end.

My next step would be survival. I'd need a way to make money; something that wouldn't seem out of place for a ten year old to do.

Transportation was next. I had vague recollection that London had a subway system...possibly called the Tube, and I knew they had those weird three story buses. Public transportation was supposedly better in Europe than in the states. I needed to learn my way around that system, and I needed something portable that I could use to travel in the spaces in between.

Finding free food would be a bonus too, but I could hardly ask a librarian. For one thing, she would likely call Child Services, and for another thing I would likely have to use this library again in the future. It had a real bathroom that I could use to do a sponge bath in, and it was nice to use the restroom without having to hide behind a bush.

It suddenly occurred to me that there might be one avenue of investigation. The men had planned on killing three other families. If I could watch the news for the next few days, I might be able to figure out some sort of common factor in the deaths.

I stole a newspaper from an old man on my way out, and I headed south. I'd seen a bulletin board for a car boot sale. When I'd asked the librarian about it, she'd told me that it was something like a flea market, an informal gathering of people in a field where they brought things in their cars that they wanted to sell.

It sounded ideal for me. I had two hundred pounds on me, and it might be enough to get me items I might need to survive.

There hadn't been any bicycles in the flat, or I'd have tried to take one. It was probably too much to hope that someone might have a good deal on one now, but it wasn't like I had much else to do.

It was a two hour trip.
I was already tired by the time I reached the place. I was going to have to take up jogging again; this body was in worse condition than my original one before I'd gained my powers. It was thinner, without the small pot belly, but it had a lot less muscle tone.

Without video games or computer screens, how had this girl gotten so flabby?

The flea market was larger than I would have thought from the librarian's description. It covered the space of maybe half an acre. It made me a little nostalgic for the Lord's Market back at home.

I wandered around, looking carefully for anything I could use. Back home at events like this there always seemed to be someone selling knives and swords. There was nothing like that here. Was it illegal, or was there some other reason?

There weren't any guns either, but I knew those were illegal.

Even back home I wouldn't have been able to buy either one as a ten year old.

A bicycle was at one stand; it was bright and pink, which wasn't ideal when you were trying to hide it, but it was cheap; just thirty pounds. As near as I could tell, a British pound in 1992 seemed to be worth anywhere between three or four dollars in 2013. I didn't like spending that much money, but while I could have stolen a bicycle from another kid, it would have possibly gotten police attention that I couldn't afford.

I was leaving the swap meet when I noticed a large, heavyset man following me.

Was he with the people who had attacked me, or was he another sort of predator. I couldn't be sure. The swap meet was on muddy, grassy ground, and I hadn't ridden a bicycle in a while. If I tried to ride on this kind of terrain I wasn't sure whether I would be any faster than he was.

I knew how to fight, but this body was weak, and I wasn't sure how well it would stand up to a man who was four times my current weight. Pepper spray would have been ideal, but there hadn't been any at the swap meet.

There were people around still, although many of them were beginning to pack up and move out. I could call out for help, but that would raise questions about where my parents were. I could lie and say that I lived nearby; that might be the wisest course.

The one advantage to being a ten year old girl was that people would look out for you. They would try to help. The only question was whether I wanted that sort of help.

In this situation, the bicycle was as much a hindrance as a help. It was an older bicycle, and heavy.

I saw an artist who was using spray paints on an old vanity.

“Hey, mister,” I said. “Could I pay you to help me?”

“What?”

“I just bought this bike, but I don't like the color. I'd be willing to pay you to help me.”

The woman smiled and we dickered for a little bit. I kept an eye on the man, who was pretending to look at some cheap art in the corner. She spent the next hour working on the bike, and I paid her ten pounds. She was happy to offer me something to drink, and we sat and chatted.

Apparently it would be another thirty minutes before the pain dried enough to touch, and one or
two hours before it was dry enough to handle... and a full day before it was fully dry.

I simply needed it to not be a bright pink, and I needed an excuse for the man to go away.

The woman agreed to hold my bike for me for a couple of hours, and I slipped away. The man began following me again, and I ducked away.

I spent the next thirty minutes trying to lose him, but the swap meet wasn't that large, and I wasn't that hard to find. I was crouched behind a table staring at him as he walked by a trash bin.

There were bees flying around the bin; apparently one of the stands was selling lemonade, and people had been throwing the leftovers inside. The bees had been attracted by the smell of the sugar.

If I'd had my powers this would have been easy. I would have sent the bees directly at the man, and he wouldn't have even remembered that he was after me.

I could almost imagine the bees stinging him right in the eyes. That would keep him from following me.

A bee swooped in, and a moment later the man was screaming.

I stared, my mouth wide. Had I done that?

It hadn't felt like my usual swarm sense, but I'd felt... something. People were gathering around the man, and I quickly moved away. I returned to the woman, took possession of my bicycle, and I left.

She'd painted it in a camouflage pattern. With luck I'd be able to hide it in the grass and it wouldn't be noticed. If not I'd have to hide it in the bushes.

It took me a little time to get used to riding a bicycle again; I hadn't done it in years. But what had taken me two hours of walking was an easy thirty minutes of riding, and I knew that once I got used to it, things would probably go even faster. The bicycle had a basket on it, too, which meant that I might be able to carry things from the grocery store, assuming that I could find one.

I spent the rest of the day exploring the neighborhood.

Finding a Little Caesar's was a bonus; I'd heard they'd pulled out of Britain in my world. Here, either it hadn't happened yet, or it wasn't going to happen at all. I bought an entire medium pizza for the cost of a McDonald's meal, and I ate as much as I could before giving the other half to a homeless guy on a street corner. I had no way to preserve it, and there was no reason for it to go to waste.

I hid the bicycle under the bush, and as I went to sleep in the culvert that night, I stared at the beetle that had decided to take up residence with me.

After an hour of trying, I finally made it stand up, and begin to dance.

It was horribly clumsy; nothing like the refined elegance of the powers that I'd once had. I couldn't control more than a single bug at a time, and whatever feedback I was getting from the bug was even worse than it's limited senses would suggest.

It was like trying to use your arm when it was numb because you slept on it. It was clumsy and would barely follow your commands, but you could still do some things with it.
I felt much more optimistic.

I was up earlier the next morning, in time to reach the hotel and pretend to be one of the children of the guests. I ate a hot meal, and I looked over a newspaper that someone had left.

There were headlines screaming about three murdered families.

Part of me felt guilty; could I have helped them in some way? Most of me was more pragmatic; I knew better. In this body, with no powers and no weapons, I'd have just been murdered again.

I couldn't even have warned them.

There were addresses, and I'd bought a map at the Swap meet. I'd just have to check out the sites of the murders so I could find out if there were any clues to the people who had murdered me.
I'd taken classes in lockpicking while I worked for the Protectorate, but I'd never thought I'd need them. It had always been so much easier to simply send a swarm up under the door to open it from the other side, or to use the bugs that were already in the room.

Because of that, I was more than rusty, and picking the lock in the back garden of the first house took me more than forty five minutes. Even this, the third house was taking me twenty minutes. It was frustrating; even though I could now control a single bug that wasn't nearly good enough to get through the door.

His vision and other senses weren't good enough for me to simply use him to remotely scout the place out either. In my former life I would have used thousands of bugs, my vision and other senses a composite of all of their senses. Bugs' vision wasn't particularly good anyway, and my new connection was tenuous.

Eventually I felt the lock click under my hand, the pieces of wire I'd found finally doing the job. I grimaced, and looking around I slipped into the house.

There wasn't any blood. That didn't surprise me. These people had supposedly died in a car accident along with their ten year old child. They hadn't even been on my radar, but I'd noticed the story about the accident and I'd drawn my own conclusions.

A single murder or even two could go under the radar; three would be a pattern.

The newspapers had thought it strange that two other young families had been dying of natural causes. What I was looking for was a reason why they were being targeted. If there was a common thread between the three of them, it would go a long way to helping me to determine where the others might strike next.

This was the third house, and the other two had been a bust. They'd all seemed like ordinary people; family pictures on the wall, toys and other things. If I'd slipped a few more valuables in my pack, who could blame me? It wasn't likely to do them much good, and even the food in their pantries was likely to go to waste by the time the police finished their investigations.

So I drank their milk and I ate the cheese in their refrigerators; luxuries that I wouldn't get in my little culvert. I checked bank books and passports, looked through records; everything I could to see any single clue that would give me the hook that I needed to lead me to the next step.

There had been clothes at one house that fit me. I hadn't taken as many with me as I should when I'd left my flat. I'd even risked a quick shower.

I slipped any jewelry or valuables I could into my pack; I still wasn't sure how I was going to pawn them, but I had a few ideas. The four hundred pounds I'd gotten from my parents wouldn't last forever, and it wasn't like I could get a job.

It was humiliating; I'd been a super hero and before that a crime lord. Now I was reduced to being a grave robber and a burglar.

I was checking their mail, when I heard the front door open. I froze, and then I carefully began to move. There was a large picture window leading out to the back garden, with floor length curtains, and I slipped behind those, careful that my feet didn't stick out. I slipped my pack behind the other side of the curtains.
It was helpful that I was small and thin.

“'The muggles haven't checked here yet?’ I heard one voice.

“They were busy with the other two; the muggles here just died in a car crash, so going through everything wasn't a top priority.”

“It seems suspicious, three sets of Hogwarts kids dead in one night, and another missing. Muggles die all the time, but I don't like it.”

“You think somebody is targeting them? The other side likes to pretend they don't know anything about muggle life, but they know enough to fake a death or two.”

“Well, they'd stick out, wouldn't they? Purebloods like to pretend that they don't understand muggles, so much that they intentionally dress like they've never seen one. There's been some complaints by the Obliviators about the problems it's causing.”

“It's not like half of them don't live right in the middle of the muggles; not everybody can live in Hogsmeade,” the second voice said. “They just don't want their pureblood friends to know that they've rubbed elbows with them.”

“Well, the older ones still remember how muggles used to dress, and they think none of it changes. It's not like muggle fashions don't change every twenty years or so.”

“I think it's more like every ten years they change,” the second voice said.

“Hell, you can get all kinds of things cheaper from the muggles; you know some of those rich bastards are tighter than a goblin on tax day. They've got to be getting some cheap muggle crap on the sly.”

“Well, it's a little over our pay grade. We're just here to make sure there isn't anything incriminating for the muggles to find. The last thing we need is for some muggle auror to find an acceptance letter.”

“I thought the boy hadn't gotten his letter yet.”

“That's the funny thing; all of these kids have birthdays in August. They're the last lot to get their letters, and it was the professors who alerted us about what to look for when they noticed the letters not being sent out.”

“Aren't these supposed to be hand delivered anyway?”

“They can't deliver to the dead.”

“So why bother here?”

“This one knew a half-blood. They aren't supposed to, but sometimes kids share toys, chocolate frogs, cards... the usual things. What do you think a muggle auror would do if he saw a chocolate frog jumping around?”

“Investigate?”

“He'd give the obliviators even more work. It's best to head these things off before they become problems.”

“You put the muggle repelling charms up, right?”
“What do I look like, an incompetent? Just get to searching.”

For the next several minutes I stood as still as I possibly could, worried that one of them would notice that the drapes were moving in a way they shouldn't. The time stretched out, although it couldn't have been more than thirty minutes.

Eventually, the two men met back at the bottom of the stairs.

“What do I look like, an incompetent? Just get to searching.”

“Find anything?”

“No. It looks like it's clean.”

I closed my eyes and tried to reach out to any bugs in the area. My senses still weren't that good but I finally locked into a housefly.

Houseflies were nearsighted and they couldn't focus, but I didn't dare even try to peek out from behind the curtains, and I wanted a look at these guys. I still regretted not getting even a peek at the men who had killed the Scriveners and the other.

Now, I'd never know who they were even if they walked up to me; not until I heard their voices.

I strained, and felt myself making the connection. It took a moment for me to force the fly to move, and then it took a moment for me to realize what I was seeing through the poor vision of the fly. Luckily I'd had years of experience in seeing through the eyes of insects and I was able to make a reasonable guess at what I was seeing.

It looked like two white men wearing long coats... most likely trench coats of some kind. When I'd been in control of the swarm, I'd been able to compensate by using different kinds of insects to compensate for each others visual weaknesses, but here I only had a single bug, and mostly everything was a blur.

I forced the fly to get closer to them. I might be able to identify his face, but it was like looking at someone's face without my glasses on and squinting. There were no guarantees that I would recognize him.

Part of me wanted to peek out from behind the curtain. Even a single glimpse might be enough to recognize both of them later. But if I was able to see them, they'd be able to see me, and the human eye was designed to see movement. I didn't dare move.

I kept my breathing slow and shallow, not wanting to alert either of them to the fact that I was here.

“Want to have a drink at the Leaky Cauldron? I hear that Tom's got some of the new stuff from France.”

“I've got to file a report, but I'll meet you later.”

“Fine.”

Then there was a sudden explosion, and it looked like the man further away simply vanished. A moment later, the one the fly was close to did as well, and the fly was pulled inevitably toward the place where the man had vanished, its body tumbling uncontrollably as the second crack sounded.

I flinched as I heard the sounds; they reminded me a little of twin pistol shots, which given that I'd been shot in the back of my head twice in my last life was understandable.
What... the... hell?

There weren't any parahumans in this world, not that were talked about. I'd been looking, both in the library and in the newspaper. It was possible that I had missed something without the Internet, but even if it was true, what were the odds of there being two teleporters in the same place?

By definition, parahuman abilities tended to be unique. The Entities that had granted them were interested in seeing what we would do with them, and they hadn't seemed to like to repeat themselves, not exactly. No two parahumans had exactly the same power, although some were very similar.

Worse, the way they were talking, there was an entire community, and some of them were engaged in working to keep the secret. I didn't know what obliviators, but it sounded like they had people who made problems and probably people disappear.

That there were at least two sides wasn't a comfort when it was possible that neither side was actually good people. Just because the Empire 88 weren't quite as bad as the Slaughterhouse Nine didn't make them heroes. They were still Nazis.

Would the other side want to kill me to cover up the murder of my family? Making me disappear would be a good way of keeping me from talking, especially as I had already disappeared myself.

Moving out of the country might be my only option, and even that depended on how large their organization was. It couldn't be that large; the more people you were trying to keep secret, the harder it got.

They'd used terms that I didn't understand. Muggle seemed to refer to the larger community... and it didn't seem complimentary. There was a certain casual racism about it that suggested that these people kept themselves separate from the rest of the world, even if the two men had said that almost all of them lived among us.

How that could have been accomplished I wasn't sure, but there had always been groups that had tried it...the Amish, certain Jewish groups... others. Usually it tended to be related to religion.

The last thing I needed was to deal with a cult of parahumans. On my world the Fallen had been some of the worst... Endbringer worshipers and fanatics. Religious fanatics couldn't be reasoned with; they did crazy things like suicide bombing and kamikaze attacks.

What was a chocolate frog anyway? Some kind of rare species that they were keeping hidden? Why would that arouse suspicion with the authorities? Police officers weren't zoologists. They'd look at a brown frog and think it was weird, but they'd move on pretty quickly.

They kept talking about pure-bloods and half bloods, and muggle borns. It almost sounded like powers were genetic here, passed down from generation to generation. Scion had only appeared in 1982, which was hardly enough time for bloodlines to have appeared.

So these people had powers that didn't come from Scion or his wife? What did that mean?

Were they mutants, like in my Dad's old comics from before real superheroes had put the publishers out of business?

There were too many unanswered questions, and while this had filled in a few blanks, it had created ten questions for every one it answered. It hadn't gotten me any closer to finding out the things I needed to know.
Who was trying to kill me, and why were they targeting children who were born to ordinary people? It sounded like an ethnic cleansing but for that to be true there had to be actual ethnicities involved.

They'd mentioned some places... The Leaky Cauldron was apparently a bar or a pub. Hogsmeade was a place where no normal people lived, which was probably why it wasn't on the map. How did you hide an entire city, though? I'd never heard of a Stranger power strong enough to cloak an entire village.

Maybe they used a different name around other people and simply didn't let “muggles” buy in? Even so, there would be ordinary people driving through all the time on the way to somewhere else. The way they were talking it didn't sound like one of those creepy religious compounds.

This was the second group that mentioned letters. Were these some kinds of Death Notes? Was killing people before they received their letters a form of cheating?

I had so many questions, and very few things that I could act on to get more information. The one thing I couldn't do was let the second group know I was around, or they'd send their obliviators to deal with me.

The one thing that might be useful was that they'd suggested that members of this group, whatever it was didn't fit in. There would be deliberate oddities in how they dressed, and that would be something I could watch out for. I couldn't depend on it, of course.

If some of them were in the police department, that meant that some of them were able to fit in reasonably well.

I waited ten minutes behind the curtain, my fly buzzing around the whole time. I had no guarantee after all that they had actually teleported. What if they'd simply gone invisible with a weird side effect? I'd seen weirder on my own world after all.

It probably wasn't a problem. This species of housefly had excellent hearing, and I could hear my own breathing just fine. Still, Stranger abilities were by definition strange. People who could become invisible might be able to become inaudible too.

Nightmare images of slipping around the curtains only to face a psychotic murderer on the other side went through my head. I carefully slipped my knife open before I slipped around the corner.

I really needed to find out what weapons were legal to carry in this country... not that it bothered me a lot to carry something that wasn't legal, but because the legal weapons would be easier to get a hold of. It would also let me know what to expect from the enemy.

Getting out of the house was easy; I didn't even steal any more food other than a jar of pickles on the way out. I'd parked my bicycle down the street, and as I slipped through the back gate, I kept an eye for any watchers.

I felt imaginary eyes on me on my way home; I tried using every trick I knew to lose a trail; doubling back, making quick course changes... none of it was very good on a girl's bicycle. There were no crowds for me to get lost in, and little I could do about my lack of speed.

Taking up jogging again would be useful for my endurance, but I was struggling to keep enough food as it was. In situations where food was scarce, calories count.

Still, I got home shortly after dark, and I spent the rest of the evening practicing my bug skills. I finally managed to control two of them at once, even if it was still like juggling instead of easy like
it had once been.

If I'd used the bugs to fly around outside looking for people trying to sneak up on me, no one could blame me.

The only thing I could do now was to keep my eye out for people and things that didn't look right. These people deliberately set themselves apart from normal people, possibly so they could identify each other. I could use that.

That night my dreams were twisted and distorted.

I saw Scion destroying the entire world, all worlds once again, and this time I wasn't there to stop him. Instead I was being stalked by teleporting men in brown trench coats.
The homeless man I'd shared pizza with two days before handed me the travel pass. I handed him back a five pound note.

“Any problems?” I asked.

He shook his head.

I looked at the pass. It was a season pass that would let me use the buses and the tube. The cost made me wince, but it would give me the kind of freedom that my bicycle alone wouldn't. I'd found a tube entrance in the opposite direction from the library. It wasn't far from my culvert.

London had the kind of public transportation system that Brockton Bay never had, even in it's glory days, and with it, the entire city was open to me. That meant more opportunities to seek out places to get free food, but also to find places for entertainment.

As it turned out, the hardest thing about being homeless was sheer boredom. There was only so much time you could spend in the library, especially since I couldn't check any books out. I couldn't even speak in front of anyone who was a police officer, because they'd probably ask for my passport.

I'd been trying to fake a British accent, but Nigel the homeless guy thought it sounded terrible.

Apparently I sounded like Dick Van Dyke in Mary Poppins.

In my previous life I'd gained many skills. I'd learned how to fight, and to move silently. I'd learned how to intimidate people, although when you were backed by a swarm of millions of stinging insects, that wasn't all that hard.

I'd never had to use other accents, and I wasn't really sure how to go about it. My best bet was simply to listen to people, keep my mouth shut and try to talk like they did.

“You ready for the next part?”

It worried me, trusting Nigel even this much. I'd spun a story about how my poor mum was in the hospital and I was on the run from an abusive stepdad. I wasn't sure how much of it he believed. The only important thing was that he not go to the police, and that he help me.

He nodded.

I handed him a couple of pieces of jewelry that I had stolen, and together we walked to a pawn shop. Nigel had has ID, and I made sure only to give him pieces from my original family's jewelry box. Hopefully if we got caught I'd be able to argue that it was part of my inheritance, and within my rights to take it.

He came back out with two hundred pounds thirty minutes later. It was possible that the pieces might have been worth more, but I doubted it. The other Undersiders had fenced jewelry before, and you never got anything close to their value when you did.

He handed the money over without question though, and he seemed grateful to have it.

I slipped it into a fanny pack that I wore under my shirt. It was another thing I'd stolen from the
second house I'd been in. It was wide enough that it could fit a book, but far too shallow. It was perfect to put money in, and since I didn't have a wallet and it fit in the front I was less likely to get pickpocketed.

My biggest risk was that someone would grab my backpack, which had some of the jewelry I'd stolen stuffed in it. I had it stuffed under some clothing and other crap, hoping that no one would notice.

“I might be able to get more later,” I said. “Well have to use another shop, though, so as not to arouse suspicion.”

“You are a strange little girl,” Nigel rumbled. He had a deep, rich voice and he was black with a beard that was speckled with gray. I wondered what had led him to be out on the streets, but I didn't ask.

We got another pizza and split it, and then Nigel showed me how to make a hobo stove. It was made using a tin can, or cans up to the size of a paint can, although he warned me not to use anything that had toxic chemicals in it.

We parted amicably, and I felt a lot better, especially once I'd retrieved my other goods from the half dozen hiding spots I'd put them in.

I quickly found that life was a lot easier with the Travel Pass. Buses and subways really did reach a lot of the city, and there were now places I could access that I never would have before.

There was a Sikh temple that offered free food to anyone. I didn't dare go there too often because they would likely call child services if they thought I didn't have anyone. It was nice to have a free meal though.

Museums were easy; they weren't part of my overall plan so much as they were a way to help fill the endless days.

I went to the market and would buy foods that were just about to expire; usually these were cheaper. The problem was that they usually were in batches larger than I could eat before the insects got to them.

For three days I explored the city, and then I started to notice them.

It started with a woman who was wearing her dress backwards. She looked as though she'd rather be anywhere than where she was, but she was buying things at a shop.

Then there was a man who looked like he belonged in the nineteen fifties. His clothes were outdated and he didn't even seem to be wearing them ironically.

I tried to follow these people, but they always vanished shortly after I did.

Once I became aware of it, I saw more and more people like that. There were a surprising number of them on the Tube. They all looked like they were tourists from the way they looked around and whispered to each other, but they all had British accents.

It felt very strange and discomfiting.

The funny thing was that the people around me didn't seem to notice a thing. Either these people were so common that no one noticed anymore, or there was something else going on.
My control over insects grew. After three days I was up to sixteen insects at a time. It was still a minuscule number, but it made tracking people a lot easier. I could follow two sets of them without looking as though I was following them.

I was in the West End looking through bookstores. While the proprietors kept giving me suspicious looks, no one stopped me as I leafed through books that no ten year old would have bothered with. I was hoping to find something... anything about the people who I was trying to follow. Surely with as many of them as there were someone would know something?

Had their obliviators murdered everyone? Even that would have been noticed; people went missing every day, but usually it was for understandable reasons. They were being followed by an abusive boyfriend, they had a drug habit, they were unstable.

I stepped out onto Charing Cross road, and I noticed another couple walking by. Their clothes were just as outlandish as the others I had seen, but again no one seemed to be taking notice. It was almost as though there was some kind of stranger effect, one that no one was able to see through but me.

Was it because I had powers?

I sent a small swarm of insects to follow them, while keeping a few to watch behind and around me. I followed them at the edge of my range, which was more than a block away.

They moved into a building, and I cautiously approached it, my heart skipping a beat as I saw it.

It was nestled between a bookstore and a record store. It looked old and strange compared to the more modern buildings around it, almost like it was something from another century. Considering that London itself was full of buildings like that, it wouldn't be a surprise, except that this one looked much, much older.

It was a tiny, dingy looking pub. There was something strange about the way people looked at it; their eyes slid away from it, as though they couldn't see it at all.

It didn't have a sign out front. I felt reluctant to step inside; I was a minor after all, and going into a bar would draw attention that I didn't need.

Yet this was the first lead I'd had in three days. I felt for my knife in my pocket.

It was definitely illegal to carry around in Britain. I'd found that out on my last visit to the library. They didn't allow mace or pepper sprays either. Not allowing people the tools they needed to defend themselves was hard to comprehend from an American viewpoint.

Taking a deep breath, I slipped inside the pub.

It was dark and shabby, but the moment I stepped inside I knew I was in the right place. The people here were all dressed in ways that were subtly wrong, with some actually wearing black robes. There were old women wearing outrageous hats, and men who were playing a kind of chess. It took me a moment to realize that the figurines on the chessboard were actually moving by themselves.

The man behind the bar looked at me. He was bald, with dark skin and he didn't have any teeth.

“Just got your letter, did you? There's still been a few stragglers.”

My face froze, and I clutched my knife in my pocket harder.
“Where's your parents?” he asked.

“They thought I could handle it myself,” I said, shrugging. While I wasn't much at acting, I'd learned how to bluff with the best of them.

He scowled. “That's not smart. The Alley is safe enough most times, but the big rush is over with and there aren't so many kids there now. You'll be fine as long as you stay out of Knockturn Alley. That's not for the likes of you.”

Gesturing, he stepped out from the back of the bar.

“You'll need help to get through until you get your wand, then you can do it on your own. If you've got muggle money, take it to Gringotts and they'll change it for you.”

At my expression, he looked around and leaned toward me.

“Having muggle money isn't something to be ashamed of. People don't like to talk about it much, but I'm guessing you're a half blood from the way you're dressed, and because you aren't with one of the tour groups the professors sponsor for the muggleborns.”

I nodded as though I knew what he was talking about.

He led me to the back of the bar, and I tensed. I had two bees hiding on the nape of my neck, ready to attack and at least try to sting his eyes out, but it might not be enough.

He paused, and then turned to me.

“This is important to remember; once you get your wand I don't want you to come back and keep asking. It's the third brick up, and the second across.”

The bricks were low enough that I could reach them. He tapped one three times and the wall opened out into another world. It didn't open in a mechanical way; the brick quivered as though it was alive, and then a hole appeared in it that grew larger and larger.

The large archway led out to a cobbled street that twisted and turned out of sight.

I forced myself to look unimpressed and stepped through, and the hole vanished behind me. There was a stack of large metal pots... cauldrons according to the sign in the nearest shop.

One shop had a sign advertising dragon livers, but I couldn't understand the prices. Another sold owls. Why owls instead of other kinds of birds I had no idea. There were shops selling broomsticks, and telescopes, bat wings and newt eyes.

It was all a little overwhelming. It was like Salem Massachusetts had taken witch mania to heart and had a shopping district entirely dedicated to stereotypical witches. It was a little tacky as far as I was concerned.

Yet the people here didn't look like they were humoring their children. They didn't look like they were shopping ironically. There were adults unaccompanied by children; most of them in fact, and they seemed deadly serious in the things they were buying.

Furthermore, there were signs that things weren't as they seemed. I could see a little boy gesturing at a toy broomstick that was floating behind him without any obvious strings. There were things in windows that were moving that should not have moved.
Everyone here had that distinctive look about them, and there were a lot of people wearing black robes. There was something about their expressions, though, that was worrying. Everyone seemed tense, as though they were looking over their shoulder. When I'd been a villain in Brockton Bay it wouldn't have registered with me at all. In a city ruled by gangs everybody looked like that.

But I'd been a hero in Chicago for two years, and I'd seen how people looked who didn't live in a war zone. These people were tense, and I wasn't sure why.

Eventually I reached a large white building with a guard standing out in front. In my world he would have been defined as a Case 53, a parahuman whose powers had warped his body into something inhuman. Here those supposedly didn't exist.

He was shorter than me, swarthy, and with inhumanly long hands and feet. He stared at me rudely as I looked at the inscription on the doors, warning against thieves.

“Is this Gringotts?” I ventured a guess.

I'd heard the aurors talking about goblins and money, and the bartender had told me to get money changed here.

He grunted and nodded.

With my bugs keeping a careful eye on him, I walked past him, slipping inside the building. It was taller and more magnificent than any of the other buildings, and the inside had a lot of marble. I'd seen places as nice in Chicago, but never in Brockton Bay, which had been on the decline for decades.

There were a huge number of tellers, possibly a hundred, all of whom seemed like they were hard at work. All of them were goblins, if that was what the guard outside was. That made it clearer that he wasn't just some kind of strange Case 53 anomaly. Like parahumans, no Case 53 had the same deformities.

Yet all of these people seemed to be formed from the same cloth. They were all small, they all had basically the same skin tone, and they all had hands that were outside of the human norm. Their feet were presumably the same, but I couldn't see them behind the counter.

I cleared my throat and spoke to the first goblin that didn't have a line.

“I'm here to change my money,” I said.

He sneered at me and pointed at the stall at the end. “Talk to Gorlok. Last goblin against the south wall.”

I saw goblins weighing out gemstones the size of glowing coals. The value of just one of those gems was mind boggling, and I wondered if they were real or some kind of replica. If they were real, then each gem was worth at least a million dollars, and that was if their quality was low. He had a stack of them that he was weighing, which probably represented enough money to get my dying city back on its feet.

How much money did these goblins control?

“I'm here to change muggle money,” I said. I didn't say into what, because I didn't know.

The goblin stared at me for a moment, then gestured for me to take a seat. Not knowing how much I would need, I slid two hundred pounds across the counter. Hopefully this wasn't a huge mistake.
He handed me back a stack of coins.

“Can you explain the exchange rate?” I asked.

He was obviously used to this question, even though his eyes narrowed at me. “Knuts are the smallest denomination,” he said. “Twenty nine knuts makes a sickle. Seventeen sickles make a galleon.”

“And how many galleons to a British pound?” I asked.

“Five pounds to the galleon currently,” he said. “The number changes sometimes.”

He'd given me thirty nine galleons, fifteen sickles and fifty eight knuts.

I hesitated. “Do you buy muggle jewelry?”

His eyes almost seemed to gleam, and he nodded. I felt uncomfortable, but I pulled my backpack around. I looked around.

“Is there somewhere else we can do this? I'd rather people not see what I've got.”

He grunted. “First witch with sense I've seen in a while.”

Flipping a sign up onto his post, he stepped down and around the bar they were all sitting at. He gestured for me to follow him, and he led me through one of the many doors.

“Witch has jewelry to sell,” he said to an older goblin. There were goblin guards in the room, and the goblin had a jewelers' glass on his eye. He looked up and glared at me.

“You saw the sign out front,” he said. “Trying to trick us is the same as trying to steal from us... and no one steals from Gringotts and lives.”

“It's possible that some of it might be costume jewelry,” I said. I looked at him. “But if I find out that you've cheated me... well, I've got a long memory too.”

He grunted.

At his gesture, I handed him my backpack. Half my jewelry was buried behind the bush near my culvert; leaving it inside the culvert had seemed foolish.

“I can give you a third of what a muggle jeweler would charge you,” he said. “Muggles like to overcharge, and they don't like to buy back, but we've got some use for it.”

I nodded. It was nothing less than I'd expected. If he'd told me he was giving me full value, I'd know he was lying. The fact that he didn't ask where I'd gotten it was worrying. He didn't seem to care whether I'd stolen it or not.

“I'll give you six hundred galleons for the lot,” he said.

I stared at him for a moment, trying to do the math in my head. Six hundred galleons would be the same as three thousand pounds. That wasn't bad, all things considered.

“I'll take it,” I said.

I could always transfer the money back to British money if I didn't find things to buy, and I still had the other half buried.
Taking the money, I was now six hundred and forty galleons richer than I'd been earlier today, whatever that meant. I wouldn't know how rich that made me until I actually went out and shopped.
“I'll take two.”

The old man stared at me as though he hadn't heard what I'd said.

He'd just led me through a whole involved process of trying out different wands, and I had to admit that there was a certain thrill when I felt... something moving through me with this one. I still didn't even know what these were for, but the bartender had said I'd need one to get back here, and so here I was.

The fact that every person on the street carried one suggested that it was more than just a key. At eight galleons it was cheap even if that was all it was. I certainly wasn't going to let a possible tool go to waste.

“The wand chooses the wielder,” he said again. “You can't simply...”

“Take two?” I asked. “Why not?”

“Wands develop an affinity for their owner. As you grow in your powers, the wand grows with you. Switching wands on a whim would stunt that growth.”

“And when mine gets broken?”

“Broken?”

“I'm a child. Things get broken. Even if it's not me doing the breaking...”

Memories of my mother's flute flashed though my mind. I'd been stupid, taking it to school when I was being bullied, but I'd never expected them to defile it the way they had.

Living out in the open the way I did, there were no guarantees. I could be mugged, attacked by dogs, or simply be unlucky and trip, and the wand would snap like the piece of wood that it was.

Ollivander looked shocked. “A witch does not break her wand.”

“I believe in being prepared,” I said. “So I'd like a spare. I won't use it unless something happens to my main wand.”

He looked at me darkly, then sighed. “Paranoid, I'd call you, but the way things are going for muggleborns these days perhaps you aren't being foolish.”

“Oh?” I asked him.

“I haven't seen as many muggleborns heading for Hogwarts this year as usual,” he said. “And it makes me question why. There are whispers that you-know-who is back.”

“Who?”

“I shouldn't say anything,” he said hurriedly. He looked toward the front of the shop, as though he expected someone there to be listening. I knew there wasn't, because I had bugs on the front and back entrances watching. I could hardly tell him that, of course.

“If it's dangerous, that's all the more reason you should tell me,” I said. “otherwise, how will I
defend myself?"

He hesitated, then said, "There are ugly aspects to our society that people don't like to talk about. There are people who don't care for muggleborns, and ten years ago there was a war among our kind about just that issue."

"Who won?" I asked.

"You wouldn't be allowed a wand if the other side had won," he said. "But they never really went away. They simply went quiet."

"And they aren't so quiet now?"

"There have been rumors," he said. "No one really knows. But no one really wants to risk bringing the bad times back by asking."

He must have seen that I understood from my expression, because he stepped back and hustled to get me another copy of my wand.

As he bustled around, I looked outside the window at people shopping. I still wasn't sure I should even be here, but the wands were cheap enough that it was worth it just for that.

"Blackthorn, ten inches with a dragon heartstring, very flexible. That will be twenty one galleons."

"I thought that they were seven galleons apiece," I said.

"The first one is subsidized by Hogwarts," he said. "Fourteen is the true price."

I'd heard the name Hogwarts bandied around a few times, but I still hadn't found out what it was. I hadn't dared to ask, because that might reveal that I wasn't supposed to be here.

"Fine," I said. I handed over the money.

I slid one wand into my backpack, and the other into belt. It wouldn't fit into my pocket, and my arms were too short to hide it up my sleeves. Maybe some kind of holster?

Without saying anything else, I left Ollivanders. The old man had creeped me out, given his tendency to stare just a little too long and to make cryptic pronouncements. I wasn't sure what to make of his assertion that wands were semi-sentient. I hoped that it was just a marketing ploy, because if it wasn't, then was owning one a little like slavery?

Wandering around, I saw a lot of products that I couldn't ever see a need for. Why would I buy a cauldron, or the parts to dozens of disgusting animals?

I was heading for the nearest bookstore when I stopped.

Gambol and Japes seemed to be a joke store. While it was possible that I wouldn't find anything useful, it wasn't impossible that these people might be stupid enough to actually sell things that could be used as weapons.

Stepping inside, I looked around. One thing I'd noticed about these people was that it seemed like they had a lot of tinkers. On my world, parahumans with the power to build technology were considered some of the most dangerous capes around.

Here, there were products of whatever power these people used everywhere. There were floating broomsticks and moving chess pieces. There were a thousand different products, all scattered
around without any seeming rhyme or reason.

I looked carefully through the products. A lot of it really did seem to be useless; what was I going to do with artificial poop that turned back into rubber with a command word? With a telescope that gave the user a black eye?

Some of the pranks seemed to be mean spirited, and all I could think was that my bullies would have loved a store like this back when I was in Winslow. They'd been forced to limit themselves to the usual pushes and shoves and spilled food... at least until they'd shoved me into a locker filled with two week old tampons and other medical waste.

I could see that sort of escalation in some of the pranks this place sold, and it didn't give me a good feeling about these people that the shop seemed to be very successful.

Who would buy something like this unless they were bullying people? It didn't say good things that business was so good with such a presumably small population.

After five minutes of browsing, I froze as I found one that seemed really interesting.

“Peruvian instant darkness powder?” I asked the proprietor. It looked like a black rock, not like a powder at all.

“Throw it, and it will shroud your target in darkness.”

“How dark?”

“Impenetrably dark,” the man said. He was younger than the wand maker, maybe my Dad's age. “He won't be able to see his hand in front of his face. I have to advise against using it at the top of stairs or in other dangerous places.”

It was almost as though he was telling me exactly how to murder someone. Was he an idiot, or was he actually promoting using his product for killing?

“How much is it?”

“Ten galleons,” he said.

At my look, he said, “We have to import it from Peru. It lasts a while too; depending on prevailing winds and the like up to fifteen minutes.”

“I'll take three,” I said. “And these marbles work to trip anyone, even on unlevel ground?”

“They're enchanted to seek out the person who steps on them and to make them flail around comically before falling down. We used to sell banana peels that did the same thing, but there were issues with quality control.”

“I'll take three sets of those, and some of these firecrackers. Are they legal to use in London?”

“Not for children, so you'll have to stay out of muggle areas when you use them.”

Carefully, I picked out the fireworks that looked like they were the most dangerous. They reminded me a little of my Dad's reminiscences of the good old days when fireworks were strong enough to blow people's hands off.

Hopefully these tinkertech fireworks would be just as dangerous. Even if they weren't, I could probably use them as a distraction. I had enough control over my insects that I could probably use
them to light one while I was somewhere else.

I nodded, and I stuffed my purchases in my backpack.

The clerk looked uneasy as he handed me my receipt. “You aren't planning to do anything illegal are you?”

“I'm just a kid,” I said, smiling. It didn't reach my eyes.

He didn't looked convinced. If anything, he looked even more anxious. He staggered back as I moved around him toward the door.

“Watch your step,” I said as I left, waving.

As I passed through a number of other stores, I didn't see anything I would need. Robes might help me fit in here, but where would I keep them? Buying a cat or a snake or even an owl would be irresponsible when I was living out in the wild.

The bookstore was where I really needed to go, but I stopped into a shop called Barons.

It was here that I really found myself getting excited. It was a shop filled with chests and containers of all kinds. Some weren't enchanted at all, while others were larger on the inside. They sold wizarding tents too, some of which had indoor plumbing and showers.

I really, really wanted one of those, but there was no way I'd be able to set one up in the middle of London without someone noticing and coming to investigate. Even if I could, the cheapest tent would cost more than half of my original stash.

They had chests that expanded on the inside too, including some deluxe models that expanded on the inside to the size of a rather largish house. Unfortunately, they also came with a price tag that was as much as a house. Even if that wasn't true, I still didn't have a place to put it.

It occurred to me that what I really needed to do was to find a warehouse that I could break into. If I could do that, I could set up a Wizarding tent inside and no one would notice. There was no point in buying anything here until I could find a place for it though.

Still, the thought of plumbing and showers whenever I wanted was almost enough to make me pony up the money immediately.

The woman saw the look of disappointment on my face, and she looked down at the fanny pack at my waist. From the expression on people's faces I'd learned not to call it a fanny pack. I still wasn't sure what I should actually call it.

“I don't suppose you know of any stores that sells stuff like this secondhand?” I asked.

She frowned. “There's a couple of stores in Knockturn Alley... but it's not safe for someone like you to go there.”

Could everyone tell I was a muggleborn just by looking at me? Did I look like a tourist? I was going to have to work on my act.

“It's just... I really need something like this, but these prices are a little steeper than I can afford,” I said. I looked up at her. “I may have to risk it.”

“You shouldn't... you really shouldn't,” she said.
Her saying it made me want to visit it even more. It sounded like it was what the bad parts of every town were. The place where pawnshops and petty crooks were found. However, there was an undertone to her voice. If this was where the genocidal wizards were congregating, it might not be wise for me to go there, at least until I was able to increase the size of my swarm.

She must have seen something in my expression that she didn't like. The woman bit her lip, and then looked around. There was no one else in the store.

“I could enchant that for you,” she said. “I'm really not supposed to; the Ministry regulates these things, but there's a workaround that helps avoid breaking the Secrecy rules.”

“Oh?”

“Your bag will be able to hold up to six hundred pounds,” she said. “But to muggles it will appear to be empty. I can even throw in a charm so that whatever you ask for is always at the top of the pile.”

“How much will it weigh?” I asked. I struggled to keep the growing excitement off my face. This was something that would be a game changer for me, but if I let her know how badly I wanted it, she'd overcharge me.

Telling me that it was semi-illegal was most likely a marketing ploy to drive up the price. Still, if I could afford it, I was going to buy it. I couldn't afford not to.

“Nothing,” she said. “Not more than the bag itself anyway.”

“Should I have it done to my backpack instead?”

“That thing will be a lot more convenient than the bigger bag, and a lot less likely to get stolen, especially if you hide it under your shirt.”

“You won't be able to fit anything larger than the mouth of the pack inside, but you can always carry with with you. The things inside are protected from each other; they don't jumble together or break. You can even keep your wand inside.”

“Can living things survive inside?”

“As long as the air holds out,” she said. She looked at me curiously. “Are you planning to put a cat or Kneazel in there?”

I shook my head. “I was just curious.”

I'd never weighed any of my swarms, but I had a feeling that six hundred pounds of bugs would be a fearsome amount. If this worked out, I'd probably be back for a couple of more.

“How much?”

“Seventy galleons.”

At the rate I was going I was going to be out of money by the end of the day. It didn't matter, though. I still had the rest of it buried in the bush, and this would make my life so much easier. I'd be able to keep all the food inside, and all my other goods except for my backpack.

“How long would it take?”

“Three hours,” she said.
“Done.”

I handed over even more money, and I was out, feeling lighter than I had in a while. It wasn’t a Wizarding tent, but it would solve a lot of my problems, and if I could find a place to put it, I could get one of those too.

It would be like getting my life back. While I could stand living outdoors, I hated feeling unsafe. When winter came, I was going to be in trouble, and the Wizarding tents were climate controlled.

These people seemed to believe that they were wizards and witches. I couldn’t argue that they seemed to have powers, but magic didn’t exist. More likely these were just parahuman powers channeled through a set of backward beliefs.

It might even be that these people weren’t powered by passengers like I had been, but were some kind of mutation. There were a lot of them, and they all seemed to have similar powers, so that seemed the most reasonable explanation.

They’d cloaked their powers with a lot of myth and legend, which suggested that these people had had them for a while. Hopefully, whatever I found at the bookstore would answer questions that I was having without my having to arouse suspicion.

Reaching the bookstore, I slipped inside.

“Looking for your Hogwarts books?” the teenage witch behind the counter asked. “We’ve still got a few stacks left. First year books are on the far end. We’ve got the whole set.”

I followed her directions to a table where the books were stacked up in groups.

Standard book of spells... I doubted that would do me much good, considering that I was a parahuman and not actually a witch. A history of magic sounded like exactly the book I wanted, though. Magical theory might be all right. The books on herbs and potions didn’t sound like anything I’d ever use.

The books on fantastic beasts might be useful; I’d seen enough strange creatures to be curious about them. Had they been created by the wizards like the animated chess pieces and flying brooms? We’d had bio-tinkers at home, but they’d typically used their powers to create things far worse than dragons and unicorns.

Maybe the goblins were bio-tinkered by the wizard too. The history of magic might clear some of that up.

It was probably best to buy the whole set so as not to arouse suspicion. My fanny pack had a mouth large enough to slide the books into.

“I’m going to look around for a bit if you don’t mind,” I said.

I stayed for several hours, but realized that I needed to get my pack before that store closed. I returned, and spent more money than I had to on books, shoving them into the fanny pack as fast as I could go. I them emptied out my backpack into the fanny pack, and shoved the backpack in there too.

By the end of the day I was exhausted. I barely caught the last bus home, and the walk back to my culvert seemed to take forever. I didn’t have a tenth of the endurance I’d had in my adult body, and the thought of sleeping back in a hole when I’d seen Wizarding tents was dispiriting.
I froze as I turned around a corner and saw a tall man leaning down and staring into my culvert. He was thin, with sallow skin. He had shoulder length, greasy hair.

They'd found me!

I reached into my fanny pack, and began to pull out the things I was going to need.
“Miss Hebert,” the man called out.

I stopped, my hand gripping the darkness powder in my pouch tightly. Running would have been a better option, but until I knew how they were tracking me it might be useless. The fact that he knew my real, original name which there was no way he should known was more than a little concerning.

No one should know me by that name; no one in this world. As far as I could tell, the girl whose body I was wearing was named Millie Scribner.

Had Cauldron sent someone for me?

That didn't seem likely. In the last minutes of the battle against Scion I had used up the Doormaker's powers, and Cauldron no longer had the ability to simply open doorways to other worlds. They didn't seem like the kind of people who would care much about me anyway; their leader had shot me twice in the back of the head.

This was a member of the Wizarding community, and he should not know my name.

All sixteen of the wasps and bees I had collected flew out from behind me and circled around. I needed to keep him talking for long enough to get them into position. They wouldn't do a lot of damage, unless I was luck and he had an allergy, but they'd distract him long enough for me to use the darkness powder and the tripping marbles.

It might be enough for me to get away. We were out in the open, but there were a dozen different escape routes I could use. I'd mapped them out in my head when I'd found this place. The last thing I'd wanted to do was to be trapped inside a culvert when the people who were trying to kill me came back.

“I'm not sure I know anybody by that name,” I said cautiously. “Why do you want to see her?”

He stood at stared at me. There was something about the look in his eye that I didn't like.

“I am the professor of an exclusive school, one which she has been invited to,” he said. “May I have your name?”

“My mother always told me not to talk to strangers,” I said.

“And yet here you are,” he said.

There was something about the way he spoke; it was very precise.

I'd read a little on the bus back; from what little I knew, wizards used their wands to create any number of powers. They were like mini-Eidolons, able to create and maintain any power at all. Unlike him, they weren't able to do just anything, only abilities that they had been trained to do.

The important thing that I'd gathered from it was that they needed their wands to do just about anything.

The man had a wand in his hand, and I had to treat it like it was a loaded weapon. There were two different options for me... stay as far away as possible so that it was harder for him to aim, or close
in and try to get it from him.

I couldn't tell what kind of martial arts training he might have had; it was possible that he might not have had any. People tended to be lazy, and if they had a certain power they tended to rely on it overly much.

It was only people who had sub-par abilities like I'd once had who were forced to work harder. Bug control hadn't even ranked on the scale of super hero and villain abilities, but I'd made it terrifying.

My reputation alone had been enough to get me out of some scrapes. I no longer had that, and I was going to have to work with my wits.

We'd both been silent, staring at each other for a moment.

“You are an annoying child,” he said.

“I've been told that,” I admitted. “More than once. I'd be happy to give that letter to her.”

I stepped forward, my eyes never leaving the wand he had in his hand. If he lifted it I'd dodge to the right and lunge forward, depending on my bugs to distract him long enough for me to get the wand.

“So you do know where she is,” he said. He glanced back at the culvert. “It would seem that she has fallen on hard times.”

By the time he glanced back I had already closed half the distance between us.

“Her parents had an unfortunate accident,” I said. “Met with some dangerous people and didn't come out alive. You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?”

He stared at me.

“It would seem unusual for a child to come out of a situation like that unharmed.”

“Some people are lucky, I guess,” I said. I was almost there.

I had the darkness powder in one hand, and I was easing the pocket knife open with my other. It wasn't easy; Swiss army knives were hard to open at the best of times, and one handed in the dark was even harder. However I finally felt it slide open just as I got within arms length of him.

A cut to his wrist and he'd drop the wand. I'd step inside his reach, and the knife would slice the femoral artery in his thigh. The shock and blood loss would most likely keep him from being a threat after that, but only if I could catch him by surprise. This new body was small and weak and didn't have the strength or reflexes my old body had.

“I am Severus Snape,” he said. He stared me in the eye for a moment, and I felt the beginnings of a headache. “And I am here to offer you admittance to Hogwarts.”

“What?” I asked. “So you aren't here to kill me?”

He glanced down, and he must have seen the glint of the knife.

Mister Snape stepped back and slowly put his wand away. “I am here to make an offer. There was some concern when it was found the some of the other prospective students had met with unfortunate accidents.”
“Accidents, right,” I said. I chuckled sarcastically. “Whatever makes you people feel better.”

We were alone; I was sending some of my insects out to the limits of my range, and they weren't detecting anyone else. He might have been arrogant enough to think that he'd be able to take a muggle child by himself, but I'd already survived one attack.

His eyes narrowed. “What do you know about what has been happening?”

“I overheard them planning to kill three more kids and their families,” I said. “Before they got their letters.”

“And you chose not to go to the police?”

He knew enough to call them police instead of whatever the hell word the others kept using. Despite that, he still chose to walk around in robes.

“They said they had people in the department.”

He straightened up. “If this is true, then Hogwarts is the safest place in Great Britain that you can be.”

Hogwarts.

“That's the school,” I said.

“Yes. You are a witch, and Hogwarts will teach you how to reach your potential.”

“Me. You are saying that I'm one of you people?”

He stared at me.

I wasn't sure why I hadn't made the connection before. All of the other dead had been members of this race... wizards or whatever they called themselves. It stood to reason this was why Millie Scrivener had been targeted.

It explained the feeling I'd gotten when I'd handled the wands. I'd been quick to explain that away as sales tactics, or as something inherent to the wand itself, especially since Ollivander had been so insistent that it was the wand that chose the wielder.

“You know who my people are,” he said. “And what they can do.”

“I've seen some of the things they can do,” I said grimly. “So why would your people be trying to kill me if I'm one of you?”

“Some people believe that this sort of power should be reserved for those who have enjoyed it for several generations. They fear that newcomers will prove to be corrupting influences on their way of life.”

“So they are racists,” I said. “How does that help me?”

“Hogwarts is the one place they will not dare to attack you,” he said. “Also, it is better than a hole in the ground.”

I stared at him. Did I believe him? I couldn't be sure.

My impression of the wizards was that they were arrogant enough to believe that a normal human
child wouldn't be worth trying to fool. Normally, they'd be right too.

In my world, people gained powers when they triggered; it happened when they'd had the worst day of their lives. It wasn't unknown for it to happen to children, and so people were a little more guarded around children.

Here, apparently people my age were considered powerless, even by the Wizarding community.

“How did you find out my name?” I asked, challenging him.

“There is a magical quill,” he said. “Whenever a child's magic first manifests itself, the book writes their name in a book. For most children, that happens early, and letters are sent out to them on standardized dates, giving them plentiful time to prepare for their journey.”

He hesitated. “Some people are late bloomers. Their magic doesn't manifest until that last month. If it does not happen until September then they have to wait another year.”

“I don't have any magic,” I said.

“The quill does not make mistakes,” he said. “Have you not had unexplained things happen around you? Been able to push your will onto the world?”

My bugs.

I felt a sudden shock go through me. I'd been assuming that I'd been getting my powers back, slowly but surely. But it didn't make sense that the connection in the brain to the alien intelligences that gave us our powers would exist in an entirely new body, not in a world where the shards hadn't been giving people powers.

I wasn't getting my powers back. I was mimicking them with this “magical” power, whatever it was.

According to the book on magical history that I'd skimmed, records of wizards went back five thousand years, long before Scion had ever gotten close to this planet.

“Maybe,” I admitted reluctantly. “But I overheard some men saying that all of the children had birthdays in August.”

“Children with birthdays in September are not accepted until the next year even if they do have their magic,” Snape said. He paused. “You don't seem surprised at the existence of magic. Most muggles have more questions. Have you been exposed to the magical world before?”

It meant that someone had either seem the book or whatever list they'd copied from the book to keep the students organized. While I would have expected the students to have been kept in alphabetical order, it was possible that they'd been kept by birth month. I'd seen stranger organization schemes during my trip to Diagon Alley.

“I followed some strange looking people and found Diagon alley,” I said. I pulled out a wand. “Bought a few things.”

For once he seemed flabbergasted.

“You've been rather resourceful,” he said finally. “But we should get you to safety.”

My bugs were hearing distinctive cracking sounds in the distance. Had I been followed back here,
or had he? There was a good chance that whoever assigned him to come get me had my name on a
list somewhere.

That meant that my best bet to finding the people who'd done this was in Hogwarts itself.

He'd heard the sounds, and while he was trying to look cool and calm, I could see his fingers
tightening on his wand, and a sudden stiffness to his posture. Whoever was coming he didn't want
to meet, at least not with me in tow.

“All right,” I said.

He held out his hand, and a moment later I felt the world contract around me as though I was being
squeezed by a tube.

Strider’s teleportation ability was a lot more pleasant.

We were suddenly standing on a huge lawn that sloped upward. To my right was a dark forest, and
I could feel that it was full of insects, even if I could still only control a few of them.

Up the slope there was a castle.

“There are anti-apparition spells that protect Hogwarts,” Snape said. “To prevent wizards from
simply apparating inside.”

“No moat?” I asked.

Not being able to teleport inside was nice, but if I could walk up to the door and blow it off its
hinges, it wasn't that good of a protection. Hopefully there were other things protecting the castle,
or I'd have to rethink my decision in coming here.

I knew better than anyone that a school was not necessarily a safe place.

He glanced at me, but didn't deign to reply. We started walking up the slope.

“You know that you have a mole in the castle, right?” I asked. “I overheard the two men who killed
my parents saying that they'd gotten the names off a list in Hogwarts.”

He stiffened, but didn't say anything.

“How'd they know I was staying in a culvert?” I asked. “No one followed me. Was there a master
list that had all the names and the addresses on it?”

From his body language I could tell that there was.

He handed me my letter, and I scanned it. It was addressed to Taylor Hebert, North East Culvert...
hmmm... I hadn't known the name of the park. That was really specific.

Apparently I was going to have to buy a whole lot of the crap that I'd turned my nose up at...
cauldrons, robes and the whole bit. Luckily I'd already bought the wands and the books.

“I gather you're accepting the invitation even if you believe that the Dark Lord has agents inside
the school?” he asked.

I was getting winded on my way up the slope. It had been a long day, and this body was dreadfully
out of shape. I was going to have to restart my running and build up my endurance again.
“It would seem prudent, now that I know you can track me wherever I go and someone here is looking at the book that has my location,” I said. “I didn't get all of this... just the wands and the books.”

“Wands?”

“For breakage,” I said. At his look I shrugged. “I'm a child.”

“Most children who break things do not plan ahead,” he said. “Unless it is deliberately done, and often even then. They also tend to prefer to pretend that they are older than they really are, unless they see some sort of gain.”

“I don't trust people,” I said. “And if the wands are this important, isn't a spare a good idea?”

Buying a second wand had actually been an impulsive decision. I'd been in denial about the feelings I'd had when I'd finally found the right one, but there had been a kind of strange euphoria when I'd felt that power in my hand.

I was going to have to watch myself; in my old body I'd just barely been an adult. Now that I was in a preteen body, I also had a preteen brain. I'd still have an advantage over other children my age because I'd been through these experiences before.

Having to go through puberty a second time wasn't something I was looking forward to. The only thing that would be worse would be not going through it, because one of these genocidal wizards got to me.

I was going to have to watch my step at this school. In my old school, half the kids had been in gangs, but only a quarter of them had actually been carrying weapons at any particular time. If this really was a school for magic, then every child would have a weapon in his pocket, and all of them could try to kill me.

“I suspect that you will be a headache to whatever head of household who has to deal with you.”

“That's not my concern,” I said. “I've got people trying to murder me, and so I really don't care what anyone says.”

“You won't be allowed the knife in school,” he said.

I held up my wand. “No weapons allowed?”

“The Wizarding world frowns on its students being stabbed,” he said. “No matter how satisfying that might be. For that matter it's illegal to carry in Muggle Great Britain as well.”

“Well, things are a little more lenient where I come from. You defend yourself or you die.”

“I wasn't aware that the United States were so violent,” he said.

His United states probably wasn't. Mine was a post-apocalyptic hellhole... and that was before the apocalypse had actually started.

We reached the top of the rise, and I finally got my first good look at the castle. My breath caught in my throat. I'd seen other worlds and things no person should have to see but I'd also been raised on Disney just like every other little girl in America.

Because of that, castles had a special place in my heart, and this one did not disappoint. I couldn't
help but stare at it.

“Welcome to Hogwarts,” Snape said.
“She fully intended to stab me,” Snape's voice said.

I was sitting outside what was apparently the principal's office, although apparently he was called Headmaster here. Hopefully he was better than Blackwell had been, letting the popular kids get away with everything and punishing the other kids.

My bugs were listening in to the conversation; it wasn't that I didn't trust Snape, although of course I didn't. But if this was the place where people got the information to get their killing sprees started, I needed all the information I could get.

“I'm sure it wasn't that bad Severus,” an older man's voice said.

“She knew where to stab me to best incapacitate me. That's not normal for an eleven year old child. Her mind didn't even feel like that of a child... it was difficult to read anything other than surface thoughts, and I was only able to get bits and pieces.”

There was silence for a moment.

“If she was Tom, you wouldn't have been able to read anything at all. Did you learn anything else?”

“The deaths of her parents didn't bother her in anything other than an abstract way. It was as though she didn't care about them at all.”

He'd read my mind.

I felt a chill go down my spine. In my old world, mind reading had been thought to be impossible, and discovering that it wasn't was horrible. I'd been able to beat people in the past because I was smarter and a better planner. If they knew all my plans just by looking at me, then I wouldn't have any chance at all.

“I'm sure that she was just in shock. We saw a lot of that during the war,” the other man said. “It will come to her in time.”

“Giving people the benefit of the doubt will be the death of you,” Snape said. “Not everyone can be redeemed.”

“And if I'd felt that way about you?”

Snape was silent for a moment. “It's not normal for a child to be thinking about how to make me bleed to death.”

“I'd suspect that some of your students might disagree.”

There was a sound of expelled air, almost like Snape was trying to suppress a chuckle.

“More importantly, what if she is right?” Snape said. “It is a serious accusation that muggleborns are being targeted using information from this school.”

“It's possible that it could have been a member of the board,” the other man said. “If it had been a member of the staff, I would have expected there to be more deaths.”
“That would depend on how much access they had,” Snape said. “Given that only a few people had access, it should be easy to work out who was involved.”

“The fact that there have only been four attacks suggests that someone got a quick look at a list.”

“Are we sure that there have not been more attacks than the girl knows about... perhaps some who have already received their letter?”

“That would provoke the kind of response that Tom doesn't want. A few mugglesborns die before they get their letters, well, most wizards think muggles live short brutish lives anyway. But attacking Hogwarts students would risk turning the populace against him.”

Snape was silent. “It seems risky to depend on his political acumen given that childrens' lives are at stake.”

“Showing concern about the students? How unusual. Especially since none of them will be your direct responsibility.”

“They are all of our responsibility.”

Snape was silent for a moment. “Then we must find out who this leak is. If it was a member of the board, we can take action, but having a member of the staff be contributing to the deaths of students... that's unacceptable.”

“I'm sure it would surprise many of the students to hear that.”

“I spend far too much time and effort trying to keep the dunderheads alive to let all my work go to waste,” Snape snapped.

“Then finding out who was involved will be part of your task,” the older man said. “I will make other inquiries. We will discuss what we have found after the beginning of the school year.”

Snape grunted in acknowledgement.

“Well, that leaves us with the problem of young Miss Hebert. What are we to do with her?” The older man sounded cheerful, despite the topic they'd just been discussing. Either he didn't really care, or he was good at hiding his emotions.

“Leaving her out in the muggle world for the next week will probably result in someone being killed,” Snape said.

“She seems quite resourceful,” the other man said. “Finding Diagon Alley based on the tiny number of clues available to her... astounding.”

“I wasn't talking about her,” Snape said dryly. “Although it is possible that the Death Eaters will track her down. All they have to do is send her a letter by owl and then follow the owl.”

“Regardless, I think you are right. Given the danger the muggleborns are in, and the likelihood that they will go after her, she should not return to the muggle world. I will make inquiries as to a Wizarding house that might be willing to take her.”

“Preferably one that does not have other children,” Snape said. He hesitated. “There is something seriously wrong with her.”

“There are children who have natural affinities for occlumency; you were one of those if I recall.
Given the trauma she has been through, we should give her the benefit of the doubt.”

“It’s not the occlumency that bothers me. It’s the sociopathy.”

“Weren’t you telling me just last week that children are natural sociopaths?” The other voice chuckled. “It takes time for their moral development to... er.. mature. I'm sure she will be fine.”

I was panicking by this point. If they knew what I was thinking, then they’d know that I didn't belong here. I'd hijacked the body of one of their children. While it was true that she wasn't using it at the time, would they consider that a crime? Would they try to exorcise me?

“Perhaps it is best if you stay out of her mind for the time being, Severus,” the other voice said. “It’s not polite to look where you aren't invited.”

“Is that something you are planning to abide by yourself?” Snape asked. “Because you are a better legilmens than I, and you might be able to find out just what is wrong with her.”

“I see no reason to violate the privacy of a young girl's mind, not when we have bigger issues to deal with. We have three dead muggleborns with their families, and one missing. Justin Finch-Fletchley, Hannah Haywood, and Sarah Hamilton all need justice. Millie Scrivener is still missing.”

“We should have Miss Hebert speak to the aurors.”

“Tom always had sympathizers in the office; I have reason to believe that he has more now.”

“So we are to follow this investigation entirely on our own?” Snape sounded doubtful. “Surely there are members of the Order who can be trusted.”

“They are being watched,” Dumbledore said. “We must be discreet. Do you have any idea who Tom has spying here?”

“Half the children in my house I am sure,” Snape said. “Possibly some of the staff members.”

“Perhaps you can get information from Tom himself?”

“He has only spoken to some members of the inner circle,” Snape said. “I do not happen to be one of them. There are rumors about what he had to do to reconstitute himself.”

“Yet reconstitute himself he has,” Dumbledore said. “And his forces are gathering even as we speak. I need you to speak to as many of your old contacts as possible to find out about who is perpetrating these murders.”

“They may not be willing to talk,” Snape said.

“Do your best.” The other man's voice was firm and didn't seem like he expected an argument. I didn't hear one from Snape.

Snape was a double agent in Tom's organization?

If wizards could read minds, how did that even work? From what the other man had said, Snape was able to resist mind reading somehow, by what sounded like natural skill and training. Yet if I was a criminal mastermind, I wouldn't trust anyone who wouldn't let me read their mind. I'd insist on it, even if I had to force them at weapon point.

Or I'd just kill them.
Having someone you couldn't trust at your back was a recipe for disaster. Whoever Tom was, he was an idiot to trust someone who could hide what he was.

Still, if Snape and the other man weren't going to invade my privacy, that still left the matter of the other wizards. Could all of them do it?

If Wizards had to learn spells, then maybe only some of them could. It would have to be something I would learn as quickly as possible. It made sense that not all wizards could do all spells, or otherwise there wouldn't be such a thriving trade in places like Diagon Alley.

Certainly, almost everyone can cook, or at least make a sandwich, and yet restaurants still exist. But convenience wouldn't be much of a factor if everyone could simply make anything they wanted. Some wizards had to be better at some things than others, or there wouldn't even be an economy.

Every wizard would be able to provide everything they needed for themselves.

I heard the door beside me open, and Snape looked out at me. I was sitting on the floor, leaned up against a wall.

“So you haven't chosen to set fire to the entire building,” Snape said. “I am pleasantly surprised.”

Looking up at him, I said, “I'm just sitting here doing what you asked. You can ask any of those guys.”

I pointed at the moving pictures. Truthfully, they creeped me out. If I understood Snape's explanations, they were simple mental clones of people who had actually lived. How did that work exactly? Did the wizards make a copy of the mind and place it in the paint?

Wouldn't that make Wizarding paintings the perfect interrogation technique? As long as you could paint a picture without someone knowing, you could theoretically torture their painting for whatever information you wanted, and depending on how sentient they actually were, maybe even be somewhat more moral than ordinary torture?

Regardless, all they would have seen was me sitting on the floor, my back against the wall with my eyes closed. Unless they could see magic of course; there were a lot of things I didn't know, which meant that I was going to need a crash course in magic before any of this went any further.

“The Headmaster is ready to see you.”

I stood up and I stepped past the gargoyle. Was the gargoyle like the paintings, or was it somehow more sapient because it was three dimensional? It had stared at me suspiciously the whole time I was sitting there.

Stepping onto the moving stone staircase, I grimaced.

If this school was the safest place in the Wizarding world, then the other places had to be deathtraps. I'd already seen moving staircases, and if OSHA had any sway in Britain, or the Wizarding world, the whole place would have been shut down before it even started.

My father worked with the Dockworkers, and while they'd had their arguments with the Occupational and Safety administration, he had to admit that a lot of their rules made sense.

Stairs should have rails, and small children shouldn't be sent plummeting to their deaths. While having paintings watch over the children was creepy, it wasn't like they could do anything to save
anyone.

As we reached the actual office, I stepped inside, and then looked around. It was a large circular room, with knick knacks and odd items everywhere. Dumbledore was apparently like a lot of old people I'd known; an avid collector of strange things and unwilling to let any of it go.

There were portraits of old men and women on the walls, most of the people in them were asleep.

There was a bird in the corner. It snapped at the air and ate one of my bugs. It turned to look at me, and then it coughed violently. It made a choking sound and then it suddenly caught on fire.

What...the...hell?

It fell over, and the fire was burning merrily. I stared at the corpse, which collapsed into ashes faster than should have been possible.

The sad thing was that I knew exactly how long it took a body to go from living to dead and then to ashes because of fire.

“Fawkes is a phoenix,” an old man said. He was sitting on a high backed chair. “His life cycle includes burning to death and then rising again. His species is essentially immortal.”

“I know how he feels,” I muttered.

The man looked like Gandalf. Was that deliberate? Did Lord of the Rings even exist in this universe?

“I understand that you have had quite the experience,” Dumbledore said. “And that you have been very clever at surviving things that most grown wizards would not.”

“What else could I do?” I asked. “Lay down and die?”

“And yet you continued trying to look for your parents' murderers, despite the clear danger that would be involved.”

“They were after me,” I said. “I had to find them first.”

Even a wizard would die from a knife in the back, and they had to sleep sometimes.

He didn't flinch, which meant that either he wasn't reading my mind, or he was a better actor than I'd thought.

“Still, that was an amazing act of bravery from a girl who had no power but her own wits and her own determination.”

“What happens to me now?” I asked.

“You will stay at Hogwarts until the end of the week. You will then be taken to London, where you will board the train with the rest of your classmates.”

“Why would I do that if I am already here?”

“The train ride is an important opportunity to bond with your classmates. It helps to create friendships that may last for your entire lives.”
“I’m not that interested in making friends,” I said. “I’m here to find out who is targeting me, and I'm going to make them pay.”

“Revenge is never the way to achieve happiness,” Dumbledore said. “It only causes more pain.”

I stared at him. It was like he wasn't even listening to what I was saying.

Was stopping a mad dog revenge, or was it simply prudent? What made him think that these people were going to stop killing muggles and muggleborns? Unless someone stopped them, it was only going to get worse.

Snape got it; unless I was mistaken, he'd been a double agent in the other organization, which meant that he'd seen and probably done horrible things.

I knew what that was like. There were things that I'd done that I still had the occasional nightmare about. I'd done them for the best of reasons, for the greater good, but I'd never liked them.

“Fine. I'll give up on the whole thing and leave it to the adults, who I am sure know much better than I do.”

Dumbledore smiled at me, but I could see that Snape wasn't buying it.

“Excellent,” he said. “While you are here, you will have access to the approved sections of the library, and the dining hall. You will be staying in one of the Gryffindor rooms; perhaps those are rooms you will be spending a lot of time in over the next seven years.

I could hear Snape snorting next to me. What did that even mean?

“The paintings will keep watch over you. I would ask that you stay out of the Forbidden forest. Despite your... unusual survival skills, there are a number of creatures in the forest who are known Wizard killers.”

The library would be useful. It would give me a greater sense of this world that I'd stepped into, even more than the school books that I'd bought.

“I would like for Madam Pomprey, our Medi-witch to examine you, to see that your adventure in the muggle world didn't leave any continuing problems.”

Just what would a witch healer be able to determine about me? Was I really some kind of zombie, reanimated, but not really alive? Or was something else going on.

Maybe I really was Millie Scribner, and Taylor Hebert's memories had overwritten hers. Or maybe Taylor Hebert's soul had possessed her, although I wasn't sure if I really believed in the existence of a soul.

My stomach clenched. If they discovered that I really wasn't who they thought I was, what would they do with me?

Dumbledore must have seen my sudden look of anxiety.

“Many muggleborn students worry about visits to the healer. I can assure you that you will not be subjected to any injections or other intrusive tests such as the muggles tend to do. It will be entirely painless.”

Somehow I found that hard to believe.
“She shows evidence of repeated exposure to the Cruciatis curse,” Madam Pomfrey said. “Enough that I am surprised that she is still sane. I have seen aurors who were never the same again after similar levels of exposure.”

“I'm not entirely sure she is sane,” Snape muttered.

Madam Pomfrey ignored him. “There are signs of dark magic exposure that I haven't seen before. It is similar to what we see in people killed with the Killing Curse, except that of course it must be a less efficient variant since she is clearly alive.”

“Is there any indication that she was abused otherwise, especially over the last few days?” Snape asked.

“None. She's a little dehydrated, and a little sun burned, which is surprising given our climate. Where did you find her?”

“Living in a hole in the ground in central London,” Snape said. “I would have expected her to be covered in insect bites at the very least.”

“I saw none,” Pomfrey said. “And nothing wrong with her that a little nutrition and sleep in a good bed won't fix. Her mind, however...I can't imagine what that kind of torture would do to an impressionable young girl.”

“Warped her,” Snape said darkly.

I was lying on a hospital bed. I would have liked to say that there weren't insects here for me to use to eavesdrop with, but there were. Apparently magical healing didn't require the same level of cleanliness that muggle healing did.

They were using something to muffle their conversation. It was creating a strange sensation; half my bugs were outside the circle and could hear nothing, while the other half were inside, and they could hear just fine.

I felt a sense of relief.

Madam Pomfrey's inspection really hadn't been invasive. It had mostly involved her running a wand up and down over my body, like a piece of equipment from Star Trek. The fact that I wasn't actually a zombie was a relief; for all I'd known, it was possible that I could have started rotting sooner or later, and then what would I have done?

This meant that I was clear to move on to the next part of my plan, which involved doing as much research as I could over the next week.

I needed to find out what the limits to legilimency were, and what an occlumens was. I needed to get a general idea of what the capabilities of most of the wizards I was likely to meet were. I'd fortunately bought the first through seventh year books, claiming that I was buying for a rather large family.

Even when I hadn't thought I had magical power, I'd bought the books just in case; learning what spells the wizards were studying would be an indicator of which spells they were likely to use. I'd been wrong to dismiss the books as useless outright, and I'd bought them for fear of missing
something and because they were cheap.

“Just from speaking to her, I don’t see any signs of mental trauma, but it’s likely that some will crop up over the next few days. Seeing your parents murdered in front of you has to be terrifying for a young girl. The fact that she was able to survive and even thrive is remarkable.”

“Indeed,” Snape said.

“She doesn't have any other friends or family that she can turn to?” Pomfrey asked.

Snape shook his head. “She gives me the impression that her parents have only moved here recently, and that she had no close family back in the States. Otherwise we'd been dealing with the MACUSA about taking her to be educated in Ilvermorny.”

“I can't recall ever having an American at Hogwarts.”

“That won't be the problem,” Snape said. “I have a feeling that letting her attend here will be like setting a piranha on goldfish.”

“You must be exaggerating! She's just a little girl!”

“She looks innocent,” Snape said. “But don't be fooled.”

“She'll be a Gryffindor for sure, as brave as she was. Wandering around London on her own, surviving for several days. Without their wands I'd imagine a lot of fifth years would do worse.”

“Not all of the brave are in Gryffindor,” Snape said stiffly. He gestured and the strange silencing field he was using disappeared.

Snape strode over to my bed.

“I will take you to your room,” he said. “We will return to Diagon Alley tomorrow to complete your purchases.”

“What if I don't have any more money?” I asked.

“There is a fund provided for those without means. However, I suspect that you are not the type to have spent all of your money, despite being a child.”

I shrugged. “Maybe I don't want to spend my money on fancy pots and weird robes.”

Antagonizing him wasn't the best idea, but he was so stuffy that I couldn't help myself. Besides, when was the next time I actually got to be a child? Once school started I was going to have to get serious and work on finding out who wanted us all dead.

Tom seemed like a prime candidate, but I couldn't ask him about it without revealing that I had been listening in. I suspected that was an ability not shared by most wizards, and would be best kept under my hat, at least as well as I could in a school filled with mind readers.

“You will do as directed,” he said. He gritted his teeth.

I slipped out of bed, and back into my sneakers. I took a final look around, and we made our way out of the Hospital wing. It said something about the safety of this school that there were so many beds. The place looked like they were ready for a war, which suggested that having a school where one hundred percent of the students were armed might not be as safe as Snape and Dumbledore were trying to make it out to be.
The Hospital Wing was on the first floor, and we went through a long hall that led to stairs going up.

“Is there really a rule about having knives at school?” I asked.

I was interested in what he had to say. I’d turned the knife over in the interest of not causing problems, but I’d suspected he’d been lying the whole time.

He was silent for a moment, then admitted “No.”

“You just didn't want me to stab you.”

“You will learn far worse ways to hurt people than stabbing,” he said. “But it would be preferable if you did not start with that.”

“Will there likely be a lot of classmates that I will want to stab?”

His face turned dark. “Wizarding children are no better than muggle children; in some way they are worse, because they have more ways to express their natural tendencies.”

“Tendencies to bully?”

He glanced at me and didn't say anything.

“I won't stand for that,” I said. “I don't like bullies, whether they are students or teachers.”

“It's likely that you won't have much of a choice. Older students have skills that make them much more dangerous than a muggle of equivalent age.”

“There are ways to stop that...”

“Even the Wizarding world frowns on killing or maiming other children,” Snape said quickly.

“If teachers would do their jobs it wouldn't be necessary for more extreme measures to be taken,” I said sweetly. “Besides, Madam Pomfrey said that she could completely regrow bones.”

“Should I be concerned that this is the first thing you asked her?”

“I was just curious,” I said. “What with all the moving staircases and all, I was a little worried about falling.”

“Given that many of the children at this school will have parents who were sympathizers of the last Dark Lord, I would suggest that you try to blend in and not cause too many problems,” Snape said. “The first response of many of the more privileged students would be to make complaints to their parents about the dangerous mudblood.”

“Mudblood?” I asked.

“It's an offensive term for the muggleborn,” Snape said. “Its use marks the user as someone who does not care for them.”

“If they don't come after me, I won't come after them,” I said. “I can tolerate words, but I won't let anyone bully me.”

I'd made that mistake in my first life. Three girls had made my life hell for more than a year; they'd been the cause of my getting powers. In my world, powers came from having the worst day of your
Letting them get away with bullying hadn't worked. Ignoring it hadn't worked. They'd just escalated until they had put me in the hospital.

Our conversation drifted off as we walked up floor after floor. By the fourth floor my energy was flagging. By the sixth I felt like I was going to drop dead. Had this girl whose body I was wearing never done any exercise in her life?

He led me to the Gryffindor dormitories, which were at the top of a tower on the seventh floor. There was a common room with a roaring fire, reached by climbing a mahogany staircase decorated in crimson and gold. There was a lion over the mantle of the fireplace, and it seemed very cozy.

It was one of the tallest towers in the castle, and I wondered if all of the students had to climb this much just to get to bed. If they did, physical education might not be as important.

“Will I be allowed to spend time on the grounds?” I asked.

“Why?” Snape asked.

“I want to start running; I'm terribly out of shape and I need to get stronger.”

“Wizards don't run,” he said.

“They should,” I said. “They'd live longer.”

Whether he caught the double meaning in what I'd said or not, he seemed to simply ignore the questions.

“You will required to stay away from the edge of the forest and out of the lake. There are creatures in the lake and some of them are not... entirely tame.”

If the people trying to kill me knew I was here, they'd be able to get me while I was out on the grounds. There were probably more protective spells than I knew about, but I couldn't depend on that. Yet trying to run around inside the castle, with its shifting stairs would be a recipe for disaster.

I'd need to stay close to the castle.

“It's probably best if you do not stray too far,” Snape said.

It was possible that working on my strength and endurance might not be helpful at all. Yet I suspected that being able to dodge would be important no matter what magic was like, and without physical endurance, slowing down would happen sooner than later.

Were spells like heat seeking missiles, or was it like guns, where the person who aimed better and missed less often was the winner? I didn't know, and not knowing was likely to get me killed.

“The stairs leading up to the girl's dorms are enchanted so that should boys attempt to climb them, they will turn into a slide. Male prefects may bypass this in emergencies.”

“Is it the same with the boy's stairs?”

Snape looked at me assessingly. It looked like he wanted to lie, but he knew that I'd test it out the
moment he left, and so he simply shook his head.

“That'll be useful,” I said.

He showed me the bathrooms. Shockingly, there were no showers, but only baths. That seemed dangerous to me; it would be relatively easy to drown someone and make it look like an accident. Although actually showers had the risk of slipping on soap and breaking necks, so it might be a wash.

With four beds to a room, it looked like I was going to have roommates. I hadn't slept in the same room with anyone, outside of wartime since Emma. The fact that I'd be sharing a room with three other eleven year olds wasn't promising.

“Any other child, and I'd ask if you needed someone to check in on you. It can be frightening for some of the younger ones to be home for the first time.”

“So you don't think you need to check in on me?”

“I know I do,” he said. “But not because you are afraid. Compared to the hole I found you in, this must seem like a castle.”

“It is a castle.”

“Precisely.”

I stared at him, giving him a flat, unamused look. One should not encourage bad jokes; I'd learned my lesson with Clockblocker.

“Lights out is at 10 P.M.,” he said. “And you should not leave the dorms before 6 A.M. I am sure that you are planning to ignore these rules, but once the term starts, the halls will be patrolled.”

“And they aren't now? So anyone could break in and attack me? So how is this place any safer than where I was?”

“The professor has taken steps so that you can't be tracked here.”

I hadn't noticed him doing anything. Snape must have noticed my expression.

“As Headmaster, Professor Dumbledore has options that are not available to the rest of us. He can, for example lift the anti-apparition spells that cover the castle in the event of an emergency.

“So as long as nobody is in the castle who can call their buddies and let them know I'm here, I'll be fine.”

“At least here you aren't in a hole,” Snape said.

“I'll be the judge of that,” I said.

He was silent for a moment. “It's unusual for an American to be selected for Hogwarts. It means that you first found your magic in Britain. Your parents were visiting?”

I shrugged, keeping my eyes down. “You know how it is. I don't really know a lot about why they came here; they didn't exactly explain it to me.”

“I have a hard time believing you didn't eavesdrop,” he said.
I looked at him sharply. Did he know I'd been listening in on his conversation with Dumbledore? Had I given myself away, or had he peeked in my mind like he'd promised not to.

“My father and mother were some of the best people I ever knew,” I said. For once I could speak with sincerity. “She was a professor, and he worked as the head of hiring and spokesperson for a labor union.”

I didn't want to get too specific, because if he investigated my background he'd find out that the people I was talking about didn't exist. Or even worse, they actually did, but were still four years away from having their first and only child.

I'd seen Earths before where there were copies of people I'd known. The idea that Mom and Dad were just an ocean away was painful, because they wouldn't really be my Mom or Dad. It would be a constant reminder of what I'd lost, what I'd never have again.

“Get some sleep,” he said. “Breakfast is normally from 6:30 to 8:30 in the morning, but with just staff attending, it will not begin until eight. Lunch is at noon, and dinner normally ranges from six to eight. With only staff available it will be held at six.”

Ah, food. The one thing that an eleven year old would be concerned about.

“Do you need something now?” he asked.

I shook my head. I'd eaten at Diagon Alley.

After he left, I chose a bed, and began pulling the things I'd need out. I loved my fanny pack; it would hold an entire wardrobe and all the books, and once I got a chest, I'd be able to fill it with other things.

The first year spell books were written in an easy to read fashion. Some of it was because it was written for eleven year olds, but I remembered having read harder books when I was that age. Of course, you always wanted to make your instruction manuals easier to read than you had to. The military did it because no one wanted to be struggling over wording while bombs were flying around.

The spells they were planning to teach first years were useful as weapons.

Making fire was always going to be a favorite. Levitating things was a good way to drop things on enemies. You could sever a neck with a spell meant to sever clothes. The ability to give someone a cold didn't seem that useful, but I was going to reserve judgment.

It would make torture easier for one thing. Hold their mouth closed and then use the spell to fill their nose and lungs with mucus. There would be a certain degree of panic involved.

The locking and unlocking spells would be useful back in the real world, but if every first year student knew how to do them, then locks were either entirely useless or protected by stronger magics.

There was a spell to make an emergency flare, which might be useful in coordinating troops or for... actual emergencies. There was a spell to turn your wand into a flashlight. A smokescreen spell looked really useful.

I tried a few spells and wasn't able to get anything to work, but it was possibly because I was tired. This body didn't have the endurance I was used to, and it was frustrating. I needed to get it into
shape, and going to bed at 9 P.M. didn't figure into any of my plans.

It happened though.

My sleep was disturbed though, by dreams of strange alien creatures with spindly arms and legs and oversized heads and eyes. They had bat-like ears and all night they cleaned and cleaned and cleaned.
Bait

Getting fitted for robes wasn't any more fun than it had been in my last life. It wasn't even all that different. The proprietor used a magical measuring tape, but Parian had all of her clothing move by themselves.

Still I stood and pretended that it wasn't terribly boring.

Despite what Snape had said, I hadn't gone down to the great room for breakfast. Instead I'd found a simple meal waiting beside my bed when I'd woke up. There had been more than I could eat, but a letter from Madam Pompfrey told me to eat everything, because I was a little malnourished.

Apparently pizza and Sikh temple food hadn't been enough for me.

I closed my eyes and focused my senses on the bugs around me. I found Snape on the other side of the shop. He apparently had one of those silencing fields up, and he was talking to a white haired man. They had deliberately turned themselves so that no one would see their faces or lips. Was lip reading a skill known by wizards, or was Snape just being paranoid?

“He is back,” the other man was saying. He had a narrow, pointed face and hair so blonde that it looked white. He carried a walking stick with a snakes head.

I found myself wondering if I would be allowed a walking stick like that at Hogwarts. I'd carried a collapsible baton in my life as a super villain and super hero and using a stick was something I was skilled with.

“You've seen him yourself?” Snape asked.

“The Yaxleys and the Carrows have. They have been reaching out to the others and have been going out on hand picked missions for the Dark Lord.”

“Like eliminating mudbloods before they can get to Hogwarts?” Snape asked. “That seems foolish; it's likely to attract scrutiny before the people who need to be in place are back in power.”

“I don't know anything about that,” the other man said. “Although who cares if a few mudbloods go missing? The important thing is that it's only a matter of time before he calls us all back to service.”

“It doesn't sound like the Dark Lord's plan,” Snape said. “It's too petty for him, and he usually had his eye on the bigger picture.”

“There have been some rumors that he... isn't the same man he was before he vanished,” the other man looked troubled. “If his sanity is worse than it was before, it won't bode well for any of us. Bellatrix is bad enough, but she can't match him for power.”

“I wouldn't mention those fears to anyone else,” Snape said. “You know how he reacted to unpleasant news when he was himself.”

The white haired man shuddered. “Well, there's nothing that can be done about it now,” he said.

“It's best to take no action until you see which way the wind is blowing,” Snape agreed. “Lest you face the displeasure of the Dark Lord himself.”
It seemed strange to me that everyone was so afraid of someone named Tom. Tom the Dark Lord didn't seem to have much of a ring to it. Hopefully he had another name.

"I understand that your son will be attending this year," Snape continued.

“Yes,” the other man said. “He will do the Malfoy family proud.”

Ah... Malfoy. Learning which of my classmates were the children of death eaters wasn't going to be easy, but I was going to have to make a list. I doubted I'd ever be able to fully trust any of them; anyone could be subverted, but the children had most likely been taught racial hatred from the time they were born.

It was difficult, but not impossible to overcome that kind of upbringing. Theo had been the son of Kaiser, and he'd heard white supremacist rhetoric his entire life. Of course, Theo admitted that his father had only given lip service to the ideology, which may have made it easier for him to escape the ideas. Still, in the end, Theo had been a hero.

It meant that I couldn't automatically count any of the children out, even if their families were members of the group that was trying to kill muggle-borns.

I had little doubt that those who bought into the ideology would make themselves known to me, especially since I was capable of listening in on them without them knowing about it.

Both men were silent for a moment.

“This is the year that Potter is supposed to attend,” Malfoy said.

“I do not want to talk about that,” Snape said. He sounded irritated.

“The Dark Lord will undoubtedly have plans for him, once he's gotten enough pieces in place. I understand that you have strong feelings about the boy...”

“I have no feelings about him,” Snape said. “But contempt.”

“The Dark Lord will be pleased. Are you here to get new robes?”

“I have a wayward student I have been required to sheppard... an orphan. Dumbledore has commanded it.”

“A mudblood?” Malfoy asked.

“Does it matter?” Snape asked. “As long as she is supposed to be under my protection, I will be held responsible. I will have to be seen to defend her, lest I be seen as incompetent, or worse.”

“Ah,” Malfoy said. He seemed to lose interest as the proprietress approached.

The silencing field around them vanished.

Snape headed back toward me while Malfoy completed his transaction with the woman. It surprised me that Malfoy would get robes from the same shop as a poor orphan like me. In the regular world, the rich hated rubbing elbows with those who were their lessers.

Maybe the Wizarding population was so small that there simply weren't that many shops to be had. I'd asked Snape on the way to Diagon Alley how many Wizards there were in Great Britain, and
he'd told me that there were approximately ten thousand.

That would give a worldwide estimate of perhaps a million wizards, assuming the demographics were the same everywhere. In my world, there had been one parahuman per eight thousand people in urban areas, and one in twenty six thousand in rural areas.

There had been approximately seven hundred thousand parahumans in the entire world, and so wizards were somewhat more populous. The fact that they had been able to keep themselves secret was mind-boggling, and had to involve some sort of Stranger effect.

Parahumans had changed the entire history of our world, and because we knew of another world, Earth Aleph where there had been fewer of them, we had been able to see just how much of a difference they had made.

“Is she done?” Snape asked.

“She is.”

I'd been forced to buy three pair of plain work robes, a pointed hat, a pair of protective gloves, and a winter cloak. On Snape's advice, I'd paid a little more for the gloves to have them in dragonhide. He said that potions class often involved caustic chemicals and cheaper gloves often led to grief.

He'd also dragged me off to get Cauldrons, another item he insisted I pay more for than the basic set. According to him, some potions were caustic enough to burn through the bottom of them, and cheap cauldrons were likely to result in injury.

If that was true, then why did they even sell the cheap ones? Was that something that pureblood families told their children about, increasing the chances the muggleborns would get hurt?

As we left the shop, I slipped back into my hooded sweatshirt, and pulled the hoodie up. Snape looked down at me approvingly. While the hoodie would identify me as a muggleborn, it would also hide my face, which would be useful.

Whoever had killed my host body had apparently spent some time doing so, and they'd be likely to recognize my face. Personally I thought Snape and Dumbledore were foolish to bring me here. I'd already been here before and I could have just as easily given Snape my money.

All my being here did was tell prospective muggle murderers that a child was being ferried around by Snape. He was a double agent, so all they had to do was ask him about it, and he had to tell the truth, because there was at least one other agent in the school.

Was Dumbledore using me as bait? He hadn't seemed like the type when I met him, but the best schemers rarely seemed like schemers.

I didn't believe Dumbledore about it being a member of the board of governors. People like that wouldn't risk their position to kill two or three schoolchildren. They'd only do it for a large gain. Most likely it was a teacher, or someone no one would expect, like the janitor.

I'd gotten a bog standard school trunk; this was one item that Snape didn't seem to care whether I spent a lot of money or not. As I didn't have the money for any of the really fancy charms that I wanted, one trunk was basically like another.

He wouldn't let me step near the joke shop.

Although he made an effort to look confident, I could see that he was watching the crowds closely
as we made our way toward the next store.

“I presume you won't be wanting an owl.”

“An owl?”

“A Wizarding owl can find anyone in the world; they are used to send messages. The school has its own selection of owls; I assume that you don't have anyone you would want to contact.”

I shook my head. There was no one in the world that I needed to talk to. Besides, I suspected that it wouldn't be that hard to intercept a bird if I did.

In any case, I didn't have the time or the inclination to take care of an animal.

“Cats and toads are also on the allowed list of pets,” he said. “But I suppose you have no interest in them because you can't weaponize them.”

I glanced up at him. “You don't think? I can think of three different ways.”

I was lying, of course. I could only think of two.

He stared at me for a long moment.

“But I'm looking forward to a stress free next several years,” I said. “Since Dumbledore assured me that the adults were going to take care of all of the problems.”

“I can't take points until I discover which house you are in, but lying is not appreciated at Hogwarts,” he said.

“Good thing we're not there,” I said.

“The Headmaster thought that owning a pet might have a...calming influence on you, given the deaths of your parents.”

“So a cat is supposed to replace my parents?” I asked. “What kind of advice is that? You should probably offer me therapy.

“Wizards don't have therapists,” he said.

“Color me surprised,” I said. “Your culture would probably be a lot healthier if you did.”

He ignored what I'd just said. “I think we are done here.”

“Is there anything in Knockturn Alley that might be of interest to me?” I asked. “I still have money left.”

“Knockturn Alley isn't for the likes of you. The people who are after you are likely to be there.”

“That didn't exactly answer my question,” I said.

“I'm sure there would be a number of things there that you would be interested in. My duty as a professor at the school is to protect all of my students, and so I have to keep you from possessing them.”

“All right, then,” I said. “Lead on.”
We returned to Hogwarts, and I proceeded to spend the next few days in my rooms or at the library. Food mysteriously appeared in my room, and so I spent the time studying everything I could. I found a few references to legilemency and occlumency, enough to know that I should avoid people's eyes. The really interesting stuff was apparently in the restricted section, which neither Snape nor Dumbledore had reason to lend me access to.

I took up running early every morning, but I didn't see anyone else. I typically ran around the castle, although I stayed close enough that I could dart to the nearest door should someone come to try to abduct me.

The rest of the time I spent exploring the castle.

Given my ability to sense and control bugs, this was easier for me than it would have been for the average student. When you could sense the bugs in a secret passage behind the wall, you could use its senses to determine whether it was actually a secret passage, or just a walled off space.

Figuring out how to open those passages was a lot harder, especially since the portraits were always watching. I couldn't just go knocking on the walls. For one thing, if the staff knew where the secret passages were, they'd want to know how I knew about them.

So I had bugs looking for trigger mechanisms and the like, but unfortunately, the wizards tended to use magic for that as much as they did everything else. As often as not there wasn't much in the way of a trigger. I'd simply have to keep an eye on those locations and see if I could see how people got through those locations.

I made a simple map of the castle, noting all the secret passages that I could find, and I hid it in my fanny pack.

My control over bugs continued to increase, doubling one, then again, and then yet again. By the end of the week I could control over one hundred bugs at once. It was easier to control them as a group; the kind of multitasking I'd once been capable of gave me headaches, but even that was growing easier with time.

The rest of the time was spent trying out magic. A lot of it was trial and error; apparently wand movements were just as important as saying the words, and pronunciation was important too. I managed to get the cutting spell to work, and the levitation spell to work, and I practiced those as much as I could.

Either spell would be useful, and I suspected that older students would tend to take advantage of powerless firsties.

I'd tried turning the other cheek in my last like, and all it had gotten me was burned. That wasn't going to happen again.

Minor bullying probably wouldn't bother me that much; none of these children would have the emotional leverage to really hurt me, not the way Emma had. She'd known all my hopes and fears and she'd used it against me.

But I wouldn't put up with being physically attacked. These were people who had attacked and killed children. Most likely it hadn't been the kids at school, but that wasn't guaranteed. There had been kids at Winslow that I was almost certain had murdered someone, possibly as an initiation into one of the gangs.

Some of them were almost certainly the children of Death Eaters. I'd found that term in some of the
histories, and I found it particularly uninspiring.

If I'd been creating a name for my minions, it would have been something more like Death Bringers, or Deadites or something. What did Death Eater even mean?

Also, nobody mentioned the Dark Lord Tom in any of the books. In fact they refused to use his name at all. Apparently there had been a Taboo on his name, a spell that informed his people whenever his name was said, and he'd sent his merry band of terrorists to make people pay.

Given the kind of power he'd had, I was surprised that he hadn't been more successful. He should have worked on getting more support from the populace before he attempted an uprising. The Wizarding world wasn't like the non-magical world.

My world was a lot more dangerous than this one, and even there not everyone had guns. Most people had been unarmed, and they'd be reasonably easy to round up and force to do what you wanted.

Wizards were all armed, almost by definition. If you didn't have popular support from them, you'd never be able to take them over. Tom should have worked to take over the press, and to have infiltrated the government.

He should have been like Coil, and worked from within the government, even as he controlled the terrorist organization outside of it. A couple of false flag operations, and he could have pushed himself into a position of power without anyone realizing that he was a dark lord at all.

A real Dark Lord would be like Palpatine in the later Star Wars movies, not that these people would have seen those yet. The man had become leader first, and then used his evil plans to consolidate total power afterwards.

Working as a terrorist the way Tom had... that was just being an amateur.

The week passed before I was ready, and on the last day I was forced to go all the way across the country just so I could ride on a train on the way back. While I'd never actually ridden on a train before, I doubted that it would impress me much. After all, I'd ridden in Dragon's Dragon-craft, and I'd been in assorted other vehicles.

Yet I felt my stomach tighten into a knot. I was about to be surrounded by children, some of them children of the people who wanted to kill me. At the very least they might be spying for their parents, and at the worst they might try to kill me.

Strangely enough, that wasn't the part that made me nervous.

It was the fact that they were children. How was I supposed to interact with them? I wouldn't have any interests in common with even the oldest of them, other than magic, and they'd expect me to act like a child of my apparent age.

I hadn't been all that great as an eleven year old the first time around. I'd been gawky and awkward and overly affectionate. Now that I'd seen a war for the survival of all the worlds, fought Scion and the Slaughterhouse 9 and the Slaughterhouse 9000...

Children were going to be as alien to me I was to them.
“Why not apparate directly beside the train?” I asked. “Why risk being seen in muggle London?”

“It is risky to have multiple wizards trying to apparate to the same place at the same time,” Snape said. “Given that the platform itself is of limited size, the choice was either to create hundreds of portkeys keyed to different times, which was deemed overly complicated and expensive, or to simply have everyone show up in muggle London.”

That actually made sense.

What didn't make sense to me was requiring all wizards to show up in muggle London at all. Why not have Wizarding families teleport directly to the town near Hogwarts and just leave muggleborns on the train?

We were walking into King's Cross station. It was incredibly crowded, and very large.

I didn't see any Platform Nine and three quarters, but Snape had already told me the trick that was involved. I was unsure whether he was toying with me; forcing me to run into a wall at full speed seemed like a cruel joke, but if it was I'd find a way to make him pay.

In any event, I saw enough children dressed inappropriately carrying large trunks that I had to wonder how the normal population didn't notice anything year after year. Even if it only happened twice a year, that would be enough for conspiracy theories to arise.

How the Wizards were going to deal with secrecy once cell phones were invented I had no idea. Memory charms (and wasn't that a terrifying idea) weren't going to be enough once pictures were uploaded to the web.

Snape stayed with me as I grimaced and shoved my cart with the trunk on it through the wall. He stayed behind, because if he'd gone first that would have left me alone in muggle London, and would have been a good opportunity for me to be snatched.

Strangely enough, I would be safer alone on the other side of the tracks. Wizards wouldn't ignore magic the way that muggles did, and with so many parents around watching their children, attackers were unlikely to be able to get away with anything.

That was the explanation Snape had given me, and it seemed sound enough.

He didn't follow me; presumably he didn't want to highlight the fact that I was special to any of the Death Eaters on the other side.

I kept my hood up, and I stared at the steam engine on the other side. If I'd thought that people were dressed outlandishly on the muggle side, this side was even worse. The steam engine looked like something from the old west, and it was painted red.

There were cats and owls everywhere, the cats moving around the hundreds of feet. I was suddenly glad I hadn't got one; it would have been easy to lose in a crowd this size, and Snape would have accused me of deliberately killing it.

I managed to slip through the crowd and get my school trunk loaded onto the train. It helped that I actually didn't have anything in it; everything important was in my fanny pack. That way it would be easier to maneuver around, and once I got to school I could pull the extraneous things out like
clothes and school books; things that people were unlikely to bother with destroying and that would make more space for whatever else I might want to stuff in there.

Even so, it was a struggle to get the trunk on board given my body's weakness, and no one seemed interested in helping me, including most of the adults. It didn't help that I didn't see many muggle parents on this side; apparently most of them stayed on the other side.

Snape had insisted that we arrive an hour early, but even so the first few compartments were already full by the time I'd managed to get my trunk on board. I found an empty compartment in the middle of the train, and I took it. Somehow I doubted that it was going to remain empty.

The door to my compartment slammed open as I was struggling to get my empty box up. I dropped it and turned to see a miniature version of Malfoy flanked by two other students.

He looked at me and then sniffed as though he smelled something bad. He started to turn away.

“Malfoy, I presume,” I said.

He stopped, and then turned back. “You've heard of me?”

“I've heard of your father,” I said.

“I wouldn't have expected a... one of you to know about my father.”

“Taylor Hebert,” I said. “Mudblood.”

He froze and stared at me.

“What?”

“I'm a mudblood. Have you ever met one before?”

He hadn't; I could tell from the expression on his face. It didn't bode well for the intelligence of his underlings that they seemed confused about the whole exchange.

“I'm not sure...”

“Oh, I know what it means,” I said. “And if anyone else calls me that, they'll likely regret it. But it doesn't bother me all that much. I know what I am, and I'm comfortable with it.”

He stared at me.

“It's never a good idea to judge people before you meet them,” I said. “A mudblood can kill you just as easily as a pureblood, and maybe even easier, because they'd think of things that no pureblood ever would.”

“Are you threatening me?” he asked incredulously?

I shook my head. “Absolutely not. If I was threatening you, I'd pull out my wand like this, and I'd mention that I knew the cutting charm.”

Casting the spell, I used it to slice the ropes holding my trunk together.

“It's not recommended to use the cutting charm on human flesh, but it works just fine,” I said, looking up at him.
His face drained of color.

Even his subordinates seemed to pick up what was happening, although he fat one still looked a little confused.

“‘You know what the smartest thing to do with dangerous people?’ I asked.

“What’s that?” he asked faintly.

“Make friends with them,” I said. “That way you don't wake up one night with them standing over your bed ready to do terrible things to you.”

“I'll keep that in mind,” he said carefully. He was backing out of the compartment.

“It was nice meeting you,” I said. I smiled but it didn't reach my eyes.

He was gone rather quickly, and apparently word spread, because it was a long while before anyone else slipped into my carriage. I'd resorted to using my trunk as a footstool since I couldn't get it into its space above me.

I closed my eyes and reached out to the insects around me. I always kept a few on my person that I kept on at all times, but I shifted the bugs around me otherwise on a rotating basis. It was easier than actually moving the bugs, since there were always bugs everywhere, and even controlling a hundred my abilities weren't as strong as I would have wished.

My wand was on my lap, and I kept a few bugs in my compartment alert, just in case someone should try something. I then began to listen in on conversations in the other cars.

Most of it was the usual inanities; people trying to catch up, people introducing themselves. I checked compartment after compartment and I didn't hear anyone plotting to murder their classmates. I wasn't sure whether I was pleased or disappointed. If I'd heard them plotting it would have made things easier, but maybe noone was actually plotting anything evil.

I could hear Malfoy warning people about the crazy mudblood in the fifth car. I could also hear a rather annoying girl asking people if she knew the location of her friend's toad.

The door to my compartment opened.

“The toad is in the boy's bathroom in the third car,” I said without opening my eyes.

I could see her gaping at me, and a moment later the compartment door slammed closed.

Five minutes later the door opened again, and the girl stepped into the compartment, followed by a rather portly boy. He was one of the few overweight Wizarding children I'd seen, other than Malfoy, and I wondered whether it was because Wizarding culture didn't include visits to Wizard McDonalds, or whether it was simply because I was an American, and from twenty years in the future when everyone was fatter.

“How did you know?” the girl asked. “I know you haven't been out of your compartment in the past twenty minutes, but the toad was exactly where you said it would be.”

“Magic?” I said.

Technically, it was even true. I was able to see better with insect sight than I'd ever been able to with my old powers, when I'd mostly had to make do with hearing and touch. Insects have crap for
sight.

She stepped into the room. “My name is Hermione Granger. This is Neville Longbottom.”

“Thank you miss,” Neville said.

I’d heard her annoying people up and down the train, and for a moment I considered dismissing her. However, I was going to have to spend possibly the next seven years with her, and alienating her wouldn't get me any closer to my goals.

Considering that she seemed to be socially maladjusted, it probably wouldn't get me much closer to my goals either, but even having another set of eyes might be useful.

“Taylor Hebert.”

“Are you an American? I thought only British children went to Hogwarts... it says so In Hogwarts a History.”

“You can't always believe what you read,” I said. I opened my eyes and looked at her.

The girl had a rather unfortunate set of front teeth, and a large mane of frizzy hair. I suspected she might grow up to be good looking in a few years, with the help of an orthodontist, but I'd been wrong about things like that before.

Getting through the next few years was going to be a challenge if she kept acting the way she was. I'd had enough experience in pushing people away to know that she was likely to find the next few years to be rather stressful.

“I've never met an American before. Did your parents come here for work?”

That wasn't the kind of question I wanted to answer. If I told bits and pieces to enough people, it was possible that someone might collect them all together and work out that I wasn't who I was claiming to be.

“You're a muggleborn, aren't you?” I said.

“How could you tell?” she asked. “I'm so excited about magic. I've read all the books, and I've tried some of the spells at home.”

It suddenly struck me. I'd been struggling with my trunk, and I hadn't had to.

I grimaced, pulled my feet off the trunk, and then pointed my wand at it.

“Wingardium Leviosa,” I said.

The trunk obediently rose into the air, and I slid it into the overhead bin. I was going to have to be careful about being so focused on doing things the mundane way, or through my bugs that I forgot that I had other resources at my disposal.

Hermione was staring at me, and I shrugged. “I forgot that I could do that.”

“Are you a second year then?” she asked. “You look like you're our age.”

“No, this is going to be my first year at magic school,” I said. “The same as for both of you.”

“Then how did you already learn... that, and make it look so easy?” she asked. There was a hint of
jealousy in her voice. Apparently she'd thought that was going to be the smartest girl in her class and discovering that she wasn't going to be a huge letdown for her.

It was never a good idea to base your self esteem around a single thing; when that thing was knocked down, it was hard to get back up.

“Practice,” I said.

Although I had no way of knowing whether this girl was going to be a talented witch or not, I had an eighteen year old mind, which had to be some sort of an advantage. It wasn't fair, but fortunately playing fair was never something I had bothered with.

When you only have insects against people like Alexandria and Hookwolf the only way to survive was to cheat.

“We aren't supposed to be learning that for a little while,” Hermione said.

“It'll be one of the first spells they teach us, I think,” I said. “At least that's what I gathered from what I've read.”

“There's nothing about it in the books they assigned,' she said.

“You have to learn to read between the lines,” I said. “And know how teachers generally do things. They tend to start with the easiest subjects first, and then move on to the harder ones. Wingardium is one of the easier spells, so...”

“You made it look so easy,” she said. “And a whole trunk too.”

I didn't mention that the trunk was empty. Looking impressive was a lot easier if you didn't reveal all of your secrets.

“Are you a pureblood?” I asked the boy behind her.

The Longbottom boy was dressed in the slightly strange, off putting way I was coming to associate with the purebloods. I'd read about halfbloods, but I suspected that they found it easier to blend in with both sides.

The purebloods made a point to not blend in.

The boy nodded, but he kept his eyes down. Was he trying to avoid my reading his mind? To my great relief, what I'd read about legimency seemed to indicate that it was a relatively rare skill. It was probably practiced more by the purebloods, though. I'd have to watch for any tells from body language.

“You're a muggleborn, aren't you?” Hermione interrupted.

The jacket and hoodie pretty much gave it away, so I couldn't give her a lot of credit for observational skills, but she seemed to be bright enough. She might even be useful, so I decided to be civil.

I nodded.

Both of them sat down, and I fought not to groan out loud. I'd hoped to be able to spend the rest of the train ride spying on the other children. Children were stupid, and if there was a plot, it was likely that at least some of them would be blabbing about it somewhere along the ride.
I knew children were stupid, because I'd once been one. I'd trusted Emma, and that had been the biggest mistake of my life. I'd made worse mistakes, but all of my other bad decisions came from that one.

Without Emma, I never would have been shoved in a locker. I wouldn't have had the worst day of my life, gained powers, and become a super villain.

I also wouldn't have become a super hero and saved all the Earths that ever were, but she had no way of knowing that when she betrayed me.

“Do you think people don't like us?” Hermione asked, lowering her voice.

“You?” I asked.

“No,” she said, flushing. “Muggleborns.”

I frowned, considering how much to tell her. Finally I decided that I couldn't leave her in the dark; people were trying to kill muggleborns, and letting her go in ignorant was as good as putting a knife to her throat.

“Some parts of the Wizarding world are prejudiced against muggleborns,” I said. “Mostly purebloods. There are factions who think that muggleborns don't deserve to learn magic at all.”

“What?”

“There is also a faction of wizard terrorists who have been targeting muggleborns and their families,” I said. “There have been four families killed already.”

The color drained from Hermione's face. “My parents...”

“I don't think they're in a lot of danger,” I said. “The terrorists were targeting muggleborns. As long as you are at Hogwarts, they are most likely safe.”

I had no way of knowing that, of course, but that was my suspicion. These people couldn't go after every mundane person in the country, and killing a muggleborn's family while they were at school would only ensure that they were better guarded next time.

If I were trying to kill the muggleborns off, I'd simply follow them home from Winter break, since they all ended up back in King's cross station. I might even introduce myself to some of the obvious parents waiting for their children to come back.

Once I had their names, it would be easy to use an owl to find out where they lived.

It would be relatively easy to slaughter many of the muggleborn families before Wizard law enforcement ever got wind of it. The impression I got of Wizard law enforcement was that it was a lot like the law back in Brockton Bay.

People in the rich areas got quick responses to police calls. People in poor areas... not so much.

“If you are worried about it you can send them an owl when you get to school,” I said. I closed my eyes again. Maybe Hermione would get the message and would give me a little time to spy.

“How do you know all of this?” she asked.

“I listen,” I said. “Talking is great, but you learn a lot more by being quiet and paying attention to the people around you.”
Hermione was silent for a moment.

“Which house do you think you are going to be in?” she asked. “I'm thinking about Gryffindor, because that's the house that Dumbledore was in, and he's the most powerful wizard of the age.”

I barely kept myself from grimacing. She hadn't gotten the hint. I had a feeling that it was going to be a long several hours.
As the train pulled to a stop, I breathed a sigh of relief. I wouldn't have thought it was possible for someone to talk for eight hours straight, but Hermione Granger had proven me wrong.

I now knew more about her family than I had about the families of any of my Protectorate team members. I'd learned about her expectations for the future, her hopes, her dreams.... and even her tastes in music.

The horrifying thing was that she reminded me of myself at that age; a naive, socially maladjusted chatterbox who had only had one friend. The fact that she was bright wasn't going to help her either; she'd already been bullied in her grade school, and she was hoping to make a new start at the new one.

Most of the time I hadn't even said anything. I'd closed my eyes and pretended to nap while she and Neville had played some sort of Wizarding card game involving small explosions.

I'd need to find out how those cards were made; it might be possible to use a lot of them to deliver something more than a joke effect by either altering the spell, or simply rigging a lot of them to explode at once.

As I listened in to conversations all over the train, I also heard Neville starting to haltingly talk. He talked about Wizarding entertainments and some basic Wizarding news. He even brought out a Wizarding newspaper, which I did open my eyes for to look over.

There was nothing about the muggle murders; either the Ministry was concealing things or they hadn't made the connection yet. Neither prospect reflected favorably on them. People needed to know they were in danger, and one of my tasks was going to be to get the world out to muggleborn families.

The fact that the pictures moved was less of a surprise after a week at Hogwarts, but it was still a little creepy. I made a mental note of the appearances of some of the people whose pictures were inside; the Minister for Magic, Malfoy, some of the other governors of the school.

Gringotts was celebrating its five hundredth and seventeenth year without a single robbery. I probably needed to set up an account there, once I got more money. I had a few ideas about ways to make money during the summer. That repair spell seemed like a good start; I'd work extra hard on it.

“I overheard my grandmother talking about the Trace,” Neville was saying.

“The Trace?” I asked.

“It's a charm that lets the Ministry know if children under seventeen perform magic,” Hermione said. “It's forbidden to use magic when you aren't at school.”

“What?” I asked flatly.

“I heard her say that the Trace gets applied the first time a student gets on the train,” Neville said. “Before that, the Ministry has no idea of whether we do magic or not... or at least not any more than they do for adults. They've got a lot of people watching for violations of the Statute of Secrecy.”
My fists tightened against my pants and forced myself to stay calm. That was why Snape and Dumbledore had insisted that I come here and waste time riding all this way... and I'd completely bought it!

It took time for me to get my anger under control; apparently younger brain chemistry was different enough that it was a struggle.

Maybe it was because I'd thought I had a handle on Snape. He'd lied to me, and I hadn't known it. Of course, given that he was a double agent, lying had to be a particular skill of his, but still.

Mostly, the Trace was something I was going to have to find my way around. There hadn't been anything in the library that I'd seen about it, but they'd probably limited the information so that clever students couldn't find their way around it.

Even Legilimency and Occlumency had only had passing references. I hadn't found anything about how to actually do either of them, and only the bit about avoiding people's eyes had been remotely useful.

I suspected that censors had periodically purged the library of anything that the people in power considered to be dangerous; it was possible that they'd simply been moved to the restricted section, but I suspected that even that information had probably been purged.

To get the good stuff I was probably going to have to go to Knockturn Alley.

I stewed and fumed about it for much of the rest of the trip, especially when I learned that the Ministry didn't care about magic performed around other wizards; it was supposedly done in the interests of secrecy, but it effectively meant that muggleborns had a disadvantage at school.

Snape probably hadn't warned me because he'd figured I wouldn't have gotten on the train. He'd been right, of course. If I'd had to ride on the outside of the train to avoid the Trace I would have. I wouldn't have enjoyed eight hours in the wind, and it would have been dangerous, but it would have been worth it.

The problem with being a child was that other people always thought they had the right to make decisions for you.

By the time the train reached its destination I'd managed to calm down, although I still planned to let Snape know about my displeasure.

“We'd better change,” Hermione said. “We're supposed to be wearing our robes by the time we get to the station.”

I scowled.

Wearing robes really wasn't any worse than some of the outfits Glenn Chambers had tried to set me up with over the years, although truthfully I'd refused to wear most of those too. Still, there was no point in sticking out any more than I already had.

I started pulling my sweat jacket off, only to notice that Neville was blushing a bright red.

“What?”

“Maybe Neville should step out of the room,” Hermione said.

“It goes over our clothes,” I said incredulously. “Who cares?”
Despite my protestations, Neville insisted that we turn our backs when he changed. I kept some bug eyes on him of course, because getting stabbed in the back by an eleven year old would be embarrassing.

“How did you get your robes in that bum bag without wrinkling them?” Hermione asked.

Bum Bag... right.

“Magic,” I said. I stuffed my hoodie into the bag.

The look Hermione gave my bag was avaricious; she was probably wondering how many books she could stuff in one of them. The answer of course was about six hundred.

The train slowed to a stop, and I used a spell to lower my trunk. Neville and Hermione's trunks were in a forward compartment; apparently they'd been forced out by upper years but hadn't been forced to take their trunks with them.

Hermione's trunk was incredibly heavy. I suspected that she'd filled it with books, and while I could understand the urge, she hadn't seen the Hogwarts library yet. We were told to leave it, that our trunks would be taken care of. If my trunk wasn't empty I would have been suspicious and upset.

We emerged onto a tiny, dark platform. It was dark and cold. I still hadn't figured out where in England we were; like many Americans my sense of geography was limited to the western Hemisphere.

A bellowing voice called out for first years.

The man who was waiting for us was huge; in my home reality I'd have called him a Case 53. No ordinary person was over nine feet tall and as wide as he was, he had to weigh over a thousand pounds. He'd probably be slow simply because of all that mass, but just carrying that weight meant that he had to be incredibly strong. I'd have to treat him with all the caution that any Brute received.

“Mind yer step,” the man was saying. “Firs years! Follow me!”

We followed him down a dark trail; I could see the other students stumbling in the dark, but I could sense the area around us through my bugs. Hermione grabbed my hand, and I didn't pull away. Despite the fact that she was a chatterbox, she was bright, and might be useful over the next few years.

It was a steep, dark path, with trees on either side.

We came around the corner, and I could hear the other students gasping at the sight of Hogwarts. It did look pretty amazing in the moonlight, and part of me still wanted to squee in delight.

I crushed that part and threw it in a lockbox.

We were at the edge of the lake now. In the dark, its surface was black, the moonlight reflecting off its surface.

“I've heard that the giant squid likes to eat muggleborns,” Malfoy said. He was talking to a redhead and a black haired kid in glasses. He glanced at me. “But I'm sure it would make an exception for blood traitors like you.”
They were on the other side of the group, and Malfoy probably thought I couldn't hear him.

“No more than four to a boat!” the man yelled, and dutifully, we began to fill the boats that were arrayed in front of us.

I ended up in a boat with Hermione and Neville, and one other kid I didn't know, another heavyset girl who looked miserable in her robes. I'd listened in on her compartment on the train, and apparently some of the pureblood girls had been making fun of her for the entire trip not for being fat or ugly, but because she was apparently a half-blood.

We reached a cliff and a curtain of ivy that I'd never seen before, and the large man told us to keep our heads down. We found ourselves in a tunnel, and moments later, the man was knocking on a large door.

“Don't forget your toad,” I told Neville absently as we stepped out of the boat. He'd left it in the boat, and he gathered it up gratefully.

We entered the entrance hall. I'd seen it before, of course; it was larger than the house I'd grown up in. However, it looked a lot more impressive by torchlight than it did during the light of day. We were led into a small, empty chamber across from the hall.

“The first years, Professor McGonagall,” the man said.

Professor McGonagall looked us all over. Her eyes narrowed as she saw me, and I suspected that Snape had been telling tales.

She was a severe looking woman, and she launched into a speech about the four houses and how once we were sorted, it would be our family.

Wasn't that the spiel that every gang gave? That they were going to be your replacement family? I suppose that creating school sanctioned gangs probably cut down on unofficial, outside gangs like we'd had in Winslow, but it seemed like a good way to get people to fighting.

Maybe the British were just a little too genteel for that sort of thing, although that wasn't the impression I'd gotten from Snape.

She suggested that we clean ourselves up before the sorting, and then she left with one last glance at me. I smiled at her.

About twenty ghosts appeared and there were screams from some of the children. I watched them curiously. As far as I'd read, they weren't able to hurt us, but they'd make great spies and messengers with their ability to float through walls.

One ghost with a ruff turned toward us. They greeted us as a class, and made some sort of inane invitation to Hufflepuff.

I noticed several of the ghosts watching me closely as they left, and I wondered if they'd been watching me since I'd gotten here. It would be just like Snape to warn everybody against me.

“Were they staring at you?” Neville asked in a low voice.

I shrugged.

A moment later we were led out into the great hall. There were gasps as the other students looked up, and despite myself, I was impressed too. I hadn't seen the Hall during the evening, and seeing
the night sky above us was particularly impressive, as was all the floating candles.

I'd have gone with Chinese Lanterns were it me, mostly because I always thought they were cool, but it was impressive enough. Seeing the hundreds of faces staring at us, I had to wonder if any of them were already part of their parents group. Had some of them already committed atrocities, and were they getting ready to do the same to me?

Or were they just genuinely bored and curious and distracted and all the other emotions I saw on their faces?

“It's bewitched to look like the sky outside,” Hermione said. “I read about it in Hogwarts a history.”

I saw several of the other children looking at her, visibly irritated by the tone in her voice. Had I been like that when I was younger? Oblivious to the effect that I was having on people?

Was I still like that?

“I know,” Neville whispered back. “My Nan came here and she told me all about it.”

That was another advantage that the purebloods had over the muggleborn; they knew what to expect when they got here. I did hear the redhead wonder where the troll we were supposed to fight was.

Professor McGonagall put an incredibly dirty wizard's hat on a stool. I'd worn cleaner clothes when I was homeless and literally living in a hole. The thing looked terrible.

When it started to sing, I had to fight to keep my face stoic. The thing was creeping me out... it it had a mouth on the front of the brim, were we putting our heads up its butt? Maybe just up its neck hole? I couldn't imagine any scenario where putting a dirty sentient hat on our heads was going to be a good thing.

“The hat's a thousand years old,” Neville whispered. “It's been worn by every student that ever went to Hogwarts.”

Absently, I checked the hat for lice and other nasty critters. I didn't detect any, thankfully, although I wouldn't be able to detect birds or mice unless they too were infested.

Apparently Neville was right, and we had to put on the hat.

Malfoy looked like he was anticipating it, but a lot of the other students looked worried. I kept my face stoic. I didn't yet have a large enough of a swarm to push my emotional responses into the insects, but at the rate I was going it wouldn't be long.

The one thing I couldn't do was to show fear. Children were little monsters, and while Emma, Sophia and Madison had been outliers, I'd seen a lot of casual bullying in my days as well. There had been a lot of kids who had laughed when I'd been shoved in the locker, and a much larger group that had stood by and done nothing.

Kids tended to pile on when someone went down, and they were vicious. They hadn't yet developed the ability to empathize with people, and their idea of morality was “don't get caught.”

The fact that even most of the eleven year olds were a little larger than I was did not help anything.
I found myself thinking of them as being older than they were simply because they were the same size as me. I still felt like I was the same size as I was before, when I'd been awkwardly tall and a full adult. It was simply that the rest of the world felt like it was outsized.

Kid after kid was called to the front and the hat was plopped on their heads. It was obvious that the hat made a decision quickly with most of them. With a few the hat took a little longer.

They were going in alphabetical order, which meant I would be in the middle of the pack. Occasionally I would see McGonagall reach a point in her list where she would hesitate, and then clear her throat awkwardly.

All the murdered children must have been scratched out; she had the grace to look somewhat upset about it, even if she didn't warn the children about the danger.

“GRANGER, HERMIONE,” McGonagall called out.

Hermione was staring at me as the hat was put on her head. The hat seemed to debate with her for a short time, and finally it called out, “RAVENCLAW!”

Hmm... she'd been talking about wanting to be in that other house. I hadn't bothered to do a lot of research on the houses, because really, who cared what bedroom I slept in?

I knew that Slytherin was the house where most of the racists stayed, and looking over at their table, I could see unfriendly looks directed in my direction.

Soon enough I found myself next on the list. I forced myself to look cool and confident, even if underneath I was feeling anxious.

A mind reading hat seemed like an awfully convenient thing to have around if you were a Dark Lord. Simply have everyone wear the hat, and then have the hat narc on anyone who was planning to stab you in the back.

Using it on eleven year olds was confusing. What could they possibly be thinking that was of interest to anyone?

Was the hat collecting blackmail information for the administration?

Using children to spy on their parents might not be the worst idea, especially if they didn't know they were doing it.

I'd simply have to let the hat know what would happen if it didn't keep my secrets to itself. Certain species of moths would lay a hundred eggs in clothes each, and each larvae would hungrily devour cloth. An entire swarm of them would make for an entirely different sorting ceremony next year.

“HERBERT, TAYLOR!” McGonagall called out.

“It's Hebert,” I said quietly as I reached the stool.

I took a deep breath, and then I climbed up on the stool, looking out at the sea of expectant faces. Then I set the hat on my head.
“Reveal what I am and I will end you,” I muttered in my mind. I sent an image of bugs munching away at the felt of the hat, destroying it even as I was dragged away screaming. I wasn't about to let a piece of magical tinkertech force me into whatever Wizards used for a prison.

After all, I was essentially in the position of being the monster is every movie about a possessed child; was it possible for the Wizards to exorcise me, and if they did, what would happen to me?

“A vicious little thing, aren't you?” the hat said cheerfully. “If it makes you feel any better, I do not read memories; I only read personality and desires.”

“You're reading my mind right now!”

“You're reading my mind right now,” the hat assured me. “It was decided to limit me this way a long time ago, lest Wizards try to steal me to learn the secrets held in the minds of their enemies' children.”

“I... don't understand.”

“Children see things,” the hat said. “Often things their parents do not want known. Placing all of those secrets in the mind of a hat would create an incentive for blackmail. At the very least if would give the Headmaster power that he was never meant to have.”

“So you only read my personality,” I said. I wasn't sure I believed it, but I'd listen in on the Headmaster's office to see if it had been lying later. If it was, I'd follow through with my threat.

“I can tell that you are an adult in the body of a child,” the hat said. “Interesting... this is only the third such case that I've seen in over a thousand years.”

“There have been others?” I asked, suddenly interested. Knowing what had happened to them might give me a clue as to what might possibly happen to me.

“One I had arrested,” the hat said. “He was a predator attempting to harm the children of this school. One was Merlin himself, born again after being several hundred years old. The third I will not speak about.”

“How did it happen?” I asked. “Was it an accident, or was it something that was deliberately done?”

“We are here for your sorting,” the hat said. “There are people waiting. This is a discussion to be had at a later time. I can see that you are quite resourceful, so I am sure that you will eventually find me again.”

“You won't out me to the staff?”

“I sense no intention to harm any of the students, although you are quite pragmatic about what you are willing to do. I'm willing to give you the benefit of the doubt.”

“So the sorting?”

“Hmmm...very difficult. Children are easier to sort than adults. Their minds are unfinished, and still developing. They think that they are sorted into the houses based on qualities that they have, but that's not the case at all.”
“Oh?”

“Children are sorted based on qualities they wish to have. Some children wish to be seen as brave... some as intelligent. Some wish to think of themselves as loyal, and some wish to believe that they are cunning and ambitious. The truth is that elements of all houses exist in everyone, although some have very little of some and rather a lot of others.”

“And me?”

“You are very bright,” the hat said. “And you’d do well in the house of the Ravens. Yet you don’t value knowledge for itself, but as a means to an end. You don’t care whether you are seen as intelligent or not.”

“People who are bright don’t have to advertise,” I said. It was something my mother had told me when I was young.

“You are very loyal, yet you have betrayed your closest friends,” the hat said.

“I thought you couldn’t read my memories.”

“It is close to the surface,” the hat said. “I see flashes here and there, because those are the memories you associate with loyalty. You don’t give trust easily.”

“If you could see my memories you’d know why,” I said.

“You are brave, but you don’t care about glory,” the hat said. “Being seen as brave means nothing to you.”

“Getting the job done is the important thing,” I said. “Brave or not brave, results are what matters. I’d rather supervise a group of smart cowards as brave idiots, as long as they were brave enough to do what had to be done.”

I’d given that speech to some of my recruits in the Wards. Bravery meant nothing if you were dead and you failed. Sometimes you might have to sacrifice yourself, but only if the reward was worth your life.

Things like destroying the Slaughterhouse or stopping Scion had been worth that, and so from a certain point of view I’d been brave. Other than my first night with Lung, and a few other missteps, I’d never been stupid.

“Strangely enough, the best fit for you is the house that you will fit in the very least. The house of the serpent is filled with people who are much like you.”

“Don’t compare me to that group of blithering racists,” I snapped.

“Not all of them are,” the hat said. “Some just lack the cleverness to be in Ravenclaw, the bravery to be in Gryffindor, or the loyalty to be in Hufflepuff.”

“You said it was desire, not character that mattered,” I said.

“How they see themselves is what matters,” the hat said. “A child can be clever without seeing himself as being that way, or desiring to be seen that way. He can lie to himself, and wish to join a house he is ill suited for.”
“And what happens then?”

“I try to dissuade them,” the hat said. “But unless it is completely inappropriate I give in to their wishes.”

“All right,” I said. “Put me in Ravenclaw, or Hufflepuff.”

What little I knew suggested that the Gryffindors were essentially the jocks, and the Slytherins were the people who were trying to kill me. I could probably have the Hufflepuffs following around by the end of the first year, and the Ravenclaws might take a little longer, but I’d get them too.

“That, Miss Hebert is why I can't place you in either,” the hat said, in an admonishing tone. “I have a duty to this school. I am willing to allow you to remain as an adult because I can sense that you are not here by choice, and because you have nowhere else to go. I am not obligated to make it easy for you.”

“Now wait,” I said.

“You would have been a perfect fit for Hufflepuff when you were younger,” the hat said. “But life has forged you into something else entirely now.”

“I'm not ambitious,” I said.

“Aren't you?” the hat asked. “You rose to the top of your former profession.... whatever that was... in a remarkably short time.”

It sounded more and more like the hat was lying about the mind reading thing.

“I did what I had to do,’ I muttered. “I just fell into being a villain, and then into being a hero. Aren't the Hufflepuffs supposed to be hard workers?”

I'd heard Neville blithering on about how he thought he'd end up as a Hufflepuff during the eight hours on the the train.

“Any house can have hard workers, but you will never just be one of the rest,” the hat said. “You will always stand out.”

“Slytherins are known for determination, for resourcefulness, and cleverness,” the hat said. “Can you really say that those are not defining characteristics of your personality?”

“I'll have to kill someone if you put me there,” I said. “You said you have to think about what's best for the student body.”

“I haven't sorted a muggleborn to this house in twenty years,” the hat said. “Because I suspected that none of them would survive. You, though are like a cockroach... you thrive in conditions where others would fail.”

I sent an image to the hat of thousands of cockroaches eating away at it. I could probably only manage a hundred, but they could probably do enough damage in eight hours that he wouldn't be usable any more by the next morning.

“I'm incapable of fear,” the hat said pleasantly. “I think it has to do with not having glands. I'm a
thousand years old, and if it's my time to go, I'm perfectly willing.”

“A bribe, maybe?” I asked.

What might a hat want? Could it actually want anything?

“I'm a hat, Miss Hebert. I don't eat or drink or spend money. All I want is to perform my duty, have an occasional good conversation, and sleep.”

Was the hat suicidal? A thousand years of having to root through the minds of eleven year olds would have driven almost anyone crazy.

“I can't very well perform my duty if I am destroyed,” the hat said. “But I can say that I'm sending you to SLYTHERIN.”

Damn it.

It had said the last part out loud, and I could see hundreds of faces staring at me. McGonagall plucked the hat from my head and gave me a gentle push to get off the stool.

I stalked over toward the Slytherin table, sitting down next to Millicent Bulstrode. The hat knew I was bluffing when I talked about destroying it; I needed to know what it knew about the body jumpers in the past, and I could hardly destroy the only being old enough to remember what had happened.

There were strange looks coming from some of the older students; presumably they'd heard something of the nonsense Malfoy had been spouting.

Malfoy was sorted into Slytherin shortly later; I noticed that he very carefully sat as far away from him as possible, leaning over to whisper to the boy sitting next to him. I could have tried to listen to him, but I was trying to control my own anger.

The hat had figuratively dropped me into a nest of vipers.

The Potter kid was sorted into Gryffindor; I'd read some kind of nonsense about him killing the Dark Lord as a baby. He didn't look that dangerous; of course, Bonesaw hadn't looked particularly dangerous either.

Neville went Gryffindor. Apparently he still very much wanted to be brave.

I didn't really care about any of the rest of them. I caught Hermione looking over at me from the Ravenclaw table; apparently she'd been sure I was going to be sorted there, and she'd thought she'd have a ready made friend.

Thoughts of simply stealing the hat and leaving the school flashed through my mind, but it was still possible that I was in more danger outside than in.

Food appeared on the table; it was a feast like I hadn't seen in a while. The food I'd been served in my room had been simple, but filling. This was a smorgasbord; multiple types of meat, multiple types of potatoes, vegetables... if they fed these children like this every day, it was a wonder that all of them weren't fatter than they were tall.

The Slytherins at the table closest to me were staring.
“I don’t think I’d heard the name Hebert,” one of the older students said. “Are you a half blood?”

“Mudblood,” I said, stuffing my face with a pork chop.

At the look of shock on her face, I said. “What? I’m a mudblood. Who gives a damn?”

Now all of them were looking at me. One of them said slowly. “Are you a Yank?”

That’s what she was going with? I suppose I could have tried lying and claiming to be a half-blood from America, but Malfoy had a big mouth and would quickly set everyone straight.

“Red white and blue.”

The girl looked like she wanted to ask how I’d ended up being at Hogwarts, but her companion nudged her into silence. I spent the rest of the mean in silence.

The meal ended as quickly as it began.

Dumbledore was speaking suddenly.

“-the Forbidden forest is forbidden for a reason. I would also like to introduce our new Defense against the Dark arts professor, Professor Theodore Travers.”

A distinguished looking slender man stood up and gave us all a small nod.

“The third floor corridor is currently under reconstruction after the... unpleasantness last year. In related news, the Weasley twins are banned from Hogsmeade for the rest of the term.”

I heard loud groans from a couple of redheads on the Gryffindor table.

“And now the school song,” he said.

I quickly learned that Wizards had not mastered the art of carrying a tune.

“And now it's time for bed.”

“First years,” a dark haired witch called out. “To me.”

We gathered around her.

“My name is Gemma Farley. I am a prefect. Michael here is the boy's prefect. If you have a problem, you come to us. However, I think it's best you not have any problems. I will now take you down to your quarters.”

The other first years were staring at me as we made our way downstairs.

“The entrance is guarded and requires a password,' Gemma said. “It changes every two weeks. It will be posted on the notice board inside the common room. You will not allow anyone from another house inside, and you will not let them know the password.”

She turned to us.

“Our house does not have a good reputation, and there are members of the other houses who would love to hurt us. The entrance to the common room is our first line of defense, and you will not let that be breached, or the entire house will turn against you.”
“The password for this two weeks is Purity,” she said.

The Slytherin common room was done up in green, with greenish lamps and chairs. The decorative skulls probably wouldn't have done their reputation any good.

The window out to the bottom of the lake was spectacular though.

“There is one important rule in this house,” Michael said. “And that is that whatever you do, don’t embarrass the house. Do what you have to do, but don’t get caught. If you do get caught, we will not help you. Professor Snape realizes that there is bias against us by the other houses, so he prefers not to punish us in front of them. However, if you disappoint him, there will be consequences.”

He was looking at me with undisguised loathing.

“Girls, with me,” Gemma said.

I found myself in a room with two other girls. From the Gryffindor rooms I’d expected there to be more.

“Hi,” I said. “I'm Taylor Hebert.”

“The mudblood,” the girl I did not know said. “I remember. Tracey Davis.”

Millicent Bulstrode was staring at the both of us, looking like she wanted to cry. “They stuck all of us together.”

“What?”

“We're half-bloods,” she said. “And you're a mudblood. They didn't want to have to room with us. Didn't want to dirty themselves by having to stay in the same room with a halfblood.”

“The first years weren't given a choice,” I said. “It was a decision made by... whoever makes the decision. It's actually better for us; did you really want to have to sleep in a room with four other people?”

I'd prefer to sleep with no one else, but that would have been racism too blatant even for this place. I had a feeling the purebloods would prefer to have separate water fountains, if this place even had those.

I sighed and checked my bed. It was the one with the trunk, and it was the closest to the door. There weren't any obvious traps.

Sitting down on the bed, I closed my eyes.

“We've got to teach her a lesson,” Michael the prefect was saying. “I can get around the stairs, and with any luck, she'll be out of this school by tomorrow morning.”

I could hear mutters of agreement from two of the other boys.

I sighed, and I pulled a sock out of my fanny pack. I began filling it with galleons. The other two girls were staring at me.

“What are you doing?” Millicent asked.

“Nothing important,” I said. “Have you girls ever played a game called marbles? It's a muggle
game they play in America.”

“Is is like exploding snap?” Millicent asked. “Because I don't like that.”

“No,” I said. “Come over here by the door.”

I quickly showed them how to play, although neither of them seemed very interested. I heard Gemma calling out that it was time for lights out.

“Aren’t you going to clean those up?” Tracey asked.

“I'll take care of it in the morning,” I said.

The girls went to bed. I laid down, but I didn't take off my clothes. I sat in the dark and I waited.
For the next hour I lay in the dark and listened to their whispered plans about what they wanted to do with me. There were three or four others who were egging them on, but who were not planning to join in. I took careful note of their names and faces.

To their credit, most of the other Slytherins didn't seem to know much about it; they went to bed and stayed there. I had to suppose that even if a moderately racist Slytherin was annoyed by having a mudblood in the house, first years weren't that important to most upperclassmen.

They were planning to catch me while I was asleep. Some of the things they planned to do to me were sickening, but they did not plan to kill me. They simply wanted to make my life in Hogwarts so terrible that I'd drop out on my own.

That meant that lethal measures were likely off the table, and that made my job a lot harder.

Hits to the head with a weapon could always kill; hit someone hard enough to knock them out, and you risked permanent brain damage or death.

Yet many of my ordinary strategies would have to be changed. Even without the threat posed by their wands, their sheer size was a huge problem. They had a major advantage in reach on me, and I simply didn't have the strength or mass to manage a leg sweep on them.

There wouldn't be any comparison at all between their level of strength and mine. They were each likely four times as strong as I was, and there were three of them.

Furthermore, although my improvised blackjack was going to be painful, I didn't have any idea how many hits I was going to make before the sock split and the whole thing broke down. I'd used six pairs of socks, one inside the other, hoping to get more use out of it before it broke, but I still wasn't certain. I would have used more, but six pair were all I owned.

I'd have to treat them like I was treating brutes, and I wouldn't be able to limit the damage I did as much as I would have liked because if I didn't do enough then they'd get hold of me. Surprise, skill and the environment were my only advantages.

If I'd had my extendable baton, I'd be less worried about this fight. As it was... well...

Sighing, I got out of bed. It was time.

“What's going on?” Millicent asked sleepily.

I'd have to watch out for that; apparently she was a light sleeper.

“Nothing,” I said. “Go back to sleep.”

Walking over the door, I stood by the side of it. I already had bugs standing on top of the marbles; I'd experimented earlier and they were too small to trigger the tripping spells on the marbles. They were moving them into place.

I had bugs on the boys, especially on their arms. They'd be like gunmen, aiming a weapon except that they wouldn't have to use two hands.

I could hear the boys whispering now with my own ears. It was a sign that they weren't...
professionals; if they had been, I wouldn't have heard a thing until they were using the blankets of my bed to hold me down.

Carefully I pulled the Peruvian darkness powder out of my pocket and I prepared to throw it down with my left hand. I'd spent a lot of time working with a Cape whose power involved darkness, and so I was experienced in working in the dark. While I hadn't been with the Undersiders for years, I'd kept up my practice in fighting in the dark, or sometimes when simply surrounded by swarms of so many insects that no one could see anything.

This was my element.

The door opened, and my sap went down, smashing his wand.

The entire world went black as the powder hit the floor and billowed out. A moment later I had brought my blackjack around again, smashing him in the knee. He gave a muffled scream and went down, sliding backward as the first of the marbles went out from under his feet, pushed by my insects.

One body slid back against the far wall, struck by the first, and the third muttered something that sounded like Lumnos. It didn't help.

With bugs moving the marbles out of my way, I stepped out onto the landing. The bugs still weren't as precise as I would have liked, but all I needed was for the marbles to move in and out of a general area.

I ducked as a spell lashed out where I had been; apparently I wasn't as quiet as I had thought.

A hit to the wrist and I heard a crack; it sounded like the third boy's wrist was broken. I heard a scream, and then I leaped aside as the second boy grabbed for my foot. He was flailing around, shoving his friend off of him.

I brought my sap down on his elbow, and I heard something else snap. The sap was slower than I would like; after every attack I had to spend precious seconds trying to bring it around to get it into position to attack again.

I kicked the second boy in the head again and again. Normally I wouldn't have done that, but I was small and weak enough that it probably wouldn't do that much damage. Using the sap would have been lethal.

With wrists and elbows broken, I doubted that the boys could attack with their wands; it was possible that they could use their off hands, though, and so I already had insects carrying their wands back into the room.

“You bitch!” I heard the third one mutter. He was already getting to his feet.

“You can give up now and we'll end this,” I said. I moved as I did so, as all three boys lunged for where they heard my voice.

I'd already moved, skipping up the stairs as they slammed into each other. I brought my sap down again and again, hitting them in the shoulderblades, the clavicles and the knees.

Finally, I felt my socks give way, splitting and the galleons tinkling against the stone floor.

My bugs moved the marbles to where they needed to be, and I heard a scream as the boys went flying backwards and down the stairs. This was the most dangerous part, as it was possible that
they could break their necks on the way down. As they were mostly prone, I doubted that they would suffer that much damage.

The remaining marbles moved out of my way, pushed by insects, and I stepped down the stairs and into the dim light of the common room.

All three boys were bloody and I saw Draco Malfoy standing at the foot of the boy's stairs staring at us with his mouth open. I had my wand drawn.

“Get Snape,” I said. “The boys here had an accident.”

He stood there motionless.

“NOW!” I snapped.

Malfoy was out the entrance in a flash, and I could hear him screaming bloody murder.

All three boys were trying to rise to their feet, and I snapped out a Diffindo spell, cutting the arm of Michael's robe. The hem fluttered to the floor and all three of them froze.

I pointed the wand out of them.

“I could have cut your throats,” I said. “It would have been easier, and less trouble for me really. This is me being merciful. I won't be again.”

I let that sink in. I could see color draining from their faces at the realization that I was telling the truth, although it might also be from their injuries.

Snape was suddenly in the room.

He hadn't changed out of his robes; he'd struck me as the kind to keep late hours, or maybe he'd expected something like this.

“Put the wand down, Miss Hebert,” he said. He had his wand out, but carefully not aimed at me. I had no doubt that he'd be able to snap it into place before I got a spell off. Unlike these two boys, he didn't strike me as an amateur.

Professor McGonagall was there a moment later, holding a squirming Draco.

“What's the meaning of this?” she asked.

“These three boys need medical attention,” I said coolly. “They were trying to get up the girls' stairs and suffered a fall.”

“And I am to assume that the marbles I see on the floor didn't have anything to do with it?” Snape asked dryly.

“I was playing marbles with my roommates by the door,” I admitted. “I was going to clean it up in the morning. I didn't leave them out in the stairwell.”

My bugs were already pushing them back into the room, so it wasn't even a lie.

“And the billowing clouds of darkness behind you?” Snape asked.

“I must have dropped my Peruvian Darkness powder when I got up to help them,” I said.
There was already a crowd of boys gathered by the stairs, staring out at us.

“Your wand, Miss Hebert,” Snape demanded. I handed it over, stepping carefully around the boys, although I doubted that they would do anything in front of two teachers. If they would, things were far worse here than I thought.

“Sevarus?” McGonegall asked.

“Priori incantato,” Snape muttered. “Hmm...cutting spell, wingardium, cutting, cutting, cutting, cutting, cutting....”

“I did not cut these boys,” I said. “You can check. I've just been...practicing.”

I said this as much for the benefit of my audience as for Snape. One of the most important things about becoming a warlord was developing a reputation. I couldn't afford to have any of the Slytherins watching to be able to lie to themselves and think it was an accident.

At the same time I couldn't simply admit that I had beaten the boys with a sock full of galleons. Some of the boys peering out of the hallway were now staring at me, and I could almost see them connecting the dots in their minds.

“Why have you been practicing the cutting spell so diligently, Miss Hebert?” Snape asked.

“You wouldn't let me have a knife,” I said, shrugging. “How else was I going to cur... things.”

“She's an eleven year old girl,” McGonagall said, shocked. “How did they bypass the defense on the stairs?”

The fact that they were standing around discussing this instead of giving the boys immediate medical attention actually boded well for me. The looks McGonagall was giving the boys were not friendly at all.

“Mr. McCutchin was a prefect,” Snape said. The tone of his voice suggested that the past tense was intentional.

“I see,” McGonagall said disapprovingly. “We'd best get them to Poppy, and then we'll wake the Headmaster.”

I held my hand out, and Snape reluctantly handed me back my wand.

“I will need their wands as well, Miss Hebert,” Snape said. “For the investigation.”

I nodded, and as I made my way up the stairs in the blackness, I gathered up the galleons that had spilled out on the stairs. I was impressed that the Peruvian Darkness powder still hadn't dissipated; maybe I'd gotten my money's worth after all.

Two of the wands were still intact, and one was broken.

“Go back to bed,” Snape snapped at the waiting boys in the hall as I returned. He gestured, and Draco quickly ran to the stairs to join the staring crowd. “I will speak with all of you in the morning before breakfast... except for you, Miss Hebert. I will need you to come with me to speak with the Headmaster, and I suspect that we are going to have a long night.”

A moment later, all three of the boys were levitated into the air, and we were walking through the nighttime halls.
“I expected more discretion from you, Miss Hebert,” Snape said in a low voice. McGonagall was walking in front of us.

“What else could I do?” I asked. “You knew that something like this was going to happen or you wouldn't have been dressed and ready. Aren't you supposed to protect students?”

“It's generally best to let things...sort themselves out,” Snape said.

“How did that work out for you?” I asked.

Looking at him, with greasy hair and teeth the way they were, I could only imagine how it would have been for him when he was younger.

The look he gave me was cold, and I immediately lifted my hands.

“I'm just saying that if you stopped people from hurting each other you might do a better job of turning people into productive citizens.”

“The Wizarding world isn't like the muggle world,” Snape said. “There aren't as many... protections here as there are there. Those who don't learn to protect themselves will be in trouble.”

There was a stiffness in the way he held himself that said it might be personal for him. I probably wouldn't have noticed except that I suspected that I knew how he felt. An ordinary child probably wouldn't have noticed because they tended to barely see their teachers as human.

I remembered being shocked as a child the first time I'd seen a teacher at a grocery store. It had never occurred to me that they had personal lives outside of school. It was like I'd thought they were wheeled into a closet and plugged in to recharge.

Snape wasn't even that old; in his early or mid-thirties, he was younger than my Dad. He'd had a life before he'd gotten into the double agent business; most likely he'd gone to this school. He'd probably been bullied.

How he couldn't understand that bullying had to be stamped out I couldn't understand.

I'd done some research on the subject when I'd worked at the Protectorate, during my minuscule amounts of free time, and I'd been surprised to learn that bullying was worse in rural areas than in urban areas. In the cities, you could be anonymous. You could float from one neighborhood to another, and get away from the bullying that way.

You could change schools. It hadn't worked for me, but a lot of kids did.

In a rural environment, there often wasn't another school for a hundred miles, and everyone knew everyone else. You couldn't change schools and you were trapped. Your reputation as a victim or a bully followed you, and it was hard to change.

That was essentially the problem here. This was the only Wizarding School in Britain, and the nearest one spoke French, which I did not speak.

I could try to go to school in America, but I suspected that the authorities there would be a lot more diligent about tracking down my non-existent parents. They'd likely discover that I was a British child named Millie Scrivener, and they'd send me back.

Or they'd discover that I was possessing her dead body and they'd do something worse to me.
For better or worse I was stuck here, and while I could ignore certain kinds of abuse, I did not want to spend the next seven years dodging attacks around every corner. The only way to stop that was to slap down anyone who attacked me hard and with prejudice.

“It's only going to get worse,” I said. “If they keep attacking me. If you don’t stop them I will.”

“Don't make threats, Miss Hebert,” Snape said. “I've given you more latitude than I would another student in light of your... unique circumstances.”

“I think you know that I don't make threats,” I said.

It was a lie, of course. I make threats all of the time. The difference was that I was perfectly willing to follow up on them.

“Have you heard about Azkaban?” he asked.

“Not much.”

“It's the prison our kind use to contain our criminals. We have no other prisons. It is guarded by creatures that drain every bit of joy from the prisoners, leaving nothing but agony and pain. Should they try to escape, the creatures devour their souls, denying them any hope of an afterlife.”

“They call that the Kiss, and it is the highest penalty Wizardkind has.”

Snape looked absolutely serious.

“I fear that you are on your way to sharing a cell with some of the Dark Lord's worst,” he said. “And prolonged exposure to the Dementors will, as their name suggests leave you mad.”

“What if you don't have any?” I asked.

“Any what?” Snape glanced at me.

“Any joy for them to devour?”

“Then they will dig deeper. They will steal memories of your father, of your mother. Happiness with friends, first loves, all of it will drain away leaving nothing behind but dust and bitterness.”

“Well... that would be bad,” I said.

Would I be better off not remembering Mom or Dad? Would it hurt less, and would I miss them less, or would the joy be gone but the pain remain? From the way Snape was talking, I suspected that it was the latter.

“Were you any other student, I'd demand that you tell the truth,” Snape said.

“What... you want me to say that I overheard what they were planning, so I waited in my room with a sock filled with galleons, Peruvian darkness powder, and marbles enspelled with a tripping jinx? Who would believe a story like that? I'm eleven years old.”

He stared at me.

“The story I'm going to tell is that they were trying to break into my room, they tripped over my marbles, and they hurt themselves on the way down the stairs. Nobody would believe that a girl my size would defeat three upperclassmen without any magic.”
“If you don't consider Peruvian Darkness powder and tripping marbles magic, what do you consider magic?”

“Being able to blast them in the face with fire,” I said. “Or turn them into frogs. You can do things with frogs.”

He stared at me, and then he didn't say anything else as we headed for the Headmaster's office.
“The injuries were not caused by a fall,” Madam Pomfrey said. “These boys were repeatedly beaten with a heavy object before they fell. I have written out a list of all of the injuries.”

“Would a sock filled with galleons cause these kinds of injuries?” Snape asked.

Pomfrey frowned. “It would. I'd hardly think that an eleven year old girl would have had the skill to do this much damage. The damage that was done to the joints was carefully targeted to cause pain and incapacitation without being lethal. If the boys were stuck with muggle healers it is likely that they would be permanently damaged.”

“You did tell her that Wizards could regrow bones,” Snape said.

“Are you sure that she isn't protecting someone?” Madam Pomfrey asked. “Someone larger and stronger, perhaps?”

“A muggleborn in Slytherin?” Snape asked. “Who could she have possibly found that would be willing to go that far in protecting her? She hasn't had any contact with the Wizarding world as far as we can tell.”

I wasn't in the room; I was sitting against the wall outside the Headmaster's office back in my usual position, my eyes closed as I eavesdropped. They'd already called in my roommates for testimony and sent them back to their rooms. Millicent had essentially hidden under her covers, and Tracey had slept through the whole thing.

“Miss Hebert has proven herself to be quite resourceful,” Dumbledore said. “Apparently she as much as admitted to Severus what she had done before she told us the story she chose to tell.”

“Why would she lie?” McGonagall asked.

“Because the story she told is much more damaging,” Snape said. “First, it makes them all look like incompetent fools. Second is that she left their motives for entering her room suspect.”

“What?” McGonagall asked.

“Entering her room to teach a muggleborn who thought overly much of herself a lesson would make them a hero to the other Slytherins. But this way she has suggested that they were entering for other reasons. It casts doubt that will turn the entire female population against them.”

“She's eleven years old!” McGonagall said. “There's no way she should know enough to even suggest...”

“She's an American,” Snape said. “Some parts of their muggle culture are less protected than ours.”

I grimaced. Was he basically saying that Americans were sluts? My list of grievances against him was growing. I hadn't forgotten about the Trace.

“It will damage their reputation in a way that a simple hazing would not,” Snape continued. “And will almost be more painful to them than the beating they were given.”

“I thought you were exaggerating when you suggested that there might be trouble,” McGonagall said. “I didn't think it was going to be this bad.”
“I didn't think the fools would try to directly attack her this soon,” Snape admitted. “I expected them to insult her, and possibly for her to kick them in painful locations.”

He probably thought that because he'd taken my knife.

“If that was all you expected, I doubt you'd have asked me to be there,” McGonagall said.

“I've learned to expect the unexpected with Miss Hebert,” Snape admitted. “And your presence would quiet any complaints about favoritism toward the muggleborn.”

If some of the students were children of Death Eaters, they'd undoubtedly complain to their parents about me. Having McGonagall there would give him cover to be more fair than he otherwise would have been. He'd be able to blame her for giving out punishments.

“My question is how she was able to move around in the darkness that well?” McGonagall asked. “Even transformed into a cat, my vision isn't good enough to pierce that darkness.”

“It wouldn't surprise me if she forgot to mention that she'd somehow acquired a Hand of Glory,” Snape said.

“That's Dark magic,” McGonagall said. “Where could she have possibly found it?”

“She was able to find Diagon Alley without being told about it. It may be that she was able to shop in Knockturn Alley without being snatched up.”

“I think Miss Hebert should not be allowed to keep those marbles any longer,” Dumbledore said after a moments' silence. “Considering the potential for accidents in a school with as many stairs as we have.”

“And what penalty should we assign her?” Snape asked.

“For defending herself? If she was a Gryffindor I'd be giving her points,” McGonagall said.

“We'd all be better off if she transferred to Ilvermorny or Beauxbatons,” Snape said.

“As an American, I doubt she knows any other languages,” Dumbledore said. “Which would leave her ill prepared for Beauxbatons. And she has no one back home.”

“She has no one here,” Snape said.

“Perhaps having a close encounter with a driven, spirited muggleborn will do your charges some good,” Dumbledore said.

Snape didn't say anything. He just stared at Dumbledore.

“Sometimes I think that the house system has done more harm than good,” Dumbledore continued. “Because it is easy to think the worst of someone you have no contact with.”

He said this like it was a revelation. At least at Winslow the gangs had sprung up on their own. The school hadn't assigned people to gangs.

“So you are saying this girl is an experiment?” Snape asked. “You don't think that sooner or later this is going to happen again?”

I couldn't tell if Snape was trying to defend me, or to defend the other Slytherins from me. Maybe he was doing both. No matter what happened, my situation put him in an awkward position, and it
jeopardized his work as a double agent.

There was a strange edge to his voice, along with what sounded like old anger. Had this happened before?

I'd been a double agent before, and I understood that it meant that he could not be seen as being sympathetic toward me.

“With Tom on the rise, I think it's important that the young people hear other voices. Otherwise, it will be all too easy for them to fall into the vices of their elders.”

I could almost feel Snape's frustration from where I was sitting.

“We have an opening for prefect that I will fill tomorrow,” Snape said finally, giving in. What else could he do when Dumbledore was the one in power.

I couldn't get a read on Dumbledore. He wasn't actively against me like Blackwell had been, but he certainly wasn't doing a lot to help me either.

“That might be wise,” Dumbledore said. “Limiting their access to her, at least at night might reduce problems overall. After what happened last year, the last thing we can afford is more strife.”

“I've been telling you for years that separating the Slytherins and Gryffindors would make for a more harmonious teaching experience.”

“And this year I finally agreed with you,” Dumbledore admitted. “We shall see how that experiment goes. I hope you choose your next prefect more wisely.”

“I will endeavor to choose someone who will be less...prone to temptation.”

Dumbledore said. “Perhaps a half-blood?”

“What shall we do with the boys?” McGonagall asked. “Expulsion shouldn't be out of the question.”

“I fear that their families would not be understanding,” Dumbledore said. “And might in fact attempt to charge Miss Hebert with assault. As traumatized as she undoubtedly is, I suspect she would not do well in Azkaban.”

“They wouldn't put an eleven year old in Azkaban,” McGonagall said, sounding shocked.

“I can think of three cases where it was done,” Dumbledore said. “Never for longer than three weeks, but that was all it took to ruin those children for life. Children are not meant to deal with that kind of torture.”

“Perhaps suspension for two weeks,” Snape said. “Which would give everyone time to regain their composure. Considering what I know of their child rearing practices, I suspect that their families will punish them much harder than we can during that time.”

“Making them hate her even more,” McGonagall said.

“That will happen regardless,” Dumbledore said. “If we expel them, they will simply join Voldemort's ranks all the sooner, which may lead to even more grief.”

Voldemort? Was that Tom's cape name?
“Suspension it will be, then,” Snape said. “Followed by enough detentions that I can make them understand the folly of their ways. Will you contact their parents?”

Dumbledore nodded.

“Then I shall take Miss Hebert back to her room. I dare say that going without sleep won't make her any easier to deal with.”

They all rose, and a moment later the door beside me was opening.

“Come along Miss Hebert.”

I rose to my feet and followed him. I noticed that he kept his hand on his wand, and he was careful to keep me beside him instead of behind him.

We walked for a couple of minutes before he said “I am surprised that you are not curious about the outcome of our meeting.”

“You'd tell me if I was in trouble,” I said. “And if they aren't I guess I'll know about it tomorrow.”

“Very practical.”

“Professor,” I said.

He stopped, and turned to face me.

“Could you fix my socks? I seem to have damaged them.”

Considering that I only owned six pair, it wasn't a terrible request to make.

He stared at me.

“Leave them out by the foot of your bed, and the house elves will repair them by morning,” he said.

“Do they have to inform staff if they find blood on clothes?” I asked. “After all, I'm sure that people have accidents when cutting ingredients from potions.”

“Then you will be sent to the infirmary,” Snape said. “I would consider it a favor if you tried to keep the blood to a minimum.”

“Keep them off of me and I won't bother anyone,” I said seriously. “But if they keep coming after me while I'm trying to sleep, I won't have any choice but to make sure that they won't want to.”

“You should not have any trouble tonight,” Snape said. “I will be placing additional charms on the entrance to the girl's stairwell so that should any of the male students attempt this again, I will be alerted.”

I nodded. “And the female students?”

“For the most part, I think you will find their methods to be less physical.”

He was saying that the girl Slytherins tended to be more like Emma and Madison than Sophia. I could work with that.

“So they'll be spreading rumors about me and trying to hurt my feelings.”
“Assuming that you have any they can hurt,” he said. “but we both know you are quite resilient.”

“They’ll never love me,” I said. “But if they leave me alone, I’ll be happy to simply focus on my studies.”

The only way I was going to be able to live in this world was if the Dark Lord and his followers were dead, or at least incarcerated. But without skills at magic, I wasn't going to be able to make that happen. Even with those skills, I wasn't going to be able to do it alone. I needed to make allies, and I couldn't afford to alienate anyone who wasn't already inclined to be against me.

“I will hold you to that,” he said. “You will have a difficult time in the coming days, but if anyone can survive it, I suspect that you can.”

I nodded.

By the time I got back to my room, the girls were all asleep.

It seemed as though my head had just hit the bed when I woke to the sounds of movement downstairs. Snape had summoned the entire class of Slytherins to a meeting, and I hadn't been invited.

“Last night, there was an incident,” Snape said. “I've heard you talking about it, and it is true. As of last night, three of your male classmates decided to invade the Girl's dorms, abusing a prefect's privileges to do so.”

“They were going for the mudblood's room,” I heard one of the boys mutter. He'd been one of those who'd been egging the others on.

“As of today, they are having bones regrown,” Snape said. “Miss Hebert had no injuries.”

The crowd was deathly silent.

“Sometimes I wonder what has happened to this house,” Snape said. “It was once the house of the ambitious, the cunning, and the clever.”

He stared down at the boy who had spoken. “How cunning was it to charge up to the room of a muggleborn less than an hour after she arrived? What would it have gained them if they had succeeded in somehow terrorizing an eleven year old girl? They acted like Gryffindors, and they paid the price for that.”

“The mudblood would be gone,” the boy muttered.

“And is she?” Snape asked. “She's sleeping in her room contentedly while three fifth years are in the infirmary with injuries that would have permanently debilitated a muggle.”

“She got lucky,” the boy said.

“Did she?” Snape asked. “How lucky would she have had to be to come out of encounter like that undamaged? Three boys with wands went up, and three broken bodies came down, and she did not use her wand.”

There was a sullen expression on the faces of several of the people in the crowd, but others looked more thoughtful.

Snape shook his head. “If they'd managed to beat her, then they would have accomplished nothing.
Now, not only are they suspended, but everyone knows that they are incompetent fools. The stench of that will never wear off.”

“The Headmaster and Deputy Headmistress are both aware of this incident, and they will be keeping an eye on the situation. After the events of the last school year, they have sworn to be less tolerant of outright assaults. I think that this incident will make them more tolerant of whatever horrors she decides to perpetrate.”

“Because she's a mudblood?”

“And because they still think she's a child,” Snape said. “And regardless of the truth, they will believe that she is defending herself.”

I could hear angry muttering from the crowd.

“Fighting her is ultimately pointless,” Snape said. “Should you win, you will be painted as a bully who picked on an innocent child.... lose, and you will suffer whatever fate she decides to give you, while she will walk away quite free.”

“So we just have to accept her?”

“She will never be one of you,” Snape said. “And no one can force you to interact with her outside of class. Should you be stupid enough to try to harm her, I am sure that the situation will resolve itself without my intervention.”

“So you won't do anything?” A stupid looking boy asked.

I saw several people around him grimace at the question. Apparently they were quicker on the uptake than he was.

“I dislike attending funerals,” Snape said. “I won't come to yours.”

A moment later he was gone, and the murmuring in the room grew louder. I heard several people shouting at several other people.

“She told me that I'd wake up one night with her standing over my bed,” I heard Draco saying. “And there's no ward on the boy's stairs either.”

I got up from bed and prepared for my day while listening in the discussions and arguments that followed. I was starting to get an idea of just who fell into what camp; not all of the Slytherins were vocal blood purists, although some apparently were.

The ones who were quiet, who looked uncomfortable when others started spouting racists nonsense; those were the people that I might be able to reach, even though most of them likely would be never brave enough to support me openly.

Still, Snape had done what he promised, and at least tried to keep them from attacking me. If there were some who were too dumb to follow his instructions, then I'd have to do what I could to enlighten them.
Because the girl's prefect was late getting my class schedule to me, I was one of the last people to slip into transfiguration class. I saw an empty seat at the front of the class, and I saw Hermione Granger waving enthusiastically for me to sit beside her.

There was another seat at the back of the room; it would have felt better to sit with my back to the ball, but I didn't want anyone thinking I was anxious or afraid about anything.

I slipped into the seat beside Hermione.

There was a cat sitting on the teacher's desk; I'd heard that McGonagall could turn into a cat, and the cat even seemed to have markings on her face like spectacles.

“How was your night?” she asked. “I've heard some disturbing rumors.”

“I'm fine,” I said. “Some other people aren't. Hopefully they'll learn their lesson. Has out professor always been a cat?”

“What?” she asked.

“That cat is clearly the professor,” I said.

Hermione stared at the professor, who chose that moment to step off the desk and become a human. It was the fastest, and smoothest transformation that I'd ever seen, and I'd seen a lot of Changers back in my homeworld.

The entire classroom gasped.

“Transfiguration is some of the most dangerous magic you will learn here in Hogwarts,” she said. “As such, anyone who chooses to engage in horseplay will be asked to leave and will not come back.”

How did that even work? Would the student have to make up the work on their own time, or would they simply have an entire branch of magic that they didn't learn by the time they were an adult. The reading I'd done seemed to indicate that transfiguration was one of the fundamental things required to be a wizard.

Presumably almost everything learned in the early years would be of use; it was a little like normal school; the basics learned in elementary school would be used by everyone, while classes learned in high school would be hit or miss. I knew people who hadn't done algebra in twenty years, and I knew people who used it all the time.

McGonagall turned and with a wave of her wand transformed her desk into a pig. It snorted and stared at us, and I found my mind racing. Had she actually given an inanimate object a form of sentience, even if only a low form?

Could the pig be eaten, or would it revert to normal, creating splinters in the stomach that would be fatal...or even splinters in the bloodstream?

Would that be a perfect form of assassination?

I knew better than to ask any of those questions. While I enjoyed prodding Snape, I couldn't afford
to alienate McGonagall or any of the other teachers.

“Transfiguration is a branch of magic that focuses on the alteration of the form or appearance of an object, down to it's smallest fundamental parts,” McGonagall began once she'd reverted the desk. “You should pull out you paper and quills and begin to take notes.”

I grimaced. I'd tried writing with a quill in the past, and I had a tendency to blot the paper with ink. You had to re-dip the quill every three to six words, and I found myself balking at the inefficiency of it.

I watched Hermione, who seemed to somehow have already picked up the trick, and I tried to imitate her. I found that I'd been holding the quill too far upright, which made my lines too thick to make for legible words. She held hers at a forty five degree angle. How in the hell had she already learned to write with these things?

“Transfiguration is very hard work,” McGonagall continued. “And it requires a mind that is much more focused than some of the other branches of magic. Sloppiness results in failure. It is important to make firm and decisive wand movements; failure to do so will result in failure.”

“There are factors to be considered with transfiguration. First is weight; smaller objects are easier to transfigure than larger. The task grows more difficult the larger the object, until some objects are simply too big to transfigure.”

I wanted to ask what the upper limits were, but I figured I'd be able to find it somewhere in the library.

“Wand power is also a factor,” McGonagall continued. “Some wands are better suited to this kind of work than others. That does not mean that any of you have substandard wands; wands are simply a tool, and some tools are better for some tasks than others.”

“Concentration is the third factor. Allow your concentration to lapse, lose your hold on the mental image of what you are trying to achieve, and the transfiguration will either fail of be incomplete. For that reason, those who are better able to imagine the things they can create often have an easier time.”

“Viciousness is a factor with living transfigurations,” she continued. “A highly vicious creature is much more difficult to force out of his form, and also to create.”

“The fifth factor is more complicated,” she said. “And it requires some mastery of mathematics to understand.”

I glanced around at the people around me. They all seemed to be engrossed in the lesson, even Malfoy. It made sense. The Ravenclaws liked to be seen as intelligent, at least according to the hat, and the Slytherins liked to see themselves as being sly.

I did catch some of them glancing up at me from time to time, only to hastily drop their gaze when they caught me looking at them.

McGonagall spent the first half of the session laying out the theory behind transfiguration. I found it fascinating. I could see all kinds of possibilities to transfiguration, even given the limitations that had been laid out.

The fact that food couldn't be created from nothing wasn't a surprise. The fact that it could be successfully duplicated was. What was the difference? If I had one hamburger and I made a second one, hadn't that second one come from nothing?
Money couldn't be transfigured, but although McGonagall acted as though it was a law of nature, that didn't make much sense to me. What made more sense to me was that Wizarding money was enspelled not to be copiable. I'd have to try to see if muggle money could be copied, not that I had any intention of becoming a counterfeiter. Even if it was possible, it was undoubtedly against the law, as it would endanger the whole Secrecy the Wizarding world depended on.

It was apparently impossible to bring someone back from the dead. Even if you tried to transfigure a corpse into someone who was alive, the best you'd get was a zombie. No surprise there.

Curse wounds couldn't be healed, even by transfiguration.

The second half of the hour was to be dedicated to the practical portion of the course. Our first task was to change matchsticks into needle.

This wasn't something that I'd done before, and so I watched carefully as McGonagall went through the wand motions.

It was complex, and I could feel the frustration of the children around me as they struggled with the spell. It was the first real spell we were being taught, and apparently even the purebloods weren't doing a lot better.

I saw that Hermione's matchstick was shimmering, and I focused my attention on the match in front of me.

They'd started with matchsticks because they were close in form to the needle. The changes she was asking us to make weren't that difficult; we needed to change the matchstick from metal to wood, and we needed to make it sharp.

I found myself sweating as I forced myself to focus on what a needle was. Over and over I moved my wand; McGonagall corrected my wand movements a couple of times, and she moved around the room doing the same for the other students.

Finally I felt my needle beginning to change. I looked over, and Hermione was doing the same. She was looking at me with an expression of triumph, before looking disappointed when she saw my needle.

Her needle was silvery and somewhat pointed.

Mine was of a dull metal, but it was sharp; I drew blood when I touched the tip of it. I felt a sense of satisfaction. I wondered if I would be allowed to get a supply of matches from the Deputy Headmistress to continue practicing.

Not only would that let me get control over this ability, but there were things that could be done with a large supply of needles.

"Congratulations Ms. Hebert, Miss Granger," McGonagall said. She took our needles from us, and held them up to the class.

"You can see the difference that concentration and focus and sometimes point of view can make in a transfiguration. Neither got the transfiguration completely right, and it is obvious that they focused on different things. Miss Granger focused on changing the metal, while Miss Hebert focused on the sharpness."

I could see that it was true. My needle still had the pattern of the wood on it, while Hermione's was more purely metal. Her needle was blunt, but mine was more functional.
“It's impressive that you both managed to accomplish it on the first day. Five points to Ravenclaw and Slytherin.”

As far as I was concerned, Hermione was more impressive. She was actually eleven, and her mind hadn't matured yet, and she was keeping up with me, and she'd already figured out how to use a quill.

Hermione beamed, although she kept glancing at me.

As we rose to leave class, she followed me outside. “Is it true that a whole crowd of your classmates attacked you, and now two of them are dead?”

“Not that I know of,” I said. “Unless they died in the middle of the night. I'm sure Professor Snape would have said something.”

“So you were attacked,” she said, looking scandalized. “What did you do?”

I glanced around. Several of the other students were looking away, but they were obviously listening to our conversation.

“Who says I had to do anything?” I asked. “Aren't the girls stairs guarded in your dorms?”

“They are,” she said. “But I overheard Draco Malfoy saying that it was a prefect.”

I sighed, and I pulled Hermione into a bathroom. My bugs had already told me that no one was inside.

“As a hypothetical,” I said. “If a first year really did put three fifty year students in the hospital wing, would she admit to doing it?”

Hermione stared at me.

“You've been to public school before,” I said. She'd mentioned it once of twice during the interminable train ride on the way to school. “What would happen if popular kids with a lot of friends get hurt by a kid they were bullying? What would the school do? Would they pat the kid on the head and tell him it was a good job?”

“No?”

“They'd punish the kid and apologize to the parents of the bully, because their poor little babies got hurt,” I said. “A kid who fights back isn't a hero, he's a problem.”

“Is that what it was like in America?”

“Is it any different here?” I asked. “Or are schools more interested in protecting themselves than their students?”

She stared at me for a moment, then her gaze dropped to her feet. I figured that someone like her would have some experience with bullying; she would have been too annoying to her peers not to have been. As an adult, she was somewhat less annoying to me, but that was only because I had a different perspective.

“So when that kid says that someone had an accident, you don't question them,” I said.

She looked up at me.
“It's really that bad?” she asked

I nodded. “It's that bad. I'm handling it, but it could very easily go bad for me. I need for you to support me in this, and in return I'll help you.”

Doing this alone was probably more than I could handle. I needed allies, and even if Hermione was only eleven, she was another set of hands. Two wands could do a lot more than one, and if I could get her combat capable, maybe two could do a lot more than one.

Her lips tightened. “It's not right what they are doing. I've had some of the girls look down on me in Ravenclaw... I think because I'm a muggleborn, but they mostly ignore me.”

They probably looked down on her because of her personality, but I could work with this. It would increase her sense of solidarity with me, and it would make her more loyal.

“Better to be ignored,” I said. “Until you are ready to do something about it. Don't brag about how smart you are; them seeing it will be all the proof they need that their superiority complexes aren't real.”

“We've got Defense against the Dark Arts class next,” Hermione said. “I've got Herbology with the Gryffindors later.”

“Let's go,” I said.

We found the Defense classroom without issue, and found seats. Already the class was dividing itself up by house; the Slytherins sitting on one side and the Ravenclaws on the other. How much worse would it have been with Gryffindors, given the hatred I'd overheard from some of the Slytherins last night?

Professor Travers slipped into the room.

“I am Professor Travers,” he said when everyone had settled down. “And this is Defense against the Dark arts. Does anyone know what that is?”

The room was silent, with not even Hermione lifting her hands.

“In this class we will be teaching the magic you need to learn in order to not die,” he said. “That's what it breaks down to. There are all sorts of magics that can be used to kill you, and if I do my job right, they may not kill you as quickly as they otherwise might.”

Everyone was staring at him.

“I say that because there is no such thing as a perfect defense. Sometimes spells are designed that are superior to the ones commonly in use, but it's only a matter of time before someone designs a better offensive attack spell to get around that defense. Attack and defense are in a race, you see, and they challenge wizardly ingenuity.”

“That is why you can never simply depend on one defense to protect you from everything. There are general defenses that will be generally useful, but those can be overcome. To survive you have to be flexible, and able to roll with the punches.”

“Today,” he said. “We will begin with how to defend yourself against one of the most dangerous threats that face all wizards... muggles.”

“What?” I heard Hermione ask under her breath.
“Some of you may look at muggles as harmless. They have no magic, so how could they possibly hurt you?”

He shook his head. “It's surprising how many Wizards are killed every year by muggles. Their vehicles alone are a large cause of Wizarding deaths; a shield charm has proven ineffective against a car striking at high rates of speed. Worse, most adult wizards aren't even capable of casting a good shield charm.”

Hermione raised her hand.

“Yes, Miss...”

“Granger,” Hermione said. “How can you claim that muggles are the most dangerous threat to Wizards. Isn't that racist?”

Internally I sighed.

“Does anyone have an answer to that?” he asked.

Reluctantly I raised my hands.

“Yes, Miss...”

“Hebert,” I said. “It's a matter of numbers. Would you think a shark is more dangerous than a cow?”

Hermione stared at me, then nodded.

“But lots more people are killed every year by cows than sharks. The reason is that not very many people are around sharks, but a lot of people are around cows.”

The professor nodded approvingly. “Five points to Slytherin. It's much the same with Wizards. A dragon is much more dangerous than a muggle, but outside the preserves, how likely is a normal wizard to see one? You will always have to deal with muggles, though. Even purebloods are unable to completely isolate themselves, as much as they would like to pretend to. Sooner or later you will have to interact with them.”

He paused and looked around at us. “This class is not muggle studies. If you want to know about muggle culture, there is a class for that. What we are focused on today is how to defend yourself in the unlikely, but still possible event that you come face to face with a hostile muggle.”

He continued., “Not all muggles are dangerous. Most of them are completely harmless. The problem is that there are so many of them that inevitably some of them are. Often it's difficult to tell the difference, although there are some possible tells.”

“Today we will be going over those signs. Again, not all muggles who display these signs are bad. It's simply that the odds are increased when they show these signs. Once we discuss that we will discuss some counterstrategies that can be used.”

Hermione calmed down, although her face was still a little flushed.

We both began to take notes.
Flying class was to be held out on the lawn, and I wondered what sort of safety precautions they were going to take. Back in the States, even in a hellhole like Winslow they were very cautious about the risk of injury from school activities for fear of lawsuits.

I wasn't worried for myself. Despite my body's weakness, I'd flown before, on the back of a giant beetle, and using a jetpack. I'd had some experience with this sort of things, but I was fairly sure that some of these kids wouldn't have.

All I saw was two lines of brooms, and a professor.

We lines up on one side, and the Gryffindors came a few minutes later. This was the first time that I'd had a chance to really get a close look at them outside of meals, and they were roughhousing with each other as they came out onto the lawn.

They were laughing and shouting at each other, and there was none of the quietness that I saw with the Slytherins. If they'd been in a restaurant, I'd have been tempted to put a fly in their soup.

I saw a dark haired boy in glasses staring at me, with a redhead whispering in his ear. They both stared at me unabashedly, not that their classmates weren't doing the same thing. The others, though at least pretended to look away when I looked at them.

It was three thirty in the afternoon, and the sky was cloudy and gray.

The Slytherins had wisely chosen the newer looking brooms. They'd tried to push me over to an old looking broom, but I'd made sure I got one of the better ones, and no one was willing to push me on the matter. I didn't like the look of some of the brooms the Gryffindors were using.

Neville waved at me and I nodded to him. One of the other Gryffindors whispered in his ear, but he shook his head and continued waving.

Good for him.

Madam Hooch barked at the Gryffindors to hurry up.

“Stick your right hand over the broomstick, and say UP,” she said.

Willpower seemed to be a component to these things, and so I willed the broom to come up to my hand. It snapped upwards into my hand. I noticed that the same thing had happened to the dark haired boy and a few of the others, but most of them were having trouble.

Madam Hooch had them repeat it until everyone had control of a broom, and then she showed us how to mount it.

There should be some sort of safety mechanism, otherwise riding on a broom was suicidal folly. What happened if you slipped off, if your hands got slippery or if you got a splinter?

Most likely there were protective charms on these things, because otherwise, no one who wasn't suicidal would get on one.

She blew her whistle, and Neville shot up into the air. He was out of control; it was obvious, and
quick look at Madam Hooch showed that she didn't have it under control. Her face had turned white, and she didn't have her wand out.

I didn't have a lot of options. Even when I'd been at full power my bugs couldn't have carried someone of his weight, and if I were to try to fly up and catch him, I doubted that my body would be able to hold him. Most likely we would both slip off out brooms.

That left magic, and there was only one spell that I had that would be useful.

I let my broom drop, I pulled out my wand, and I shouted, “WINGARDIUM LEVIOSA.”

The levitation spell would not affect a human being, but it could affect clothes. Neville was at the upper limits of what I could probably lift with the spell, but if I could slow him down at least, then I might be able to save his life.

Grimacing, I saw him struggling as his clothes pulled tight, and his entire weight rested on them. The weight was distributed over his entire body, but I was still afraid that his clothes were going to rip, leaving him falling and nude. The broom dropped away from under him; it fell with a crash, shattering on the lawn below.

I let him drop, probably faster than I should have. I could hear a ripping sound from where I was. I dropped him heavily onto the lawn, and I saw him hyperventilating. It looked as though he was having a panic attack.

“That was well done, Miss Hebert,” Madam Hooch said faintly. “I wasn't aware that Mr. Flitwick was teaching that spell on the first day of term.”

“We haven't had his class yet,” I said, dropping my wand. “I studied ahead.”

“Ten points to Slytherin,” she said. “I think I'd best take Mr. Longbottom to the infirmary to get a calming potion.”

I noticed that she pointed her wand at him, and the bugs I had near him heard the sound of clothing repairing themselves.

She turned to the rest of us. “None of you will touch your brooms until I get back, on threat of expulsion.”

With that, she was gone.

“Did you see his face, the great lump?” Malfoy said.

I could see the Gryffindors bristling, and it looked like they were spoiling for a fight. The last thing I needed was to have to hurt someone because we got into a brawl out onto the lawn. The older kids knew what they were doing, and deserved whatever I could do to them, but these were just kids.

“I don't need a broom to make you fly,” I said testily.

His mouth snapped shut, and he paled.

The Gryffindors who had been about to say something stopped and stared at us with wide eyes. I noticed that the dark haired kid was staring at me more intently than the others. Was that a sign of intelligence, or did he need his glasses prescription changed?
Pansy Parkinson said, “You can't talk to him like that! Do you know who his father is?”

I turned and stared at her.

The color drained from her face, and she looked down at the ground. I nodded.

“After what just happened, anybody who even thinks about touching a broom is crazy. Forget about what the professor said. I don't know any healing spells yet, and it would be very easy to break your neck. I don't save idiots either.”

“Who are you calling idiots?” the red haired kid shouted.

“Anybody stupid enough to get on one of these death traps without supervision. Personally, I'd be writing to your parents about the poor quality of the brooms here,” I said. “Look at those things.”

I pointed at some of the worst looking brooms. “My guess is that the spells on those things aren't working right, which puts all of us in danger. Isn't that what Malfoy should be writing his father about, since he actually has some pull at this school?”

Malfoy stared at me, then nodded slowly.

“Yeah, Malfoy,” a boy whose name I didn't know said. “Isn't your Dad a bigwig here? Can't he do something about this?”

I could almost see Malfoy's chest swell at the attention. He nodded slowly, and then more enthusiastically.

“If you see something that should be changed, you go to people who can do something about it,” I said. “If they can't do anything about it, then you do something yourself.”

Malfoy picked something up off the ground. “He dropped this. What a stupid thing.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“A Rememberall. It tells you that you've forgotten something, but it doesn't tell you what you've forgotten.”

I frowned. “Well, I can see how that would be of limited usefulness. He probably didn't get it for himself, though. It sounds like the kind of thing parents force on us.”

“He's being raised by his aunt,” the redhead said defiantly. “Lost his parents in the war... hurt by you lot.”

“Well, certainly not me,” I said. “I'm from America, and even if I wasn't, I don't think anyone here was there during the last war.”

“Their families then!” he said.

“So because there were people in their families who made some bad decisions, they should pay for it?” I said. “So you should have to pay every time one of your brothers plays a prank?”

I'd heard people talking about the notorious Weasley brothers. I wasn't sure which one this one was, but the line between pranking and abuse was very thin. Emma and Sophia and Madison had used the just joking excuse more than once, and teachers had bought it.

I was going to reserve judgment until I saw examples of what they were doing. Was it in actual
I'd have to convince them that it was important to punch up instead of down.

"You think I don't?" he asked.

"You want to be judged as your own person, don't you?"

"Yes....?" he said, sounding a little less hostile.

"So why not give them a chance? If they turn out to be bad people, then you can treat them the way bad people ought to be treated. If they turn out to be good people, then you've made a friend."

He scowled, and I heard mutters from all around me at the idea of being friends with Gryffindors or Slytherins.

It was barely at the end of the first day of school! How had they already brainwashed these kids into hating each other. It had to be the families who had gone here in the past; the muggleborns didn't know enough to know any different.

Undoubtedly they would learn, though, and then they'd pass it on to their own children.

"So you're saying we should all be friends?" the dark haired kid asked. Potter, the killer baby.

"Why not?" I said. "We'll have time to kill each other when we're older, but why should our parents' wars have anything to do with us?"

"Easy for you to say," I heard Pansy Parkinson say. "You've got nothing to lose."

"That's true, and if people want to bring war to my doorstep, I'll be happy to oblige them," I said. "But I'd prefer not to have to kill anyone....yet."

All of their eyes were on me now.

"There are going to be people who try to pressure you into one side or the other. Some of them may be in your own families. But if you don't make your own choices, then you aren't any better than a house elf... a slave."

"What would a... muggleborn know about it?" Pansy asked. "You don't know anything about us!"

"Has anybody tried to tell me?" I asked.

The Gryffindors were looking at me like I'd grown two heads. House unity in Slytherin normally caused them to keep disagreements within house, leading the other houses to think that they all agreed with each other. I suspected that this was part of the reason that the other houses thought poorly of them.

Madam Hooch came rushing back to us, looking relieved that no one was up in the air. The rest of the lesson was rather tame after that. I caught the Potter boy looking rather disappointed. Presumably he'd wanted more acrobatics and horseplay, but as far as I was concerned, this class was already insanely dangerous for eleven year old children. Keeping it tame enough for a five year old seemed wise.

The day ended with a meal, and I headed for the library. I found Hermione there.

"I heard about how you saved Neville," she said excitedly. "I didn't think that the Levitation spell
was supposed to be strong enough to lift an entire person.”

“It almost wasn't. You need to talk him into losing some weight,” I said. “Or learn how to fly better.”

“They said you moved like lightning!” she said.

I shrugged. “I suspected something bad was going to happen, and so I was ready for it.”

She lifted her notebook, and underneath I saw an entire box of matches. At my look, she flushed. “I wanted to get better at it before the next class. Do you want some?”

I nodded, and I spent the next hour transforming matchsticks into better and better needles. I found myself in competition with Hermione, odd as it was. I found that by changing my image of the needle, I could change other things about it.

By the time we were done, I had a pile of needles in front of me, and Hermione had a pile in front of her. My needles had gotten to be better and better metal over time, until they were indistinguishable from real needles. Hermione's by contrast, had gotten sharper and sharper.

I sensed Draco Malfoy hiding behind a bookcase.

“Can I help you, Malfoy?” I asked.

He stepped out from behind the bookcase, and he gave an uncertain look at the pile of needles in front of me.

“I'm getting ready for Halloween,” I said pleasantly. I doubted that he got the joke.

“Can I talk to you?” he asked.

Glancing at Hermione, I said, “It looks like you are.”

“Alone,” he said.

I shrugged and rose to my feet. Turning to Hermione, I said, “If he goes missing, you didn't see anything.”

For once she was quick on her feet.

“See what?” she asked.

Stepping two bookcases over, Malfoy took a deep breath and faced me. “Why did you do that today?”

“What?”

“With the brooms,” he said. “Making me look good?”

“Did I do that?” I asked. I thought for a moment. “I've heard you bragging about your family in the common room. Do you really think anybody cares about that?”

He stared at me as though I was crazy. “My father is-”

“But not here,” I said. “Most of these kids have never met him, and hopefully they never will. They've met you though.”
“What do you mean?” he asked suspiciously.

“If I started bragging about what my muggle family accomplished, what would you think of me?”

“That you were an idiot,” he said. “Who cares what your muggle family did? It's different among our kind...”

“It's not, though,” I said. “People care about what you can do for them. That's it. They don't care how rich you are or how nice you are. They care whether you can make their life better.”

He stared at me. “Right?”

“So what have you done for them to brag about?” I asked. “It's just the first day, so the answer is nothing. So you've got power and influence... use it.”

“What?”

“If you get the school new brooms, then people will really believe that you have the kind of pull that you say you do.”

“I'm not sure...” he began.

“How much do school brooms cost?” I asked.

He shrugged.

“Enough that your father couldn't easily afford twenty of them?” I asked.

He shook his head angrily. “Of course not! The Malfoys are one of the oldest, richest...”

“So you talk your father into it. Talk about how dangerous the brooms are, and how grateful the students' parents will be if he donates them to the school,” I said. “It will solidify your position with people as the guy who can get things done.”

He looked thoughtful.

“Nobody cares who your family is,” I said. “But they care about what you can do for them.”

He was silent for a moment, and then he nodded. “This doesn't mean that I can afford to be seen around you.”

I shrugged. “Do I look like I give a damn?”

He glared at me, and a moment later he was gone.

Hermione stepped out from behind the stacks. I'd known she was there, of course, but it hadn't bothered me that she was listening.

“How could you say all that to him?” she asked indignantly. “About people only caring about what you can do for them?”

“It's true,” I said.

“People aren't all greedy and... money grubbing...”

“It doesn't have to be money,” I said. “Maybe it's just that you make them smile. Maybe you make
them feel good about themselves. Maybe you support them emotionally, or you are fun.”

“You didn't say that to him,” she said, mollified.

“He's not ready to hear it,” I said. “It fits enough with his beliefs that he'll actually listen, and maybe take it to heart. Even if he doesn't, if the school gets better brooms, then we're all better off.”

And maybe I wouldn't have to spend the next seven years hearing him brag about his family when he thought I wasn't listening.

“Why are you helping him anyway? He's a horrible person. He called me a mudblood on the train.”

“He's been told that muggleborn are terrible his whole life,” I said. “Do you think that meeting one is going to change that right away”

“Well... no... but...”

“It's going to take a while for him to change his mind,” I said. “And the only way it's going to happen is if he meets muggleborns who challenge his preconceptions.”

“It shouldn't be our job to teach him!” she hissed.

“That's true,” I said. “But if not us, then who? Wizard society is full of people like him, and the only way we're going to change it is one heart at a time.”

“You sound like my mom,” Hermione muttered. “Sometimes you sound like an old woman in a kid's body.”

I stiffened. Did she suspect something?

“But I guess maybe things are different in America?”

“Things were different back home, yes,” I said.

“Do you miss it?” she asked.

“My family,” I said. “But I try not to think about it much. I had friends back there too. Other than that...not really.”

It was true. Brockton Bay had been a hellhole, and I'd been too driven about my work in stopping the Slaughterhouse and saving the world to really enjoy Chicago.

Hermione frowned. “Are you just telling me things that I can accept, because you think that I can't handle more than that?”

I put my arm around her shoulder.

“Would you believe me if I said no?”

“No.”

“Good girl,” I said. If I was right about what was coming, she needed to learn how to discriminate between lies and the truth, sooner, rather than later.
The next two days passed relatively peacefully. I wasn't attacked in my bed, and while no one attacked me in the halls, no one went out of their way to associate with me either.

Even my roommates seemed afraid of me; I didn't associate much with them, instead focusing on my studies. The next attack might not come for a while, but I couldn't depend on that; it was going to happen sooner or later, and I had to come up with strategies for that.

The Gryffindors tended to stare rudely at me. The Slytherins pretended that I didn't exist. The Ravenclaws seemed slightly less afraid of me than the others, and I caught a couple of them whispering about asking me about the Levitation spell, although they never did.

Herbology was pleasant enough, and I could see the use for it. The Hufflepuffs didn't seem as dumb as the Slytherins kept whispering, but they also all seemed to shy away from me more than those in the other houses, so maybe they were a little less brave.

Apparently Hogwarts greenhouses were separated by the danger level of the plants inside. I approved of this heartily. Eleven year old children shouldn't be dealing with man-eating plants. However, I found myself interested in what exactly was in those more dangerous greenhouses. I suspected that some of them might be useful.

Sprout seemed to be a down to earth teacher. I wouldn't have any particular advantages in her class, but I doubted that I would need any. It struck me as one of the easiest classes, and hopefully the skills we learned there would translate to potions or one of the more useful classes.

Astronomy though seemed like a waste of time. We had class during the day, with labs by night once a week. I couldn't understand why we were supposed to study it; all the other classes had practical applications for becoming a functional Wizard. Astronomy... not so much.

There wasn't any magic related to it, and wands weren't necessary. It was basically just a science class. If it had been me setting a curriculum I would have replaced it with a mathematics class, or something It was all about learning the names of the stars and planets, and was pretty simple. Still, I felt I could be using my time more productively doing anything else.

Looking through telescopes that night was mildly interesting, but it didn't feel like something I should be bothering with. The fact that this was a class they expected us to take for years bothered me.

History of magic, though, made Astronomy look positively brilliant. It was interesting being taught by a ghost, for the first five minutes, but it was soon clear that he was a terrible teacher. He essentially read from the book in a monotone voice, and the only one taking notes at all was Hermione.

The problem was that it should have been one of the more interesting classes; it should have been like learning about capes in Winslow; a temporary bright spot in the middle of the day. Instead it was a terrible slog to get through, and while I wasn't falling asleep like some of the other students, I did find my attention wandering.

I found myself listening to the second year Charms class being taught down the hall. It was a lot of theoretical work that I didn't really have the background for, but it was a lot more interesting than listening to a lot of racist claptrap about the goblins.
Not that I loved goblins, but Binns really didn't seem to like them, and I couldn't understand why. There had been several goblin rebellions apparently, but the reasons behind them, once you looked past the Wizard propaganda seemed fairly sound.

Wands were apparently forbidden to the goblins, something they resented and with good reason. They'd been marginalized, and many of their career options had been curtailed by Wizard bigotry. It wasn't surprising that they rebelled every few decades.

The only surprise was that some enterprising Dark Lord hadn't promised them equal rights in return for their backing. He probably would have gotten it. Most likely, all of them had feared that doing that would have united their enemies against them.

I was happy to get out of History of Magic, and after listening to Flitwick teaching second years, I was already predisposed to liking him. Not only did he seem competent, but his class was actually useful. Presumably this class, Transfiguration and Potions were the three classes that were the real meat and bones of what it was to be a Wizard. The other classes seemed to be less useful.

Stepping into the class, I saw the professor's head snap up. He was very short; about three and a half feet tall, which meant that I was only a foot taller than he was. He would probably look a lot smaller once I got taller.

I'd heard some of the Slytherins whispering that he was half goblin, and that it was a shame that he'd been allowed to teach at the school, but he actually seemed like one of the better teachers.

“Miss Hebert!” he called out. His voice was squeaky. “I heard about your outstanding use of the Levitation spell yesterday! We aren't even supposed to be teaching that spell until October.”

“It seemed like one of the more useful spells,” I said. “There were some other spells that I tried that I couldn't get to work.”

“It's surprising that you got it to work at all,” he said. “It requires a precise set of wand movements.”

“I experimented with it,” I said. “It didn't work at all with some of the other spells. Once I got it down, I practiced it over and over until I was able to do it every time.”

“It will help once you learn the theory,” he said. “And once you understand the reason that some wand movements work with some spells and not with others, it will get easier to learn some of the spells. We will be going over the theory of wand movements this year.”

I nodded.

“If there's any books you can recommend to help me with self study, I'd be thrilled,” I said. Getting on the good side of this professor was important, and he was so friendly it was hard not to like him.

If part of me felt a little suspicious because of it, I couldn't help it. McGonagall was strict, and Snape was an ass, but the kind of ass I could actually understand. Sprout seemed so harmless that it was possible that she was dangerous, bit she wasn't exactly in a position of power.

“I'll get you a self study list after class,” he said. “I've already been asked for one by Miss Granger, so I've already got the list made up.”

Trying to get ahead of me... how ambitious of her. Having him as head of house was going to give her a leg up with it too. I'd have to work hard to keep ahead of her; while I had the benefit of greater age and experience, those benefits would vanish as we got older.
I'd never been as brilliant as she was when I was her age. I only looked that way now from the outside because of being an adult in a child's body.

He clapped his hands. “It's wonderful that we have so many ambitious students this year... and muggleborns too.”

“We've got to prove that the purebloods are wrong about us,” I said. “Which means we have to work three times as hard to get the same credit.”

He looked uncomfortable for a moment. “I'll be watching your progress closely.”

I nodded.

Hermione stepped into the room, and we found our place at the front of the class. If I didn't have my bugs to give me eyes in the back of my head, I never would have sat with my back to everyone. It would leave too many opportunities for people to attack me from behind.

However, sitting at the front had benefits. It told people that I was confident that I could deal with anything they'd throw at me, and it put me close to the Professor, where they were more likely to see if something was done to me. That fact alone might keep people from doing anything in the first place, which was better than my having to retaliate.

The one thing I couldn't afford was for every day here to become a running battle. My ingenuity and skill had limits, and sooner or later I would fail. A reputation for infallibility was important. Every person that was too afraid to attack me was one more day for me to get stronger.

Eventually I'd be strong enough to not worry about anything except sleeping, and I'd read that there were spells designed to protect the bedchamber. It was likely that I'd have to get a lot better at magic to use them, which is why I was going to pay a lot of attention to charms.

Flitwick spent the first half of the session on theory; he explained everything in a rather simplistic style so that even the slowest of my classmates could understand what he was saying. I'd heard his second year lecture, which was much more complex, and so I knew he was dumbing everything down for the newbies.

Even so, taking notes with a quill was unpleasant.

I found myself resenting it more and more, and Hermione made it look easy. She'd explained to me that the Ravenclaws thought that Wizards required quills to be used because they helped the hand get used to the same types of movements as wands. I thought that explanation to be a little fishy.

More likely it was simple prejudice about adopting muggle technologies. I was essentially living among the magical Amish. Even if strong centers of magical power stopped electronics, as Hermione insisted, I'd seen wristwatches working on some of the muggleborn students. If clockworks worked, it was likely that ordinary pens or pencils would work just as well.

Using the quill made my hand cramp, and that made me irritable.

Thus once lunch came, I was sitting by myself at the table. Fortunately, the Ravenclaws and Slytherins tables were next to each other, and so Hermione sat as close to me as she could, and she occasionally called things out to me.

I felt some of my bugs begin to die, and I looked up. Owls were flying into the room, and some of them were snapping up some of my bugs as they went to land on the tables.
Pansy Parkinson had ostentatiously left a seat between me and her, but as an owl landed on my table, she looked over at me curiously.

It lifted it's leg at me, and I saw that it was carrying a letter in its claw. Snape had talked about my getting an owl, and I'd decided against it. The school had its own owls, should I need to send correspondence out, and I hardly needed a pet for some bigot to kill just as I became fond of it.

I shook my head and kept on eating. There was no one in the world who knew me, so most likely the mail wasn't going to be something I wanted to read. It was probably a death threat, or some sort of racist diatribe.

“You've got mail,” Pansy said.

“So?”

“The owl comes, and you take your mail,” she said. “You muggleborn are so stupid. Don't they have mail where you come from?”

“It's probably a bill,” I said.

“What could you possibly owe?” she asked. “What, do you have a gambling habit?”

Did Wizards even have casinos? What could they possibly bet on that someone wouldn't use magic to cheat about? For that matter, were Wizards prohibited from winning at Muggle games? It might break Secrecy if every lottery winner was a Wizard, but access to a lot of muggle money would make even a Wizard's life better.

“Every day's a gamble,” I said. “I'm still not opening that letter.”

The bird hopped up and down and looked at me angrily. Finally it dropped the letter and flew off. The letter sat on the table, sitting in a pink envelope without any writing on the outside.

“When's the next time a muggle like you is likely to get a letter?” Pansy said. She scowled, “Fine, I'll open it.”

She reached over and grabbed the letter before I could say anything. She opened the letter, and then frowned. She dropped it, and began scratching at her hands.

Boils began to sprout up on her hands and she screamed.

Looking over her shoulder, I saw that the letter simply said in big block letters, “You aren't wanted here, Mudblood.”

I could see the professors rising to their feet, so I quickly stood up and away. If she was going to explode, I didn't want to be anywhere near her.

The other Slytherins seemed to be of the same mind, as those closest to us rose to their feet and quickly moved back.

Snape was the first to reach the table.

“Bubotuber Pus,” he muttered. He looked at me. “What happened here, Miss Hebert?”

Was that some sort of Wizard Curse?”

“Pansy opened my letter,” I said. “I wasn't going to.”
Snape pointed his wand at Pansy, and muttered some words I couldn't quite hear, even with my bugs. He seemed satisfied with whatever he saw, though.

He glanced at it, and scowled. He gestured to Gemma, and said, “Please take Miss Parkinson to the infirmary, and take care not to touch her hands.”

Her hands were swelling up to the size of sausages. She was crying and wailing like it was the end of everything. I'd seen civilians menaced by Leviathan who made less of a production about it. Of course, most of them had been frozen by fear.

Snape pointed his wand, and a moment later the letter levitated to be placed in a bag that he either conjured or pulled out from somewhere inside his robes. He was careful not to touch it.

“Have Madam Pomprey check Miss Parkinson for curses more thoroughly,” he told Gemma, who was helping Pansy to her feet. Pansy started wailing louder.

Hopefully she'd learn not to open other people's mail.

Learning to put curses on objects seemed like a really useful skill; maybe I could get Snape to show me what to study. I'd pretend that I was interested in learning about how to avoid cursed items, which of course I was.

I hadn't known items could be cursed. I had an uneasy feeling that it was an oversight like this that was going to end up causing me more trouble than anything I could anticipate or plan for.

“Curses are upper level subjects,” Snape said. “Fifth year and above. You will not be ready to use them for some time yet.”

Challenge accepted.

While Snape was seemingly refusing my obvious interest in curses, he was also giving me a clue as to who my attacker was. Essentially he was saying that it had to be a fifth year or above, possibly a gifted fourth year, or a professor.

While it was possible that the people who had killed my body had found out that I was here, I suspected that they'd have used something much more lethal. I would have expected that a professor would have been more lethal too; I couldn't see any reason for a professor to focus on me as a subject for attack.

Most likely it was an upper year Slytherin, and most likely a boy. The girls would have access to my room; if they'd wanted to trap something they could simply slip whatever they had used into my covers.

The boys, however were more limited... unless this was a statement, an attempt to show all the muggleborn what happens to mudbloods who thought too much of themselves.

Still, it was a risky play. It ran the risk of getting the professors involved, and while some of them might be sympathetic to the pureblood cause, the Headmaster certainly was not. The smarter thing to do would be to wait until I was alone and ambush me in a deserted hallway where no one could hear my screams.

Most children my age would be easily intimidated into keeping quiet, although surely not all. It had been one reason that I hadn't wanted an owl; owls could be easily killed or held for ransom.

Also, they ate bugs.
“Miss Hebert,” Snape said. “I will be escorting you to the Headmaster's office.”

I sighed and grabbed a chicken leg. I’d barely even gotten to eat.

“Pansy's going to be all right,” I asked. “She's not going to explode?”

“I did not see any curses that would immediately endanger her life,” He said. “I will, of course check on her once I have seen you safely to the Headmaster's office.”

I nodded.

“While there are lethal curses that can be transmitted by objects, they are forbidden at Hogwarts,” he said. He glanced at me, as though I was planning to immediately begin using them on the entire population of Slytherin.

As if...I was probably going to have to wait until at least next year before I got strong enough.

“And so they'd get in trouble if they'd used them?” I asked. “Not that it would bother me, since I'd be dead.”

“Perhaps you should endeavor to stand out less.”

“I'm like a mongoose in a nest of snakes,” I said. “I'll never fit in, and I'm going to have to keep moving if I just want to survive.”
“Miss Hebert... where would you find a bezoar?” Snape asked.

“One of these?” I asked, pulling it out and holding it up. “In my pocket. If you are asking where they come from, it's the stomach of a goat.”

I'd been given one by Dumbledore, supposedly because they warded off poisons. Asking me this question was most likely intended to tell my classmates that I was warded against poisons, which might make them less likely to try.

It might also simply make them try poisons that bezoars couldn't handle. Still, sending them a message that I was ready for whatever they brought might be worth the danger.

“And what is it used for?”

“Poisons,” I said. “And keeping you alive.”

Snape stared at me for a second. He glanced around the room at my classmates, who were all watching the both of us intently. The Ravenclaws and Slytherins were all very interested in what had happened.

“What's the difference between Monkshood and Wolfsbane?”

“They're the same plant, and they are almost as poisonous to the rest of us as they are to werewolves.”

“And what would you use it for?” Snape asked.

“Some sort of stimulant potion,” I said. “And the Wolfsbane potion.”

“It is called the Wideye potion, Miss Hebert,” He said. He turned to the rest of the class and nodded as he saw that everyone was taking notes.

“I am glad to see that not every student at this school is as foolish as a Gryffindor,” he said. “However, you will find that my expectations are correspondingly higher in this class.”

The entire class stared at him, with no one saying a word. He had a certain elegance of speech that made him mesmerizing when he wanted to be, and this particular group of kids were eating it up.

“Today we will be working on a boil curing potion. Recent events will make it clear why this is a necessary first step.”

He turned and began writing the ingredients on the board.

I raised my hand.

“Yes Miss Hebert.”

“Are there any steps that we need to watch out for so that the potion won't explode on us?”

Hermione had said that Neville had been forced to go to the infirmary with boils, which seemed... interesting. Presumably he'd made some sort of elementary mistake that had changed the entire nature of the potion, from one that cured boils, to one that caused them.
That might mean that every potion was like that. It might not, but it was an intriguing avenue to explore.

“Do not put the nettles in until after you take it off from the fire,” he said. “Or you will regret it. A fool of a Gryffindor made that mistake yesterday.”

I’d heard vague rumors that Neville had been injured in class.

I made a quick note. I looked up and saw him looking at me suspiciously. Did he think I was planning to make boil making potion? Possibly as a way to get back at the people who had attacked me?

Boils wouldn't be enough. Attacking in kind wasn't enough to be a deterrent. Although... dropping several boil making potions in their bath might be doable.

How diluted would that potion have to be before it didn't cause boils any more? I wrote this down in the margins of my notes. It might be something I would have to experiment with, not in my own bathtub, of course. I'd also have to find out about how to clean the solutions effectively.

Snape was watching me again.

He set us to measuring out nettles and crushing snake fangs.

As he came around to me and Hermione, I asked, “Is there any residual poison in these fangs?”

“There is only one species of venomous snakes in the British Isles,” Snape said. “And we do not use their fangs for first year potions. Undoubtedly, half the class would nick themselves and end up in the infirmary. Crush the fangs more finely; you wish it to be the consistency of granulated sugar... something you should be familiar with as an American.”

“At least we don't boil everything,” I muttered under my breath.

He pretended not to hear me, and Hermione stared at me with wide eyes. I had a suspicion that she would consider talking back to a professor tantamount to throwing dynamite into the middle of class.

I was being unfair, of course. The food at Hogwarts was actually quite good, although I still couldn't understand how the students weren't all the size of actual whales. There wasn't any sort of physical education requirement, and every meal was a feast.

The students around me ate heartily too. It wasn't that they had some sort of supernatural restraint. Did magic require calories? Who would I ask?

Of maybe Hogwarts food was magicked to be non-fattening.

It seemed to work, whatever they were doing.

Snape seemed to have criticisms for everyone except Draco Malfoy, who seemed to preen. He looked at me triumphantly as his potion turned perfectly clear. My potion with Hermione was the second best out of the bunch, but it was still a little cloudy.

I suspected that there were some steps in the process that hadn't been adequately explained, and I could see that Hermione was frustrated, especially by the looks Draco was giving her. She was going to insist on getting every potion right.
I, on the other hand would be interested in getting them wrong. Unconventional potions, created through mistakes in the process would be devastating. This potion alone would be interesting, and it took almost no time to make.

The most difficult thing would be testing out the resulting potions. I might have been better off having class with the Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs if they were as stupid as Snape seemed to think; they'd probably have a lot of creative mistakes.

Of course, Snape seemed as prejudiced against the Gryffindors as the rest of the school was against the Slytherins.

I already knew who'd sent the letter. Bugs had senses of smell that were fairly acute; they used it to track down food. Different insects had different senses of smell, but bubotuber pus had a distinctive smell that all of them could identify.

Although the culprit had been careful not to touch any with his bare hands, he'd been around it enough that the scent had lingered on his robes. That was something my bugs could smell, although it wasn't something that I could take to Dumbledore.

I'd doubled my number of bugs I could control again; I could now control somewhere around two hundred and fifty. That would be enough to carry potion vials, although I wasn't sure that I wanted to risk revealing them to the world for something like this.

On the other hand, I might be able to get away with it if I was clever. Working on a distribution system might not be that difficult. I'd have to make sure that I was somewhere in public when it happened; if the people attacking me thought that I had co-conspirators, it would drive them crazy looking for them. They might tear themselves apart trying, which would keep them from focusing on me.

Was it worth the risk of my being discovered?

I suspected that Wizards probably had easy ways to deal with bugs if they knew about them. Once they knew that bugs were a large part of my arsenal, they'd get rid of them, probably using some kind of charm or shield I'd never heard about.

Still, hitting people with a sock full of galleons wasn't going to be enough to drive the people who wanted to hurt me off for long. I needed to send a message and I had to do it in a way that even the slowest of the Slytherins could understand.

Finally, I decided.

I needed the kind of uncertainty that this was going to create. I needed people to assume that I had someone protecting me, so that they'd spend more time trying to figure out who that was than attacking me.

“We should go talk to Neville,” I said to Hermione.

Her eyes lit up. “He's probably still in the hospital wing.”

I nodded. It was the right thing to do; it was the human thing to do. Also, I needed a better explanation of what had happened during his accident.

We went straight to the infirmary, where Neville was lying in bed. His face was still covered in
boils, although they already were looking better than Pansy's hands had looked.

He looked up at us, and he smiled. “Hey.”

Neville grimaced as the skin of his cheek pulled tight. Hermione patted his unblemished hand.

Parts of him were covered in boils, and other parts were clear. I tried to imagine what sort of splatter pattern had done this; how far did it extend, and how far I needed to be when I replicated his mistake.

He thanked me for saving him from a broken arm; I waved it off.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Professor Snape...” Neville said. “He's so scary. I guess I wasn't paying attention.”

“The potion exploded?” I asked.

“It melted my Cauldron,” Neville said. “Boiled out over everything. Professor Snape says I'm going to have to pay for a new one.”

“I'm sorry that happened to you,” I said. “Maybe Hermione can help tutor you in potions.”

Hermione glanced at me quickly, but Neville grabbed her hand. “Would you?”

“I'm sure both of us would be happy to,” Hermione said quickly, glaring at me.

At her angry look, I shrugged. Tutoring Neville would have kept her busy and out of my hair. Helping to tutor him might not be a bad idea. While it was possible that he was simply unlucky this first day, he seemed like the kind of person who might be clumsy in a class like potions, where small mistakes could cause big disasters.

Helping tutor him might actually give me special insights into exactly what mistakes he was making, and if there were useful ones, I'd be able to turn those to my advantage in ways that people might not expect.

The fact that his variation on the potion destroyed cauldrons was unfortunate. It meant that I needed to get multiple cauldrons, and I'd need to be careful about cleaning up as well.

I could steal some of the school’s cauldrons, but I'd have to replace them eventually. It was possible that Wizards had magical versions of muggle forensics, so I'd have to be particularly careful. I'd use my spare wand for everything too. If it needed to be attuned anyway, I probably needed to practice with it.

We sat and talked with Neville until lunch. I did not receive any mail.

For the next two days, I went about my normal routine. I used my bugs to find out where the school cauldrons were, and I slipped in when no one was looking, and I clumsily picked the locks guarding them. Why anyone bothered I wasn't sure; there were magical ways to open locks available to anyone who wasn't me.

Stealing several cauldrons wasn't hard; levitating them through the hallways to an unused bathroom was considerably harder task given that the walls were covered in paintings. I had to give up a night's worth of sleep to pull that one off, which left me unreasonably cranky the next morning.
Apparently paintings slept when no one was around; whether that was an energy conservation method, or they simply slept because they thought they should, it didn't matter. What mattered was that I was able to levitate several pots within pots to the unused bathroom and hide them in the stalls.

I managed to brew the potions that very night, and if I hadn't been using bugs and levitation spells for the last part of it, I would have been in serious trouble. The explosion the first one made covered half the bathroom. It was a wonder that more of the students hadn't been injured.

In the end I managed to make six vials of my boil causing potion, and I spent the rest of the night trying to clean the bathroom. While it was unused in the middle of the night, getting rid of the smell and the burn marks on the floor was a lot harder than I'd thought it would be.

The cauldrons melted, and I managed to levitate them into buckets. Pouring them down a toilet proved to be a poor idea, and when I was done, the toilet was no longer working. However, I was able to keep the cause of the problem from being apparent.

I barely made it back in time not to get caught, and the entirety of the next day I was so exhausted that I could barely keep my eyes open. Having a teenager's body and stamina would have been much more convenient.

When I'd been a super hero, and then a super villain, I'd pulled all sorts of all-nighters. Now I found my self going to bed early, ignoring the whispers of my roommates.

Because I'd gone to bed so early, I was able to wake up early as well.

The boy who'd sent the pus had been one of the boys egging my attackers the first night. Geoffrey Avery was a pureblood, and he hadn't said anything about what he was going to do to any of his friends, at least not when I was close enough to listen.

It was simplicity itself for me to coat the insides of his bathtub with the potion. Experimentation with a less than friendly rat had showed that Neville's concoction was dangerous even when dry, and that if reconstituted it took time to work, but eventually would.

I went back to bed, and decided to sleep in. I was awakened to the sounds of screams.

Jerking awake, I saw that Millicent and Tracey were already up. They were staring at each other, wide eyes, and grabbing robes, they ran downstairs.

I took a little longer to get dressed. By the time I was done, Snape was already levitating a boy covered in a sheet down the boys stairs.

His hand and arm slipped out from under the sheet, and I saw that it was so covered in boils that it looked almost unrecognizable. Apparently six doses had been much too strong, even when dilute through an entire bathtub of water. Using three might have been enough, but I'd wanted to avoid underkill.

Snape looked at all of us.

“This stops now,” he said. He sounded genuinely angry. “I am taking Mr. Avery to the infirmary, and when I am done, I expect the entire House to be in the common room.”

With that, he was gone.

I saw several people openly staring at me, and I carefully kept my face neutral. Now that I thought
about it, using an untested potion on a human being hadn't been the smartest thing I could have done. Why had I done it?

Was there something wrong with my brain? I hadn't been this impulsive since the last time I was eleven.

I fought to keep myself from scowling.

How could I make plans if I couldn't trust my own decision making? If my own brain was working against me, I wasn't sure what I could do.

Snape was back less than thirty minutes later.

“I thought we were done with this after last year,” he said. “Fighting with the Gryffindors was bad enough. Fighting among ourselves?”

He shook his head.

“The other houses think that we are the villains, that every Dark Lord comes from among our ranks, and that because of that we cannot be trusted.”

“Mr. Avery almost died tonight,” he said. “He has boils inside his mouth and down his throat that crippled his ability to breathe, and it was only through my quick intervention that he survived at all.”

Snape stared at me, but I kept my eyes straight ahead, my face expressionless. I kept my mind blank too, just in case.

“I would like to hear where everyone was when this all happened,” he said.

The next thirty minutes was composed of questioning. Snape kept looking at me, and I kept my mind as blank as possible.

Finally he shook his head.

“Should Mr. Avery die, the aurors will become involved. At that point, my ability to intervene will be null and void.”

The room was quiet. I saw some of the others looking at me, and it was clear that some of them wanted to throw out an accusation, but no one said anything.

“And Miss Hebert?” Snape said.

“Yes?”

“Detention,” he said.

“What? Why?” I asked. My acting must not have been very good, because I heard a muttering coming up from the crowd.

“We will discuss that during your detention, which will begin on Monday.”

I sighed and nodded.
In a way, he'd as much as outed me to the entire class, but given the way that Slytherins worked, it would only help my reputation. Maybe he wanted to quiz me on who my ally was, or maybe he didn't believe I had done it at all and simply wanted to throw whoever he thought the true culprit was off the scent.

I considered going back to bed for my first Saturday off, but my stomach told me that it was time to eat. For some reason, this iteration of me was much more concerned with food. If I wasn't careful I would get fat, especially because I hadn't worked out a way to keep running without becoming too visible.

The last thing I needed was for my enemies to be able to predict where I was going to be at any given time. Even my bugs couldn't watch everywhere, and I'd die just as quickly from a rock pushed off from one of the towers as anybody else.

Breakfast was my first priority, and then I was going to have to try more magic.
“Professor Snape?” I asked.

Detention at Winslow had involved a bored teacher sitting at the front of the classroom while the students did their homework and tried to ignore the spitballs hitting the backs of their heads. I’d had detention on multiple occasions because of some scheme of Emma’s.

This was the first time that I was going to a detention that I actually deserved, and I wasn't sure how it was supposed to go.

I'd spent the entire weekend poring over library books in my room, and practicing spells over and over again. My roommates had studiously avoided the room until bedtime, and then they'd been careful not to speak to me.

“Miss Hebert,” Snape said from behind me.

I'd known he was there, of course, but I wouldn't have had I been limited to human senses. He was very good at lurking and blending into the shadows.

“Close the door,” he said.

I did so, carefully, and then I turned to meet his eyes.

“What you did was inexcusable,” he said. “Mr. Avery almost died, and his parents are withdrawing him from school and making a complaint to the aurors. He is in St. Mungos now.”

I had no idea what St. Mungos was, and I didn't feel like asking.

“So why haven't they come for me?”

“There is evidence that he was the one who sent the infected letter to you,” Snape said. “And the Aurors have decided, with the Headmaster's prompting that he was attempting to brew a boil creating formula in his bathtub, one of monstrous proportions, and that he fell in.”

“They fell for that?” I asked incredulously.

“You will find that there are competing groups in the Wizarding worlds. Some strongly dislike the muggles. The other... does not particularly care for them either, but dislike the first group even more. Mr. Avery's family has been involved in some unsavory practices in the past, and this is the Aurors first chance to concoct an excuse to go after them.”

“On trumped up charges...” I said flatly.

The more I heard about Wizarding society, the less I liked it. It was possible that there were wonderful things about it, but the victim rarely appreciated the culture of the oppressor.

“Of which you are the beneficiary,” Snape said. “However, I doubt that something similar will happen again. Even the Headmaster's patience has its limits.”

“I... don't know what you are talking about,” I said. “Avery had enemies.”

“That is true,” Snape said. “Enemies that he has made peace with, or ones outside the house who would not be able to get to him in his own bathroom.”
“So you’re saying that I’m a good enough potionmaker after what... one lesson to create a potion that you haven’t taught us and that isn’t in the book?”

I knew that much because I’d checked.

“It was a question that I asked myself as well,” Snape said. “But I did some tests on the bathwater. It was suffused with a very strong version of the very first potion that I teach first years.”

“The potion that’s designed to repair boils,” I said.

“The potion that I specifically told you how to turn into something dangerous,” he said. “As exemplified by your friend, Mr. Longbottom.”

“It seems like a lot of circumstantial evidence,” I said. “Nothing that would hold up in court.”

“You haven’t been in Wizard courts, Miss Hebert,” Snape said. “The standards of evidence are... considerably looser than in the Muggle world.”

“And they aren’t asking to have me sent to Azkaban?” I asked.

“No,” Snape said. “They have declined to press charges... undoubtedly because they intend to kill you the moment that you step off the train at the end of the term.”

“I guess I’d better stay over for the holidays,” I said.

“This is not a laughing matter,” he said. “The Averys are adult wizards, not schoolboys, and they fully intend to kill you.”

“I already have death eaters wanting me dead,” I said. “Why is this any different?”

He stared at me.

“The only way I will survive is to be strong enough that no one will dare to come after me,” I said.

“No one is that powerful except the Dark Lord himself,” Snape said. “And the Headmaster. More importantly, neither of them is alone. They have allies. Were they alone, inevitably someone would try to kill them, and even Wizards have to sleep.”

“And I don’t have any allies. Where would I find them?” I asked. “Upper years either despise me for being too confident, or ignore me as unimportant. First years don’t have the power to be good allies.”

“That will not always be the case,” Snape said. “The allies you make now may be with you for your entire life.”

“You think I can afford to make long term investments?” I asked.

I realized now how preachy I must have sounded out on the lawn during flight class. I’d hoped that I wouldn't sound like some kind of clueless mom because they thought I was one of them, but listening to Snape now, I found myself feeling impatient, even though part of me knew that he was right.

“Can you afford not to?” Snape said.

I frowned.
Having someone other than a few bugs to watch my back would be nice, but I'd never been all that good at making friends. Emma had been my only close friend in my childhood, and once she betrayed me, I hadn't had any other friends until I'd been with the Undersiders.

As a hero, I'd had work associates. I had never been as close to any of them as I had been to a group of teenage supervillains. The thought that I would never see anyone that I cared about again created an ache in my...

Better not to think about it. Focus on the task at hand, and let the rest of it fall as it might.

“We will go over the potion that you made,” Snape said. “Including dosages, and why what you did was irresponsible and dangerous. I will explain at length just how dangerous what you did was, and then you will spend whatever time is left cleaning the pot.”

“So you'll help me understand what a safe dosage is?” I asked him. “Not that I'm admitting to anything, mind you. But I'd have thought that being diluted by that much bathwater would have made it almost harmless.”

“And how much did you put in the bathwater to compensate for that?” Snape asked.

“Well, if I'd done it, I might have put six batches in,” I said. “That's not that much, right, given how much bathwater there was.”

Snape put his hand to his eyes. “Each batch of boil remover consists of six doses,” Snape said. “Made in larger lots to conserve effort and energy.”

So instead of six doses, I'd dropped thirty six doses in.

“He inhaled the fumes,” Snape said. “Which at lower doses would be relatively harmless. At that dose it formed boils inside his lungs. He was apportioned to St. Mungos, and it is likely that it will be several months before he is returned to normal, even with Wizard healing.”

“I thought Wizards could grow back bones,” I said.

“They can't grow back lungs!” Snape said irritably. “I'm tempted to turn you over to the authorities myself, and hang what the Headmaster wants.”

“Why did he go to bat for me?” I asked.

“He believes that you can reform my wayward house,” Snape says. He chuckled darkly. “He believes that everyone can be reformed... even you, Miss Hebert.”

“And you?” I prodded.

He shook his head. “I know better. There are people in this world who will never be reformed.”

I wondered if he felt that he was himself a member of that group. He'd been a Death Eater, after all, and in some ways he still was. He was like any undercover cop; he had to sit by and watch as all sorts of crimes happened. If he tried to stop them, he'd be killed, and whatever good his role was doing would be undone entirely.

“I'll watch out,” I said. I looked up. “I don't suppose that the Headmaster has decided where to put me over the summer?”

“You've made the task considerably harder with this stunt,” Snape said. “There were several
prospects, but none of them want a blood feud with the Averys.”

“So he isn't dropping me in a muggle orphanage?”

“You'd be dead in two days,” Snape said. “He is continuing to look. As you will be staying over for the holidays, there is no great hurry, is there?”

I shook my head. Given the way I understood the Trace worked, the more time I spent in areas where there were large numbers of Wizards, the better.

“So now we will go over what you did, step by step,” Snape said. “And I will explain to you exactly what you did.”

Doubtlessly he intended to be pedantic and if I'd been an ordinary eleven year old, being forced to listen to an extra lecture would have bored me to tears. But I'd heard the other Slytherins describing Snape as a potions master. If they'd done it in front of his face, I'd assume that they were exaggerating to get on his good side, but as he had been nowhere nearby, I had to assume that they'd been sincere.

But learning the theory behind dosing was something that I absolutely needed to know, and I suspected that he could be a good teacher if he was actually motivated.

As it turned out, he could. I didn't even mind having to clean out cauldrons.

This was my first Monday at Hogwarts classes; the previous Monday had been spent arriving by train.

Learning Wizarding combat was something I was very interested in learning. Unfortunately, right now the only combat spells I had were the cutting spell and possibly the levitation spell, and I could dodge with the best of them. However, I hadn't seen how fast Wizard spells traveled, which was going to make it hard to just how fast I needed to be.

After detention, I found Hermione waiting for me. We were supposed to go to the library together and study with Neville as we'd promised. I had some thoughts about asking the both of them to ask other members of their houses to join our study group. If I couldn't make friends in my own house, I'd have to reach out to others.

“Hello,” I heard from behind me. I'd seen them walking up, of course. “Who is this I see, brother? The impossible girl?”

“What?”

Two redheads were staring at me and Hermione.

“A muggleborn snake,” the second twin said. “It's like seeing a intelligent member of the Ministry.”

“Isn't your father a member of the Ministry?” Hermione asked waspishly.

She had aspirations to eventually be Minister for Magic. I didn't have the heart to tell her that the cards were stacked against her. The government seemed to be very much an old boy's network. Of course, I was mostly listening in to Slytherin conversations, and so my point of view might be biased.

I could reach bugs in any part of the castle, but I didn't dare take my attention off my immediate
surroundings in case of more attacks. I did keep an absent ear on the conversations of the people closest to me at all times, and I'd even managed to pay attention to two conversations at once, although that too made my head ache.

“That is a point,” the first twin said. “And we never said that the fruit falls far from the tree.”

“After all,” the second twin said. “We're talking to the crazy muggle girl who has already put four fifth year boys in the hospital.”

“Allegedly,” I said.

“So you didn't?” they asked.

I shrugged. “I might have. I've never done anything to anyone who didn't deserve it, at this school at least.”

“So careful with her words,” the first boy said. “Like a true Slytherin. Are you planning to become a used broom salesperson when you grow up?”

“No,” I said.

I'd been watching them closely over the past few days. I didn't like some of the pranks they were doing, but it didn't seem that they were focusing on any one group, other than the Slytherins. Against most people, their pranks seemed to be harmless jokes. Against Slytherins, they seemed to be harsher, but as most of the people they targeted in Slytherin seemed to be the people who didn't like me the most, I was tempted to give them a pass on that.

“You know that Slytherin is... unhappy with me,” I said. “Not anything I've done, in particular, except maybe the beating and the boils, but just because of who I am.”

They nodded sagely.

“Part of the reason that I have to be lethal is because as a firstie, I only know a few spells, mostly the cutting spell. If anybody tries to attack me, I'm going to have to cut them, and maybe hurt them badly. If I only knew some less lethal spells, then life might be easier for everybody.”

“Is the little firstie asking us for a favor?” one twin asked.

“ Asking us to tutor her in combat spells? The kind that would help her continue to do horrible horrible things to the Slytherins?”

“That should be part of the appeal, I would imagine,” I said. “Every time I beat a Slytherin, it hurts the rest of them right in the soul. It makes a mockery of everything they believe in.”

“We're very good at mockery,” the first twin said.

“But doing it for free seems a bit much,” the second twin said.

“What would it take for you to agree?” I asked. “I've got a bit of money.”

“Help,” the first twin said. “You've got to be a clever little firstie to have done what you've done. Help us with some of our more difficult stunts, and we would be happy to help you along your path to becoming Dark Lady.”
“She's not a Dark Lady!” Hermione said gallantly.

“Not yet,” the second twin said. “But she's already got friends in Griffindor and Ravenclaw. If she makes some in Slytherin, that means we're all doomed.”

“Doomed.” the first twin said. He grinned at us.

I could tell that neither twin believed what they were saying. They reminded me a little of Uber and Leet, without being nerds. They had an interest they were focused on, and there was a sort of monomania involved, where they had trouble thinking about anything else.

“I've heard you boys sell joke supplies,” I said. “I'd be interested in seeing what you had... and I've got some money.”

“Blood money, that,” the second twin said. “But we can clean it off.”

“Make a list of what you've got and prices, and I'll let you know what I'm planning to buy,” I said. “With luck, I might be one of your best customers.”

“I suppose you want a list of our more...lethal jokes,” the first twin said.

“If you can think of a way to turn it into a weapon, it might make me more inclined to buy it,” I admitted. “I'm in the snake's den, and I could use any advantage I can get.”

The two looked at each other, frowning. “The professors are keeping a closer eye on us after last year, but with your help we might be able to carry out epic pranks.”

“I reserve the right to refuse to help on anything that is too mean,” I said. “I don't like bullies. But fun things, sure, I'm willing to help.”

“You aren't planning to hurt anyone, are you?” Hermione asked. “Or do anything that's going to get someone expelled.”

“We blew up an entire corridor last year, and we're still here,” both twins said at once.

Hermione frowned and seemed to hesitate. Finally it looked like she came to a decision. She took a deep breathe.

“I want in too,” Hermione said, with a quick look at me. “I can help, but I want the extra tutoring.”

“So we'd have access to three of the four houses,” the first twin said musingly. “This almost seems like a dream come true.”

“Almost too good to be true,” the second twin said. “If it was any other Slytherin we wouldn't be listening to this at all.”

“Taylor is loyal,” Hermione said stubbornly. “And she does what she says she's going to do.”

“That's true,” I said mildly. “Which includes when I make threats. I don't want any pranks directed at me, unless it's required to pull off a prank against the entire house, or the entire school,” I said.

“The entire school?” the first twin asked.

“Firstie has ambitions,” the second twin said. “What sort of prank would the firstie have us play on the entire school?”
“Oh, put something in everybody's shampoo to make their hair turn the color of their opposing house,” I said. “Everybody... and if you could have it be delayed a few hours that would be even better... it would keep late bathers from getting caught up in it.”

“Ambitious,” the first twin said. “But not impossible. But what about Hufflepuff?”

“Suborn a house elf,” I said. “They clean everything anyway. Convince one of them to do it, and you'd never have to be even remotely close to them.”

“It'd take some potions work,” the first twin said, looking at the other. “And we'd have to save it for something big, like the holidays. But it could be done.”

“So what do you think?” I asked.

“I think we can work together,” the boys said in unison.

They held out their hands, and I shook them.

I was one step closer.
“Ready to give up, firstie?” George asked.

I grimaced, sweat running down my face. Not running was turning out to be worse than I'd thought.

Dodging spells wasn't that hard; I was quick, small and agile, and I had years of experience with
my bugs help. What was hard was keeping it up; my endurance was terrible.

Worse, I was training without my bugs. I wasn't going to be able to depend on always having them,
and training without them was the only way I was going to get better.

I'd finally learned to separate the two based on a difference in the freckles on their faces. To allow
them their fun, I pretended that I neither knew nor cared about the difference.

“Expelliarmus,” I called out, but George pivoted, and managed to avoid the spell.

Aiming without my bugs was a lot harder too, especially since spells actually were slow enough to
dodge. People often weren't where they were when I'd aimed the spell, which meant that I had to
anticipate where they were supposed to be.

So far, the boys had taught me and Hermione three spells... Expelliarmus, Flipendo, and Petrifucus
Totalis. In return, we'd already done some minor services for them; dropping small parcels in
places, giving them some information about where people would be and the like.

Neville had joined us, and he was the one Hermione and I praced on the most. Hermione had
learned the cushioning charm and had taught it to me, and so we were in an abandoned classroom
with all the chairs stacked against the wall.

We'd been careful that people not know what we were doing; half our value to the Weasleys was
that people didn't know about our connection.

“I never knew it would be so much fun to abuse a firstie,” George taunted.

I found myself flying through the air, hitting the pillows on the wall behind me. I grimaced as I fell
to the pads on the floor. The boys had managed to transfigue some after I'd described what they
were. What they'd come up with was something more like mattresses than athletic pads.

Moving on that kind of unstable surface was hard, but I preferred that to being injured over and
over again. The unpleasantness of flying through the air was exactly the kind of thing that helped
us get better.

Hermione insisted on staying just as long as I had, and to my surprise so had Neville, even though
he was having a lot more trouble than I was physically. While I was slim and lithe, he was stocky
and had more weight, which made him slower.

While that made him a perfect target for us to practice on, it meant that as often as not he was
gasping for air by the end of the session and looking like he was going to have a heart attack.

The one thing that the twins seemed clear on was that it was better to know a few spells very well,
instead of a large number of spells poorly. They'd apparently been involved in some sort of running
battle with Slytherin the year before, and it had escalated, giving them more experience than they
would have liked.
I'd managed another week without being attacked, even though it was just a matter of time. People were stupid, and the initial horror of what had happened to the Avery kid would fade, and the anger would still remain. People would start to rationalize and to assume that it was a one time thing, and sooner or later someone was going to try something.

Without looking weak, I'd tried to explain my position to the Weasley twins; that I did have a sense of humor, but that I couldn't be seen as weak.

They'd seemed to understand. There had already been several low level skirmishes between them and the Slytherins already this year, and I suspected that they were supporting me more as a slap in the face to the Slytherins as to actually help me.

The one thing they were doing that was really helpful was that they were giving me an idea of what fighting was like, at least at school. I had no doubt that Aurors and Death Eaters fought on an entirely different level, but I wasn't expecting anyone like that.

I was dealing with school boys, although some of the upper years were getting closer to being actual Death Eaters themselves.

If I'd been Voldemort, I'd have already had some of the boys in my organization already. However, I suppose that the Dark Mark, whatever that was would be hard to hide in a place with people living as closely together as a boarding school.

I'd have created a sort of outer level, a bottom lair of members who didn't receive the mark if that was the problem. Having agents in the school itself would be helpful if I was keeping an eye on the Potter kid.

I'd heard some of the elder Slytherins speculating about the Dark Lord's interest in him. Apparently he was protected somehow during the summer, and so attacking him at school seemed to be likely.

An assassination attempt at the train station would be what I did; depending on the kind of protection he had, I'd have people attack him there or on the way home. If that didn't work, I'd station people outside his house, and then wait for him to come out. It was possible that his protection was only around his house, like the protections that I'd heard a lot of Wizarding houses had. In that case, the first time he went to a restaurant or a walk around the block, he was dead.

Wizards, it seemed tended not to go for group tactics. Battles, at least according to the Weasleys tended to be one on one duels, with larger skirmishes being rare and not involving much in the way of tactics. It was possible that they were wrong; but I hadn't managed to find anything in the library that contradicted them.

There were things I could do to take advantage of that; I could teach Wizards the advantage of attacking each other en masse, of taking cover, of tactics. But if I did, it wouldn't take the other side long to pick up on how useful those tactics were, and once they did, I'd have started an arms race that might not stop until their entire culture was in flames.

Most Wizards were relatively lazy, from what I'd heard from Neville and the Twins. They did the minimum to get by, and the powers they had ensured that they didn't have to do much. Most Wizards didn't have to pay rent, or get insurance, or even maintain a car.

They had to pay for some food, but most of their other expenses could be covered with magic. Like most people in the muggle world, they tended to specialize; one wizard might be good at making a certain thing, but no so good at another. He would trade with someone who had the opposite skills, or they'd both go through a broker.
No Wizard was good at everything, which was why the economy worked at all. There still had to be people to write the books and raise the food and animals and sell things in shops. If Wizards had been able to simply conjure everything they needed, there wouldn't have been much of a need for them to interact with each other at all.

Despite this, they were much less interdependent than muggles, and most of them didn't really have to work much.

From what I could see, they weren't required a lot of the education that Muggles received either. They didn't study government, or history. I had a vague idea that Arithmancy was something like mathematics, but otherwise I couldn't see any muggle subjects that were being taught.

That meant that most Wizards had the equivalent of a sixth grade education. What did that do to their critical thinking abilities? Did it make them more credulous and more easily led?

Was that why the education system was set up the way it was, to make ruling over the average Wizard that much easier?

It wouldn't surprise me to find that the people in power made sure that their children had private tutors and received a better education at home.

Limiting their education would also limit opportunities for muggleborns to simply slip back into the muggle world should they find the prejudice too great. Job opportunities without a high school diploma, or whatever the British equivalent was would be just as limited in the muggle world, and I had a nasty suspicion that was the point.

Still, before I stared suggesting ways to improve Wizard tactics, I'd best master theirs. It was possible that there were limitations on Wizardly warfare that weren't readily apparent.

Despite the cushioning charms, my body was covered in sweat, and I was aching. Hermione and Neville didn't look much better.

“As much fun as this is,” George said. “We've got to get back to working on our great Halloween project.”

I took a deep breath and rose to my feet.

I grabbed a towel and wiped my face. “I appreciate that you guys are actually following through with this.”

“We're getting better too,” George admitted. “There's some real twats over in Slytherin, and we've already had some run ins with them this year, even if the professors are keeping an eye on us.”

I'd already seen some low level skirmishes in the halls between the different houses. Slytherin and Gryffindor seemed to have the biggest rivalry, although no one seemed to be immune. The Hufflepuffs at least seemed to stick together, which was something that I needed to push for whoever I was going to be working with.

“Are you ready?” I asked Hermione. She was wincing as she rose to her feet from where she was working with Fred.

She'd questioned why we were starting so violently, but I'd explained to her that it was the very unpleasantness of the experience that made you learn faster. Without something at stake, even if it was just a little pain, no one would ever be motivated to learn to do better.... and that would be deadly when stronger spells came into play.
Hermione nodded, wiping sweat from her brow. “I think I'm getting better,” she said.

She was, and faster than I was. I’d started with an advantage from my years of fighting, but she was moving forward with a sort of focused intensity that was surprising. I would have been proud to have had a recruit as motivated back on my old Protectorate team.

“I'm going to need a bath,” I said.

I always checked my bathtub with insects these days; no need to have someone turn my own trick against me.

Hermione and I separated. Her house was in one of the towers, and mine was in the dungeons. As I made my way down the stairs, I stiffened as I heard a whispered conversation through my bugs.

“Are you a snake or a pig?” I heard a mocking voice say.

Millicent was alone, and two large Gryffindor boys were standing over her. She was staring at the floor.

“Do you think she even knows?” the second boy asked the first. “Must be confusing, trying to decide whether to crawl on your belly or stick your face in a trough.”

“I can see which one she’s been choosing,” the first boy chortled.

I heard Mildred sniffle, although she was doing her utmost to pretend that nothing they were saying bothered her. I'd heard her and Tracey talking at night, when they thought I was asleep, and her own family had been making comments to her like this for her entire life.

“Is the little baby going to go cry to mama?” the second boy asked. “Because I doubt that the other snakes are going to care. You're part muggle.”

“Part muggle, part snake and part pig... what does that make her?”

“Stupid,” the second boy said. “Just look at her face. She shouldn't even be here.”

I hesitated.

I'd been working on getting the goodwill of the other houses; the last thing I needed was for Gryffindor to turn against me, especially as I valued the alliance with the Weasley twins. Getting involved in this would threaten everything I had been trying to put together, and it wasn't like Tracey or Millicent had ever done anything for me.

No one had seen me, and it would be easy for me to turn and walk the other way. No one would ever know, and no one would look down on me for something they didn't know I'd tried.

Millicent tried to push her way past them, and one of them shoved her back.

I closed my eyes.

How many times had I gone over my own bullying in my mind? It had lasted years, and while the locker had been traumatic, with bugs crawling all over me, and being trapped in a small, dark space, that hadn't been the worst part.

The part that had broken me was that there were dozens of onlookers, people who knew what was happening, and none of them had helped.
They'd cared so little about me, that it wouldn't have mattered if I'd died.

Objectively I'd known that most of them had probably been too scared to do anything; afraid that they'd end up a target of Emma and Sophia. Still, none of them had so much as put a quiet word in a teacher's ear.

Could I really turn myself into a member of that crowd? Could I make myself into exactly what I had hated?

No.

Sighing, I reached into my pocket for some darkness powder, then I hesitated. I needed to send a message, and attacking from behind would make me seem like just another crazy girl.

I could see some first year Hufflepuffs watching from behind the other corner as well. I had no doubt that they would quickly report whatever they saw to their friends.

Stepping around the corner, I said “Leave her alone.”

Both of them turned and stared at me.

“Well, if it isn't little Miss Crazy,” the first boy said. He didn't seem particularly worried.

“Facing us in the light,” the second one said. “Not too smart.”

I strode toward them. “Let her go, and I won't hurt you too badly.”

“Making threats,” the second boy said. “Like we're Slytherin cowards.”

“I warned you,” I said.

I spun to the side as a stunner flew where I had just been. I had bugs on the boys, but I missed having a defensive screen of bugs.

“Flipendo!” I shouted, and one boy went flying.

My left arm went numb as the other boys spell clipped me. I ignored it, and I continued walking toward him.

“You think the stories about me are overblown?” I asked. “Exaggerated?”

I lunged forward and grabbed his wand. He held onto it tightly, and with a twist of my wrist, I snapped it. I stuck my wand in his face and I said softly, “Diffendo.”

Hairs fell from his bangs. He grimaced and lunged forward, and I spun out of the way. He tripped and fell, and suddenly Millicent was on his back, pounding his face into the floor.

The other boy was rising to his feet, but I quickly petrified him.

Once I had both boys petrified, I levitated the first one by his clothes, and I moved him toward the head of the stairs.

“I've had some pretty good luck with stairs,” I said to Millicent. “Do you think anyone would know what happened if I dropped him off the side here?”

I could hear muffled groans coming from him. The Hufflepuffs had already left. I wasn't planning
to do anything terrible to him, but I needed him to understand.

Floating him out over the side of the staircase, I flipped his body so that he was facing straight down.

“I hope you invested in good quality robes,” I said. “If those rip, it's lights out for you.”

“Or you could start leaving the lower years alone,” I said. “Most of them aren't Death Eaters yet, but it's almost like you want them to be.”

There were muffled cries from the two boys; the other boy was watching what was happening with wide open eyes, even as Millient was punching away at him. She was doing a good job.

I let him drop a little bit, and I could hear a muffled scream.

There was also a little ripping sound. I swung him around so that he was back up on the landing.

“You could try to take revenge on me,” I said. “But I can get to you even in your own room.”

Letting the boy drop to the floor, I leaned forward and whispered, “I even know the password to your common room...it's Mongoose.”

The boy muttered something about Neville.

“Oh, Neville didn't tell me. I know how to get in the Hufflepuff common room and the Ravenclaw too. Nobody is safe, and if you should happen to catch me by surprise... well, I'm not even angry with you now. You wouldn't like me when I'm angry, I don't think. The last person who made me angry was Mr. Avery, and where is he now?”

I stood up and kicked the boy in the face. I might have loosened some teeth and broken his nose, but I didn't do any permanent damage.

“Come on Millie,” I said. “They aren't worth it.”

Although I kept my face neutral, inside I was grimacing. This was going to cause problems with the Gryffindors; hopefully I'd be able to explain it to the Weasley twins in a way they could understand.

The last thing I needed was to have two houses against me.

I stiffened as I felt Millie grab my left arm. She was looking up at me with an expression that seemed strange on her face.

Her eyes were shining.
"This is totally unacceptable," McGonagall said.

I was sitting in the Headmaster's office facing Dumbledore, Snape, and McGonagall Millie was beside me, and so were the two bullys. They hadn't taken their eyes off me the entire time.

"I was protecting my roommate," I said. "What more do you want me to say?"

"These boys deny that they did anything wrong; they say that you simply attacked them out of the blue."

"And why would I do that?" I asked. "I've been here two weeks and I haven't attacked a single Gryffindor. I actually pushed for better school brooms that would help keep some of them safe."

"There have been... incidents between the Slytherins and the Gryffindors," she said.

"And since when have I cared about house politics?"

I found myself getting irritated despite myself. This was feeling a lot like one of my visits to Blackwell's office, where nothing I said made any difference if it didn't fit the party line.

"Even if what you say is true, you should have come for a teacher," McGonagall said. "Not dangled a student at a height that would have almost certainly killed him, and broken his wand."

"She kicked me in the face and broke my tooth too," one of the boys said.

"And what would have happened if I'd gone to a teacher?" I asked. "They'd have lied and said they hadn't done anything; for all I know they'd have been the ones dangling her off the side of the stairs, and then they'd claim that she was lying, because of course Slytherins always lie."

"You shouldn't have resorted to physical violence," McGonagall insisted. "We have been making allowances for your... situation, but there have to be limits."

"Because Gryffindors are always pure and good, and Slytherins are always evil?" I asked.

Considering that two of my judges had been Gryffindors, I doubted that this was a good avenue of attack, but I found myself getting irritated by the injustice of it all.

"Because a student could have died," she said. "And this isn't the first time."

There was that. Sooner or later I was going to find a student whose robes weren't up to snuff, and that would be that.

"There's no proof I was involved in that last thing,' I said quickly.

"But plenty of proof that you probably were," she said. "These boys have accused Mr. Longbottom of giving you the password to the Gryffindor common room. Is that true?"

"He has never said anything about that to me," I said. "And I haven't used him to get any information of that sort."

"We shall see," she said grimly. "You should know that it is an infraction for a student to be found in the common room of another house."
“More serious than being accused of attempted murder?” I asked, with an eyebrow raised.

Snape was watching both of us quietly. I suspected that he had conflicting feelings about this situation. He genuinely seemed to dislike the Gryffindors; I had no idea why. Maybe it was the result of his having years of them acting out in school and causing explosions, maybe it was something from his own school days.

It didn't matter.

Despite his appearance of indifference, he seemed to empathize with, and want to support his snakes. The fact that I'd done so, even to a half blood like Millie had to push some buttons with him.

However, he'd told me time and time again that my violence was going to get me killed or imprisoned.

The way he was handling this so far was to stay quiet and to simply observe what was happening. Maybe he hoped it was going to resolve itself without his input.

There was a knock at the door.

Snape spoke for the first time. “When I first heard Miss Hebert's story, she mentioned that there might be some witnesses. She described them, and I sent a prefect to summon them.”

The door opened, and Gemma entered with the three Hufflepuffs that I had seen.

“I've brought them,” she said. “Hannah Abbott, Susan Bones, and Wayne Hopkins.”

The three looked tiny and they shrunk back as they saw everyone's eyes on them.

“Miss Abbott,” Snape said. “Please tell us what you saw occur an hour ago between these four students.”

She swallowed and then looked at all of us. “The big ones had backed the Slytherin girl against a wall. They were saying some... pretty mean things to her. They called her a pig and a snake, and said some other stuff. They started to push her, and the other one came around the corner, and warned them off.”

“She didn't attack first?”

“No,” Hannah said. “He did.”

“What happened then?”

“She got hit in the arm with a stunner, and she kept coming. She hit him with a spell sending him flying, and then we decided to go look for a teacher.”

Everyone was quiet for a moment.

McGonagall gave a cold, hard stare at the boys, who had the grace to look guilty.

“Do any of you have anything to add?” Snape asked.

The other two shook their heads.

“You are dismissed,” Snape said.
The Hufflepuffs left, but Gemma remained, standing quietly against the far wall. I wasn't sure why she was here for this; did prefects have something to do with discipline? In that case, shouldn't it be the Head Girl standing there?

Once they had left, McGonagall said, “You did not say that they attacked first.”

“Would it have made a difference?” I asked. “Either you believe me or you don't.”

McGonagall turned to the boys. “Return to your rooms. We will discuss your punishment in the morning.”

They got up to leave, glaring at me as they passed by. I ignored them.

Dumbledore had been silently sucking on a piece of candy. He seemed neither amused nor angry.

“It is possible that Miss Hebert went too far in protecting her classmate,” he said. “But she was the one who was attacked, and she defended herself. Yet threatening his life was unnecessary and dangerous, and isn't behavior we should encourage.”

“They each outweighed me by sixty pounds... I don't know how many stone it is, or whatever weight system you people use. If I had a lot of power, I could choose to be merciful. But because I don't, I have to fight back ten times as hard, and I have to make sure that anyone who does come after me regrets it.”

“The professors are here to protect you,” McGonagall said.

I chuckled bitterly. “And when you aren't there? Who's going to protect me or any of us in the dark hallways when no one is around?”

Millie spoke up.

“Nobody's ever stood up for me before,” she said. Her voice was almost imperceptible.

“What was that?”

“My own family thinks I'm ugly and stupid,” she said, more loudly this time. “And when those boys started saying all that... it's nothing I didn't hear at home. But she stood up for me, and that... I don't know.... it's important.”

“It's good that she wanted to protect someone,” McGonagall said. “But hurting people isn't the way that things are done here. You are dismissed Miss Bulstrode.”

As Millie got up to leave she gave me another look; I wasn't sure what it meant.

I chuckled again, and McGonagall gave me a sharp look.

“Your situation is already precarious enough with your house, Miss Hebert. If I start taking points, it will not do you any favors.”

“Perhaps Detention,” Snape said. “One session with each head of the four houses, and one session with the groundskeeper. I have been unable to pierce that thick skull of hers, perhaps one of the other heads might have better luck.”

“I'm sure Pomona will be happy that you volunteered her,” McGonagall said dryly.

“I think Flitwick likes me,” I said brightly.
“These will be punishments, and not ways for you to learn yet more creative ways to cause destruction,” Snape said.

I stared at him, even though I didn't feel particularly betrayed. Five days of detention for essentially threatening to murder a student was probably lenient, considered that I'd almost murdered a different student a couple of weeks ago.

It might not even have happened at Winslow; the administration would back up whoever caused them less problems. However, I'd heard of schools where even taking weapons to school would get a student expelled, or even jailed.

A third of the students at Winslow had been armed at one time or another, so expelling them all simply hadn't been feasible. Everyone here was armed.

“I suppose that's fair,” I said. “Unless the Gryffindors just get a slap on the wrist.”

“They will be punished,” McGonagall said grimly. “But that is none of your concern. It is not your job to police the halls.”

“I think that's the problem,” I said. “When things that are wrong happen, everybody says that it's not their job to fix it. So what happens when everybody stands by and waits for the people in power to save them?”

“You are a child,” McGonagall said. “If you want to seek justice, become an auror when you are older. Perhaps by then you will have learned that every problem is not solved by hitting it.”

“The pure bloods solve their problems with money,” I said. “I just use mine differently.”

McGonagall gave me a long, cold stare. I suspected that she wanted to take house points, but she suspected correctly that something like that wouldn't bother me at all.

“Perhaps you should have Miss Farley to take Miss Hebert to her room,” Dumbledore said.

Snape nodded.

“Miss Farley?” Snape said. “Make sure that Miss Hebert reaches her rooms, and that she does not leave them until tomorrow morning.”

Gemma nodded.

She gestured, and I rose to my feet, following her.

We walked in silence for a couple of minutes. Finally, Gemma spoke to me in a low voice without looking at me.

“We're not all like that, you know,” she said.

“What?” I asked.

“Not everybody in Slytherin is a muggle hater,” she said. “Not even all the pure bloods.”

“That's... surprising,” I said.

“Well, a lot of people don't really like them, but wanting to hurt them? That's something completely different.”
So low level racism instead of hard core. I could work with that. I was unlikely to change the opinions of the most die hard of them, but the rest, I might have a chance.

“There are those who do, though. The ones who are tend to come from powerful families,” she said in a low voice. “And there have been... disappearances from the families of people who tried to fight back. The rest of us have learned to keep our heads down.”

“You think that's an option for me?” I asked. “They are offended that I'm in Slytherin at all.”

Finally, she looked at me.

“You need to stop making waves,” she said. “Or you'll make everything harder for the rest of us.”

“And why should I care about that?”

“Because right now you've only got about a third of Slytherin and whatever Gryffindors you've offended against you. If you keep acting mental, it'll be all of us.”

“I've got to defend myself,” I said. “And watching people get bullied...I can't abide by that, Maybe if you prefects were doing your job...”

“We can't be everywhere,” Gemma said impatiently. “But if I'd known what they were trying to do that first night, I'd have stopped them.”

“You'd have tried.”

“I'd have succeeded,” Gemma said. “Ordinary people follow the rules, even when they are inconvenient. Gryffindors don't, but Slytherins learn to work with the rules.”

“Because Slytherins are the ones who make the rules,” I said dryly.

I thought she was being a little naive. Those boys had intended to hurt me, and I'd been researching the spells that Wizards used to maintain their secrecy. There were apparently memory charms that could make memories inaccessible; the aurors used them all the time on muggles.

She might have tried to stop them, but she might not even have remembered what happened next. She shrugged. “If you don't like it, change it. You were chosen to be in this house, so there has to be more to you than just a low level thug. You've got a brain; use it. If you go around snapping people's wands and beating them, one day they'll be the ones dropping you off a set of stairs, and nobody will be sorry that you've gone.”

“I'll quit when they do,” I said. “If they leave me alone, I'd be happy to keep my head down and learn magic.”

If it weren't for the Death Eaters, I might actually be able to enjoy this world as a retirement. As a Wizard who knew the muggle world, I'd lack for nothing. I'd be able to supply almost all of my own needs and I'd probably be able to live in relative luxury.

“We're already in a low level war with Gryffindor,” Gemma said. She shook her head. “This is going to start things up again after last year. We can't afford this; if they start coming after us, we'll give you to them rather than starting the whole thing all over again.”

“And what happened last year?”

Gemma glanced at me. “Things got ugly. You-Know-Who is back, and there's a faction of pure
bloods who think that means it's only a matter of time before things are returned to their rightful place."

"Rightful place?" I asked. I suspected I knew, but I wanted her to spell it out for me.

"With Wizardly boots on muggle necks," she said. "And the muggleborn out in the cold."

"That's not going to happen," I said. "There's six thousand muggles for every Wizard, and they'd got weapons that could chew through Wizards before a single muggle got within Wand range. Your whole species would be extinct in a year."

"Our whole species," Gemma said. "I'm not one of the pureblood supremacy idiots. I'm half-blooded myself, and I grew up around muggles. I knew how stupid the whole idea is, and so does the Ministry, otherwise they wouldn't put so much work into the whole Secrecy thing."

We were walking down the final set of stairs heading for the dungeon.

"But there's a faction that believes that Wizards have been cheated of their rightful place. They like to pretend that Wizards were once the rulers of the world, when the truth is there were never enough of us to do that, even back in the old days. There are actually fewer Wizards and Witches now than in the past, due to the last war."

"And it's starting over again."

"People are scared," Gemma said. "And when people are scared, they get angry. They tend to lash out at people who are the closest to them, and against whom they already have grudges."

"Is that what happened last year?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I'm still not clear on what started it. I think a lot of people were picking up on stress from their parents, and they brought it here with them. That's why you need to calm down; this place is a powder keg waiting to explode, and you are a match."

Her being a half-blood seemed likely if she was making that kind of analogy.

"So what do I do?" I asked.

"Stay out in public," she said. "Never walk alone. Don't make people angry. I'm going to try to talk to the prefects of the other houses to see if we can defuse the situation, and maybe keep the Gryfffindors off your back. I'll make sure that the prefects know what actually happened... I'm sure those boys are probably saying all kinds of things that aren't true."

"It may not help," I said.

"Then we'll deal with it the right way," she said. "I've been watching you, and it's like the little remarks don't really bother you. That's good. If your feelings were easily hurt we'd have a lot bigger problem."

"For the remark to hurt, I'd have to value whatever person was saying them," I said. I looked at her coldly. "And frankly, I haven't talked to anybody here who seems worth getting upset about. You want to help me? Fine. Keep people off my back, and I'll make your job easier. But if they keep coming after me, then I'll hurt them until they learn to leave me alone."

"I'd take points for you talking like that," she said after a moment of silence. "But you really don't care, do you?"
“Why would I?” I asked. “If I had friends in Slytherin, I might care. If there were even people helping me instead of standing by, I might care. But people who stand by and do nothing when they know something is wrong... that's cowardice.”

Gemma stopped.

She turned to me. “I've got a little sister; she'll probably be in Hogwarts in a couple of years. I love her more than I love anything. If I act like I love mudbloods, there's a chance that I'll wake up one day and find out that my sister, or my Mom or my Dad has gone missing.”

“It's easy to talk about being courageous when you have nothing to lose. You're an orphan who barely has any friends... the only thing they can do to you is to kill you or hurt you. Me...they can kill my family. You don't get to look down on people who have nothing to gain and everything to lose from helping you.”

I stared at her coldly, and she finally shook her head and escorted me to my room.
“I want to thank you,” I said. “Actually, we do.”

Millie was standing behind me, staring at the floor. We were in the library, and a lot of the other students were out watching tryouts for something called Quidditch. I had a vague notion about what it was, but I'd never been particularly into sports. I'd heard that they flew around and tried to hit each other with bats, which sounded ridiculously dangerous, even if I'd probably be good at it.

“Why?” Susan Bones asked. “For telling the truth?”

“There are people who wouldn't have said anything.”

“My aunt is the head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. She told me that justice would be done a lot more often if people were willing to speak up.”

“That takes courage,” Millie muttered from behind me.

“Well, I'm no Gryffindor,” Susan said, “But I know wrong when I see it. What those boys were doing was wrong.”

The girl next to her, Hannah Abbott said “We really were looking for a teacher, or at least a prefect. But we still get lost sometimes around here.”

“You're lucky to be in Hufflepuff. You've got people to watch your back,” I said.

Susan nodded slowly. “I don't suppose that you have that. It was pretty brave, what you did with those boys. I don't think I could have charged them like that.”

So they'd seen a little more than they'd admitted to. What they'd said had been enough, however.

I hesitated. “I'm starting a new study group. You probably know Hermione Granger and Neville Longbottom. Me and Millie here will make four.”

“A study group with all four houses?” Susan asked. “And what will you be studying?”

“Everything,” I said. “Anything one of us is weak in, the others who are stronger will help them.”

“That sounds a lot like what they tell us in Hufflepuff,” Hannah said. “I wouldn't have thought to hear that from a Slytherin.”

I leaned forward. “I'm not really a Slytherin, you know.”

“What?” she asked.

“I'm a Gryffindor undercover,” I said. “I used ventriloquism on the hat to make everybody think I'm a Slytherin.”

Hannah stared at me.

Susan giggled. “That sounds like exactly the kind of lie a Slytherin would tell a Hufflepuff.”
I grinned at her. “What's more likely? That I'm a Gryffindor in disguise, or that a muggleborn actually got into Slytherin?”

“Well, there's a lot of rumors going around about you,” Susan admitted. “People wondering about who you really are.”

“Oh?” I asked casually. “What are they saying about me?”

I probably knew, of course, but even with my bugs I couldn't be listening everywhere all the time at once.

“Some of them are saying that you've been planted here by the Americans to find you-know-who.”

“And what would I do if I found him?” I asked. “They'd have sent someone older.”

Not that I wouldn't try to kill him if I was strong enough. I had a lot of experience and cutting the head off the snake did tend to be an effective tactic.

But it was likely going to be a long time before that happened. After all, he was reputed to be the second strongest Wizard in all of Britain, behind only Dumbledore.

I'd never seen Dumbledore do a lot of magic, and I wished I had that chance, because it would give me a hint about what I was dealing with. Were the Weasely Twins any good at all, or were we just schoolkids playing without a hint of the speed or knowledge that real Wizards had.

“I guess that's true,” she said. “It's not like you really are some kind of monster in disguise.”

“Growl?” I said, then grinned at her. “Maybe I'm really the undead revenant of a murdered girl out to get the people who went after my family.”

Her face went blank. “You shouldn't joke about that.”

“Given the way things are, I'm pretty sure that me and the other muggleborns are pretty much the only ones who can joke about that kind of thing.”

“My entire family was murdered by You-Know-Who,” Susan said. “During the last war. I'm not the only one either. Don't think that just because we're pure bloods we're all on the same side.”

I raised my hands.

“I'm sorry,” I said. “I didn't know. Then you understand what it's like.”

She nodded slowly.

“Maybe you don't want to join our group,” I said. “I'm sure there are people who are going to pressure you into not joining.”

She gave me a look.

“I believe in doing the right thing,” she said. “If other people had I might still have a family.”

She hesitated. “When are you meeting?”

“Tomorrow night in the library after dinner,” I said. “I've got detention tonight.”

“At the rate you're going, that's where you'll be spending the rest of the year,” she said. She
thought for a moment, then finally nodded. “I'll be there.”

“Me too,” Hannah said quietly. “I wish I'd been more brave when those boys were acting like that.”

“It's hard to be brave,” I said. “But getting better is easy. You just have to want it, and work for it.”

“That's what they say in Hufflepuff too,” Hannah said. “It's weird to hear it from a Slytherin.”

“I'm not a normal Slytherin,” I said. “And neither is Millie here. You should have seen her pounding that boy's face into the ground.”

Millie flushed and stared at the ground.

“We'll see you tomorrow evening,” Susan said.

I smiled at her, and for once I meant it. I wasn't going to be able to do this alone; I was going to need allies, and the close knit nature of the Hufflepuffs meant that they were more easily influenced by their members than people in other houses.

If I could convince Susan and Hannah that I was a good person to know, they'd convince their classmates for me, and my job would become exponentially easier.

Getting the Hufflepuffs on my side would be a decisive victory. Hermione was working on the Ravenclaws, but they tended to be standoffish, and the Gryffindors were giving Neville flack about his association with me.

Figuring out how to turn the tide of opinion in my favor wasn't going to be easy. It wasn't as simple as having good publicity, because I didn't have any of the usual Protectorate or Cauldron methods of manipulating opinions.

Still, I'd at least sat through some of Glen Chamber's classes on public relations, and I had a general idea of what I had to do, which was more than could be said of a genuine eleven year old in my position. My original self at this age would have been clueless.

“Come along Millie,” I said. “We still have things to do before dark.”

She followed behind me. It was disturbing how much her opinion of me had changed in the space of a day. She'd been cautious and avoided me before, watching me as though I was a Cobra about to strike.

She watched me just as much now, but it was clear that she had a very different opinion of me now. It actually felt a little uncomfortable.

We walked.

“Pansy,” I said.

She looked up at me. Her hands were still a little discolored from what had happened to me, although it was fading fast.

“What?” she snapped.

“I'm glad you're feeling better,” I said.

She stared at me. “And I should care what a mudblood thinks why?”
I leaned forward.

“Who do you think got revenge for what happened to you?”

She continued to stare at me; her gaze wasn't any friendlier. “I heard that he fell in the tub himself. That's what the aurors say.”

I shrugged. “That might be true.”

“Are you saying it's not?”

“I'm not saying anything,” I said. “But let's say hypothetically that you knew someone who was willing to do all kinds of crazy things to get back at the people who hurt her friends. Wouldn't it be a good idea to actually be friends with her, instead of being one of those people.”

“Those people?”

“People who don't have much of a survival instinct,” I said. “Idiots.”

She flushed. “Are you calling me an idiot?”

“Other than opening my mail, I haven't seen you do anything actually stupid,” I said. “And that wasn't really stupid, it was just naive.”

“You can't go your whole life not opening mail,” she said. “It's the mail.”

“In any case, I'm glad you weren't hurt worse.”

She made a gesture that I didn't understand. It looked like a reversed peace sign. The gasp from Millie behind me gave me a little context though.

“Or not,” I said.

I suspected that the Pansy might be a lost cause. She wasn't particularly bright as far as I could see, and she didn't have the flexibility of mind to look past her own prejudices.

Someone like Draco Malfoy, on the other hand was actually a better candidate for conversion. He was one of the brighter people in class, and his family was known to be opportunistic. They went where the power was, and that meant they were willing to bend.

When a Dark Lord arose, that meant they might be prone to falter, but it also meant that they respected power and those who had it.

He was already taking my advice and bragging less. He'd really enjoyed the attention he'd gotten when the new brooms were delivered to the class; I'd seen him sneaking looks art me, although I'd been careful to pretend not to notice.

While having people openly on my side was important, having people on my side that no one knew about might be even more useful.

Hermione was struggling to convert the Ravenclaws in part because they knew she was my friend, and so anything she said about me was suspect. Anything said by the Weasleys, or by Draco, should I manage to convince him would be given a lot more weight.

“You can't win everyone over,” I said to Millie as we walked away. “But it doesn't hurt to give them a chance.”
She nodded, as though everything I was saying was important. Maybe to her it was.

From what I'd overheard her talking about to Tracey, she hadn't just been ignored by her family for being a half blood; after all, her mother was a muggle. However, the final nail in the coffin had been the fact that she had never been considered pretty, not even as a child.

That meant that her value to the family was much less; it was going to be a lot harder for her to get married and have the children that the family seemed to value so much.

Now I was telling her that the important thing wasn't how you looked, but what you could accomplish. That had to be enormously attractive to her; a final option for her to make her place in the world when looks or status wouldn't do.

The fact that Pansy, who had both looks and status would reject me wasn't likely to deter Millie. She'd seen that kind of behavior her entire life. The fact that it didn't bother me though, that was probably new and refreshing.

She'd been following me around all day like a puppy. It would have irritated me, but Gemma was right; there was safety in numbers. While it was true that there were some bullies who wouldn't be deterred by multiple victims, most of them preferred to wait until their target was alone. It wasn't always because they were cowards either; sometimes it was just for plausible deniability. Without witnesses it would be my word against theirs.

The rest of the day went without incident.

My first detention was to be with the groundskeeper, the Case 53 I'd seen at the train station. Some of the Slytherins thought he was a half-giant, but I had a hard time imagining a normal human mating with something that was even larger than he was. Was cross species breeding even possible? People had said that Flitwick was part goblin, but it was possible that they were just an offshoot human species, maybe even Homo floresiensis. The effects of magic might have mutated them even further, and it was possible that Wizards had altered their genetics.

Were Wizards essentially bio-tinkers? How many of the magical species that existed the results of Wizardly tampering, and how many of them were natural species? The history books didn't even try to speculate, and I hadn't seen anybody who was even trying to theorize about the subject.

I was directed across the lawn, towards the groundskeeper's hut. It was massively oversized, which made sense.

A familiar head of white hair was in front of me. I blinked. Malfoy was serving detention?

I hurried to catch up to him.

"Why are you here?" I asked.

"Same as you," he said without looking at me. "I got into a fight with a Gryffindor"

As we approached the hut, I realized that I recognized several other people waiting outside. Terence Higgs was a third year, and team seeker. Miles Bletchly was the Keeper, and Hestia Carrow wasn't anything. All were third years.

Hagrid stepped out of the hut. He was even more massive close up than I had remembered; most of the time I'd seen him since the first he'd been sitting down at dinner.

"Listen up," he said. "Yer all here fer fightin. I'd have thought after last year, you lot would have
learned better. Normally the Gryffindors would be right here with you, but the Headmaster didn't think you could be trusted not to get into a scuffle so they're going to be here tomorrow night instead.”

Had there been that many incidents that I wasn't aware of? I'd thought I'd been doing a good job, but it was disturbing to think about just how many things I might be missing.

“Gather round,” Hagrid said. “Tonight we go into the Forbidden Forest.”

I frowned, looked around and found a stick on the ground. I transfigured it into a Bowie knife.

“What are you doing?” Malfoy asked. He looked a little pale.

“I've heard there are werewolves in the forest,” I said, teasing him. I'd heard him trying to scare some of the other first years with speculations about what might be in the forest. I held up the blade. “I hope silver plating is enough. Pure silver is too soft to make a good weapon.”

He moaned low in his throat, but he clearly didn't want to look like a coward in front of the older boys.

I leaned close to him. “If anything comes after us, all you have to do is be faster than them, and you'll be fine.”

“Why?”

“Most things stop and eat what they catch,” I said. “Which will give us plenty of time to run.”

He blinked at that and looked faintly nauseous.

I suppressed my urge to grin at him. The school wouldn't be sending us into danger, and it looked like Hagrid was big enough to handle anything that should come up. In any case, there were three other older students to help. We were going to be fine.

“What will we be doing?” Hestia Carrow asked. She had a twin sister, who curiously wasn't here. I found myself wondering which Griffendor she'd gotten into a fight with.

“There's a unicorn about to give birth in the forest. Yer gonna help me make sure that there's no problems. She's had problems birthing before, and she hasn't looked well recently. I got word from some of the Centaurs that she's already started. This will be a rare opportunity to see something that Wizards hardly ever see.”

“So we're going to be acting like farmers?” Bletchly asked, scowling.

Hagrid shrugged. “If you didn't wanna get yer hands dirty, you shouldn't have been fightin in the halls.”

His eye slid past them toward me.

“Yer a young one to be out here,” he said.

“She's the meanest one out of all of us,” Bletchly said. “Beat up two fourth year Gryffindors that were bullying a half-blood.”

There was a tone in his voice; almost one of satisfaction and pride. I'd never heard him say anything against the muggleborn, or even me in particular, but he seemed to dislike the Gryffindors quite a bit. It must have something to do with having some of them fly around trying to hit him
“Now, what we're gonna do tonight is dangerous,” Hagrid said. “So I'm gonna need you all to stay with me. Keep to the path and you'll be fine. Do you all know the spell to send up flares?”

We nodded. Flitwick had taught us last week, and we'd left scorch marks in the ceiling of the classroom. That had been an entertaining class.

“If you get separated from the rest of us, send up a flare and stay put, and we'll come for you.”

“We should stay in the middle of the group,” I said to Draco. “That way nothing comes up from behind us, and if anything is ahead, the others can take care of it.”

He nodded. He still looked a little pale, but his color was coming back.

“We're going to be fine,” I said. “Stick next to me, and I'll keep you safe.”

“I don't need a mu... muggleborn to keep me safe,” he said. I noticed, however that he didn't step away from me.

“All right then,” Hagrid said. “Let's go into the forest. With any luck, we'll be back before dawn.”
Hogwarts castle was filled with bugs, but it was nothing to the explosion of life in the forest. I could almost feel the life all around me; the sheer weight of the bugs was something that I hadn't felt in a long time.

The trees were massive and old. We had old trees in Brockton Bay, but they tended to be isolated, surrounded by younger trees. Here, every tree was old, and most of them were massive and weather beaten. I could see many different kinds of trees; beech, oak, pine, sycamore, yew...it made me wonder if this was one of the places Wizards harvested their wand materials from. I didn't see any gouges on the trees, not in the limited light that was available.

The undergrowth was thick, seeming almost impassible off the path. There were thorns and knotgrass to both sides of us. I didn't like it; it funneled us into a single line, and anything that could actually move through the underbrush would be able to ambush us with impunity.

I'd know beforehand, but if it was something really dangerous, it might not make a difference.

Everyone had their wands out, all of them lit and I kept a careful eye on the students behind me. I had bugs on every one of the others just in case one of them should turn and try to attack me. I doubted that they would, not with Hagrid right there, but it would also be useful if anyone got lost.

I walked assuredly, stepping over roots without even looking.

I heard Draco stumbling from behind me.

"You must have eyes like a cat," he muttered.

I ignored him, and I checked ahead of us for any dangers. Even without my bug sense I would have been able to tell things were safe; there were sounds of insects everywhere. It was when things got quiet that you had to worry. If the birds and insects sensed something dangerous, they had the sense to hide.

It seemed as though we walked forever, although it was most likely just half an hour. I found myself tense, waiting for one of the Slytherins to turn and attack me even though I rationally knew that it was unlikely.

We passed through several splittings of the trail; getting separated from Hagrid would be disastrous, because I wasn't even sure that I'd be able to find my way out of here.

Moonlight shone through the canopy at times, and it gave the entire forest an eerie look, even though it was beautiful in its own way.

None of the Slytherins complained, most likely because none of them wanted to look weak in front of their peers. Or maybe they were afraid of Hagrid; I hadn't heard about him being dangerous, other than his size, but obviously I'd missed some things.

We reached a clearing in the forest, and I was the first to notice movement in the darkness. Even the bugs were having trouble seeing in parts of the undergrowth, although they compensated with other senses.
I saw a form imove n the darkness. Hagrid tensed.

It took me a moment to recognize it, even with my bug senses; it was a man with the body of a horse. A centuar; I'd heard there were some in the forest, but I'd never seen one.

“Hagrid,” the centaur said neutrally.

“Ronan,” Hagrid said. “Good ter see ya.”

“Pluto is in transition,” the Centaur said. “Change is coming.”

“Right,” Hagrid said. He didn't sound like he knew what the centaur was talking about; neither did I.

Glancing over at Draco, I noticed that he seemed trouble. Maybe he put greater store in this astrology stuff than I did? Maybe astronomy class gave some insight into the future; yet from what I'd heard the divination classes at Hogwarts used tea leaves instead of telescopes. It was very perplexing.

“Have you seen the mare?” Hagrid asked.

“She's in the south glen, two clearings to the east,” the centaur said. “It is a difficult birth.”

“We'll hurry up then,” Hagrid said.

As we walked past the centaur, I thought I saw him staring at me specifically, although it was possible that it was a trick of the light.

We did indeed pick up the pace, and it wasn't long at all before I saw the silhouette of Hagrid hold up his hand.

“There's a whole herd of them up ahead,” he said. “And they can get a little tetchy when they are protecting a mother that's foaling. I want everybody to move slowly, and don't make any moves that could be interpreted as aggressive. I don' want to explain to yer parents why you died with a unicorn horn in your chest.”

I heard a gasp from Hestia Carrow up ahead, and then I stepped out into the clearing.

I'd been busy looking behind us and to the sides, so the sight of the unicorn herd in the moonlight took me by surprise. I found my breath catch in my chest as I saw them running around in the middle of the glade in the moonlight.

It was easy for me to forget, sometimes, the child that I'd once been. But I'd had the Unicorn Trapper Keepers that all the other girls had, and I'd had the posters on my walls. When I'd really been eleven, I'd dreamed of unicorns when I wasn't dreaming of Alexandria, and now that they were really here, something in my chest felt tight.

They were stunning.

The herd was poetry in motion, a river of white so beautiful that it made my heart ache. I couldn't catch my breath as I stared at them, and I found that I wanted to do nothing else but stand there forever.

It made the excitement I'd felt when I'd first seen Hogwarts castle pale in comparison. This was the kind of magic I'd always dreamed of... not just a tool, and not a weapon, but sheer wonder.
Draco shoved me a little from behind, and the spell was broken. I let myself breathe, and I steeped aside, and watched as he took sight of the Unicorns.

For a moment, I saw a look of wonder on his face as well, but he saw me watching, and his face tightened.

“Stupid horses,” he said, but it didn't sound like his heart was in it. If it had just been a single unicorn during the light of day, he probably could have dismissed it like it was just another animal, but this was a herd of thirty, and the moonlight gave them an unearthly beauty.

“If there's any blood, don't put it in yer mouth,” Hagrid said. “I wouldn't think I'd have to tell you that, but there's always one.... yer cursed for life if you do that. That means you wash yer hands and yer wand after ye get through with this, with good magic.”

“You make it sound like we're going to put our fist up inside the thing,” Terence Higgs said.

“If yer lucky, ye just might. It'll probably be one of the girls, though. They get nervous around the boys,” Hagrid said.

He gestured toward me and Hestia Carrow.

“We're gonna see if they'll accept ye,” he said. “If they do, ye'll help me with the foal. I've been workin with em for their entire lives, and they still sometimes take better to a young girl.”

Turning to the boys, he said, “I wouldn't get near to the herd. Stay here and call out if you see anything dangerous. If they think you're trying to hurt the mare they can get dangerous.”

“So we're just going to stand around?” Draco asked.

“Better than going in the middle of that,” Terence muttered. “They'd turn us into pincushions.”

I was going to get to actually touch one of them? They seemed too perfect to touch, ethereal, even incandescent. It was like a dream, and the moment I reached out my hand it would all be over.

Suddenly I felt a moment of horror. What if they really could read the content of a person's soul? I'd done terrible things in the past, from the time I was fifteen onwards. I'd killed a lot of people. I'd killed a baby. I'd stolen people's free will, and I hadn't even hesitated.

Sure, I'd done it to save humanity, but the kinds of things I'd done tended to stain the soul. Was I even still a good person, had I ever been? Most of the time I ignored questions like that; I escaped the pain by focusing on what was in front of me. But here? Now?

I felt Hagrid's hand on my shoulder.

“I'm gonna be with ye;” he said. “And if there's danger, get behind me. I'll protect ye.”

Physical danger wasn't what I was worried about. Being rejected by this, the culmination of my childhood dreams... I wasn't sure I could stand the crushing disappointment.

“She's afraid she's too evil,” Terence Higgs said, knowingly.

I blinked, and looked back at him. He smirked, but there was something in his expression that bothered me, a sort of sympathy that wasn't anything at all like I'd ever expected to see on a Slytherin face.

He'd had thoughts like that himself; that was the only way he'd be able to understand what I was
feeling. Did that mean that he really thought he as evil, or did that mean that he wasn't because he was worried about it?

“Nonsense,” Hagrid said.

He pushed me forward.

The herd stopped, and they turned to stare at us. I saw a sea of horns pointed in my direction, and I forced myself to stay loose. Animals could sense fear, and while I wasn't afraid of them, I was afraid of their judgement.

As I slowly stepped forward, the air felt leaden and still. My stomach was tied up in knots. As far as I knew, these were just stupid animals. Did it really mean anything if they rejected me and I had to stay back with the boys?

Somehow it did. It felt like I was being judged by a universe that didn't care about all the good I had done, only the bad.

I walked forward slowly, and I felt Hestia Carrow behind me. She put her hand on my shoulder, and her hand tightened reassuringly. I could see Hagrid putting his hand on hers shoulder through my bugs' vision.

The strange thing was that not a single bug was on any of the Unicorns. Not one mite, not one flea not a single fly. It was as though they were so pure that even the bugs knew that they were inviolate.

I could have probably forced a bug onto one of them, but I found that I didn't want to. It would have felt like a desecration.

Instead I continued to walk forward. The unicorns stared at me, and for a moment I thought they were going to lunge forward, to attack me like the monster I sometimes felt that I was.

One unicorn was larger than all the others; presumably he was the Stallion of the herd. He stepped forward and for a moment I thought he was going to try to spear me.

Instead he lowered his head, and I reached up and touched his face. I felt a strange wetness on my eyes; I wasn't sure what it was, but I ignored it. I could have stood like that forever, but I heard Hagrid say, “The mare needs us, girl.”

I stepped around the stallion, and I saw that the herd had opened before us, leaving space to walk between them. As I walked past the unicorns, I reached up and touched their flanks. They were softer than anything I'd ever touched in my life.

There was a mare lying in the middle of the clearing. Her sides were heaving and she was lying on her side. Of all the unicorns she was the most beautiful, and I found my hands trembling as I dropped to my knees beside her. There was a silvery, luminescent blood staining her hindquarters, which probably wasn't a good sign.

I reached out cautiously, and I put my hand on her flank. She was warm, and I felt a jolt of something passing through me as I touched her.

Her side moved convulsively. If felt like she was having trouble breathing.
Carefully, I said, “I think she's having a contraction.”

“She had problems with the last foaling, which is why we've been keeping an eye on her,” Hagrid said.

This was something outside my experience. In Chicago as a Ward, I'd never had to assist in birthing a baby, although there had been other Wards who had. Generally, there had always been someone on the other end of the communicator who would be able to help you through it.

I'd had basic instruction in what to do, of course; it was part of our training as heroes. That had been training in what to do with a human childbirth, though. I had no idea what to do with a horse birth, much less in the birth of a magical creature.

“She's startin to push it out,” Hagrid said to Hestia, “But she's havin trouble. The hooves will come out first, but if ye see them bottom sides up, that means the foal is backwards or upside down and we'll have to turn her.”

“What do you want me to do?” I asked.

He reached into his pocket, and pulled out something that looked like berries.

Hagrid handed them to me. “I want ye to try to feed these to her, and try to keep her calm. Watch her horn; this is going to hurt her, and she might get aggressive.”

“What is this?” I asked.

“Berries soaked in calming potion,” Hagrid said. “It won't hurt the foal, and it'll help her keep from panicking. Some will probably soak through your skin, but it won't hurt ye any.”

He could have told me that before he'd put it in my bare hand. I grimaced, but I didn't complain. There was too much going on right now.

He gestured toward Hestia.

“Now you get to get yer hands dirty. Remember what I said about washing em.”

The girl grimaced, but she kneeled down behind the Unicorn obediently.

“Watch her hooves,” Hagrid said. “She might kick.”

I found myself at the front of the unicorn, staring into her eyes. I carefully reached out, berries in hand. I kept my hand out flat and open so that she could lip the berries from my hand.

For the next thirty minutes, I simply stared into her eyes and ran my hand gently down her neck. I heard Hagrid barking instructions to Hestia, and there was worry in his voice.

Finally, I heard Hagrid say, “Hold her now; this is gonna be tricky.”

I nodded, and I tightened my grip on the Unicorn's head. She struggled a little, but it was a moment before I saw something moving on Hagrid's end.

It wasn't a pure white like the other Unicorns, or even silver like some of the foals. It was of the purest gold, and it had eyes that seemed as large as the universe.

I was the first thing it saw as it peered around the flanks of its mother, and it stared at me as though it loved me, as though I was the most wonderful thing that it had ever seen.
Of course, I was the only thing it had ever seen, but I couldn't find the energy to be cynical right now. All I could do is stare at it for the next several minutes.

It finally rose to its feet on staggering legs, and it took a couple of steps toward me.

Hagrid spoke for the first time in several minutes to Hestia.

“The foal is all right, but the mother isn't out of the woods. I need you kids to head back to the castle; have Madam Pomprey come back here; she'll be able to help us keep the old gal alive.”

I stared at him.

“Isn't there some magical way for you to summon her?” I asked.

“Don't have my wand,” he said. “And I never was much of a wizard anyway. One of the older boys will be able to find his way back. Now hurry. Hestia here is gonna stay and help me.”

I felt curiously empty as I slowly moved the Unicorn's head from my knee and set it on the soft loam of the forest floor. There was a look in her eye that I didn't like; it almost seemed like one of hopeless resignation, as though she knew that she was going to die.

Would her foal even survive without its mother?

Silently, I rose to my feet, and I headed back toward the others.

“I couldn't see anything,” Draco complained. “All we've done is stand around all night and stare at a bunch of horses.”

“Hagrid says we need to go and get Madam Pomprey,” I said. “The Mare isn't doing very well.”

“He wants us to go into the Forest by ourselves?” Draco asked. He looked like his eyes were about to bug out.

“Sooner we get out of here, the better,” Terence said. “Better if all of us go together instead of one or two of us... it'll be harder for something to pick us off.”

I nodded.

Apparently some Slytherins had some sense.

“All right, let's go,” I said.
“Does anyone know how to get back?” I asked.

“Uh...right through there,” Terence said, pointing at an opening in the thick underbrush. “I think we took two lefts?”

That vaguely fit with what I remembered, and if we started to get lost, I could always send my bugs up above the canopy to check the location of the castle. With their poor vision, they likely wouldn't be able to see it very well, but they'd be able to see the lights well enough.

“Let's go,” I said. Without asking anyone I plunged into the underbrush, and I heard Miles Bletchley and Terence Higgs follow me without comment. I could see Draco with my bugs hesitating, but then he too followed behind us.

Plunging into the dark, I didn't even bother to light my wand. The light from the wands of the others behind me created a dim light, but I was mostly moving by feeling the insects under my feet. Miles caught up to me from behind.

“So you really are a girl,” he said.

“What's that supposed to mean?” I asked. The bliss that I'd experienced from being with the Unicorns was wearing off, and in its place was anxiety at the thought that we wouldn't make it in time.

“Some people thought you were a Death Eater polyjuiced as a way to test us,” he said. “Weed out the ones who weren't really into the whole racial purity thing.”

“Then why would I beat up on those three idiots the first night?” I asked.

“I didn't say it was a good theory,” he said. “But you have to admit you aren't normal.”

I glanced back at him. “I don't know what you mean.”

“Just the way you move... it's creepy. You sit and stare past people like they aren't even there, but you see everything.”

I shrugged. “What do you want me do? Act weak and helpless?”

“Act like a human being,” he said. “It's like you're some kind of spider or something, just waiting to pounce on anybody that walks by.”

“All I want is to be left alone,” I said. “Then I can act like a human being and enjoy the unicorns.”

“There's always some people who can't leave enough alone,” he said. He glanced behind him; the others were further back along the trail. “Not all of us feel that way.”

“But nobody wants to do anything about it,” I said. “Yeah, I've heard.”

“Who says help has to be obvious?” he asked. “It's not like we're all Gryffindors, and won't do anything unless we have an audience to clap for us.”

I frowned.
“If you can’t keep people off my back, what can you do?”

“Slip a word here and there,” he said. “About how it’s not worth it to step on a mudblood when the Gryffindors are the real enemy. Oooor.... it would be easy to get the people who want to give it a shot even more reason to hate you.”

“So what do you want?” I asked.

“I want to beat the Gryffindors,” he said. “And that won't happen as long as our house is fighting itself. Sooner or later, you're going to end up seriously injuring a member of the Quidditch team, or they'll be suspended for killing you. Dumbledore doesn't like us all that much anyway, and he's probably looking for a chance to chuck us out on our ear.”

“So keep your people in line,” I said. “Convince them, and I'll remember who not to thank.”

He blinked for a moment, and then he nodded. “Right. Best not.”

“I remember my friends,” I said. “And the people who cross me. It doesn't mean that everybody has to fit in one category or the other.”

“None of this means I like you,” he said. “I think you're the worst thing that happened to this House since the Potter kid got sorted...not because you're a mudblood, but because you're a really violent person. If it had been one of us purebloods who did all the crap you've done, we'd have been out on our ear.”

“I was Sorted before Potter was,” I said, ignoring his comment about being violent. It was actually somewhat true, even if I'd had my reasons.

“Yeah, but you didn't start beating people until afterwards,” he said. “Or dropping them in boil potion.”

“He fell in himself,” I said. “The aurors said so.”

“Right... only an idiot would actually believe that,” he said.

“As long as you make sure the idiots know that, I think we should be able to...” I stopped.

There was something moving in the underbrush. It was too dark for me to see well, even with the bugs, but it was massive.

We stepped out into a clearing, and I reached into my fanny pack for the knife. Contrary to what I’d told Draco, I hadn't actually managed to turn it silver, or even silver plated, even with two weeks of obsessive transfiguration practice. I had managed to make it shiny, but if there really were werewolves in the forest, I might regret not learning to make it silver.

With my other hand I pulled out my wand.

“There's something coming,” I said. “Something big.”

The others were bunching up behind me. That wasn't good tactically; something big enough would be able to plow through all of us at the same time, and we'd get in each other's way trying to fight back. Sticking together had worked in the days of melee weapons and shield walls, but none of us were particularly big or strong. Wizard tactics were likely close to riflemen tactics anyway.

A moment later the others heard the sound of something pushing its way through the undergrowth.
I smelled it before I saw it. It stank worse than any boy's locker room that I'd ever been in, not that I'd been in many. I'd smelled gas stop bathrooms that were easier on the nose.

As it broke through the undergrowth, I saw it; in the dark it looked taller than Hagrid, although it was possible that was an illusion. It had greenish, rubbery flesh, and it had straggly green hair.

I heard Draco give out a scream, and it grunted and began to come toward us.

Miles and Terence gamely stepped forward and began to launch stunners at the thing, but it didn't seem to have much of an effect.

I launched the flare spell at one of its eyes, and while it didn't seem to hurt it, it stopped and batted at the fire in its face.

Terence seemed to get the idea first; he launched his own flare spell at its face, and then Miles followed suit. Draco stopped screaming and did so as well.

The thing was roaring and swinging its club around, but it didn't look like it intended to run. It was putting one hand over its face and swinging its club blindly. Sooner or later it was going to hit one of us, and when it did, someone was going to die.

Slipping my wand into the fanny pack, I tensed, watching its movements. I couldn't afford to make a mistake here, or I was dead.

I watched the way its club was moving, and then I darted forward.

The way it had pushed through the underbrush told me that its skin had to be tough; it was obviously somewhat resistant to magic, and the way the tree cracked when it struck it with its club told me that it had massive amounts of strength.

The one saving grace was that it seemed to be slow, not just physically, but mentally.

I darted between its legs, and I slashed upward. I felt my knife connect, and then a putrid liquid splashed all over me. I wasn't sure what it was, but I doubted that I wanted to think about it too much. The thing roared and tried to dance back, stomping at me.

I took the opportunity to slash at its thigh, where the femoral artery would be on a human. Its skin really was tough, but I managed to jam it in as hard as I could and drag my way down, putting my entire weight into it. My hands were slick, but I managed to catch hold of the knife.

A hand reached down to grab me, but I rolled aside. The thing roared in pain, and its claws caught at my robes. It started to lift me up, but I managed to slip out of them, leaving it to stare stupidly at my empty robes. The knife was still stuck in its thigh.

The boys were shooting flares at its face, but it was ignoring them now, concentrating on trying to find me. I grabbed the knife and yanked it out again, and then I ducked as a massive hand came down to where I had just been. I rolled to the side as a foot stomped at me, and I slashed at the back of it's leg, trying to hamstring it.

My knife didn't cut deep enough, and I grimaced as I slipped on what was becoming an increasingly slippery section of ground. The thing was bleeding heavily, but it was so large that it had to have a lot of blood.
I cut at it again and again, slashing at it with my knife. I felt it bite into the tendon, and then I hit it again in the other leg. It screamed again, and then I felt it starting to collapse.

Lunging to get out from under it, I was almost fast enough, but my feet slipped out from under me, and I landed on my arm just as the thing landed on me. I felt a sickening crunch, followed by a sensation of cold on the outside, and hot embers on the inside of my arm.

Worse, I was partially trapped under the thing, and from close up it smelled infinitely worse than it had when I'd fought it from a distance.

Without the light from their wands, everything was in shadows. I looked up and saw the three boys standing in the distance.

“Is it dead?” Draco asked. “Is she dead?”

“You couldn't be that lucky,” I called out.

Slowly, cautiously the three of them approached. I saw Miles standing over me, and he simply stood there, watching me. My wand was in my fanny pack, under a ton of whatever this thing was, and my knife was lost, probably stuck in the thing somewhere.

I was completely helpless, unable to move, and if he wanted to kill me, he could do it now, easily. He could even blame it on the monster, and no one would ask any questions. They'd think I was really stupid, and then they'd go back to their day to day lives.

He was silent for a moment, and I wondered what he was thinking. Finally he spoke.

“Can you move?” he asked.

“No,” I said, wondering if I was making a mistake.

“We won't be able to lift the whole thing,” he said, “But if the two of us use the levitation spell, Draco might be able to pull you out.”

“Fine,” I said.

A moment later they gave it their first try.

“You stink,” Draco muttered as he put his hands under my shoulder blades. I felt a jolt of intense pain in my arm as I slid out from under it.

The boys lifted with the spell, and Draco pulled while I pushed with my feet. It took us four tries before I was out.

Miles held his wand up, lit.

I could see the white of the bone sticking out of my arm.

“Either of you know any healing spells?” I asked.

“Not that'll heal that,” Miles said.

“Give me your robes,” I told Draco.

“What?” he asked.
“If I bleed out, I'll be dead before we get to the castle. Lend me your robes.”

My own robes were drying in a pool of monster blood.

He cursed under his breath, and then he pulled them over his head. A moment later I wrapped them around my arm, putting pressure on it. I pulled it tight, and I ignored the sudden burst of pain. When I was satisfied that I'd done the best I could I stood up.

“Doesn't that hurt?” he asked.

“Does it look like it hurts?” I asked testily. “We can stand around talking, or we can get back to the castle.”

We started walking faster. I was feeling a little faint; whether it was from blood loss or shock I wasn't sure, It wasn't a good sign. It didn't matter; leaving me alone in the forest wasn't an option, and getting help for myself and the Unicorn was a priority.

“What the hell was that?” I asked.

The others were no longer trailing far behind. They were all crowded up behind me, although whether it was because they thought I was going to protect them, or whether they thought they could protect me I didn't know. In my current condition I wasn't going to be able to protect anyone.

“That was a forest troll!” Draco said. “It's an XXXX creature! That's a wizard killer!”

“No... XXXXX creatures are wizard killers.” Miles said.

“We're wizards, it would have killed us...” Draco said. “I can't believe that you killed it with a knife. You stabbed it right in the stones!”

“What else was I going to do?” I asked. “Run away?”

“Yes...?” Draco asked. “Most people's response to a troll isn't to run up and stab it in the crotch.”

“Have you met her?” Miles muttered. He was staring at me like he'd never seen me before. Most likely he was re-evaluating how dangerous I was.

“It could move through the undergrowth faster than we could move through the trail,” I said. “And it would have caught one of us sooner or later.”

We broke through the undergrowth, and we were suddenly back on the lawn.

Making our way up the slope was hard, but I forced myself to do so. In the light I could see that I looked like Carrie after her prom; I probably smelled twice as bad. I was leaving blood on the grass as I walked, although it was rapidly drying.

It wasn't bedtime yet for the older students, and I heard gasps as I stepped into the hallway. I ignored them, and concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other. The last thing my reputation needed was for me to collapse right in the main hall.

The crowd parted in front of us, and everyone was silent as I walked past. No one said a word, but I felt the weight of dozens of eyes on me. Every step felt heavy, but I kept my head up and my face as neutral as I could.

Madam Pomfrey was on her feet the moment she saw us. “What in the world?”
“I killed a troll,” I said. “I need you to stabilize me, and then go out to the forest to help Hagrid. One of the Unicorns is dying.”

“Students are my first priority,” she said. Her wand was out. “You must be in a lot of pain.”

“You should see the other guy,” I joked. “Just stop me from bleeding and get me to a bed, and then you can get to Hagrid.”

Snape stepped into the room.

“Is Miss Carrow still alive?” he asked after doing a mental head count.

“This is from a troll,” I said. “I just need the bleeding stopped, and then Madam Pomprey needs to get out to help Hagrid with a dying Unicorn.”

He stared at me for a long moment, then turned to Pomprey.

“Is Miss Hebert in any danger?”

“She needs treatment,” Pomprey said. “She's in tremendous pain.”

“My experience is that if a student says they can tolerate their pain, and they are not a Gryffindor, then they probably can. I will stabilize Miss Hebert.”

She looked at me for a moment, and I waved my good hand at her. “I'll be fine,” I said. “It only hurts when I laugh.”

“Are your ribs injured?” she asked, frowning. “I didn't see anything when I...?”

“I was joking,” I said. “I don't laugh.”

Her lips tightened, and she said, “If you are well enough to joke, then perhaps Professor Snape can help you. I'll go get my supplies.”

I sat on the edge of a bed, ignoring the mess I was making, and I watched as Snape began to make preparations to treat me. I hadn't had any experience with Wizardly healing, and it was going to be interesting seeing how different it was from Panacea.

“Drink this,” Snape said.

“Is that going to make me sleep?” I asked suspiciously. I'd already been dosed by calm inducing berries this evening without my consent; I wasn't going to drink anything without knowing what it did.

“It reduces pain,” Snape said.

“I'll do without it,” I said.

The last thing I needed was to be in the infirmary alone with people knowing I was hurt.

“Fine,” he said. He pulled out his wand and pointed his wand. “Brackium Emendo.”

Wizardly healing, as it turns out is much more painful than what Panacea had used. I managed to keep my face calm throughout however.

“Now you need to drink this,” Snape said. “It is a blood replenishing potion.”
I looked at him suspiciously.

“You have lost copious amounts of blood. You will be required to stay here overnight because of the possibility of infection. Trolls are filthy creatures.”

“Fine,” I said.
I woke to a clicking sound.

It took me a moment to remember where I was; apparently the blood loss from the night before had affected me more than I'd been aware of. The fact that I'd survived far worse injuries in the past didn't change the fact that my new body wasn't nearly as durable as my last one.

Passing out in the middle of everything wasn't going to do my reputation much good.

It rook me a moment to recognize the source of the clicking sound. A familiar white haired man was entering the infirmary, tapping his cane on the ground as he went. Was this his way of warning me of his presence? He didn't seem to need the cane to walk.

I turned my head to focus on him, even as I fumbled for my wand in my fanny pack. I'd lost the knife somewhere in the fight last night, and I didn't have another stick to transfigure. Turning the stick into a knife had been a basic modification of the matchstick to needle spell; a matter of visualization. I wasn't sure, however, whether I could transfigure something not made of wood.

In a pinch, I could transfigure my second wand, but that seemed like a bad idea for a number of reasons.

I very carefully kept my wand on top of the covers, pointed in his direction. He ignored it, carefully sitting down beside me.

“Miss Hebert,” he said. He was staring down at me like I was an intriguing specimen of insect.

I stared at him silently. He worked for Voldemort, which meant he was possibly here to kill me, but his wand wasn't out. I doubted that he'd try to kill me in any other way, and I had a relatively amicable relationship with his son, although I couldn't be sure how much he had been told about that.

The fact that I couldn't tell where his wand was, despite the fact that he moved with the quiet assurance of someone who was armed worried me. I'd have to rely on his eyes to tell me when he was going to draw, and hope that it wasn't too late.

“You present me with an unusual problem,” he said. “Currently the winds of change are blowing against your kind, but you have rendered a service to my son not once, but twice.”

Apparently Draco had been keeping his father informed.

“The Malfoys do not forget,” he said. “Whether it is a service, or a slight. Yet to support you openly would be to put us at even greater disadvantage.”

Ah... he was trying to pretend not to be one of the people who was trying to kill me. There was no reason for me to let him know that I knew otherwise, and many reasons for me not to do so.

“So don't,” I said.

“Yet sooner or later you will face someone you cannot simply... dispose of,” he said. “Adult wizards who are fully aware of just how...dangerous you can be.”

“I'm harder to kill than most people think.”
His eyes darted toward the wand pointed at him.

“So it would seem,” he said. “One wonders how an eleven year old girl knew how to kill with such... proficiency.”

“I lived in a tough neighborhood,” I said.

It had the virtue of even being somewhat true. Neither Brockton bay nor Chicago had exactly been walks in the park.

“I wasn't aware that the muggle world was so dangerous,” he said.

“You'd be surprised at the things you have to deal with in certain parts of that world,” I said. “Even if most of it seems drab and decidedly boring.”

“I've heard some foolish prattling that you intend to become a Dark Lord yourself,” he said. “That you were able to fool the unicorns through some sort of dark magic, and that you plan to take over all of Wizarding Britain.”

“I'd prefer to be left alone,” I said. “But if I am pushed, I'll do whatever I have to.”

“I can get you a transfer to Ilvermorny,” he said. “As an American, you should be there anyway, and you would be assured of being allowed to pursue your education uninterrupted by British politics.”

He called murder politics.

I frowned.

My reasons for staying hadn't changed. The authorities in America were almost certain to do a better search of my background than the ones here had; I'd looked it up, and they didn't have an equivalent to Hogwarts book and quill. They'd find out that I was actually Molly Scrivener, and then they'd try to find out why I was pretending to be an American.

I shook my head.

“I appreciate the offer, but I'm going to stay here. There's nothing left for me back at home.”

“I will not be able to protect you,” he said. “Should you stay, you are only likely to find death and suffering. In the coming years, this will not be a welcoming place for your kind.”

“Oh?” I asked. “Why is that?”

He stared at me, then grimaced. “You know why. My son says you seem to know more than you should; more than any child your age should, and I am inclined to believe him.”

“What could I possibly know that would be dangerous?” I asked. “The identities of the people who have... questionable affiliations maybe? Ones who have children here?”

“What are you saying?” he asked carefully.

“Just that they have more to lose than I do,” I said. “My family is dead, and there is no one in the world that I care about. That leaves me with a certain... freedom to act.”

His face tightened.
“You'd threaten children?”

“Not Draco,” I said. “Since he seems to be a little more sensible than the rest of them.”

“But the others?”

“I don't particularly like hurting people,” I said. “I'd much prefer to be left alone. If certain factions wish me dead, maybe it would be wiser to wait until the school year is over.”

He was silent for a long moment, his eyes searching my face. I wondered whether he was a legilimens; in case he was, I focused on my absolute sincerity and determination that I meant what I was saying.

“Those aren't the words of a normal child,” he said. “Don't you fear anything?”

I stared at him steadily. “If I were a Gryffindor, maybe I'd tell you.”

For the first time he smirked a little. “Perhaps you really do belong in this house,”

“I tried to get the Hat to place me elsewhere,” I said. “It seemed to think that Slytherin was the only place for me.”

He scowled. “In my day, the Hat always gave preference to the wishes of the student. Perhaps it is becoming senile.”

“It could use a cleaning,” I said.

“The Malfoys do not forget,” he said as he rose to his feet. “And neither will I.”

“I don't either,” I said. “I'm not a threat to anyone who isn't a threat to me. Get people to leave me alone, and I will feel myself amply repaid.”

He nodded slightly, and a moment later he was gone.

I closed my eyes again, and it seemed like no time at all before I heard a heavy footstep entering the Infirmary.

It was Hagrid; he looked stricken.

“Did the Unicorn make it?” I asked.

“She's gonna make it,” Hagrid said. “But I never shouldda left yeh out there.”

I shrugged. “I can handle myself.”

“Most of the trolls are in the north side of the forest right now,” Hagrid said. “It musta been a male shoved out of the pack, lookin for better huntin by himself.”

“What's going to happen to you?” I asked. “Mr. Malfoy looked pretty angry.”

“Suspended without pay for a month,” Hagrid said. “I'd be out on my ear if Dumbledore hadn't stood up for me.”

“I'd imagine that there's not a lot in the forest that's dangerous to you,” I said. “Even that troll last night.”
Hagrid shrugged. “We'd have batted each other round a bit, then go on our own ways. I'm sorry yeh had ter kill him.”

“I didn't have much choice,” I said. “Maybe if I'd been a fifth year, but I don't know a lot of magic yet.”

“I'm sorry yeh got hurt,” he said. He hesitated. “I wouldn't have thought such a little thing like you could kill somethin as big as that troll. It bled out almost right away.”

“It was built like a human,” I said. I shrugged. “It wasn't that hard.”

He looked unconvinced. “The others said you moved so fast they barely saw you.”

“It was dark,” I said. “And they were shooting flares instead of lighting the path. With the way the luminos spell probably hurt their night vision, I'm surprised they saw anything.”

“I'll do better next time,” Hagrid said.

“Just remember that all first years aren't as tough as me,” I said. “You have to treat them like they are babys.”

He nodded, and a moment later he was gone.

For the first time I became aware of the fact that someone had changed my clothes and bathed me, or perhaps used magic to do it, as I didn't have any troll blood on my body.

I rose to my feet, and I felt a little woozy. Apparently blood replenishing potion wasn't nearly as effective as Panacea, something I was going to have to take into account as I went forward. I couldn't simply push my body to the extent that I had in the past, and not simply because I was out of shape.

In my old world, even after Panacea had become... unavailable, there had been other healers. I'd had a support team that was there should I get injured. Here I was on my own. Learning healing spells needed to be something that I learned sooner than later.

It wasn't just for myself; if one of the others had been injured last night, I wouldn't have been able to help them other than whatever first aid I could render using the materials at hand; and that wouldn't have been a lot.

I managed to reach the bathroom despite my dizziness, and after completing my ablutions, I returned to the infirmary, where I found Madam Pomfrey waiting for me.

“You should not be out of bed,” she said.

“I needed to use the bathroom,” I said. “And I figured that it would be less dangerous than a troll.”

“There is a strong possibility that you could faint and hit your head,” she said. “Which very well may be more dangerous to you than a troll.”

“You don't seem surprised.”

“I'm familiar with your capabilities,” she said. “After all, I'm the one who has been treating the people you have sent here.”

“They attacked me first,” I said.
“I’m sure that’s a great comfort to their parents.”

I frowned at her; was she giving me shade? She wasn’t even looking at me; instead she was mixing something in a bowl on a cart.

As I crawled back into the bed, I asked her, “Is there any chance that I could learn some basic healing magic from you?”

“You should ask Professor Flitwick,” she said. “Those spells are generally reserved for upper years.”

“I’ve got more need for them than most people,” I said.

“That seems to be true,” she said. “I would prefer that you stop sending me patients in the middle of the night.”

“I could start waiting until the middle of the day...?”

The look she gave me was not friendly. I closed my mouth and I accepted the liquid she gave me. It tasted like the blood replenishing potion Snape had given me the night before, with something else added.

“This will help you sleep more,” she said. “And when you wake, you will need to eat something to help the potion along. You will not feel like eating, but you need to push yourself to do so.”

“I’d rather not sleep,” I said. “Considering that people know I am here, and there are those who don’t wish me well.”

Madam Pomprey stared at me and shook her head. “I will be here watching over you, and after last night, I doubt that most of the students would bother to come after you anyway.”

She didn’t seem to be lying; I’d had some classes on detecting lies from suspects and she had none of the usual tells. Still, it’d be embarrassing to wake up dead.

“Without sleep, you will continue to be weak,” she said. “For quite some time. There is only so much magical healing can do. Your blood loss last night was severe enough that I am surprised that you were still standing. I certainly wouldn’t have left if I had realized you were in that condition.”

I hadn’t even been aware that I was in that kind of shape. I was going to have to test my new body more so that I could know what to expect; otherwise, I’d end up bleeding to death over some embarrassing accident without even being aware of it.

“Then it’s a good thing you didn’t know,” I said. “There aren’t enough Unicorns in the world.”

“There’s only one of you,” Pomprey said. “And the life of a wizard... or even a muggle is more important than the life of a Unicorn.”

Watching her, I wondered if she even realized that she’d just implied that Wizarding lives were more important than muggle lives. It was probably an attitude so deeply ingrained that she wasn’t even aware that she had it.

Still, she seemed to mean well.
“Fine,” I said. I drank the concoction and grimaced. “I'm holding you to the protection thing. I won't be amused if I wake up and find that one of the Weasley twins has drawn a mustache and goatee on my face.”

They'd do it, too.

“I'll do my best to keep that from happening,” she said dryly. “Although they do have their ways.”

I was feeling sleepy again. The potion worked faster than any medications I'd had, and I was out again.

By the time I woke, the sun was shining brightly through the windows. Hermione was sitting on a chair next to my bed, and I forced myself to keep from grimacing. I'd been alert enough to wake up when Lucius Malfoy had entered, but I'd had no idea that Hermione had come in.

While she was known to be my friend, there were all sorts of situations where she might have turned against me, ones that Pomfrey had no idea about. It would be best if I not accept sedating potions in the future, not while I was in a location like this where nothing was safe.

“Taylor!” Hermione said when she saw that I was awake. “I was so worried!”

“I'm fine,” I said.

“You're in the infirmary!” she said. “You're not fine! People are saying all kinds of crazy things... that you killed a troll with your bare hands, that you killed one of the Slytherin girls... that Hagrid killed one of the girls and you killed him. But I knew that none of it could be true. What really happened?”

“I killed a troll,” I said. “With a knife, while the others distracted it with flares.”

She stared at me, seemingly speechless. The idea of a child of her age being faced by a real danger was foreign to her; the thought that a teacher would allow something like that was even more so. I'd been doing my best to subtly disabuse her of the notion that adults always knew best.

“H...how did you know how?”

“I lived in a bad place before,” I said.

“America?”

“Not all of it... but there are places that are dangerous, just as there are in Britain. Even Wizarding Britain has Knock turn Alley.”

“But to know how to use a... where did you even get a knife?”

“It's not that hard to turn a stick into a knife if you know how to turn a matchstick into a needle,” I said. “It's just differs in a matter of degree.”

She stared at me. “But you'd have to know what a knife is really like to visualize it that well.”

“I've carried one before,” I said. “We had a real gang problem where I grew up. I was taught how to use one by a good friend... to protect myself.”

“I can't imagine that,” she said. She looked down. “I must seem silly to you, prattling on about little things when you've had real things to worry about.”
If things grew worse for muggleborns, she had things to worry about too. Preparing her for that wasn't going to be easy.

“I saw unicorns last night,” I said. I let a little of the genuine wonder that I'd felt leak out onto my face. “It helped me realize that not everything is dark and evil, that there is some beauty still left in the world. I think it's good that I have normal kids around me... it reminds me that I don't have to be kind of person I was back then, that I can be better.”

It was even true, to a point.
Stepping into the Great Hall, I was surprised to see that everyone became quiet as I entered the room. Heads snapped around to stare at me, and conversations petered off until you could hear a pin drop.

I could smell the bacon, and so I ignored the staring eyes to sit in my accustomed place. I'd debated trying to change seats so that I'd be less likely to be the victim of an attack, but everyone else tended to have their favorite spots, and I was already making enough waves by just being there.

As I sat, I began filling my plate.

Millie and Tracey were staring at me. “Did you really kill a troll last night?”

I shrugged; my mouth was full.

Apparently recovering a large amount of blood took its toll on the body's reserve; according to Pomprey, I was going to have to eat more for the next few days to make up for it. I didn't mind, really.

“Draco says that all of them helped,” Tracey said.

I was surprised that he hadn't claimed credit for himself. However, he hadn't screamed and run away like most children his age would have done, so he deserved whatever credit he could accrue.

Nodding slightly, I reached for a piece of toast.

“Apparently it was a rogue male,” I said, “The rest of the pack is on the other side of the forest. It was just one of those freak accidents.”

“I heard that the Dark Lord himself sent it to kill you,” Pansy said. “Because he thinks you plan to be the Muggle Dark Lord. That's so stupid though.”

“Oh?”

“Like a mudblood could ever be a Dark Lord... who would follow them?” she asked. “And it's crazy to think that the Dark Lord would even know you existed.... like you're that important.”

“How many times have the Goblins rebelled?” I asked.

“I don't know.... a lot?”

“And according to you, Wizards are better than goblins?”

“Of course.”

“Even mudbloods?”

“...yes....barely.”

“Then if goblins can rebel, why not muggleborns?” I asked.

“Because mudbloods don't have any power,” she said, as though I was stupid to even suggest it. “They aren't even all that good at magic.”
I used my wand to levitate a piece of ham and two pieces of toast from in front of her simultaneously. She didn't seem to notice.

“So why were you in the Infirmary?” Tracey asked. “I'd have thought that you'd have been either dead, or not harmed at all.”

“The troll fell on me when I killed it,” I said. I took another piece of bacon.

“What?”

Everyone was staring at me.

I shrugged.

“How did you let it get that close to you?”

“I killed it with a knife,” I said. “And that requires close up work.”

“With...a knife,” Pansy said. “Not a spell... you didn't even use magic to drop something heavy on it. You killed it with a knife. Is that even possible? Trolls are huge?”

“The skin of their scrotum and the back of their knees is thinner,” I said. “I probably should have transfigured a bigger knife, though. It would have died faster.”

Some of the first years around me looked puzzled, as though they didn't know what I was talking about. The older students nearby looked a little green.

“So you used magic to make something to kill with non-magically?” Pansy was staring at me incredulously, as though I'd grown a second head.

“It seemed like it was resistant to spells,” I said. “What else could I do?”

“Run away?” Pansy asked. “Scream for help?”

“Die you mean?” I asked. I shook my head. “I try not to do that any more than I absolutely have to.”

“How did you know how to kill a troll with a knife?” Tracey asked, as though she was afraid of what the answer would be.

“I grew up in a tough neighborhood,” I said.

“That's a muggle thing, isn't it?” Mildred asked.

I nodded.

That seemed to end their interest in the conversation, which suited me just fine. I'd said all I meant to say, and the last thing I needed was to seem as though I had secrets, even though I did.

I still caught several of my classmates staring at me when they thought I wasn't looking, and through my insect's vision, I could tell that other students where whispering all over the Great Hall behind my back.

At the end of the meal, Dumbledore stood up.

“Last night, you may have heard that there was an incident in the Forbidden Forest. Courage is
what is usually attributed to Gryffindor, but last night several students in Slytherin showed great
courage under a situation which would have cowed some adult wizards.”

“For courage under fire, Terence Higgs, Miles Bletchley and Draco Malfoy will each be awarded
twenty five points. For courage beyond that expected of any child of her age, and for risking her
life to defend her classmates, Taylor Hebert will be awarded seventy five points, for a total of one
hundred and fifty points for Slytherin.”

There was a collective gasp from the entire room.

There were politics behind the decision, I suspected. Giving points to Malfoy would help ingratiate
the school to his father, although truthfully he hadn't run, which actually was worth some kind of
an award. I doubted that I would have been as brave at his age.

Giving me the largest proportion of points wasn't simply because I'd done most of the work. It was
a way to emphasize my value to Slytherin, to make me more valuable to the group and to help push
whatever agenda Dumbledore and the Sorting Hat had in subtly backing me.

I'd been thinking about Dumbledore lately, and it occurred to me that any overt support he gave me
would be counterproductive with my House, because of his own unpopularity.

For a moment I wondered why they hadn't had Snape deliver the points, but it occurred to me that
having Dumbledore do it prevented accusation that Snape was being biased and attempting to push
his House to win the House Cup.

Personally, I didn't care about points at all; it seemed rather arbitrary and meaningless when the
reward was a little bit of bragging rights at the end of the year. It seemed to work to keep the peace,
though, and so I was willing to work within the system.

I glanced over at Draco, whose chest was swelled with pride. He glanced at me, and I gave him the
slightest of smiles. He paled a little and seemed to deflate a bit, but that didn't keep those around
him from clapping him on the back and congratulating him.

I didn't get any of that, but several of the older students did nod at me approvingly.

Dumbledore had done me a service, and I would remember that. What he expected from me wasn't
clear; most likely his interests aligned with those of the Hat; turn Slytherin from a terrorist
breeding ground into something that produced reasonable human beings.

The fact that this aligned with my own goals didn't mean that our goals would always be in synch. I
suspected that he'd been delighted to have me in the House despite the fact that it was objectively
the worst place for me.

He hadn't gotten where he was without being a master manipulator. He knew how to play the
political game. Being a powerful wizard wasn't enough; there had been plenty of powerful Capes in
the protectorate who had never risen to the top of their respective divisions. Usually it had been
because of personality conflicts or an inability or lack of interest in playing the political game.

As the meal ended and the plates vanished, I stood up and I headed toward the exit. I felt three
other people making a beeline for me.

“What do you want?” I asked.

Marcus Flint was standing behind me, flanked by Terence Higgs and Miles Bletchly.
“You saved the team, Hebert,” Flint said. “The boys told us what you did, and we'd have been a Keeper and a Seeker short.”

“Anybody can be replaced,” I said.

“You've obviously never played Quidditch,” Flint said. “I don't like your kind. I don't even particularly like you. But I respect you, and I never thought I'd say that about a first year. Most of you are snot nosed little nothings.”

Was he saying I was worthless as a mudblood, or as an annoying kid?

“But not you. You're mean as a snake, and dangerous as one too. If you have any problems with anybody on the team, let one of us know and we'll take care of it... preferably before you do. Hopefully nobody on the team will be that stupid. I have a feeling that someone might be able to hurt you, but you'd make them pay later.”

“The best way to get her is to drop a troll on her,” Terence said. He was smiling slightly as he said it though.

“Nobody would ever be able to get a troll in the school,” Flint said absently.

“I think if she drank a cheering charm, it would be like deadly poison to her,” Miles said. He was smiling slightly as he said it, though.

This... didn't feel like the jokes that Emma had made. Was this what friendly teasing actually felt like?

Miles and Terence had seen what I had done last night, but instead of making them afraid of me, it seemed to make them... admire me? A little?

I couldn't tell, and that bothered me more than I wanted to admit. The strange warm feeling in my chest was probably a side effect from the potions I'd been drinking.

“You should try out for beater next year,” Terence said.

“She probably weighs less than a bludger,” Flint said. “Beaters have to be strong.”

“She killed a troll with a knife the size of my forearm,” Terence said. “Which means she can probably beat the Weasley Twins half to death without too much trouble.”

Apparently my alliance with the twins was still a secret.

Good.

“She weighs half as much as a bludger,” Flint argued. “I don't care how vicious she is, there's laws of nature. You try to hit something that weighs more than you, you're the one who goes flying.”

“I think she could do it, and without cheating,” Miles said, glancing at me.

They hadn't even asked if I wanted to try out.

“It's too bad that first years can't try out,” Flint said, looking at me as though I would obviously want to try out for a sport I knew nothing about except that it sounded ridiculously dangerous.

I already thought that flying class needed more safety protocols; having kids flying around, beating each other with bats while a hundred a fifty pound ball of iron tried to slam into them sounded like
a perfect receipt for a bunch of dead kids.

Yet somehow they made it work, which meant that there were aspects to it that I wasn't seeing.

I'd never been into sports, and I wasn't now. But letting them think I might try out next year was harmless, and if it kept the team's goodwill toward me for a few months while I grew stronger, I didn't have a problem with lying.

Terence and Flint argued, and I stiffened as I felt Miles hand on my shoulder.

In a low voice, he said, “Me and Terence.... we know what you did for us last night. You could have gotten away easy and left us to die, and nobody would have thought anything about it. But you put yourself at risk when you didn't have to, and we'll remember that.”

“You helped,” I said.

He chuckled bitterly. “Using a first year spell against a class XXXX creature? We'd have been dead sooner than later. The Defense teachers over the past few years haven't been good.”

“The one we have now isn't bad,” I said.

“He's the best one I've had,” Miles said. “Most of them aren't worth a crap. You'd think Dumbledore would at least try to put somebody in the most important class, but they say the Dark Lord put a curse on the position.”

“Oh?” I asked casually. “Is that something that can be done.”

He stared at me for a moment, then paled a little. He removed his hand.

“That's seventh year or maybe further stuff. Don't go trying to curse the whole class if you stub your toe or something.”

I smiled at him sweetly, then grinned as he paled some more.

“I remember my friends,” I said quietly. “Even if they can't be my friends publicly.”

He nodded and took a step back. Terence and Flint were still arguing about my potential skills as a beater, which Flint thinking that the physics of the task would defeat me, even if he didn't seem to know the word physics.

“I'll think about it,” I said more loudly, and then I stepped away from them.

As I headed for class, I saw people staring at me and whispering everywhere I went. I listened in as I could, but there were too many conversations all happening at the same time for me to get more than a few fragments of each of them.

“--she's not really a witch. She's a creature pretending to be a witch. How else could she have killed a troll like that without magic?”

That was actually close to the truth; if it became a common rumor I'd have to figure out a way to direct people's attention elsewhere.

“She's a vampire.”

That... didn't even make sense. It was already daylight, and I was clearly walking around in the sunlight right now, as they were staring at me.
“She obliviated them and made them think she killed it. Somebody else did it.”

“Doesn't that make her even more scary?” A second voice asked. “If she can already obliviate people?”

“....yeah.”

That was a rumor that I wasn't going to fight. Keeping people uncertain about what you could and could not do was basic Caping 101. Most Capes always held a little back, just in case. Having people uncertain might make them hesitate in attacking me.

It was going to make them less likely to overestimate me, though, which I did not like.

“I think she's kind of cute,” I heard a boyish voice say. It wasn't a voice I recognized, so it wasn't one of the Slytherins.

“She'll stab you, mate. Just let it go.”

I fought to keep myself from wincing. That was the kind of complication that I did not need. Just thinking about it made me a little nauseous. Kids that age shouldn't even be thinking about pairing up, and it was hard for me not to think about even seventh years as anything other than children, even though chronologically they weren't that far from my actual age.

Sometimes experience aged you.

Vista had always been a lot older than her age would suggest. She'd been through a lot of vicious, nasty fights, and it had made her into someone older than her age.

These kids were still kids. Their concerns were the concerns of children. They hadn't had to fight and die, and had to watch people they loved die in front of their eyes.

That was a good thing, although I doubted that all of them would stay that innocent by the time they graduated.

War was looming on the horizon, even if I was somewhat insulated from it here with the children. There were indications in the Wizarding Newspaper that some of the purebloods left lying around, if you were able to read between the lines.

Wizards were dying of accidents, and it was almost always a muggleborn wizard who had done well for himself. There weren't a lot, maybe one or two a week, but it was a pattern, especially as I'd been told that wizards tended to live twice as long as muggles on average, both due to wizard medicine and their own, innate magic.

It didn't make sense that there were this many accidents in this small of a population. The overall death rate per year in the United States (not counting Endbringer deaths or Golden Morning) had been less than one percent a year. That had included deaths from a lot of illnesses that Wizards could cure with a wave of a wand and car accidents, and most Wizards did not drive.

Old age should have been the main cause of Wizard deaths, and even if Wizards had simply died at half the rate of muggle deaths, there should have been less than fifty wizard deaths a year from all causes. Accidents simply should not happen as often to wizards.

You wouldn't climb on a ladder to get something and fall to your death. You'd just use your wand. Poisoning?
Wizards didn't use caustic cleaning products like muggles did. Again, a simple swish of a wand meant there was no need.

There were spells to protect from being trapped in fires.

Of course, even Wizards could choke on a piece of food; I was surprised that some of the Gryffindor boys hadn't already died, given the speed with which they ate. Anyone could slip in the shower.

But when those things kept happening over and over to one class of people, it moved from being suspicious to being attempted genocide.

They were keeping it low key from now. I had no doubt that aurors were investigating the deaths, and that sympathetic pureblooded politicians were obstructing those investigations. There was a battle being waged in the shadows, and for the moment at least, I was out of it.

Unfortunately, I knew that was a situation that wasn't going to last. Sooner or later I was going to be drawn into a war that was not my own, and then all this pettiness at school would seem like a distant memory.
“That's not how you use a shield spell!” Fred exclaimed from the floor.

“Oh?” I asked casually.

Running toward him and smashing him with it had been fairly effective, but I suspected that it had only worked because he hadn't been ready for it. I'd felt feedback when I'd hit him, which meant that my size and weight were a limitation.

He rose to his feet.

“A wizard who has to get close to someone is a Wizard who's dead,” he said. “Everybody knows that. You'd know that too if you weren't a crazy troll killing muggle.”

I shrugged.

Working on shield charms was a major step forward in my evolution as a witch. I was still trying to work out creative ways to use shields, though. What if you could do more than just make a barrier in front of you?

Put a shield around someone's head, and not only could you suffocate them, you could prevent them from speaking spells. You could even fill the shield with something terrifying, like bees, and they wouldn't be able to get rid of them.

If you put shields around their hands, would they be able to gesture with wands?

I was still uncertain whether shields could be moved or shaped; I was still learning the basics. It was something I fully intended to find out, though.

“Can you reshape the shields?” I asked.

Asking a third year might not be the best option, but if something was common knowledge no point in doing a lot of research I didn't have to.

“What do you mean?” Fred asked.

“Change it from this basic shape to something else?”

He stared at me for a moment. We'd been working with each other for a few weeks now, and he likely knew that I never asked a question without having a reason behind it.

“Why would you want to?”

“Well, for one thing, have you heard of muggle tanks?”

The Weasley twins were purebloods, but their father was some government official who dealt with muggle artifacts. That meant they were a little more familiar with technology than some of the other students, although I was still astonished by their ignorance sometimes.

He frowned. “Those things that have water in them?”

“Yes, but there's another kind of tank... an armored vehicle, alike an automobile,” I said.
I knew their father had one of those. I'd overheard the youngest Weasley bragging about it, right before Draco had made fun of him for it.

“Armored?”

“Think of a turtle, except with a shell made out of thick metal,” I said.

He nodded slowly.

“Well, eventually they discovered that having armor straight up and down made it relatively easy to break through. But sloping the armor made it a lot tougher.”

“Why?”

“If something hits sloped armor at an angle, there's a chance that it might bounce off, or be deflected,” I said. “There's other reasons; you can get more armor for less weight or something, but it's kind of complicated.”

“Attacks already bounce off shields,” he said.

“But what if you could change the shape so that the spell bounces right back to the caster?” I asked.

He froze for a moment. “That would be a huge advantage... but there's no way to know what shape could do that. People are going to be attacking you from all kinds of angles, and in the heat of battle you aren't going to be able to figure out the exact shape that you need.”

“But if you could,” I said. “The shape could be changed?”

“Maybe...” he said. “I'd have to do some research.”

“What about putting a shield on someone else?” I asked. “Like if one of you wanted to protect Ron?”

He frowned. “Without being in front of him? That's something I'd have to look up too.”

“You could even use that for a prank,” I said. “If you could make the shield hard to see.”

“How?” he asked.

“Put a shield in front of someone's feet... a small one, and they'd trip.”

“There's already a tripping jinx.”

“But if they check you wand, what would they find?” I asked. I lowered my voice in a weird approximation of his.”Oh, no, Professor, I didn't cast a tripping jinx. You can check my wand.”

He looked thoughtful. “I can see how that might be useful. There's probably other things you could do with it.”

“Turn a shield into a sphere and fill it with water,” I said. “Or something funnier...I'm not really good at pranking people. Then dismiss the sphere when they walk under it.”

He stared at me searchingly. “Why do I get the impression that you don't want to know this for pranks?”

I shrugged. “Maybe I'm getting a sense of humor.”
He smirked. “I'll believe that when I see it.”

“What about a reverse bubbleheaded charm?” I asked. “One that would keep smalls in instead of out? That's make those stink bombs of yours a lot more effective.”

It would also be perfect for more dangerous gasses.... and it would be something that they'd be unlikely to dispel because they were gagging and their eyes watering.

“It sounds like a lot of work for me and George,” Fred said thoughtfully. “But you aren't wrong. I think people would rather have a specific spell for something because it usually works better, but for pranks, you might be right. Doing things people don't expect is key.”

“Like hitting someone with a shield charm?” I asked sweetly.

“That wouldn't have worked if I was ready for it,” he said irritably. He grabbed a towel and wiped his neck.

“I wouldn't have done it if you were.”

He was silent for a moment. “Are you going to the Halloween Feast?”

“A girl's gotta eat,” I said.

“Dumbledore is going all out this year,” he said. “There's supposed to be dancing skeletons. I heard that he was going to wait until next year, but he's changed his mind.”

He was probably trying to distract everyone. I'd overheard some of the students talking about letters from their parents. Everyone seemed worried, even the Slytherin parents, and many of the students had been told to keep their heads down and not make waves.

The older students seemed to be taking this reasonably well, but it was frightening the First and Second year students.

I wiped my own forehead with my towel. Wizarding combat involved a lot of running around, at least the way I did it. It wasn't as good as endurance running; I had considered asking Snape if I could have a treadmill delivered by owl, but I wasn't sure where I'd put it, and the last thing I ended was to have an object that I used all the time, a perfect target for curses.

In the past few weeks since the troll attack there hadn't been any more attacks on me. No one was particularly friendly with me either, other than my core group of acquaintances. The Quidditch team did seem to treat me with a modicum of respect, more than than they did the other first years anyway.

“This has been good for me and George,” Fred said. “We're getting faster, and it's good to practice with someone other than each other, even if it's just a group of firsties. It'll be good for the next time things get heated.”

The school had managed to quiet the open battles in the halls, but there was a simmering tension that hadn't gone away. People were afraid, and in my experience, that fear was easy to turn to anger.

I was having them practice with me, Hermione, Mildred and Neville, although I was having extra sessions the others didn't know about.

“I'm glad you decided to work with us,” I said. “And that you aren't just the jerks the Slytherins
“I think you are.”

“All the Slytherins?” he asked.

I nodded solemnly.

He grinned and threw his towel at me. I dodged it. “That just means we're doing our jobs right. The Weaseleys are the bane of the Slytherins.”

“Draco certainly seems to think that about your brother,” I said.

Draco had been maturing nicely, although he still had times when bits of his former self showed through. This occurred most often around the youngest Weasley boy, although he seemed irritated occasionally by Harry Potter.

“We all think that about Ron,” Fred said. “But that's brothers for you. You can't live with them.”

I waited for the rest of the phrase and he just grinned at me.

“You should have some fun at the party,” he continued. “After all, you're half monster yourself.”

I bared my teeth at him, and he laughed.

He flicked his wand, and muttered and his towel went into his bag. “I'll see you on Wednesday.”

With that, he was gone. I waited in the room for several minutes after he left. While I could tell if there were people watching, portraits were harder, and they tended to gossip. The last thing that I needed was for rumors to spread about what I was doing with an older boy, especially a Gryffindor.

I'd chosen a hallway that didn't have any portraits, but there were always wandering ghosts, and Peeves would be delighted in spreading nasty rumors, especially since he thought there was nothing I could do to him.

With my luck, they'd think that I was drinking his blood. The rumors that I was a vampire hadn't gone away, and there were even some people claiming that I was Snape's illegitimate daughter.

The weird thing was that I couldn't absolutely rule that out, because I didn't know a lot about my host bodies' family life. I could say that there wasn't much of a physical resemblance between us.

Maybe it was because we were both considered intimidating. I'd noticed that Snape purposefully worked at being intimidating, although it had never worked on me.

After facing Jack Slash, the Siberian and Scion, very little was actually intimidating.

As I stepped out into the hallway, I heard the sounds of weeping coming from one of the bathrooms. It was the one that seemed never to be used by any of the girls, even though I'd used it a couple of times.

Stepping cautiously inside, I said, “Myrtle?”

I was at least passingly familiar with most of the ghosts in the school. I had been paranoid enough about them that I had needed that information. After all, they were harder to watch out for than people, who my bugs could sense easily, or portraits, who were limited to one place.

The sobbing noise from the bathroom stopped.
“Go away!” I heard a voice echo from within a stall.

“All right,” I said, shrugging. There was no point in going where I wasn't wanted, and I wasn't an expert in ghost psychology, especially as from everything I had read, they weren't actually the spirits of the dead, but instead were imprints, or copies of those spirits.

They were like magical portraits in a way; they couldn't experience physical pleasure, and their abilities to learn from new experiences were limited; that was part of what made Binns such a terrible teacher, although I suspected that he'd never been a particularly brilliant one.

The room was cold; even colder than the rest of the castle. I'd read that was something that tended to happen in the presence of ghosts, and it might be a way to detect them. My insects could sense cold, after all, even if a ghost was hiding.

The ability to see them at all was a Wizarding trait; muggles would have only felt a sense of discomfort, or coldness, or a shadow out of the corner of their eye. It was enough to make me wonder if there had been ghosts in my old world; most likely not because they were only generated from Wizards.

Some of the worst Pureblood bigots liked to speculate that this was because Muggles didn't have souls. Not all purebloods felt this way, but a few did.

“You don't want to know what's wrong?” she asked.

“You were murdered and are angry about it?” I asked.

I saw her head poke out of the bathroom stall and she glared at me. “That's just what I'd expect from a Slytherin... making assumptions about people.”

“Oh?” I asked. “So I'm wrong?”

“Yes!” she said. She didn't elucidate, though, staring at me as though she was waiting for some kind of response.

“Well, I've got to get going,” I said. “I hope you get over whatever is bothering you... and the dying of course.”

I didn't tell her that I'd been dead before, so I could sympathize. That was the kind of thing that could easily get me dead again, or maybe worse. I'd heard about the Dementors. It took a cruel kind of society to make the death penalty the kinder option.

Having your soul sucked out, and all hopes of an afterlife snuffed, that was truly disturbing; I hadn't even known there was proof there was an afterlife. That was a piece of information that would have set all of humanity back on its respective rumps and made them question everything.

The Wizards didn't seem to know what that afterlife was; like the ghosts, it wasn't a question I could answer either. Maybe this was my afterlife and if so, I had a feeling that I wasn't in the good place. Purgatory maybe?

“None of the ghosts want me to go to the party on Halloween,” she said.

“The party with the dancing skeletons?” I asked. “Isn't everyone going to that?”

“No! The afterparty... it's for ghosts and guests, a celebration of our collective Death's day. Halloween is supposed to be the day we're closest to being alive again, and we like to celebrate it.”
“Weren't you invited to last year's party?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said sulkily. “And that's why I'm not invited this year.”

She started to cry again.

I could see why even ghosts might be reluctant to have her around; her constant complaining and crying would get on anyone's nerves. However, I could remember crying in a bathroom myself because of what others were doing.

Could ghosts be bullied? Were they even truly sentient, or were they simply simulacra?

Did it matter?

Getting them on my side would increase my influence by a great deal. My biggest limitation currently, other than my size and lack of magical ability was the fact that I could only concentrate on one thing at a time. That meant that it was inevitable that sooner or later I was going to miss something.

“Well,” I said slowly. “You need to ask yourself what it would take for you to get invited. Or you need to crash the party.”

“Crash...?”

“Show up without being invited. If you are good, people might not say anything. If you are bad, they'll chuck you out, but at least you'll have tried.”

She frowned. “I couldn't do that... not by myself.”

“Are you asking me to go to the party with you?” I asked. “Uninvited to a ghost party as your plus one?”

“Plus one...?” she asked. Finally she nodded. “That would be great!”

“And it's after the regular party?” I asked.

“The Bloody Baron didn't want to miss the Dancing Skeletons,” she said. “He's invited them to the after party too, but nobody knows if they're going to show up.”

“I'll have to get permission from professor Snape,” I said. “Because it'll likely involve me being out after hours, but I'll go with you if I can.”

She smiled, and what had been a very plain girl was suddenly just a little less plain.

Her smile vanished almost as quickly as it had come, like a summer rain shower. She started sobbing again.

“What is it now?” I asked.

“I wouldn't have to be bothering with all of this if I hadn't been murdered.”

“Right,” I said. “I'll be going now.”

“You'll be there, won't you?” she asked, sounding suddenly insecure.

“I do what I promise,” I said. “Good or bad. Whether I'll come back next year depends on how
badly you embarrass me and how angry you make the other ghosts.”

“Embarrass you?” she asked.

“We can talk about what happened last year, and how you can avoid offending the others tomorrow after dinner,” I said. “I've got something I have to do right now.”

She hesitated, then nodded.

I sighed and headed out of the bathroom. Turning this into a win was going to be difficult, especially if Myrtle made it harder for me with the other ghosts. Yet she was trapped here, and being trapped in school for all of eternity was my definition of hell.

I needed to go to the library to look something called Boggarts up; apparently Travers was going to have us face one tomorrow. We were going to be the first class that had seen one, and so I had no lead time from the rumors and conversations of the other classes.

Was that deliberate? Was there something about this monster that would give Travers some kind of an advantage?

I hadn't forgotten that one of my goals was to find out who was doing the killing of the muggleborn, and just as importantly, who it was in the school that had given out all the names.

It had to be a staff member because students had not been present at school when the letters were mailed out. However, I couldn't make the mistake of assuming that it had to be a human staff member.

The house elves pretended to be all nice and subservient, but sometimes I wondered if there was hatred in their eyes. After all, they were slaves, and of course slaves were going to pretend to love slavery. How they really felt might be a different matter... or it might not. I wasn't discounting them though.

Even Mrs. Norris was a suspect; if McGonagall could turn into a cat, who was to say that some of the other pets in the castle weren't actually people too? She certainly liked to snoop around enough.

For some reason, I felt an underlying sense of dread about tomorrow.
“Boggarts are not beings,” Travers said. “Does anyone know what that means?”

“It's a kind of spirit that created by human emotions,” Hermione said after raising her hand. “It was never alive.”

“That's important to remember,” Travers said. “They were never born, and they cannot be killed. What are some other examples of non-beings?”

“Dementors,” I said, even as Draco called out “Poltergeists.”

“One at a time, please, and all of you are correct. A point to all of your respective houses,” Travers said. He paused. “Being amortal, these creatures cannot be killed. That can pose a problem for certain kinds of wizards.”

Was he looking at me?

“They can only be dealt with,” he said. “And the means of dealing with them are different with each species. The one factor that all of the spells have in common is that they all deal with positive emotions. Because these creatures are created from powerful negative emotions, the way to drive them off is to use the emotions that are their opposite.”

The entire class was silent. Although Travers sometimes showed signs of being a mild bigot, that wasn't unusual in the Wizarding world. He did have a powerful way of speaking, though. He actually wasn't bad as a teacher.

“The way to deal with the Dementors is the Patronus charm, which is a spell that is rather difficult even for many adult wizards. Fortunately, the spell to deal with Boggarts is much easier.”

There was a wardrobe in the back of the room, and from inside there was the sounds of scratching. The silence of the class made that sound seem to echo. I saw fleeting moments of anxiety on the faces of many of my classmates, even the Slytherins, although they were better at hiding it.

“Boggarts are generated by fear,” Travers said. “And as such, they are driven away by laughter. What other limitations do they have?”

“The size of the room?” Tracey said.

Travers nodded. “A boggart will shapeshift into your greatest fear, but it will size itself to the room it is in. Nundus are huge, but in here, it would probably be the size of a horse.”

“It's weaker than the thing you are afraid of,” I said.

He nodded. “It's a pale reflection of the genuine thing, although the fact that it can copy powers does make it somewhat dangerous. It is less dangerous in a setting with multiple people; it will be trapped, unable to decide whose fears are most pertinent.”

“Some people think they are sentient; others think not. No one really knows, any more than any one knows what they really look like when there is no one to watch them. Ultimately, they feed on fear, and are strengthened by it. Most boggarts are not truly dangerous, but it is possible that given enough fear they could become so.”
Everyone was silent, and I could see the wardrobe shaking. People in the room were growing more tense.

“Knowing what you fear is the first step in overcoming that fear,” Travers said. “And that is what we are going to do today. I have shown you the wand motions for the Ridikulous spell. Given your young age, I do not expect that all of you shall be able to accomplish the spell at first, but I expect that all of you will be able to do it by the end of class.”

“Who will be first?” he said. “Line up. The first three will earn points for their house.”

Malfoy was the first to stand up. He stepped forward, his shoulders tight and a grim expression on his face. He glanced at me, as though he was wondering if I was his greatest fear.

I doubted it, and when Travers flicked his wand to open the wardrobe, I was proven correct.

A tall and skeletally thin man stepped out of the Wardrobe. He was wearing deep black robes, and he was bald. His face was waxy, and his eyes were a deep red. A hood covered his face.

Draco was pale and sweating.

“Remember the spell,” Travers said, leaning down close to his ear.

“Rikkikulous!” Malfoy said. It took him three tries before the figure began to slip and stumble before falling on his back.

Voldemort; it had to be. Was this a true representation of how he looked, or was this just the manifestation of Draco's fears?

Considering that his father had worked for the man, it was possible that Draco had a better idea than most about what he looked like, but it was just as possible that the elder Malfoy had protected him from seeing him.

Hermione was next. She stepped forward, and the creature shifted and changed shape before our eyes.

It's form settled, and I stared at what resulted in shock.

It was me.

My face was looking at her with a cold, dispassionate look. “I don't know why I bother with you. You'll never catch up with me, so why are you even bothering trying? You don't belong at this school anyway.”

“R...Ridikulous!” Hermione said, getting it right on the first try. Her face was red, and she would not look at me.

My figure began to tap dance, grinning in a way that didn't seem quite right. I saw some of the other students shudder.

Goyle was afraid of Voldemort too, although his version wasn't as well formed as Draco's. This Voldemort ended up dressed like a woman, in a pink sundress.

Crabbe, though, was afraid of me. I saw myself standing in my pajamas with a bloody sock in my hand. My head was cocked, and a creepy smile was on my face. There was a lot more blood on the
sock than I recalled had actually been; had he been one of the students who had seen me, or was this what his mind had created from the stories told by the others?

“Ridikulous!”

My figure was suddenly dressed like a circus clown; somehow that only made me look more disturbing. My grin grew wider, and it soon was unnaturally wide.

“Perhaps at the end of class,” Travers said hurriedly. He stepped toward Crabbe, and the boggart twisted again. This version of Voldemort was much more detailed than Draco’s had been.

Did Travers have personal experience of the man?

Half the Slytherins, as it turned out, were afraid of Voldemort. Four were afraid of me, as was one other Ravenclaw.

Pansy Parkinson's fear was a mirror that showed her as being ugly. Daphne Greengrass's fear was of herself in a hospital bed, looking deathly ill.

Blaise Zabini's was his mother offering him something to drink. Apparently not all fears had obvious meanings.

I’d thought of skipping this class; showing my fears to others ran the risk of outing me, or of weakening a position that I had worked very hard to achieve. Yet not showing up would also weaken my position. If people thought I was afraid of a boggart, or afraid to show what my fear was, they might think that I was safe to attack again.

So many students were afraid of Voldemort that I had to wonder what the point of the exercise was. If Travers was a Death Eater, it had to be difficult to watch his boss being humiliated over and over.

Or maybe he was like a House Elf and secretly wanted to see his boss fail.

His expression never altered throughout any of it, although he did take notes?

A quick look over his shoulder with several flies showed that he was noting our fears in a column next to our name. Why was he collecting that information? For his master? Of was it for some lesson further down the line?

I’d been working on a plan all night to deal with this. I’d push my emotions into my bugs, as much as I could. In the past, I’d only been able to push the expression of my emotions into my bugs, but I’d been working on doing it all night, and I’d thought I was able to manage it.

What was I afraid of, really?

Being discovered?

I had a plan to deal with that, beginning with my Peruvian Darkness powder and ending with the tunnel to Hogsmeade that the staff didn't think we knew about. There was a floo in Hogsmeade that I could use to get to Diagon Alley, and from there I'd make my way to America by slipping onto a ship.

Before I’d come to this school, I wouldn't have had the resources to have made it on my own, but
things were different now. I had stolen several books from the library, books that I would return if this all went well. If it didn't, I'd use them to continue my studies on my own. I'd also looked up the location of America's version of Diagon alley, and I would be able to get supplies there to educate myself on my own.

Leaving Hermione and Neville behind would be painful, but they'd be relatively safe as long as they were at school. It wasn't like I would be able to protect them once they got home anyway.

I'd been storing non-perishable food in my fanny pack for a while now, preparing for the event that I was discovered. I'd heard preppers call it a bug out bag, which I found a little ironic.

In Earth Aleph, preppers were considered crazy cranks. In my world, Earth Bet, with Endbringers, the Slaughterhouse Nine and other dangers, they'd been considered just a little more prepared than the rest of us.

What else could I possibly fear? Most of the fears of my past were things that I had dealt with, which meant that they probably were no longer my greatest fear.

Some of the Ravenclaws were showing obvious fears; being told they were failures, giant spiders, snakes, floating, flaming skulls. Some of them were afraid of Voldemort too, but not as many as the Slytherins, which made sense. Voldemort had to feel closer to people who had death eaters in the family. In some cases, he might even be closer.

Was this an exercise to see who wasn't afraid of Voldemort?

“Miss Hebert?” Travers said.

Sighing, I stepped forward.

The entire class was watching. I casually reached into my fanny pack and pulled out the darkness powder in my left hand, ready to throw it.

Shifting, the creature settled into a familiar form.

It was Lisa, wearing the costume I'd last seen her in; the black bodysuit with purple lines and the domino mask. She was leaning toward me with a look of terror on her face.

“Wake up, boss!”

What?

She reached out as though she was going to shake me.

“You've been dreaming. It's not over! If you don't wake up he's going to destroy everything!”

I felt a chill of horror go down my spine. Had my victory over Scion not been real? Had it just been the feverish dream of a dying brain?

Was this?

Which was more likely... that I'd woken up in another body in a world with real magic, and that I'd ended up going to a school for magic, or that I was hallucinating?

Why hadn't it even occurred to me before?

I'd thought that I'd resolved my issues about school, about Emma and Sophia and Madison. I'd had
more important things to worry about for a long time now. Yet here I was in a school again, dealing with bullies in a world where I was no longer helpless.

Was this my mind's way of trying to work through that trauma?

“You need to wake up!” Tattletale said. “He's coming!”

She looked behind her and she screamed, and a moment later a blast of light came from another place, hitting her. She reached out to me, as though to beg for my help, but the flesh melted from her skull.

I shook my head. I'd sent the Undersiders away. Lisa wouldn't have been there to try to wake me up. If she was, everything would have been lost anyway. If I questioned my very existence, then what would anything I did here and now matter?

For a moment I closed my eyes and I tried to wake up. Nothing happened.

Sighing, I opened my eyes again, and I lifted my wand.

“Ridikulous,” I said firmly.

The form in front of me shuddered, and a moment later it shifted into another familiar form.

It was me... not the old me, but the new one. My own body looked incredibly small and vulnerable, weak now that I looked at it from the outside.

“I'm still here,” she said. She looked at me entreatingly. “Why won't you let me go?”

It took me a moment to realize the implications. Was this Millie Scrivener? Was she trapped in her own body, living in an unending hell as she watched a parasite take over the life she should have had? Unlike me, she was actually an eleven year old girl, and she'd seen her family murdered in front of her. She'd seen me do things that had to have horrified her.

I felt an old, familiar feeling; it felt like the walls were closing in around me. Was that what it was like for her? Trapped in unending darkness, with no one who cared what had happened to her?

I'd barely even thought about her or her family, yet it was possible that she had been right there beside me all along. Just because this was my boggart didn't mean that the fear itself wasn't real.

After all, for all the children who were afraid of Voldemort, he really was a threat to them and their families.

“Ridikulous!” I said more firmly.

Both of the things the monster was showing me couldn't be true, not simultaneously. That meant that at least one of them had to be a lie, and maybe both of them.

The shape shimmered again.

It was me again; but this time I was standing over a pile of bodies. There were faces I recognized, including people who were in this very room. Hermione, Draco, Crabbe, Goyle... Snape, Dumbledore. I was standing over them with a bloody scalpel. My entire body was drenched with blood.

On the walls behind me, several of the students were pinned up, their torsos cut open with a fine precision. Some of them were skill alive, staring at us with a look of sick horror on their faces,
even as their lungs were still moving and their hearts were still beating.

Some of them had been flayed, and thanks to my experiences tracking down the Slaughterhouse Nine, I knew exactly what that looked like. Blood was pooling toward the pile of bodies in the middle of the floor.

I'd seen this before with Bonesaw... no...Riley now. She was better, and I would never....

It wasn't like I'd ever do something like this; take my enemies apart so that I could figure out how they worked; how magic worked. Even if Scion really wasn't gone, I wouldn't...

I was staring down at them all with a dispassionate look, and then I looked up.

“It's a start,” my voice said. It was cold and seemed to lack even the slightest hint of emotion. “But I'll have to do them all. It's for the best.”

“Ridikulous!” I heard Travers say beside me.

The shape flew backwards, and a moment later the Wardrobe closed and locked itself.

“That was... a little more interesting than I expected,” he said. He was staring at me like he'd never seen me before, and looking around, I saw that everyone in the class looked pale. Some of them looked like they were about to vomit, and I could hear a sobbing sound from the back of the class.

Hermione wouldn't look at me.

Was this because of what I'd seen earlier, or because of what she'd just seen? Did she really think that I was the same kind of maniac that I'd spent more than two years hunting down?

I was better than that. I'd done horrible things, but only to stop things that were even worse.

What else would have shown up if Travers hadn't banished the thing? A dead baby?

That would have done wonders for my reputation... knowing that I'd once killed a baby, even if it was only to save him from an unending torture. Boggarts didn't give context, and I certainly wasn't about to explain.

“Sometimes it is difficult to find a sense of humor about these things,” he said, and for once his voice almost sounded gentle. “I will expect results by the end of term, but I think it might be best if you face the boggart on your own. I'm not sure the rest of the class would be... comfortable facing your fears.”

It seemed that everyone in class was averting their eyes. I could still hear sobbing from the back of the class.

Maybe I would have been better to have skipped this class after all. It hadn't left me in a weaker position, but it had possibly damaged my reputation.

Worse, it had left me with some deep, disquieting fears.

Was this world real, or was it all a hallucination, the last gasp of a dying brain? Although I tried to push the thought away, it horrified me on a level that nothing else would have.

Even if this world was real, what about the other fears that had been revealed. Had I stepped into an empty body, or was I trapping a young girl in a hell from which she couldn't escape?
Last of all, was the thing I was most afraid of myself? I'd done a lot of terrible things in the name of the greater good; it got easier and easier to do them the more of them you did. At what point would I lose that last vestige of morality and become the thing I'd always been fighting against?

I'd seen what pragmatism had done to Alexandria, to Eidolon, to Contessa. Was I any better? Would I become even worse when I had much more power than I had now?

All in all, I found myself wishing that for just once I'd stayed in bed.
“Riddikulous!” Severus shouted.

It was good that he was a talented occlumens; having Voldemort see what he had to do to dismiss his Boggart would likely have resulted in an extensive session with the Cruciatis curse.

Locking the boggart in the box, he turned the corner and glared at Travers, who was coming down the hall.

“You had to teach boggarts,” he snapped.

Travers had the grace to look ashamed. “It seemed important.”

Any other year, Severus would have applauded the effort; it was rare to have a competent teacher in Defense, and students would find a strong background in defense useful in the coming years.

“Then you should have excused Hebert. You were informed of her background.”

“I expected to see her parents dead, not.... what I saw.”

There was a certain cruelty to that, but Travers had always thought of the muggleborn as being a little less than human. It wasn't a sentiment shared by Severus, even though his own muggle father had barely been human. He'd been abusive enough that Severus had a fair idea of what his own Boggart would have been at eleven, and he knew that some of his charges would have similar boggarts.

Even without the present situation, had the man never considered privacy?

“You know how boggarts are created!” Severus snapped. “Which is why we're having to deal with... this.”

“I had no idea the girl was so disturbed. I did notice that the muggleborn seemed somewhat less bothered.”

“They've seen similar things on television and in movies,” Severus said. “At least some of them, even if not quite to the detail of her vision.”

The purebloods tended to live more protected lives, at least in some ways, although often what they most needed protection from was their own parents. Muggles did not generate Boggarts, any more than they generated ghosts... only Wizardkind did, and most often Wizarding children, because their fears tended to be more intense, and they had fewer emotional defenses.

There were now Voldemorts and versions of Taylor Hebert being seen all over the castle; along with Giant spiders and snakes. Travers had inadvertently spawned at least a half-dozen boggarts when he'd traumatized a class of first year by showing them exactly what was in Hebert's head.

Even the bits and pieces he'd managed to piece together from his glimpses inside her mind had shown him what a spectacularly bad idea that was. The girl was seriously disturbed; whether it was seeing the deaths of her parents, or brain damage from the Cruciatis curses she'd been exposed to, Severus isn't know.

It was odd that she seemed to have a strange sort of affection for him; it was something that he
could read in her body language as much as from her mind. She wasn't afraid of him at all, no matter how much he tried to distance himself from her.

If it had been any other child, he would have assumed it was because he had rescued her from that culvert and the life she had been living. He hadn't seen anything like that in her mind, however. Instead, she had a strange feeling of... kinship with him. It was as though she recognized something in him in herself.

The thought gave him chills. He couldn't even begin to imagine what they might have in common, and if they did, what it might imply about his own sanity.

“We've caught half of them,” Travers said.

They'd caught three. Half a dozen was only an estimation, and most of the ones they had caught had been in the form of Voldemort. The Taylor Heberts had been a great deal; more cunning and difficult to catch, which was concerning in many ways.

If they were a pale reflection of the real thing, but had some measure of whatever Seer ability she was using to seem to know a little bit about everything, they were going to be almost impossible to catch, other than by Taylor herself, and she was still having trouble with the counterspell.

Apparently not having much of a sense of humor was a crippling impediment at times. It made Severus wonder how Hebert would manage a patronus charm. He suspected that she'd have even more trouble with that spell than with Riddikulous. Did the girl even have any good memories?

Severus scowled. “They're getting better at hiding; we have no idea how many of them there really are.”

Were multiple sightings actually just the same boggart in different places, or were they different boggarts?

Even sending all of the students to their respective dorms wasn't enough to eliminate the danger. Boggarts were drawn to the taste of fear, and Travers hadn't had a chance to teach the rest of the classes the spell.

“And what will you be teaching them next? The Unforgivables? We'll end up with dead children in the hallways over schoolyard squabbles.”

“I'm not that stupid,” Travers said.

“I've seen your memories in the Pensieve... you should have shut it down sooner than you did. What were you trying to accomplish? The fears of the children in my House could be dangerous; if you had revealed that Mr. Malfoy was afraid of being beaten by his father for example and revealed it to all of his classmates, I suspect that your job would be the least of your worries.”

“I'll take that into account for the future lessons,” Travers said. He scowled. “Why do we even have that girl here? She beat three of her classmates with a sock, and then threatened to push others off the stairs. I don't understand why the pureblood parents aren't demanding her head.”

“Because they don't think a muggleborn is ever going to be a real danger,” Severus said. “After all, they're poor at magic, or haven't you heard.”

“It's not her magic I'm worried about,” Travers said. He grimaced. “I was hoping to get a clue as to what motivates her.”
“I know what motivates her,” Severus said. “I'm far more concerned about what she has experienced. That last memory was too... specific to be manufactured. I fear Ms. Hebert is damaged more than we first suspected.”

“So you will help get rid of her?”

“If I got rid of all the students who inconveienced me, I would be teaching an empty classroom. The Headmaster, in his... wisdom, has chosen to keep her in my House as an object lesson.”

“That muggles are dangerous?” Travers said. “I couldn't agree more.”

“That some of them are competent.”

Travers snorted. “I'm not even sure she's really a mudblood. She's a little too talented, and her first vision showed a spell I've never seen before.”

“There are strange magics in parts of the Americas,” Severus said. “As well as other countries.”

Something skittered at the edge of his vision, and Severus scowled.

“Deal with your mistake,” he snapped, and he headed down the hallway.

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“Do you really think we're safe?” Tracey asked.

“We'll be fine,” Millicent said. “You know her. She was afraid that she might be terrible, but that means she's not, right? Do you think You-Know-Who would be afraid of what he might do?”

“The thing that scares me is... what if that wasn't what she was afraid of. What if that was the funny version, like putting a Death Eater in a dress or something?”

“The boggart didn't go away until the Professor sent it back,” Millicent said. “It was what she was afraid of.”

“And the rest of it? Worrying that the world isn't real? That's what people who are mental worry about.”

People who didn't think things were real could do anything. Nothing would stop them because there was no sense that there were consequences. Part of the reason some people were so cruel to muggles was that they didn't see them as human.

The thought of someone who didn't think of anyone as human was terrifying.

“Are you talking about me?” Taylor asked, coming around the corner. She was wearing her pajamas, and she looked like she'd just bruised her teeth.

“No...no...” Tracey said. “We weren't. We were talking about... boys.”

The terror in her voice made her want to jump up and run, but there wasn't any place to go. The girl seemed to know everything even before anyone had said it, and Tracey suspected that she wouldn't be able to hide no matter where she went.

Taylor stared at them, her eyes unblinking. Her head tilted to one side. “You wouldn't lie to me, would you?”
Her voice had gone flat in a way that was terrifying. There had always been something strange about the way she moved, like she was a preying mantis instead of a human being, but when she was angry there was something....

“No...”

Tracey's voice quavered, and she fought to suppress a grimace. Her bowels felt tight, and she felt like throwing up.

“That sounds like a lie,” Taylor said. She took a step toward Tracey. “I don't like lies.”

Her movements became even stranger as she walked forward. She stared directly at Tracey, and there was a look of almost predatory anticipation.

“You know what I do to people who lie to me, don't you?” Taylor asked. She smiled, and her smile seemed to stretch across her entire face. “I make them disappear.”

She snapped her neck to one side, and there was an unnatural cracking sound. She began walking toward them, her limbs moving in an exaggerated, unnatural fashion.

“But before I do that, we're going to have a little... discussion.”

Tracey screamed, and a moment later a second Taylor appeared at the door. It looked as though she'd been rushing to get to the room, even before Tracey had screamed. Behind her was the Prefect, Gemma.

“Riddikulous!” Gemma shouted.

The Taylor who was closer to them was suddenly wearing a pink tutu and was singing a weird little song. It rushed to jump into their wardrobe.

“I'm not sleeping with that in there,” Tracey said.

“I'm afraid of You-Know-Who!” Millicent said quickly to the real Taylor, who was staring at the both of them.

“I'll get the professors,” Gemma said. “I've got your wardrobe locked so it can't get out.”

She left, leaving them alone with the real Taylor.

“I'm not afraid of you,” Tracey said.

“You should be,” Taylor said. Her smile grew and grew, and her face turned into something inhuman, and almost insectisoid.

She started walking toward them, her arms and legs twisting unnaturally with a strange cracking sound. “I've got to start somewhere, don't I?”

Tracey gasped and woke up.

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“We've got more than a dozen traumatized students,” Madam Pomfrey said. “And this Bevy of Boggarts is not making the situation any better. I ran out of calming potion three hours ago.”

“It was perhaps unwise for Mr. Travers to hold his lesson in public,” Dumbledore said. “Some of
the students may have fears they would have rather kept private.”

“And her?” Madam Pomfrey asked. “She's showing signs of serious instability.”

“Is it any surprise?” Dumbledore asked. “What would you have me do? Expell her? She'd be dead within two weeks. You know what's happening out there, and she hasn't made any friends among the Pureblooded parents with the things she has done.”

“'I'm just concerned,” Madam Pomfrey said. “I'm almost as concerned about the first two visions as the last. Someone who believes that the world is not real... if the world is not real, why hold back?”

“I believe that her last fear means that she doesn't really believe that she is dreaming,” Dumbledore said. “As you say, why worry about killing everyone if they are just a phantasm? In a way, I am relieved to see the contents of her final fear.”

“Why?” Madam Pomfrey stared at him, horrified.

“Because it means that she is not lost,” he said. “That image is not one that Voldemort would have ever had, because he would not have believed that it mattered what he did to anyone other than himself. She is actively afraid of hurting other people.”

“She's rather good at it for someone who is afraid.”

“And that's why she is afraid,” Dumbledore said. “Precisely because she is good at it. She has skills that are... unusual for someone of her age. Those do concern me. Yet I have seen hints that ultimately she is a good person. She protects the innocent, and the helpless, and she is not dangerous if she is treated with even a modicum of respect.”

“This is a school full of children!” Madam Pomfrey said. “Most of them at an age where respect is the last thing they understand.”

“Then perhaps it is time they learn,” Dumbledore said. He expression tightened. “Being told that they are superior has given some of the purebloods ideas....ideas that make them vulnerable to certain outside influences.”

“Miss Hebert is not an object lesson. She could have killed any of those students.”

“But she didn't. She applied exactly the amount of force she intended to, and no more,” Dumbledore said. “She has shown a level of restraint that is surprising in someone her age.”

“If that is what you call restraint, I'm not sure I want to see what losing control would look like.”

“I think we already have,” Dumbledore said. “My greatest concern is the detail of her final fear. Had that been an image taken from muggle entertainment, there wouldn't have been the other elements.”

“Other elements?”

“You didn't notice the smells?” Dumbledore asked. “To my regret, I have seen a scene like that once, when I was in Africa, and I will never forget how it smelled. Those smells were absolutely authentic, and if the Death Eaters have escalated to that level of cruelty, then we have much more to be concerned about than we thought.”

“So you plan to speak to the girl?”
“I think I must,” Dumbledore said. “If only to find out more about the crimes that have been perpetrated against her. It is something I should have done at the beginning of term, but I suspected that she was too traumatized to deal with it. However, now I am reconsidering. Some boils should be lanced, after all.”

“Muggle quackery,” Madam Pomfrey sniffed.

“They do the best they can,” Dumbledore admonished mildly. “And their methods are much less barbaric than they were even when I was a child. Perhaps one day they will surpass us.”

Madam Pomfrey sniffed. “As though that will ever happen.”

“As soon as this situation with the Boggarts is resolved, Miss Hebert and I will have a chat,’ Dumbledore said.

“Good. It's about time.”

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“You didn't see it,” Hermione said. “It's... I don't know what to think.”

“You can't hold somebody responsible for what they're afraid of,” Neville said, leaning close to her. “At least she's not afraid of Professor Snape.”

Hermione laughed mirthlessly. “The only thing she's afraid of is herself. That's what everybody is saying.”

“Well,” Neville said. “That's good, right? If she is worried about killing you, that means she cares about you.”

“She's afraid she's going to snap and kill everybody,” Hermione said. “Not just me, or you, but all wizards everywhere.”

“She couldn't do that, could she?” Neville asked, frowning. “It's silly to think that one wizard could do something like that.”

“You-know-who wants to kill all the muggles, and they outnumber us six thousand to one,” Hermione said. “I can think of a couple of ways to kill all of us, and if I can, I know she can think of ten times as many.”

“Wait... how?”

“I'm not going to tell anybody!” Hermione said, staring at him. “Those aren't the kind of ideas that you talk about.”

“Imagine that you had those kind of ideas all the time,” Neville said. “Because you'd had to have them to defend yourself. Wouldn't that worry you?”

Hermione was quiet for a moment. “It worries me that I can even think of the things that I've been thinking about.”

“How much worse must it be for Taylor? Even imitation Taylors are giving the Professors a run for their money, at least from what I hear.”
The students were being escorted to and from class by Prefects, and otherwise were being confined to quarters. The library was one of the few places where students from other houses could still talk to each other, and so it was more crowded than usual.

“You're mate is mental!” Hermione heard a redhead say loudly from one table over. Apparently he’d been listening to their conversation. She needed to learn the muffling charm, sooner rather than later.

Hermione fought the urge to make a rude gesture. The last thing she needed to do right now was to lose house points. She was already getting pressure from older members of her house about associating with Taylor. The general consensus seemed to be that she was a dangerous, unstable loner.

If it was this hard for Hermione, how much harder was it for Taylor? To have the whole school look at her and think she was mental, or worse, a killer?

Taylor had always seemed above it all, as though the words people used didn’t bother her at all, but Hermione knew that couldn’t be true. The fact was that the boggart had proven that she had emotions, that she could be hurt.

She felt her face flush.

“What must she think of me? She saw my boggart!”

Neville patted her on her back, but it did nothing to eliminate her shame.
Detentions

Over the past few weeks, I'd had my detentions with the various heads of houses spread out. I suspected that was partially because they hadn't wanted to deal with me. I'd ended up having a single detention a week.

Professor Sprout had been relaxing; we'd mostly worked with plants and I'd talked about my limited experience in gardening when I was a child with my mother. That hadn't amounted to much, but working with Sprout had been relaxing in a way I wasn't used to. She hadn't been judgmental, and she gave off the feeling that she would actually support you in whatever you did.

It actually made me a little jealous of Hufflepuff.

Snape was supportive in his own way, but it wasn't the same in Slytherin. There, even the first years had to be on guard with what they said to each other, lest it be used against them.

Professor Vector had me writing out star charts. I was still struggling to see the significance of her class, and so this was actually remedial work for me.

Homework didn't really influence final grades anyway; all that was important was the final exams. Homework was simply for keeping track of what students understood and where they needed help. I wasn't sure I liked the system; I really did believe that some students didn't test well, and it put a lot of importance on the result of a single test.

However, I didn't really care all that much.

My detention with Professor Flitwick had involved my teaching some of the remedial students some of the charms I had mastered. It had opened my eyes as to just how slow and recalcitrant some of the younger students could be. The fact that they'd been purebloods had been proof that the stereotype of muggleborn as not being good at magic wasn't true.

Detention with Snape had been the same as always; being forced to work with ingredients that most children found disgusting. For obvious reasons, cutting up flobberworms and dealing with insect parts didn't bother me at all, and I was careful enough in what I did that it didn't bother Snape all that much.

He'd done his best to ignore me during the detention, likely because he felt that my talking to him would make it less of a distraction. I'd spent much of the time mindlessly going through the motions while I was listening in to things happening in the Slytherin common room.

However, now I was supposed to go to detention with Professor McGonagall. I'd threatened her Gryffindors. She was better at hiding her bias against the Slytherins than Snape was in his bias against her house, but it still showed somehow.

Worse, now that the boggart issue had made things worse for everyone, I had a feeling that the professors were irritated with me. It was getting a little tiring having people pointing their wand at me and shouting Riddikulous all the time, even if I understood the reason.

The boggarts seemed to have an uncanny ability to sense what was around them, one that didn't have anything to do with bugs. It had taken me a little while to realize that their abilities had nothing to do with my own; what they had was the version of me that other people perceived.

It meant that they knew when people were coming, and it also seemed to mean that they could
sense fear from a greater distance. They seemed to be feeding on that fear, and they stalked the halls because that seemed to be what people thought I did.

I was just glad that none of them seemed to be me in vampire form; apparently nobody had really believed that rumor in any kind of a real way.

The fact that they couldn't be trapped made it even worse. They had to be trapped and transported to a place where there was no fear to be had. Even muggle fear would be enough to sustain them, although it would be a pale imitation that would leave them sickly and weak.

It also wasn't something they could generate, since muggles couldn't really perceive them. To a muggle, a boggart only manifested as an uneasy feeling in the pit of their stomach when they saw an open dark closet at night, or heard a creak in the corner.

The boggarts would fade away eventually if they had no fear to sustain them. How long that would take seemed to vary from boggle to boggles, and wizards didn't seem to have any comprehension of a scientific study.

No one was even sure of just how many boggarts there were; I had a suspicion that there were more than the official count, because I could feel some of them at the edge of my senses with my bugs.

The boggart incident wasn't making me any friends, and it wasn't likely to make McGonagall happy with me.

Gemma was scowling.

“I'm not sure why I need to escort you to detention; clearly you aren't one the students who is scared of them.”

“I still can't get the Riddikulous spell right,” I said. “Apparently, I don't find my own fears very funny.”

“Well, at least if you see another one of you coming down the hall, you know it's not you,” she said. “I woke up in the middle of the night with one sitting on my chest. Do you know what that's like?”

“I heard the screaming.”

“I'm a prefect!” she said. She looked a little frazzled. Lacking sleep apparently wasn't good for her. “I'm supposed to be the one that comes and takes care of the little ones when they have nightmares. I'm not supposed to be the one who needs help.”

At least the one that had attacked Gemma hadn't been in my form. I'd taken note of the students who were most afraid of me, and just as importantly those who weren't.

“I'm sure I'd be just as startled,” I lied.

Apparently I wasn't as convincing as I'd thought, because she looked at me skeptically.

“We're here,” she said, with what sounded like relief.

“Miss Hebert,” Professor McGonagall said. Her voice was cold, and conveyed none of the warmth I occasionally heard from her when she talked to some of her own house.
“Professor,” I said, my voice as neutral as I could make it.

“After the things you did to my students, I was very concerned about your continued presence at this school,” she said. “Which is why I chose to have my detention be the last of your detentions. That would give me a chance to observe you and overcome my own... biases.”

“And what have you concluded?” I asked.

“Until recently, you have been an exemplary student. Your penmanship is beginning to improve, and you seem to have the writing skills and mind of an adult.”

I fought to keep myself from wincing. Did she know what I was, and was she fishing, or was she trying to offer me the sort of complement that any other eleven year old would have been flattered by.

“That is why I feel that I can be honest with you,” she said. “I am worried about you.”

“What?”

“I saw the pensieve memories of your boggart,” she said. “And those are not the fears of an ordinary, well adjusted girl.”

“What's a pensieve?” I asked.

“Wizards have ways of extracting memories and allowing others to view them,” she said. “To step into a memory and move around within them.”

I stared at her in horror.

“That's.... that's a violation,” I said.

“A certain degree of cooperation is required,” she said. “Else the memory will not be reliable.”

“So if someone goes to trial, they can just use this pensieve thing to prove they aren't guilty?”

She shook her head.

“It would be easy for a criminal to simply obliviate himself,” she said. “To wipe his own memory of the crimes. Already criminals sometimes obliviate their victims to make tracking them more difficult.”

There must have been something in my expression, because she grimaced.

“I did not begin this to give you ideas for further atrocities, Miss Hebert,” she said. “I am here to speak about my concerns for you.”

“Could a pensieve work on things that someone didn't sense?” I asked. “If their eyes were closed?”

“I'm not certain,” she said slowly. “It is true that the pensieve sometimes allows the study of things that the original user does not remember seeing. It is possible that they actually saw these things, but were not aware of them, though.”

“So if someone only had the memory of voices,” I said. “Say, of their parents' killers, there might be something that could be done with that?”

“Pensieves are rare,” she said. “Only the most powerful wizards have them.”
“Like the headmaster,” I said.

She stared at me.

“You said that you had viewed the memory; that means that the device is likely here, in the school. The most powerful wizard in all of Great Britain is the Headmaster. It's not a great leap of logic.”

“I'm not used to children of your age using logic much,” she said.

“Any wizards, really,” I said.

She looked vaguely offended.

“Muggles don't have the same advantages that wizards do,” I explained. “Which means that they have to think harder if they want to get anything done. Also they have the advantage of a greater talent pool.”

“Oh?”

“Imagine that there were only ten wizards in all of Britain instead of ten thousand. The law of averages suggests that at least half of them would be idiots. Most of the rest of them would be normal, and there might be one or two of them who is exceptional.”

She nodded cautiously.

“One person can't do that much by himself,” I said. “And a genius surrounded by idiots is limited. Every genius needs competent people around him, or he will be stunted in what he can do.”

She was silent, watching me closely.

“So ten thousand wizards will have five thousand idiots, and maybe one thousand competent people. That's barely enough to run a society. The muggles have more competent people because they outnumber witches and wizards by six thousand to one. There are a lot of stupid muggles, but there's also a lot of competent muggles out there, which wizardkind doesn't want to acknowledge.”

It was why large high schools tended to field better football teams than small ones. It wasn't that the players on small rural teams were terrible; occasionally there were some really good ones. It was because the available talent pool left coaches with more to pick from. In a class with twenty boys, putting together a football team pretty much involved including everyone who wasn't actually in a wheelchair.

Wizarding Britain had the population of a small town. Worldwide, the Wizarding population would have had a third the population of Jamaica.

“Whatever your thoughts are about the Wizarding world, you have to live in it, dear,” she said. “Perhaps if there are things you do not like, you will work to change them?”

“I will,” I said. “As soon as I have the power.”

“Preferably without murder and mayhem,” she said.

I was silent.

She stared at me and then she sighed.

“Severus tells me that you tend to see these sessions as additional tutoring. These are supposed to
be punitive, and although you have been doing better, you still have to pay for your crimes. After thinking about it, I think I will have you muck out Thestral stalls.”

“The bone horses?” I asked, surprised. “Do they even defecate?”

She didn’t look surprised that I could see them; supposedly only people who had seen death could see them, which made me wonder if I could see them better than anyone else. After all, I had seen more death than anyone in this entire world.

“Not as much as an ordinary horse, but they are living beings, dear. Hagrid has been reinstated as of yesterday, which means that the stalls haven’t been mucked out in a month. I would like you to report to him at his hut and he will show you what to do.”

“I like horses,” I said. I smiled up at her slightly. “Thank you. You could have done something terrible, like having me dust the restricted section in the library.”

She stared at me for a moment, and then gave a startled laugh.

“You’ll have to wait for a naive replacement of Mr. Travers before you get one of those. There’s not a professor in this school who would be that foolish.”

I shrugged. “It was worth a try.”

I’d known she wouldn’t go for it, but since she’d been this decent to me after I’d threatened to murder her students, I’d thought it would be worth a laugh.

“We aren’t done speaking about this,” she said. “Knowing what you’ve gone through, I can only imagine how difficult it might be.”

“You can understand how I might not want to talk about it, either,” I said. “I appreciate the fact that the staff hasn’t spread around what happened to my parents, leaving it up to me just how much I wanted to talk about it... or not.”

“I haven’t heard that you talk about it at all,” she said.

“Even so,” I said.

“Sometimes it is good to talk about these things,” she said.

“I understand the point of therapy,” I said. “But there isn't anyone in Hogwarts, and maybe not anywhere in Wizarding Britain who is trained as a counselor, and a muggle therapist wouldn't be allowed to hear anything about this world.”

She frowned.

“Professor Snape told me on the day that I met him. I don't know why some Squib or minimally competent Wizard doesn't go to school to get a degree ; it looks like Wizards could use counseling.”

“More now than ever,” she murmured faintly.

Was that a comment about me, or about Voldemort? Maybe both? I couldn't really read her meaning.

“Off with you now,” she said. “Rubeus is expecting you sooner rather than later.”
“All right,” I said. Looking up, I asked her, “Is using a pensieve difficult?”

“They are difficult to make,” she said. “But not to use. However, some skill is required to extract the memories. I do not believe that you will be able to break into his office and use the headmaster's pensieve without his assistance.”

I looked up at her, startled.

“I have taught at this school for much longer than you have been alive,” she said. “Which means that I know how young people think. For all that you are a Slytherin, I think you have many qualities of my house, including bravery, but that also means you can sometimes make foolhardy decisions.”

Shrugging, I said, “My decisions seem perfectly logical to me.”

“I'm sure they do, dear,” she said. “The question is whether they will seem the same way in ten years.”

“Judging that would require me to still be here in ten years,” I said. “Which is what I'm trying to do. I'd love to just... what do ordinary Wizards do, anyway?”

“They work for the Ministry,” she said. “Or open their own shop.”

“So government or the private sector,” I said I frowned. “Maybe I could open a private security company? Bodyguards, protecting assets, that sort of thing?”

“It sounds like you'd like to be an auror,” she said.

I shook my head. “They don't get paid enough and nobody likes them.”

“The only people who fear aurors are people who have done something wrong,” she said.

I smirked. “You still believe that. In the hands of a corrupt government, police become thugs and enforcers. In the worst cases, they become agents of terror, who make people disappear to be tortured and then killed. It's endemic in the muggle world, not just in past history, but right now.”

“That wouldn't happen here,” she said.

“Wouldn't it?” I asked. “Can you tell me that there weren't sham trials after the last war, where people who were rich were released because they claimed to be under some kind of curse, while the poor were killed or even worse, Kissed?”

She was silent, frowning.

“When the rich get to make the rules, people lose faith in the system,” I said. “Why follow the rules if you do not think they apply to the fellow down the road?”

“The poor are usually not the ones who revolt,” I continued. “But they usually follow those who are richer, and the problem is that if they win, they tend to become the rich ones, and then the cycle starts again.”

“So cynical for someone of your age,” she said.

“Family murder tends to do that,” I said. “I think Hagrid is expecting me?”

She nodded and I stood up.
“If I need anything, I will call you,” I said. “But I'm doing my best not to need anyone.”

As I left the room, my bugs overheard her murmuring, :That sounds like a lonely life:"

Shoveling thestral crap wasn't the worst detention I could have been assigned, and if I was lucky, I might even be able to find new kinds of bugs I had never seen before. Feces often had weird kinds of larvae in them, and magical feces might have magical larvae.

Or maybe it would just be crap. That was the story of my life, after all.
“I'm not surprised yeh can see em,” Hagrid said. “But I'm kind of sorry that you can. I feel like it's my fault.”

“You think it was the troll?” I asked, surprised.

We were in his hut, having finished the long, sweaty job of cleaning the thestral stalls. I had no idea whether what they would have left behind would be invisible or not; I could see them just fine, so it stood to reason that I could see their manure just as easily.

“Wasn't it, though?” he asked.

I shook my head.

“Death eaters killed my parents and tortured me,” I said. “I thought all the staff knew.”

He stared at me.

“Sometimes they don't share things with me... they think I can't hide a secret.”

I'd cleaned my hands and arms, but I still felt grimy and uncomfortable. Still, Hagrid had been the one to introduce me to the Unicorns, and he was my best bet at getting to see them again, so I needed to stay on his good side.

He shook his head. “That thing with the troll... it shouldn'ta happened. I just didn't think it would...”

“It wasn't,” I said. “I know how to handle myself.”

“Kids yer age always think they do,” he said. “But its not yer job to take care of yerself....not yet.”

“Who else, then?” I asked. “I don't have anybody left, and school is well and good, but the professors won't always be here. I've got to learn to defend myself, just like every witch and wizard.”

“Yeh think it's bad here,” he shook his head. “It's worse out there. There's a lot the papers don't talk about; the Ministry doesn't want people to panic. It's not just muggleborns disappearin.”

“Oh?” I asked casually.

“I shouldn't be tellin ye this, but aurors have gone missin too... and not just muggleborns.”

I nodded.

“And they just vanished, without any sign of where they went,” I said. “What do you think the odds are that it was just a series of unfortunate accidents.”

“That's what some people are sayin... that bein an auror is dangerous, and there's gonna be more losses some years than others. The Headmaster doesn't believe it, though.”

“He shouldn't,” I said. “Muggle wars tend to be about attrition. Whoever has more men and weapons to keep throwing at a problem tends to win. I think it's probably the same with Wizards... except that it's harder to replace a skilled Wizard than it is to build another gun. I'll bet he's getting
rid of the most dedicated aurors too, leaving the ones who are more likely to fall into line for alter.”

Hagrid frowned.

“That means they have to have people inside the aurors organization who know everybody well enough to know who the hardliners are, and who will likely follow the new administration.”

“New administration?”

“Voldemort's planning to take over the Ministry, isn't he?” I asked. “Or replace it entirely, but it's probably easier to take it over first.”

Hagrid winced at my use of the name, then shook his head. “He always wanted to tear it down. That's why he kept attackin the muggles last time; the Ministry spent so much time trying to keep the secret that it came close to collapsing.”

“Well, either way, I bet a skilled auror takes a long time to replace,” I said.

It was why crossbows replaced longbows, and muskets replaced crossbows. They weren't really superior weapons, at least at first, but they were easier to use. A skilled longbowman took years to train, but musketmen could be replaced quickly.

Wizards were closer to skilled bowmen. They took years to become competent with magic, and once they were gone, they were hard to simply slot someone else in. Aurors had an even more specialized skill set.

“Have they been training aurors up over the last few years?” I asked. “Or are there fewer than there used to be.”

“The Ministry's been cuttin back on them,” Hagrid said. “No war, and things were quiet., so they didn't see the need.”

“Presumably his people pushed for that over the years,” I said. “They spent years weakening the Ministry from within, like termites eating away at a house. You can't see the rot on the outside, not until it's too late.”

I was starting to respect Tom Riddle a lot more.

He'd been killed, and yet his servants had been so convinced that he was going to return that they had continued to carry out his plan. Or maybe they hadn't believed he was coming back but a weakened Ministry had fit with their own goals. Either way, it had left him in a batter position once he'd returned.

“You seem to know a lot about wars for a little girl,” Hagrid said.

“You obviously haven't been a little girl,” I said, grinning. “It's a kind of war just getting through every day.”

I carefully set my hot chocolate down. I'd thought the trick with the rock cakes was to soak them in liquids until they were soft enough to be eaten by someone who wasn't at least partially inhuman. I'd been soaking mine for almost half an hour, and they still weren't edible.

“Have you ever seen a pensieve?” I asked.

“Headmaster's got one, I guess.”
“It sounds like a handy thing to have,” I said. “Being able to look over memories. You might be able to catch things you missed.”

“They don't work that good for me,” Hagrid said. “I'm tough against magic.”

“Well, that sounds handy too,” I said. “Which means that you should probably watch out.”

“What? Why?”

“The last war, a lot of people pretended like they were under mind control spells. My bet is that this time, there really will be... unless the Ministry has an easy way to detect those.”

Hagrid shook his head. “If it was easy, people wouldn't have been able to plead out.”

“I'm guessing the people who have gone missing are some of the people who'd be able to resist the spell?”

He nodded slowly.

“So you'd be tough to control?” I asked.

He frowned. “I've had stunners bounce offa me. Nobody ever tried to use the Imperius on me.”

That he remembered. The problem with Masters was that if they could make you forget that you'd been mastered, you'd never really be able to tell if your thoughts were your own. The Master- Stranger Protocols had been the best that the Protectorate could come up with.

I'd had the resistance training, but that was no guarantee that I'd be able to resist magical mind control. These people didn't have anything, as far as I could tell.

It had been bad enough in my world; one in eight thousand people had been parahumans in the more crowded towns, and of those, only a small proportion had been Masters. That meant that there were probably only a few Masters in any given town, and many of them were people like me who could control things that weren't humans.

But in this world, any adult wizard who chose to learn the right spells was potentially a Master. It was illegal, but that had rarely stopped anyone who was determined.

Someone who had a dedicated group of followers who weren't worried about the law could accomplish a lot if they were careful. It was a dangerous strategy; they had to make sure that every single attack went through, and not a single enemy escaped.

They had to keep the aurors from realizing that they had been attacked until it was too late, and they were probably doing this by putting their own people in positions of power, or by controlling the minds of the people who were in power.

If they'd already done everything they needed, there would be no need for secrecy, but for the moment they were likely getting into position.

It was a long term strategy that showed better planning than I'd expected. Everything I'd heard from my listening in to the conversations between the Slytherins in Hogwarts suggested that the Ministry and the Newspapers were the two main sources of power in the Wizarding world.

They didn't have armies, because they didn't have to. Every Wizard had his own weapon, and in an emergency, the women could be called up as easily as the men.
But if rumor was correct, Voldemort had put a curse on the Defense position, which would have crippled the training of years of Wizards. According to the Weasley Twins, a lot of adults couldn't even master a basic Shield spell. That had to be due to years of incompetent teachers.

After all, adults had no trouble with other sorts of magic, the kind taught by Flitwick and McGonagall. It was only in Defense that they were weak.

If that had been part of his plan, I had to appreciate his cunning. He'd essentially neutered the younger members of Wizarding society for ten years or more. Most likely the Pureblood children who were the children of his followers would receive extra, competent instruction in the summers.

“If you're hard to control, then you might end up a target,” I said. “Maybe not now, but eventually. They might try to use the Ministry to do it, too,” I said.

Hagrid scowled. “That happened to me when I was a boy.”

“So be careful,” I said. “I'd like to see the Unicorns again at least once before I die.”

“Get permission from the Headmaster or Mr. Snape, and I'd be happy to take you,” he said.

I nodded. “It's getting late, I'd better get going.”

It was dark as I left Hagrid's hut and started my way back up toward the castle. There was a cold breeze, and I shivered in the October wind. Brockton Bay was cold in the winter, but I didn't have the same kind of warm clothing here as I did there.

Additionally, I was smaller, with less body fat, and that meant that I felt the cold more intensely, especially in the dungeons. I kept meaning to learn the warming charm, but I'd been busy with half a dozen other projects, including learning defensive magic, keeping up with schoolwork and spying on my classmates.

I was making my way up the lawn when I heard a sound behind me. I froze; my bugs weren't seeing anything, but there was an unfamiliar smell.

Suddenly aware of how dark it was, I reached into my fanny pack and pulled out my Bowie knife. I'd heard that some Wizards could disillusion themselves, and it was possible that one was following me right now.

My ears strained to hear any other strange sounds, but the grass was soft, and it would have been very easy for someone to walk silently on it.

I hurried to get to the castle. I'd be safer there from an invisible opponent, if only because their shoes were likely to make noise on the hard floor. I'd also be closer to help if I kept to hallways that had portraits; while they couldn't do anything on their own, they could leave their portraits and get a professor, or the Headmaster.

Dealing with Strangers had always been unpleasant; Aisha had been annoying, but she was on my side.

Disillusionment wasn't taught at Hogwarts, which limited the people it could possibly be. It almost had to be an adult, or at least one of the older students who had picked the spell up somewhere else.

I began to gather a swarm of gnats; here in Scotland they were apparently called midges. It was hard for them to fly in this amount of wind, but I didn't need for them to attack someone. All I
needed for was...

There.

One of my gnats impacted something that it couldn't see, and once it did, it vanished from the sight of the other midges around it. The invisible figure was behind me and to the right, and it was catching up to me rapidly.

I was tempted to attack him, but it was possible that it was only Snape or Dumbledore spying on me. I didn't think that was the case, and if it was an enemy wizard, I'd be in a lot of trouble.

I could use my bugs to create a distraction, but that was a last resort, as it would get rid of my greatest asset in staying alive.

There was one other choice, however.

Reaching into my fanny pack, I grabbed the Peruvian Darkness powder, and I threw it behind me, ducking as a spell flew over my head.

Not Dumbledore then.

I began to sprint for the castle doors even as the darkness spread out behind me. Fighting an adult wizard would be stupid; what I needed to do was to get to a place where there were a lot of people, and there weren't many places like that at this hour.

A spell flashed past me again, but it wasn't well aimed. They were still inside the darkness and were shooting blind. I had several gnats on him or her now, and as I reached the gate, I slipped inside.

He'd expect me to head straight for the doors, but at this hour there wouldn't be anyone in that part of the castle. Instead I sprinted to the left, heading for the greenhouses.

I managed to turn the corner as they moved through the gate.

They'd stopped when I'd dropped the Darkness Powder, probably because they'd assumed that I was going to go on the offense. In retrospect I probably should have, but if they were a decent wizard, I'd have ended up with an unforgivable to the face.

They were heading toward the doors now, slowly. Apparently they expected me to ambush them. That increased the chance that it was someone at the school who was doing it, or at least someone who was receiving letters and information from someone at the school.

My bugs saw a golden light surrounding the area I knew my invisible assailant to be in, and a moment later footprints began to appear on the grass; my footprints. How they knew they were my footprints as apposed to the hundreds of others that had passed through the area on a day to day basis I did not know.

Maybe they were able to demand that it only show the most recent set of footprints.

Cursing under my breath, I sprinted for the side door. It lead into a hallway filled with classrooms to my right. I reached the end of the hall and turned right, just as a spell flew over my head. I had midges on their wand now, so I could tell where they were aiming.
Halfway down the hallway, the entrance to the Headmaster's office presented itself.

“Chocolate cockroaches,” I said, hoping that the password hadn't changed.

The gargoyle let me in, and I quickly made my way up the stairs toward the Headmaster's office.

“Miss Hebert,” Dumbledore said. He was still in his daytime robes.

“I'm being chased by an invisible Wizard,” I gasped.

Not doing more endurance running was proving to be a problem. I doubted that I'd have been able to run much further, and that was terrible considering that this was only a fraction of the distance I'd been able to run in my own body.

He frowned and stood up, leaving the office.

I stared at his flaming bird, who stared back at me, then snapped at one of my bugs. I felt the invisible wizard moving rapidly away, and moments later he was outside of my range.

It was five minutes later when Dumbledore returned. The time seemed to stretch out, and I simply stood and stared at a painting as I kept track of what he was doing with my bugs. The genial, grandfatherly demeanor he affected for the students was gone when he thought that people weren't watching.

Instead he was coldly efficient in his investigations, and I saw glimpses of why he was considered the most dangerous Wizard in all of Britain. Whatever his motives, from his expression I gathered that he took the safety of his students quite seriously, despite the contradiction involved in all the usual dangers in things like flying class and Quidditch.

Finally, he returned, grandfatherly mask back in place.

“I found a set of tracks following yours,” he said. “Although the portraits didn't see anyone following you. They did see the discharge of a wand aimed at you.”

“Did the tracks leave Hogwarts, or did they double back?” I asked.

“I could not ascertain,” he said. “There are spells that can obscure tracks, and they used them.”

“So it wasn't a student,” I said.

If they were able to obscure themselves from Dumbledore, they weren't just a schoolboy. The fact they knew he was coming wasn't as indicative. Apparently almost every British Wizard had gone to Hogwarts; which meant that even the adults would know where the Headmaster's office was.

“I've been wanting to speak to you,” he said. “Would you like a lemon drop?”

I shook my head. I'd heard of Veritaserum, and there were probably other things that could be put in candies that would make it easier for him to interrogate someone. While he didn't seem like the type to drug a student, I couldn't simply assume he was as good as he pretended to be.

“Perhaps you'd like to take a seat.”

I frowned. I'd been wanting to ask him about the pensieve, but I had a feeling that he was intending to ask a lot of questions that I could not answer.
However, if adult Wizards had found me here at Hogwarts, I couldn't simply wait.

I sat down.

“My first question is how you knew there was an invisible person behind you in the first place,” he said.
“I know things sometimes,” I said. “It's part of what kept me alive when I was on my own after my parents were killed.”

That was true in multiple ways.

I stared at my hands. Looking him in the eyes would be a mistake; Dumbledore was supposed to be the most powerful Wizard in Britain, possibly the entire world. It was possible that he could do things with mind reading that weren't in any of the three books I'd read.

None of the books had even had that much detail; I suspected that someone had censored the Hogwarts library, although it was possible that the books were in the Restricted Section.

Dumbledore frowned, staring at me as though I was an interesting puzzle. I could see him perfectly well despite looking at my hands through my bugs.

“Sometimes a young witches' accidental magic does what it has to to keep them alive,” he said. “It's rare for them to be able to use it consciously under the age of eleven, though.”

“I don't think it happened until after the murder,” I said. “If it had... I think things might have gone differently.”

I likely wouldn't have been here at all, and instead another child would be standing here in my place. That wasn't something that I was willing to share; it was possible that Dumbledore would insist on exorcising me to save Millie Scribner, even if she was really already dead.

“You certainly seem rather... competent in the things you do,” he said.

I laughed, and the sound seemed bitter even to my own ears.

“What other choice do I have? Lay down and die? Either I'm better than the people around me, or I'm dead. There's no ground in between.”

“Not even unicorns?” he asked.

I froze, then shook my head.

“Unicorns are a happy dream, but I can't enjoy them unless I'm alive. You know what's out there even better than I do. We don't live in a world where a muggleborn can afford to relax.”

“So let us get back to what happened. Your special sense alerted you that something was wrong,” he said.

“And then I heard a noise,” I said. “Maybe a rock, maybe the sound of a robe swishing. It was quiet at the moment that I heard it, and when there's a sound where there should not be a sound, you take action.”

“I saw the cloud of darkness outside,” he said. “Peruvian Darkness powder?”

I nodded.

“I threw it behind me. If I was wrong I was only out a little powder. I wasn't wrong.”
“I followed your trail,” he said. “You made for the greenhouses. Were you planning to come and see me?”

I shook my head. “I hoped to put him off, but I didn't know about that tracking spell. Once I saw him use it, I ran.”

He was silent for a moment, frowning in thought as though I was an interesting problem to be solved. He obviously wanted to ask me more questions, but he knew that pressing me was likely to make me clam up entirely. What exactly did he want to know from me?

“Most students would not have done nearly so well,” he said. “Nor many adults.”

“I'm not most students,” I said. “Do you have any idea who might have done this?”

“Other than Voldemort's followers, the family of Mr. Avery and the family of three Gryffindor students?” Dumbledore asked. He shook his head, even though I wasn't looking at him. “You've made a lot of enemies, Miss Hebert.”

“So what are you going to do about it?” I asked.

“What I should have done from the beginning,” he said. “I will place anti-intruder charms on the walls and the gates. It will not protect the grounds but it will keep intruders from coming within the walls.”

“You didn't have those already?” I asked in disbelief. “I thought Hogwarts was supposed to be one of the safest places in Wizarding Britain?”

“Part of the reason for that is that most British Wizards consider it sacred ground, Miss Hebert,” he said. “Even during the first war, Voldemort did not attack Hogwarts, and so far it has not been a target... now that it has, steps must be taken.”

“I suppose that means my Hogsmeade weekend is off the table,” I joked, smiling a little.

“It is perhaps fortunate that First years are not allowed to go. There would be a problem in any case as parents are required to sign a permission slip.”

Right. My parents were supposed to be dead.

“Has there been any progress in finding a family to keep me for the summer?” I asked. “I'm planning to stay over the winter for obvious reasons, and I'd be perfectly happy staying here over the summer too.”

“Unsupervised?” he asked. “No, that would not do. Most of the staff have lives outside of the school, and much of those lives are explored when school is not in session.”

I scowled and looked over his shoulder. There were so many books and small objects to look at that it was easy to excuse not looking at him in the eye. I wasn't sure which one was the pensieve. Did he even keep one in his office.

“There are still several candidates to take you,” Dumbledore said. “But I would prefer to keep the decision as to who until we are closer to the summer break. There have been unfortunate incidents involving information at this school.”

“You don't think I'd tell anyone?” I asked. “I understand how important secrecy is.”
“I’m sure you do,” he said. “But you can understand the need for secrets.”

“If I find that they are unsuitable, I’ll likely end up in a culvert somewhere,” I warned him. “Although with what I know about the Wizarding world now, I’d probably do a lot better than I did the first time.”

“Magic performed around young wizards tend to be detected,” Dumbledore said.

“So remove the Trace from me,” I said, looking up at him. I stared at his beard. “It's the only way to be sure that I'm safe.”

“The Trace is inviolable,” Dumbledore said. “And not easily broken, even by me. Only time itself can break it.”

I grimaced, not sure that I believed him.

“There are places that are protected by magic,” Dumbledore said. “That can't be found. Perhaps you will be placed there.”

“And then my guardian is confounded, or mind controlled, and suddenly we're having Death Eaters over for dinner,” I said.

“Secrecy is the best guard against something like that,” he said.

“There doesn't seem to be many other options,” I admitted. “Maybe leaving the country for the summer might help... assuming I haven't angered anyone enough to have them send someone after me.”

He thought for a moment, then nodded.

“Perhaps a grand tour,” he said. “Europe is nice in the summer, and I know some people who are planning just such a trip.”

“Are they people I'd get along with?” I asked suspiciously.

“Does it matter?” he asked. “I think you see yourself as a pragmatist, Miss Hebert, and for the sake of your survival you would put up with even very disagreeable people knowing it was only for a few months.”

I nodded slowly.

“You don't seem as impulsive as other children your age,” he continued. “In many ways, you seem older than you really are.”

I frantically shoved my responses into the bugs in the walls. What did he know?

“But that often happens to children who have been through great trauma,” he said. “They feel that they must be adults, and in your case, that’s not entirely untrue.”

I hid my relief just as I had my moment of panic.

“Still,” he said. “I would like to do more about finding the people who have killed your parents.”

“The pensieve?” I asked.

He stared at me, one eyebrow raised. “You have heard about them?”
“Professor McGonagall mentioned it,” I said. “I'd be perfectly happy to show those memories to you, but I have some concerns.”

“The pensieve requires the consent of the wizard,” Dumbledore said. “Resisting would degrade the images to the point of being incomprehensible. The wizard also chooses the memories that are revealed; should we proceed I will require that you focus on everything you remember from that night.”

“I don’t remember being tortured,” I admitted. “I don't remember anything prior to waking up next to my parents' dead bodies and hearing them talking.”

“It's strange that they would have bothered to Obliviate you,” he said.

“Maybe they didn't,” I said, “Maybe it was just the trauma of what happened that made me not want to remember.”

For all I knew, I really was Millie Scribner, and my accidental magic had simply summoned the memories of Taylor Hebert to replace my own. That was an explanation just as horrifying as the idea that I had taken over the body of a screaming child.

“Perhaps,” he said slowly. “Is this something you are ready to try?”

I nodded.

He pulled out his wand and came to stand next to my chair. “This will not hurt.”

“That means it will hurt,” I said. “When nurses say it won't hurt, it hurts, and when they say it will be a big stick, it doesn't hurt much at all.”

“Then I should tell you it will hurt tremendously,” he said. “And allow you to be disappointed. Instead you will feel a coldness at your temple, and the memory itself will fade somewhat, and become less intense.”

“So you could use it to help people with trauma then?” I asked.

“What?”

“If you can make memories less intense... people who have been through horrible things are sometimes tormented by the memories,” I said. “If you can make them forget, even a little, wouldn't that help them get better?”

He looked startled, and then a moment later, thoughtful.

“Are you speaking about yourself, Miss Hebert?”

His expression didn't seem to be about me at all. Instead he seemed preoccupied and was making conversation just to make conversation.

I shook my head. “I don't remember any of it at all. That's probably why I'm so well adjusted.”

Sometimes a joke could deflect people's attention away from things you didn't want them to talk about. I'd had two years of court mandated therapy, but the Protectorate had continued to place me in stressful situation after stressful situation. Or maybe it had been me who had done that. It had felt like I was damaging myself as fast as the therapists had been healing me.

A small smirk appeared on his lips. “I'm sure that is true. Shall we begin?”
I nodded, and looked down at my hands again.

“I want you to remember the day of your parents' murder.... anything you can remember,” he said
“Focus on that memory, as hard as you can.”

I thought back, and focusing, I felt something cold at my temple. My eyes were closed, but my
bugs saw a sine of something silvery being pulled from my temple. Dumbledore frowned, and then
he put the stuff into a vial.

A moment later it was done. The memory in my head felt.... faded somehow. It was still there, but
it was a shadow of its former self. It was like several years had passed in an instant, and the
memory seemed less important.

Someone who knew what they were doing could change someone's personality like this; remove
traumas, make other things seem more important. There were people back on Earth bet who would
have killed to be able to do this, and it was in the hands of an old man who used it to what,
remember where he'd put his bathrobe?

I opened my eyes, and Dumbledore held the vial up to the light.

He did something, and a moment later a hidden cabinet in the wall sprang open. A podium slid out;
it's top was a metal bowl filled with water.

Stepping toward it, Dumbledore added the silvery strand to the bowl. I found myself steeping
toward it without consciously meaning to.

An image of my own face was swimming around inside the bowl; fortunately it was my new face,
and not my old one.

“What do we do now?” I asked. My voice was hushed. This felt strangely momentous.

“We put our faces in the bowl,” Dumbledore said.

I stared at him, for a moment forgetting to avoid his eyes. Was he really expecting me to put my
face in the same bowl that he had? Was the water cleaned, ever, or had it been used by the
Headmaster and all of the Headmasters before him? Surely it would have evaporated at some
point.

“It's the only way,” he said gently.

I sighed, and I waited a moment, and then I lowered my face into the bowl. I kept an eye on him
with my bugs, and I had one hand on my wand. I saw that he was lowering his face into the bowl as
well, and after a moment I relaxed, as the magic overtook me.

There was blackness surrounding me, but somehow I was able to see Dumbledore surrounding me.

“I think you enjoyed that a little too much,” I heard a voice say.

“A man who doesn't enjoy what he does isn't a man at all,” the second voice said. This voice was
much deeper, and it was raspy. There was a deep rumble to his voice.

I frowned. I didn't remember them saying that, not at all. I listened intensely. The first man had a
tenor voice, with a slightly different accent than what I was used to.

Dumbledore held up his hand, and everything stopped. He frowned.
“The first voice had a West Midlands accent,” he said. “The second has a Yorkshire accent.”

I looked at him in confusion.

“I suppose as an American you cannot tell the difference, but imagine that you heard two men talking, and one was from your South, and the other from New York. You’d be able to tell the difference.”

“Do you recognize either voice?” I asked.

He shook his head.

“I fear that I have seen hundreds of students in my time as headmaster, and even if I remembered all of their voices, adult voices change over time.”

He lifted his hand, and everything started up again.

“It's almost too easy,” I heard the first voice say again. “Killing muggleborns before they get their letters. Why didn't anybody else ever think of this?”

“Because Hogwarts keeps the Book locked up tighter than a Gringott's vault. Even our man inside only got a look at a few names, or we'd be making a clean sweep this year.”

The second man sounded regretful. Now that I knew what the terms meant, I could understand what they were saying better.

I listened as they made their way through the rest of the conversation. The sound at the end I now recognized as the sound of apparation. I hadn't heard it very often, but it was distinctive.

Suddenly the world around us exploded into full color, and we were back in the alley.

The alley was dingy, and Millie's parents were lying on the ground five feet away from me. I looked small from this angle, smaller than I thought of myself as really. It looked like we'd been dressed out for a night on the town.

They hadn't taken anything from her purse. That would have been a clear sign to police that this wasn't a robbery gone wrong.

I rose slowly to my feet and I looked down at them dispassionately. I was staring down at my own arms, and muttering “What the hell?”

I looked down at the people who were supposed to be my parents, and there was no emotion at all on my face. Instead, I walked over to the woman and rummaged around in her purse. I found a pocket mirror, and I opened it, staring at myself.

Running my hands up and down my body, I watched myself do a quick check of my own body, obviously looking for injuries. When I didn't find any, I dug through the woman's bag, and rolled the man over and took his wallet.

It was chilling how blank and lacking emotion my face was.

“Not the reaction of most girls your age to the deaths of their parents,” Dumbledore murmured from beside me.
“I was in shock,” I said.

We watched as I rifled through their wallets, looking at the money and pulling the rings off the woman's fingers and the earrings out of her ears.

“I know this looks bad,” I said. “But I did what I had to in order to survive.”

Taking the man's keys, I headed for the street. I tried several cars before I found the right one, and I slipped into the seat, which was on the wrong side.

I pulled the seat up as far as it would go, and my feet barely reaching the pedals, I started the car and I drove off, somewhat unsteadily.

The vision ended, and suddenly I was pulling my face from the pool. My face was wet, and Dumbledore dried it with a wave of his hand.

I hadn't meant to show as much of that memory as I had. Was this going to cause him to look at me differently?
"I loved my parents," I said. It even had the benefit of being true. The fact that the people on the ground hadn't actually been my parents wasn't something that he needed to know. "I know what it looks like, but I was in shock."

Dumbledore was watching me with a look I couldn't interpret.

How much had he already guessed, and how much had he gotten wrong? He didn't have all the pieces of the puzzle, but people had made intuitive leaps before, and he'd had a long time to learn how to judge people, especially if he was basically able to read minds.

"You seemed rather...focused," Dumbledore said mildly.

“It's how I deal with problems,” I said. “Focus on solutions, and worry about crying later. What should I have done? Sit there and cried?”

“It's what many would have done,” he said.

“They said they had people in the police department,” I said. “That meant that the moment the police reached me, they'd realize I wasn't dead. I'd be dead shortly afterwards. I knew I had to get away.”

“I don't have a lot of experience with driving,” he said. “But I have not seen many children your age behind the wheels of cars.”

“It's more common in rural areas of America,” I said. “Where a child might have to drive a parent to the Hospital if he was bitten by a rattlesnake or suffering from a meth overdose.”

I didn't say that I'd been raised in such an area. If he chose to infer that, who was I to complain?

“And the fact that you didn't recognize the car?”

“It was a rental,” I said. “And my memory was still a little scrambled. Whatever happened to me had left me a little confused, and it wasn't until later that my mind cleared up.”

The best lies were those that had some truth to them. I was still confused about what had happened. Had some higher power placed me in a new body, or had it been Millie's accidental magic looking for someone to avenge her? The worst possibility was that I was in a coma somewhere, either during Golden Morning, or possibly just after the locker.

Maybe my whole career as a villain and hero had been a lie created by a mind that was desperate to have some kind of power, any kind of power over what happened to her.

Dumbledore was silent for a moment. He watched me intently, but I didn't raise my eyes. I watched him carefully through my bugs, though, looking for any sign in his body language about what he was thinking. I didn't get anything, which wasn't surprising. Not only was I not the best at reading body language, he'd had more than a century of learning to hide his.

“You haven't spoken much about your background, Miss Hebert,” he said finally. “You've said that there is no close family in the United States. Not even a grandmother, or a second uncle?”
“I’m the only member of my family that's left in this world,” I said. “There's no one else. You think I'd fight this hard if there was someone who would take care of me?”

I probably would, but he didn't need to know that.

“You have chosen not to share your family situation with your classmates,” Dumbledore said. “And I and the staff have chosen to respect your wishes. Yet is it perhaps unhealthy to bottle up feelings that to all reports you have not yet expressed?”

“I'll cry when I'm dead,” I said. I realized that this sounded a little harsh from the expression on his face, and so I rushed to explain. “I learned a long time ago that crying doesn't do anything but make you look weak, and in this world, looking weak is a good way to get dead. It doesn't mean I don't care.

He was silent, so I continued.

“I'd have been perfectly happy as a Hufflepuff, but the Hat wouldn't let me,” I said. “Isn't it supposed to take student's wishes into account?”

I gave an irritated glare at the Hat, which was sitting on a shelf. It sat there like an inanimate piece of felt. I hadn't forgotten my anger at it; a lot of my problems were a direct result of the Hat's decision. Was it listening to us right now, or was it sleeping?

How much had it already told the Headmaster, and was he playing some kind of game with me? It might serve his interests to pursue the fiction that he didn't know what I was.

“I've never seen anyone who belonged in Slytherin more than you do,” Dumbledore said after a long moment. “Which, contrary to what my opponents may think is not a slur to your character. Slytherins are shrewd and cunning. They are ambitious, and they have highly developed senses of self preservation. What they do not have to be is evil.”

“I'm not evil,” I said. “I care about other people. I'm just not as emotional about it as some.”

“You've chosen to protect the innocent,” Dumbledore said. “Despite the risk to yourself and to your standing. That's a rare quality these days.”

“All that's needed for evil to win is for good men to stand by and do nothing.”

He smiled at me sadly. “If only more people felt that way, I doubt we'd be in the situation we're in at the moment. I would like to show this memory to some colleagues of mine... perhaps they might recognize the voices where I do not.”

“Don't show it to aurors,” I said. “I've heard they have people in the Ministry, and if aurors find out that I'm not dead, they'll redouble the attempts on my life.”

“Your existence is public record,” Dumbledore said. “And you have already made enough of a splash that every parents of a Hogwarts student undoubtedly knows about you, as well as the friends and family of those parents. I'd say that you are probably the most famous child of your age who is not involved in Quidditch, or of course Harry Potter.”

“I haven't put it out that my parents were murdered,” I said. “Which means that if the Death Eaters find out, then the person who is revealing the name must be one of the people here who told them.”

Dumbledore looked dubious. It seemed obvious to me.
“One would presume that they would know whom they had murdered,” he said. “Else they would not be murdering.”

“Would they really remember the names of those who they killed? Muggleborns aren't actually people to them.” I said. “What's another mudblood to them?”

He winced at the epithet, but nodded his head.

“My face might be a different matter,” I said. “Which is why I plan to stay out of the papers, or at least not to have my picture posted.”

“Perhaps that would be wise,” he murmured.

I was silent for a moment. “If they really have infiltrated the aurors, it would be easy for them to call me in for questioning, and then have an unfortunate “attack” on the way to the Ministry. I get killed, along with whatever Ministry stooge that is guarding me but not working for them, and they kill two birds with one stone.”

“You have a rather pessimistic view of the world,” Dumbledore said.

“I'd say I'm never disappointed,” I said. “Although I am occasionally pleasantly surprised.”

Dumbledore shook his head sadly. “I had hoped to be able to provide you with seven years of education that are to be some of the best years of your life. Hogwarts is meant to be a haven from the outside world.”

“That's not realistic,” I said. “The world outside moves on, and the things that affect students' families affect them as well. From what I understand the country is close to war again.... possibly an attempted coup, or possibly a civil war. Hogwarts isn't going to be able to stay neutral from that.”

He stared at me for a moment. “You seem well educated in politics.”

“My mother was a professor,” I said. “It certainly wasn't because of my school.”

She was an English professor, but she'd taught me how to read and think for myself. Also, the Wards had been forced to take classes in political science, because understanding the dynamics of how people worked together was helpful when dealing with the interplay between multiple gangs.

“And because you grew up in a place where the rule of law was weak, where children had to protect themselves and where authorities at school failed you, you believe that it is your responsibility to care for yourself.”

Apparently he'd been paying more attention to the tidbits I'd let slip to my classmates than I'd expected, or maybe he was extrapolating. Hopefully he wasn't as good at it as Lisa.

“Isn't it?” I asked. “Old people look back at childhood as being this wonderful time, but that's because all they remember is the high points. It's just as terrible as the rest of people's lives, just in different ways.”

“I'd say there was wonder in each stage of life,” Dumbledore said. “And I've experienced almost all of them.”

“I'd like to live to be as old as you,” I said. “Maybe even as old as the Flamels, assuming I could keep my health and my vitality. But the only way for that to happen is for the people who are
trying to kill me to stop doing that, and that's not going to happen unless they are dead or in Azkaban.”

He looked as though he wanted to argue, but he didn't say anything.

“So if you would find out who is doing the murders, and who here is informing them, then maybe I could enjoy my childhood.”

Dumbledore sighed, and then said, “I will escort you back to your rooms, and then I will begin the additional security preparations to protect the school. I expect that I will have a long night tonight.”

“I stink,” I said. “So I'll probably need a bath first, but I'll be going to bed as soon as I can afterwards. I actually like thestrals. They're a little strange looking, but they seem gentle.”

Our trip through the hallways was quiet and he escorted me down to the dungeons.

“Back from detention, Miss Hebert?” Snape asked, stepping out of his office as we approached.

“Miss Hebert's detention was rather more exciting than any of us expected, through no fault of her own,” Dumbledore said. “Perhaps once Miss Hebert is safe in her rooms, we can discuss some things.”

“I got to see horses eat a dead cow,” I said brightly, smiling widely.

“Enjoying life's little pleasures, Miss Hebert?” Snape drawled. He waited until I turned around to shudder.

They escorted me to my rooms, and I waited for them to leave and then I gathered my toiletries and prepared for my bath. The Headmaster's office was within my range from the bathroom, if only barely, and I wanted to hear what the both of them had to say.

As I ran my bath, I listened in to Snape and Dumbledore as they walked through the hallways heading for the office.

“Miss Hebert was attacked on her way back from her detention, by a disillusioned attacker on the grounds.”

“I presume the attacker is not dead?” Snape asked. “Given her usual methods I would have expected to see more blood.”

“For once, Miss Hebert decided to do the prudent thing, and she used Peruvian Darkness powder to escape.”

“Being ambushed by someone who is disillusioned isn't something most Witches would survive.”

Dumbledore said, “She says she sometimes just knows things, and that this sense gave her enough warning to act.”

“She does seem to have a preternatural ability to know things she shouldn't know,” Snape said. “Although it does not fit with the usual pattern of Seer's ability.”

“Perhaps given her unusual drive to survive, it is a form of accidental magic that she has chosen to develop into an unusual kind of skill.”

Snape just looked thoughtful.
“The intruder's tracks headed off the grounds, but it's possible that they circled back. I've taken the liberty of waking all the portraits, and I've got them watching for any disturbances that might indicate a disillusioned intruder, especially at the entrances to the House Dormitories. I've got the House Elves doing a head count now.”

When had he had a chance to do all that? He hadn't been outside of my range for very long. Maybe he'd done it while I was watching him.

I'd heard it was possible to do silent, wandless magic, but if it was true, then this was actually impressive. He'd sent messages without my being aware of it, which was concerning on a lot of levels.

“Miss Hebert also consented to give me pensieve memories of the night she woke after the attack on her and her parents. I have viewed that memory, and I'm inclined to think that I may have misjudged your opinion of her.”

“Oh?” Snape asked neutrally.

“Take a look at it, and tell me if you recognize the voices of the perpetrators,” Dumbledore said.

I luxuriated in my bath as I listened to them going through the motions of their investigations. Apparently all of the students were where they were supposed to be, except me. That was a relief; if meant that the perpetrator was someone outside the castle.

Snape and Dumbledore spent the better part of an hour casting spells on the walls and gates, and by that time I was in my bed and struggling not to fall asleep. I still struggled sometimes with my body's needs.

Figuring out a way to do endurance running was going to be a challenge. It would be years before I was able to transfigure a treadmill, and I doubted that the castle staff would let me put one in my room.

I needed a solution.

The stairs in Hogwarts might have kept my waistline relatively thin, but it hadn't done anything for my long distance running ability. Yet it sounded like the spells they were casting weren't able to cover the grounds, only the walls and the gates of the castle.

My other option would be to run up and down the stairs in the girl's quarters. It would be monotonous, but it might do the trick, at least until the girl's started complaining.

Finally I heard Snape and Dumbledore returning to the Headmaster's office.

I watched as they both placed their faces in the bowl, and I wondered what kind of defenses they had to protect themselves. If I'd wanted to assassinate them both, I could have done it easily, assuming I'd been a little closer. I actually wasn't sure how long it took to view a pensieve memory. Was it in real time. Or was it at the speed of thought?

It seemed to be in real time, which was dangerous as far as I was concerned. Maybe Dumbledore had some kind of protections set about for when he was vulnerable like this; I certainly would have, even in the sanctum of my own office.

After what seemed like a long time, but could have only been a couple of minutes, they both stood up, gasping.
“Avery and Selwyn,” Snape said grimly. “They wouldn't have done this on their own, but as far as I know, the Dark Lord hasn't put out a general call to arms.”

“Perhaps they have decided to show some initiative to win his favor,” Dumbledore said. “And climb in the ranks.”

“Maybe,” Snape said. “Or perhaps the Dark Lord is being careful in how he is issuing orders. If he keeps most of the organization from knowing what the rest is doing, then he can more easily ascertain who any moles are.”

“A troubling thought,” Dumbledore said. “One that we must consider at length. On the other hand, what do you think of Miss Hebert's behavior.”

“My opinion of her hasn't changed,” Snape said. “Despite the appearance of being an innocent eleven year old child, she is a dangerous person. Given sufficient time and training in magic, I suspect that she could rival Bellatrix, or perhaps even the Dark Lord in how dangerous she is.”

“Do you think she is lost?” Dumbledore asked, and for once there was no trace of grandfatherly kindness or anything in his voice. There was just cold calculation.

I had an uneasy feeling that Snape's response was very important. If the most powerful Wizard in Britain thought that I was going to be the next Voldemort, what would he do? It was like encountering Hitler as a toddler.

I'd read a story once about a man who'd let a German soldier go during World War One, a soldier who had been a young Hitler. The man had regretted it for his entire life.

Was that what Dumbledore was thinking about?

Snape was silent for a moment.

“I think her fears would not be what they are if she were,” he said. “I suspect that she wishes to be a good and kind child, but it is not in her nature. That doesn't mean that she plans to become a Dark Lord... I rather suspect that she'd rather not bother, and that she'd only attempt it if she felt she had no other choice.”

“And what would make her feel that way?”

“If she felt that the Dark Lord was becoming ascendant, or if she felt threatened. Otherwise, she would be content to remain where she is and bother no one as long as she is not attacked.”

“Very much your House's namesake, Severus?”

“Ironic, isn't it,” Snape said dryly. “The muggleborn snake ascendant. That would make the old guard have an apologetic fit.”
Halloween

“For reasons that I am sure many of you understand, it has become necessary to make some changes that are effective immediately,” Dumbledore said at breakfast the next day.

“The outside doors and walls have been warded against intruders. Those who are Hogwarts students will still be able to get inside, but those who are not will require permission to enter. This includes parents, Ministry officials and aurors.”

The crowd around me burst into low murmurs at that. Dumbledore waited a moment until the murmurs died down.

“Students are not to be on the grounds after dark,” he called out. “First and second years are not to be out on the grounds at all without being accompanied by at least one older student.”

I understood the reasoning behind what he was saying, although I heard an angry murmur from the younger students. It didn't seem to bother the older students as much, although many of them seemed confused.

“An intruder attempted to attack a Hogwarts student last night on the grounds,” Dumbledore said. “He remains at large.”

I saw several of the Slytherins looking at me. I carefully kept my face neutral. It was well known that I had detention last night, and I was sure that several of them were going to ask questions of me the moment the meal was over, if not before.

“The news is not all bad, however,” Dumbledore continued. “Tonight is the night of the Halloween Feast, and I can confirm that the Dancing Skeletons will be in attendance.”

An excited murmur sprang up from all around me. Considering that ghosts were an everyday occurrence here, I couldn't understand why dancing skeletons would be considered such a big deal. I still suspected that Dumbledore had hired them in an effort to defuse tensions around the school. From what I was hearing around me, it might not have been the worst idea he ever had.

“Secondly, the ghosts are having an after party. Those students who wish to attend must receive the permission from their head of house, although I think that in this case they may be lenient.”

Dumbledore smiled genially at the crowd. “With any luck, this will be the best Halloween celebration since last year!”

He waved and sat down.

“Hebert,” Draco demanded. “What happened last night?”

He was on the other side of Pansy. He'd made sure to always keep at least one student between me and him at all times for the past few weeks. Whether this was because he thought it would give him more time to go for his wand, or to preserve the illusion that we didn't have anything to do with each other, I didn't know.

I shrugged.

“I haven't heard about anybody dead,” he said. “It was you that got attacked, right?”
“I didn't see anybody coming back from Detention last night,” I said, which was technically true, even if not true in principal.

He deflated.

“It's not like it'll make much of a difference,” I said. “It wasn't like you spent a lot of time by the lake anyway.”

“I see enough of it from the bottom,” he said dismissively. “Why would I want to sit outside?”

“So does anybody know what they are serving tonight?” I asked. “I've been smelling pumpkin all morning.”

“You wouldn't believe how many things they can make with pumpkins,” Millie said enthusiastically from her seat on the other side of me.

Draco made a face. Apparently he didn't like some of the offerings.

Pansy made an oinking sound, and I cast a stinging jinx at her. I had my wand in my lap.

She jerked upward, and turned to glare at me. “You shouldn't encourage her. She'll never find a husband if she keeps eating like that!”

“I'd ask what business it is of yours,” I said cool, “But what if she wants something more than being the wife of some pureblood?”

“Well, it's not like it's an option for you,” Pansy said. “Somebody would have to be crazy to get married to you. You'd end up with more husbands than Blaise's mom, dead because they forgot to pick up their socks.”

I noticed that she didn't say I was unmarriagable due to being a mudblood. From Pansy that was actually a sign of progress. Or maybe it had finally sunk in that I didn't punish when criticisms had truth to them.

Not that I expected to have a lot of husbands. The thought of dating right now was... unappealing for a lot of reasons. I couldn't date any of these children, even if I'd had my original body because even those who were almost the age that I had been once were still children in terms of life experience.

Anyone adult who would date me underage wasn't someone I would contemplate either.

Even when I got older, there were things about the Wizarding mindset that didn't seem like they would make for a good partner. I'd need an equal before I became interested, and there weren't many people in this world I felt like that about.

Any, really.

“I might go into government,” I said. “And take Millie with me.”

“Muggleborn never get anywhere,” Pansy said, authoritatively. “You've got to know the right people to get anywhere in the Ministry, and they.... don't.”

“You think that would stop me?” I asked.

“You'd have to murder half the Ministry, and then they'd put you in Azkaban,” she said. “The Headmaster wouldn't be able to protect you from that.”
“We'll see,” I said, more to get a rise out of Pansy than for any other reason.

I caught Draco giving concerned looks at me.

Ignoring him, I waited until the meal was over before rising and following Hermione, who was rushing out of the hall. She'd been doing that ever since the unveiling of my boggart, and she'd been making all kinds of excuses to keep from talking to me. She'd even started missing training sessions.

However, I knew exactly where she was going through my bugs, and I slipped after her in the crowd.

She was slipping out to the courtyard. I followed her, and managed to get ahead of her. I stepped out in front of her, and before she could say anything, I pulled her behind one of the pillars.

“You've been avoiding me,” I said.

“I haven't,” she said, but she was avoiding my eyes, as though she thought I was capable of legillimancy. Maybe she thought I could. She also looked as though she was ready to bolt any minute.

“You have,” I said. “Neville and Mildred are still showing up for training, but we haven't seen you for a while.”

“I've been busy with my studies,” she said.

It was an obvious excuse, and I could see color rising to her cheeks. She knew that I knew she was lying, and she couldn't come up with any better excuses?

“I wouldn't hurt you,” I said. “I know that seeing my Boggart was traumatic, but...”

It was what I'd been worried about. Seeing what I really was, had it frightened her to the point that she didn't want to be my friend any more?

She looked up hurriedly. “It's not that!”

Other than my Bogart, I couldn't see anything that I had done that would have driven her away. I hadn't heard of any hint of her being overtly bullied, even if she did tend to be ignored by her classmates. Would she have been bullied without her association with me? There was no way for me to know.

“Then why not come back?” I asked.

“Why would you want me to?” Hermione asked. She looked up. “After I was so disloyal?”

“You mean your Boggart?” I shook my head. “That didn't mean anything. We've all got weird little fears that we can't control.”

“It was a stupid thing for me to worry about,” she said. “And unexpected. I was expecting McGonagall telling me that I'd failed out of school or something, not that.”

“Travers was a jerk to make us show out boggarts in public.” I scowled. “What if someone had something really embarrassing, or even damaging, like it turned out their father was a Death Eater or something?”
“I heard that all the other classes got to do their Boggarts behind a screen, with only him to see,” Hermione said. She sniffed. “I was afraid that you were disappointed in me, and I didn't want to face that.”

“If I didn't want you back, I wouldn't ask you,” I said. “You know me well enough for that.”

She nodded.

“So I'll see you at the ghost's party tonight?” I asked.

She hesitated, then nodded. “I find them really fascinating. Do you think that they are really just copies of the person they once were, or do you think there's something left of the original?”

“That's a question I ask myself every day,” I said. I smiled wryly even though I wasn't actually joking.

After all, what was I other than the ghost of a once living person. I'd heard a discussion about continuity of consciousness once, and since I'd woken in my new body, it was one that had haunted me.

It was the Star Trek Transporter problem; if you were disassembled and then reassembled somewhere else, were you still you?

Or had the original you been killed and a copy been created elsewhere? The copy would think it was you, and to the rest of the world it would be you, but the original would still be just as dead.

Was I just an imprint?

I patted Hermione on the shoulder and said, “And come back to training. How else are we going to keep ahead of all the idiots?”

She nodded, then frowned.

“That thing last night, with the intruder... did that happen to you?”

I shrugged. “I've made some enemies.”

“You were attacked by an adult wizard last night?” her voice rose, almost to a shriek, and I winced. Nobody had been listening in on our conversation according to the bugs, but I could see several heads snapping around now.

“They didn't manage to land a hand or a spell on me.”

“You were serious about the Death Eaters trying to kill muggleborns,” she said, looking at me with horrified eyes.

“Me more than most, but yeah,” I said. “You're probably OK here, but summertime might be a good time for your family to take a trip abroad. Things are likely to get nasty. That's why I want you to keep up with the lessons.”

“We can't use spells outside of school,” she said.

“In self defense it's OK...and even if it's not, the possibility of Azkaban is better than the surety of being dead.”

Staring at me for a moment, her lips tightened and she nodded.
“If someone comes for you, they're going to expect a first year... helpless and defenseless. You won't be able to beat an adult Wizard yet, but if you can get away, that will be good enough.”

I was going to have to work with her and Neville and Mildred on tactics, on using improvised weapons, on being me, essentially. Because eventually the people around me were going to learn their lesson. They'd learn that I wasn't easy meat, and they'd save their attack for whenever they thought they had overwhelming firepower.

“Classes are starting soon,” Hermione said.

I nodded.

We separated on better terms than we'd started, although I suspected that Hermione was still a little guarded around me.

The rest of the day was a normal school day, although I did hear that Ron Weasley had managed to make a girl in Hufflepuff cry. His brothers had vowed to make him regret it when I'd seen them at lunch.

The scent of pumpkin grew stronger throughout the day, and the sense of excitement grew as the end of the day got closer and closer.

Finally, it was time for the feast.

Jack-o-lanterns were everywhere, their surfaces carved into a variety of faces. I noticed that the faces at the Slytherin and Gryffindor tables tended to be a little more demonic, and the ones at the other two tables tended to be much friendlier.

These people made all kinds of assumptions based on house preference.

Clouds of bats flew overhead, swarming and making the lights glitter and sputter as they flew near to the pumpkins.

The bats were real; I could tell because they were eating my bugs, which made me a little uneasy. It limited my vision and was bringing me back to normal, at least within the hall. I'd have to be more on my guard that usual here.

I kept my face blank and showed no signs that I was on edge.

It really did look beautiful though. Everything was dark and made up in orange and black.

The food was as good as it always was, with an obvious pumpkin theme. There were pumpkin juice, pumpkin pasties, pumpkin pie and pumpkin scalloped potatoes. I hadn't tasted the last before, but I decided I liked them.

Millie seemed to love it, but Draco was making faces at everything. I suppose he wasn't a fan.

The good thing was that no one asked me about the intruder. They knew me well enough to know that I wasn't likely to say anything more about it.

Finally the plates were cleared away, and the Headmaster had us stand. He made the huge, heavy tables vanish with a flick of his wand, and he had us back away from the place where the Professors usually sat.
I heard a strange drumming in the distance. It was thunderous, and it seemed to resonate in my bones. It took me a moment to realize that the doors to the outside were opening, and skeletons were dancing their way inside.

Several of them had trumpets, and I had no idea how they were blowing them without lungs. Others were beating on their own rib cages with what looked like their own bones.

There were male and female skeletons; I’d seen enough bodies to know the difference. Some had flutes that were also made of bone and some had panpipes made of the same material. It should have made a godawful noise, but somehow they made it work in a harmonious whole.

The people around me were cheering and stomping their feet. I felt a little anxious in the crowd without my bugs to give me warning, so I forced my way to the front. Hermione was standing beside me, and she was grinning widely.

This was exactly the kind of thing she'd expected when she'd decided to come to a school of magic; I could see it on her face.

The skeletons were assembling something now; they were pulling bones from their fellows and making something that reminded me a little of a throne, except that the remaining skeletons began to bang their bones against it with a drumming rhythm, and whenever they hit it in different places it made different noises.

The crowd went wild around me, and I found myself grinning along with everyone else.

I'd never actually been to a concert before. I'd spent most of my waking hours over the past two years before my death training, tracking the Slaughterhouse Nine and preparing for the end of the world.

Excitement was contagious, and I found my foot tapping in spite of myself. The music was good, a strange combination of rock and something else that I hadn't heard before. I hadn't bothered to listen to a lot of music, though, not since Emma had betrayed me, and so this was a strange sensation for me.

I was the only one who wasn't dancing by now. Slytherins and Gryffindors were dancing side by side, and I could see Dumbledore beaming. This had been his plan all along; did these skeletons have some kind of magic that made their music so entrancing, or were they simply that good. Was it mass hysteria, or was everybody just having a good time.

Almost beyond my own volition, I found myself starting to dance along with everybody else. Dancing wasn't something I'd done since Emma either.

It was strange that I'd denied myself music and dance; I could have blamed Emma, but I'd been the one to abandon it.

There was a strange sensation in my chest; it was something that I'd almost forgotten, and it took me a little while to remember what it was.

Was I having fun?

When the universe was at stake fun had been the last thing on my mind. Before that, I'd been obsessed with Emma and Sophia and Madison.

The last time I'd really let loose and had fun was when I was the age my body was now, and I knew I wasn't really that good of a dancer. Hermione was doing better than I was, and she was terrible.
Neville actually wasn't doing too bad, and Draco looked like he'd been born to dance. I made sure to keep a distance from myself and others; without my swarm sense it would be easy to get stabbed in the crowd.

Despite that niggling worry, the rest of my mind was swept away, and for the first time in a long time, I let loose and actually enjoyed myself.

I'd been mourning for a long time without knowing it. I had mourned the loss of my innocence.

Maybe now was the time, even if only for a short while, to get a little of it back.
“I'm not sure about this,” Myrtle muttered.

After two hours of the Dancing Skeletons, I was tired and I found myself wanting to head off to my room and rest. But I'd promised Myrtle, which meant that I had to at least make an appearance.

“You were the one who wanted to go,” I said. “Do you want to back out?”

Myrtle sniffed. “You just want to go back and spend time with all your living friends.”

“That's not true,” Hermione said. She'd somehow managed to drag Neville and Mildred along for the ride. “I'm very interested in seeing what ghosts do for a party.”

“I've heard,” Neville said. “Which is why I brought this.”

He held up a can of... something.

“What's that?” Mildred asked.

“Ghosts love to get the smelliest foods they possibly can for their parties... they think if it's strong enough they can almost smell it, and maybe taste it a little,” Neville said. “This is Surstromming; it's supposed to be the smelliest food in the world.”

“That's.... really thoughtful,” I said. I hadn't bothered to bring anything. “Did we bring anything, Mildred?”

“Oh.... it's Millicent,” Mildred said. “And no....I didn't think any of the ghosts could carry any presents.”

We were heading for one of the roomier dungeons, and through my bugs I could see that they'd gone all out in decorating it. There were black candles everywhere that were giving off a bluish glow, and there was a raised dais on which ghostly musicians were playing ghostly instruments. It was an eerie, yet somehow beautiful music.

The Dancing Skeletons were there, and ghosts swarmed around them, talking excitedly to them in little clumps around each of the Skeletons. There was a table covered in rotting food; ordinarily my insects would have been thrilled by this, but the cold was making them sluggish. Ghosts were passing through the food, as though they'd be able to regain their lost senses of taste, even if just for a moment.

There was a chandelier above that practically glowed with a thousand candles shining blue. There were hundreds of ghosts, most of whom were dancing a waltz.

I pulled out my wand, and immediately Hermione and the others were on guard.

“It's going to be cold,” I said. I cast a warming charm on myself and then on the others. Hermione had mastered the charm, but the others still weren't able to do it. It had already been handy on a couple of colder days in the Dungeons, although Snape didn't like it around certain potions; apparently the ambient temperature sometimes had an effect on the ingredients.

I was learning to exclude parts of my body from the warming charm as a result; it wasn't something that I'd figured out any other use for, but Hermione seemed to think that older students might even
be willing to pay for the spell, although she recommended waiting until winter, when the price would be higher.

As we stepped into the Dungeon, I saw Nearly Headless Nick floating up to us. He was scowling at Myrtle.

“She's with me,” I said. “My plus one.”

He looked at me, and for a moment it looked as though he wanted to argue. Finally, he said, “As long as you keep her from causing trouble like she did last year.”

Turning to her, he said, “Keep your moaning to yourself. Nobody likes a Deathday downer.”

“It's someone's Deathday?” Neville asked. He seemed to know a great deal about the life and times of ghosts.

“Mine!” Nicholas said proudly. “We're just combining it with the Dancing Skeleton after-party. Such an honor.”

There were actually a few living students mixed up with the ghosts. Most of them were Ravenclaws, probably lured here for the same reason Hermione had come. They were mostly ignoring the ghosts and focusing on the Skeletons.

“So does anyone know what's up with the Skeletons?” I asked as Nicholas turned to leave. “Are they like ghosts, or are they enchanted artifacts, or what? They're great musicians, and if magic can do that... I'm really impressed.”

“I heard that it was due to a magical accident,” Hermione said. “Killed an entire dance troupe, but not all the way. They decided to make the best of it, and they've been more successful since they died than they ever were when they were alive.”

“Ghosts envy them,” Myrtle said, staring at the closest skeleton. “They get to actually touch things, and some people even say they can still smell things, even though they don't have noses.”

“That's an unsubstantiated rumor,” a nearby ghost said. “And they aren't talking.”

The Skeletons could talk, which made sense. If they could blow a trumpet, they could do most of the work involved in talking.

Neville held up his can. “Where do I put this?”

I pointed at the table. He walked over to the table, found an empty plate and he opened the can.

Those students closest to him started to gag and back away, although the ghosts began to gather round. Neville looked a little green at the gills.

My bugs were suddenly all wide awake and excited.

Considering that I could start to smell it from where I was at, I decided to stay on this side of the room for a while. I could hear Hermione gagging along with most of the others, and I purposefully kept my face neutral. Pushing my response into my bugs wasn't that hard.

“You should dance,” I said to Myrtle.

“What?” she asked. “Nobody would....”
“There's more male ghosts here than female,” I said. “Which means that your chances are pretty good.”

Here I was acting like an expert on dances. I'd never actually been to one. Before Emma I'd been too young. After my bullying I'd become a recluse. Once I'd become Skitter...well, there hadn't been time to dance, and that was even more true once I'd become Weaver.

Letting go on the dance floor had been strangely cathartic, and I could understand how people might enjoy it.

Approaching the nearest skeleton that wasn't surrounded by people, I said, “You guys are great!”

His head turned toward me; there was a dim glow deep in the back of his eye sockets, but his body language didn't seem hostile, at least insomuch of a body as he had.

“Thank you,” he said. His voice was strangely deep. “I am Billy Bones.”

“Bones...isn't that a little on the nose?” I asked.

“It is a stage name,” he said. “We have chosen to leave our old identities behind, and to reinvent ourselves. It is something you are familiar with, yes?”

I froze, a chill going down my spine.

“What do you mean?”

“You are the mystery American,” he said. “The one no one knows anything about. Troll slayer and the Demon Witch of Hogwarts.”

“People are calling me that?”

“Even we've heard of you,” he said. “And we're famous.”

I scowled.

While it made sense that the parents of the students would have gotten letters about me, it didn't make sense that I was that well known. Of course, Wizarding Britain was the equivalent of a small town, and people in small towns liked to gossip, but it was inconvenient nonetheless.

I already had at least one Death Eater after me. I suspected that it was Avery; the boy I'd dunked in the boil potion had been his nephew and there was likely some resentment there. For all I knew the younger Avery was already a Death Eater.

He leaned forward. “There's something in your eyes, though...I cannot tell what it is.”

I'd seen ghosts staring at me often enough that it had made me a little paranoid. I quickly dropped my eyes. I doubted that a skeleton was a legilimens, but it wasn't impossible. After all, he'd once been a Wizard. He didn't seem to be carrying a wand, but wandless magic was possible.

“We are envied and pitied at once, creatures of two worlds,” Billie Bones said. “Better than ghosts, but not really quite human. I'm sure you have felt the same, as a muggleborn in the house of the snakes.”

“I'm not envied,” I said. “Feared sometimes, but envied?”

“People envy power. They may not say that they do, but it is true. The Slytherins respect and envy
power even more than the other houses do. I suspect that you have found them easier to deal with of late, yes?”

I nodded slowly.

“You were Slytherin?” I asked.

“Muggleborn, once,” he said, but he nodded. “It wasn't always the house it is now. There was a time when a muggleborn could join, and while there was always some stress, you could make your way as long as you proved yourself. That's not how it is now, I hear... except for you.”

“I was afraid I was going to have to make some new ghosts before they left me alone,” I admitted. “Which would make my next six years at school a trifle awkward.”

I didn't have anything in my arsenal to deal with ghosts, and from what I had seen, they tended to carry grudges for a very long time.

Was that a problem Voldemort had? Did the ghosts of his victims haunt him, or did Wizards have something like the ghost traps in Ghostbusters to get rid of annoying spirits from the astral plane?

“You won't have an easy time of it,” he said. “Not with what's coming. War is on the horizon and everybody knows it. This is our last gig in Britain; we will be taking an extended world tour until this is all over.”

“It's that bad?”

“You-know-who's people have even less liking for nonhumans than they do the muggleborn. They're perfectly willing to use those who seem useful, but the rest? If he wins, things are likely to become uncomfortable.”

“Why doesn't anyone do anything then?” I asked. “Voldemort may be the second most powerful Wizard in Britain, but his people aren't.”

“Who is better at fighting? A law abiding citizen, or a criminal? I'm sure you've seen that in the muggle world as well.”

I nodded.

“The Death Eaters fight often and they fight well, and most Wizards simply wish to be allowed to live their lives in peace. They depend on the aurors to protect than, and there are not enough aurors to do what must be done.”

I frowned.

It was the guerrilla warfare problem.

A society tended to be be large and to have fixed locations, places where the enemy could attack with every confidence that their target would be there.

Guerrilla soldiers tended to vanish into the mist, to attack and then disappear. It was worse if they received support from the local population, which was almost always the case in muggle conflicts.

Voldemort's people didn't need that kind of support. If they were smart, Wizards could supply almost everything they needed themselves, and what they couldn't supply, such as food, they could get from the muggles.
In a way they were like Cape villains. They did their crimes while disguised and then they melted into the general population.

The best way to address guerrilla warfare was to keep the populace happy so that it never arose in the first place. That ship had already sailed.

The purebloods felt threatened by the muggleborns, in part because they were trying to change things. They threatened the power of the old order, and people always became anxious and tended to lash out when they thought that their position in society had become precarious.

I couldn't see a solution to it, other than to simply burn the whole thing down and start again, and I wasn't exactly in a position to do that.

“IT was nice speaking to you,” Billy Bones said, “But I have promised a young lady a dance.”

An older Ravenclaw approached, looking at me uncertainly before Billy took her hands and they joined the dancers out on the dance floor.

They weren't the only ones; I saw Mildred....er Millicent dancing with one of the skeletons. They made a weird looking pair.

Myrtle was dancing with an older ghost wearing what looked like medieval armor. I hadn't seen an expression of happiness on her face before, and she actually looked almost pretty.

Hermione sidled up to me.

“There are ghosts here that are over a thousand years old!” Hermione said. “I've spoken to some of them! They've got some amazing stories to tell, although none of them want to talk about how they died.”

“Would you?” I asked, looking at her. “It's probably best not to ask. It's like asking someone about being bullied, except even worse.”

She stared at me for a moment, and then nodded.

“This is what I thought coming to Hogwarts was going to be like,” she said, looking around. “Not...”

“Bullying and death threats?” I shook my head. “People are the same all over, whether they are Wizards, Witches or Muggles. They're petty and they fight among themselves. Give them a little power and its even worse.”

She glanced at me. “You're really cynical to be eleven.”

“Says the twelve year old,” I said. “It must be nice to have all that extra, worldly experience.”

Scowling, she shoved me a little. “Not everybody had to carry a knife to school.”

I shrugged. “Must have been nice to go to a school where there wasn't a constant threat of being stabbed.”

We were both quiet after that.

I didn't dance with anyone that evening; the ghosts were a little too spectral for my tastes, and the Skeletons were monopolized by the older students. I'd never really waltzed anyway.
Still, we stayed a couple of hours, and eventually the evening ended to everyone's satisfaction. I was exhausted by that point, a situation that seemed to happen more and more these days. Maybe it was the mental strain I was suffering from always having to be on my guard.

Mildred went straight to bed, but I felt sweaty and so I prepared for my bath. As I slipped into the warm water, I closed my eyes.

The Death Eaters were going to attack me over the summer; at the very least they'd be waiting at the Train Station. I was going to have to come up with a plan to deal with that. Most likely, I'd have to coordinate the plan with whoever Dumbledore chose to be my guardian.

What bothered me was that I could probably slip away before they caught me, but the train station would be the perfect place to stage an attack on the muggleborn. They would never have a better opportunity to get that many muggleborn in that small of a space at once.

The train station had aurors, but if they had people in the Ministry, they could use the Imperius spell on the aurors before they ever left for work.

If I was running Voldemort's organization, and I hated the muggleborn, that's what I would do. It would make the perfect starting place to set off the war, and it would make the Ministry's job of maintaining secrecy incredibly difficult.

The Ministry would probably arrange for it to be seen as a terrorist attack, but that would involve muggle investigators and would be harder to cover up.

Would the Ministry be able to continue maintaining secrecy in the future? Cell phones were already ubiquitous by my time, and they had kept getting better. How long was it before some muggle snapped a picture that the Ministry didn't catch before it hit the Internet.

Would they even be able to manage the Internet? That would require people with tech savvy, which was the opposite of the Wizarding community.

Were it me, I'd have arranged for muggleborn to have a conventional education on top of their magical one. I'd have them go to college, enter the military and tech sectors, and then I'd have people in every aspect of muggle life.

Ex-military muggleborn along with muggleborn in the police forces would be able to teach the aurors to be better at what they did, and that would make the Wizarding world safer, assuming that I was a benevolent Minister for magic.

I frowned.

My bugs weren't seeing anything or hearing anything, but there was a strange smell. They couldn't identify it, though.

I listened with my own ears and I heard nothing.

It didn't smell like poison being pumped through the vents, and none of my bugs were dying or even sedated. It was a chemical smell, though; it smelled almost like alcohol.

The door to the bathroom opened, and there wasn't anyone on the other side.

I lunged for my wand.

My bugs saw ripples in the water on the floor; it looked like footsteps even though I couldn't hear a
thing.

Firing off a cutting spell, I saw red suddenly staining the floor. I lashed out again, but I suddenly felt hands around my throat, and I was struggling to breathe.

A massive force shoved me under the water, and the wand dropped out of my hand. I grabbed for the unseen, invisible hands, trying to bend the thumb and fingers back. It was useless; I didn't have the strength in my hands, and whoever it was was very strong.

Almost without my conscious volition, bugs began to swarm from the vents. They were coming from everywhere, and there were bugs that I didn't even realize that I'd had control of.

I kept struggling even as I felt the bugs stinging the person who was strangling me to death. They kept biting and stinging and for a moment I felt a measure of hope.

My lungs burned like hot lava and I clawed and punched. My feet scrabbled for purchase against the bottom of the tub, but they kept slipping.

Everything turned dark.
I woke to find myself on the floor ten feet away from the tub, hacking and gagging water. There was a severed and dismembered arm that looked rather familiar. It was a child's arm, and it was female.

My hands were still shaking from adrenaline, so it couldn't have been that long since I had fallen unconscious.

There was a pool of blood spreading out on the floor by the bathtub. An ever growing swarm of insects was covering what should have been a body; however, in the few gaps that existed in the cover, there was nothing there.

What had happened? The last thing I remembered was being held under the water, needing desperately to get away.

Was it my accidental magic again? Or had someone saved me while I was out?

The insects couldn't tell me; I couldn't delve into their memories, only their senses right now. There were no footprints in the water that now covered the floor other than those of my attacker, and there was no evidence that I'd been dragged out of the water. It looked as though I'd been there, and then suddenly I was here, along with a good bit of the water in the tub and part of my attacker.

Was this apparation? I thought that didn't work in Hogawarts.

Maybe it was some other kind of movement, or maybe accidental magic wasn't covered by the wards. I'd heard that House elves could teleport here, presumably by using some kind of more primal magic.

As I staggered to my feet, I had my bugs check the body; it seemed to be growing cold, and there was no sign of a heartbeat or breathing. Along with the blood loss from being dismembered, there was all the poison flowing through her veins.

She was as small as me, at least in height, although her hands had been as strong as an adult man.

I staggered over to the mirror, and there was a line of bruises around my throat, bruises that were going to be hard to conceal without muggle makeup.

Glancing back at the body, I saw that it was shimmering. I called the insects back, and I stared at the remains in front of me.

Mildre....no....Millicent was lying on the floor, her eyes staring upward sightlessly.

I felt my stomach drop.

I'd saved her from bullies, and in return she'd been one of my supporters through all of this. This wasn't something she'd done on her own; whatever strange smell she was exusing was probably because of a potion of some sort.

Someone had turned my own min...serv....friend against me, and they'd done it deliberately. They'd wanted me to kill my own ally to send me a message; they could get to me at any time, and if they couldn't they'd be able to reach my friends.
A vein in my forehead throbbed, and my fists tightened. They'd tried to kill me for no other reason than because I was alive, and now they'd killed someone I valued. There had been a lot of times in the past where I'd channeled fear into anger, at least according to Doctor Yamada, but this time felt justified.

They needed to die.

It had always been on the horizon, something that I'd tried not to think about, but ultimately I'd always known that eventually I was going to have to kill Voldemort and all the Death Eaters. It had never been a question of if, but of when.

That when had just gotten a lot shorter.

As my senses expanded, I noticed something strange.

My bug senses had expended by a factor of two again, and there were two people lying in bed in our bedroom. One of them was almost certainly Millie.

So who was this?

The form shimmered and grew longer, into a form that was almost as recognizable.

Filch, the janitor. His sightless dead eyes were staring up at me, accusingly, almost as though he'd expected some other outcome from his attempted murder.

He was a Squib, and he wouldn't have had any defense against mind control. He'd have had access to the lists, but probably not much more than a glance. He'd have been able to enter and leave the castle even after Dumbledore improved the defenses.

Why take the form of Millie?

The stairs....most likely Snape had limited access to the girl's stairs and he hadn't been on the list. Someone had put him under the invisibility and silence spells and then commanded him to drink the potion before coming up here to murder me.

Those potions weren't any joke to make; they took at least a month to brew and some part of the person to be turned into...usually hair. As janitor, Filch would have had access to stray hairs from all over the school; it might have been random chance that he'd gotten hairs from Millie.

Or it might have been deliberate. Whoever had done this may have wanted me to think that I'd been betrayed and that I was going to die alone.

A quick sniff showed that he still smelled of alcohol, along with the inevitable smells of death. I couldn't detect the other, strange smell, but my bugs could. Most likely it was something about the polyjuice potion itself that they were cluing in on.

Had Filch left for Hogsmeade last night to celebrate Halloween? It would explain the alcohol smell, and it would have given his master a chance to give him his orders.

There was only one suspect that made any sense for all of this.

Avery.

He was one of the Death Eaters who'd murdered my family, and he was the uncle of the boy I'd put in the hospital. I'd done it in the bathtub, and so killing me in the bathtub would not only be poetic
justice, it would send a message to the non-purebloods in school that no one would get away with hurting a pureblood.

If it was done in a way that looked like an accident, then all the better. After all, I'd gotten away with dousing his nephew in the boil potion, so that would prove that even the aurors couldn't protect them. They'd probably spread word to the Slytherins in some kind of low key way.

The time to brew the potion was probably the only reason he'd waited this long. He might have been waiting for Filch on the grounds; when he saw me he'd taken his chance. Undoubtedly he'd been disillusioned already during the attack. He'd been too afraid of Dumbledore to enter the castle, at least for very long. It might not have been him on the grounds, but it had likely been someone sent by him.

It was possible that he'd gotten a look at me and recognized me as the girl who should be dead; that might have been the reason he'd attacked me impulsively on the grounds, and then once he couldn't get in, he'd have sent his lackey after me.

Filch had been a nasty character, but he'd deserved better than to be killed. As far as I was concerned Avery was responsible for his death, and that was one more on his tally.

Having him attack me was a win-win. Either I died, or I killed Filch or seriously injured him. If I survived, they could send the aurors after me. That was the last thing I needed; after all the manner of death would reveal that insects were involved. That would eliminate my main advantage against my enemies; once they knew what I could do, there were likely countermeasures they could take.

I might be able to get out of this, but likely there would be a trial, and the Death Eaters had people in the Ministry. I could easily be killed on the way to the trial, or they could pad the jury with their own people... assuming Wizards actually used juries. I hadn't studied their judicial system all that much.

I glanced back at Filch. His body already smelled, and the odds were that it was only going to get worse.

Using my bugs to eat the body would be the ideal solution, but it would take time, time that I simply didn't have. Filch had to weigh a hundred and sixty or a hundred and eighty pounds, and it would take days for the bugs to eat him normally, maybe weeks. I could probably cut that time down to a tenth, but even if I could do it my morning, there was no guarantee that one of the girls wouldn't get up to go to the bathroom and see the mess I'd made.

Still, I had to try.

The bugs surrounded Filch and began eating as rapidly as they could. I had them work in shifts; when one got full it was replaced by its mate.

In the meantime I began to clean the bathroom as well as I could. I tossed the dismembered and now hairy arm to land next to the rest of the body.

“Sorry Filch,” I said. “I'll avenge you.”

My next task was to clean up the blood and gore all over the floor. My clothes had fortunately been left on the counter, which meant they were clean. As such, I was going to have to do the cleaning in the nude.

“Wingardium Leviosa,” I murmured, focusing as much as I could on the bloody water on the floor.
I managed to levitate a patch of it, which I put into the bathtub, after levitating the stopper and draining out the water.

Over and over again I had to do it, and when I was done, I wasn't sure that the floor was actually clean. I couldn't use my towels because having the house elves see bloody towels coming from a prepubescent girl's room was going to be a clear sign that something was wrong.

This was why I ended up on my hands and knees scrubbing the floor with toilet paper, wrapped around and around my hands. I could toss that in the toilet and wash the evidence away. I'd checked my hands, and there weren't any cuts on my skin, and there weren't any on my knees either.

In all, it took me over two hours to get every single piece of blood off the grout. I could have done it almost immediately with the cleaning spell, but I hadn't thought it to be worth the bother to learn, and I was now paying the price.

The only good thing was that if they checked my wand they'd see that I didn't get anything other than one severing charm off, and that one I could explain.

Grimacing, I looked at the body.

If I had caustic soda I'd be able to melt the body into a liquid that I could flush, but that would take heat and almost a full day.

Drain cleaner containing sodium hydroxide and a different drain cleaner containing sulfuric acid could be mixed together to melt the body too. It too would take time that I didn't have, and the smell would be a dead giveaway.

There was only one way that was going to work.

I pulled my secondary wand from my fanny pack, and I began to cast.

“Diffindo...Diffindo.....Diffindo...Diffindo.”

As I dismembered the body in clean cuts, more and more blood pooled on the tile. In retrospect, I should have waited on the cleaning until this part of it was done.

I had the largest spiders grab the parts and start carrying them up the wall toward the vent. I'd move them as far from my room as they could and then I'd set the bugs to devouring them as quickly as possible.

The increased food supply would probably increase their numbers exponentially, but that was all right.

Moving the whole body took more than another hour, and then cleaning what was left took even more time. By the time everything was said and done, I barely had time to slip into bed before the House Elves showed up and began to clean the bathroom that I had just vacated.

They seemed to notice some of the lingering smell, but they seemed to ignore it. From their muttered comments, apparently some of the Witches had cosmetic components that smelled foul to them, and they assumed this was just more of the same.

I fell into a dreamless sleep.
In the morning I was the last of the girls to get up, but I managed to pull myself to breakfast. The last thing I could afford was to stand out. I waited until the girls were in the bathroom to pull on the shirt that covered my neck as best I could.

There was a healing spell I could use to repair the bruises; I needed to learn it quickly, but I was a little leery of using it on myself without some practice. Miscast spells could cause all sorts of problems, such as a severed arm on the floor.

Although, in this one case it was less of a mistake than a feature.

Most of the day went by in a haze. My new body required a lot more sleep than my old one had, and I hadn't gotten enough even for an adult. My neck hurt, and it hurt to talk, and so I ended up looking sullen and taciturn all day.

I let Hermione chat away at me, and I didn't say much. When I did, she noticed my voice and tried to tell me to go to Madam Pomfrey.

As though that wouldn't raise some questions. Mr. Filch vanishes and the schools resident bad girl has unexplained bruises the next day.

I'd have aurors knocking on my door within three days.

My only option was to try the Episkey spell until I mastered it, and I'd have to start by practicing it on bugs.

I ended up spending my afternoon huddled in a secret passage, one of those that I had figured out the way to get inside. I reached out to my bug minions, and there were dozens or hundreds of them that were injured from skirmishes with each other, or with the rats in the walls.

I was glad I practiced; my first attempts ended up with scattered bugs. It was more than an hour before I wasn't killing the bugs, and two before I actually did them any good.

It was three before I got to the point where I was willing to try it on myself, and even then I was nervous. The neck had some pretty important arteries, and a mistake there could kill me just as easily as Filch.

As I was leaving the secret passage, I froze as I saw Mrs. Norris. She was staring up at me accusingly.

For a moment I considered killing her. It was possible that she could smell some of her master's blood on me, or that she had some sort of supernatural sense. Still, as far as I knew, Wizards couldn't talk to cats. Speaking to snakes was possible, but it was apparently a rare and lost art.

Guilt filled my mind. As disagreeable as Filch and Mrs. Norris had been to the students, they'd loved each other, and I'd taken that away from her. I hadn't become a hero.... or even a villain to hurt people. I wasn't sure that Mrs. Norris counted as people, but the last thing I needed to do was to make it even worse by killing her.

I left her alone. I hadn't meant to kill her master, and killing his cat would have been throwing insult after injury.

Doing the healing in my own bathroom was my only option to be safe. The girls tended to be heavy sleepers, but in the day, if I fell over, it was possible they might hear me.

Staring in the mirror, I unbuttoned the neck of my shirt and pulled it away from my neck. I pointed
my wand at my neck, and then I said in a low voice, “Episky.”

I'd worried that pointing it at myself would change the wand movements to the point that it couldn't be used, but the moment I cast it, I felt a warmth on my neck, and suddenly some of the pain was gone. So was some of the bruising.

“Episky, Episky, Episky,” I said quickly.

I soon found that there were spots on the back of my neck that I could not reach. Twisting my arms back there made moving the wand in the right way impossible. It was going to have to do; I'd just have to make an excuse if someone noticed.

At least it no longer looked like a pair of identifiable hand prints.

Those parts of the weekend that weren't spent in training and learning the cleaning spell, I spent reading up on Wizarding Law. I suspected that I knew what was coming next, and I wanted to be prepared for it.

I made sure that no one paid attention to the books I was reading; I didn't check the law books out and only pulled them from the shelves when no one was looking. I carefully kept the books face up on the table so that no one would notice the book covers.

On Monday, the aurors showed up for Hogwarts.
“I think we're on a wild nargle hunt,” Millner said. “Going after a missing squib when aurors are vanishing?”

“It's Filch,” Fawley said. “We know him.”

“Hated him, more like. He's pretty much made an enemy of every British Wizard that went to school in the last twenty years.”

“He's a squib...who would bother to off him once they got out of school?”

“Which is why the anonymous tip that it was a student at the school has to be taken seriously.”

Fawley shook his head. “We don't even know that something happened to him. You know he liked to drink... hell, if I was a squib and had to deal with a school full of obnoxious brats, I'd probably drink myself to death.”

“Maybe he did if we're lucky,” Millner said. “The last thing we need is to find out that You-Know-Who is targeting Hogwarts staff. The parents would go mental and that's the last thing anybody needs right now.”

“Well, we know that he went to Hogsmeade on Halloween night to celebrate away from the kids. He was drinking heavily according to several of the regulars, and he left late.”

“Maybe he died on the way back...got so drunk that he went off in the wrong direction?”

“Flying over the area on broomsticks didn't show anything, and the last thing I want to do is go combing through the underbrush if we don't have to.”

“Well, maybe we can find out something at the castle that'll give us something to go on,” Millner said.

As they landed outside the gate, Millner tried to open the door, and he found it locked. He frowned. “What the hell?”

A hulking monstrosity of the man came lumbering up to them from the grounds.

“I s'pose you lot are the aurors that're tryin to find Filch?” The man was puffing with the effort of moving quickly up the slope toward them.

“Yes...why can't we get into the castle?”

“Security precautions by Dumbledore himself. We had a student attacked on the grounds a week ago,” the man said. He reached out and touched the gate and it slid open easily. “Come on in. I'll take you to the headmaster.”

The man stayed behind them, Fawley noticed, and he had a hand on his umbrella. There was something cold about his expression that belied his friendly expression.

It was possible that Moody was rubbing off on him. The man was a paranoid crank, but sometimes he was right, which was the unfortunate thing. Especially given the disappearances, every auror had to look out for himself these days.
Looking around, Fawley felt a strong sense of deja vu. It was as though the last ten years hadn't happened, as though he was back in Hogwarts all over again. It was a strange, bittersweet feeling, and the halls looked somehow smaller than he had remembered them, even though everything was demonstrably the same.

Reaching the Headmaster's office, they were quickly admitted.

“Dumbledore,” Millner said.

“Mr. Millner, Mr. Fawley... how has adulthood treated you?”

“We're aurors now,” Fawley said. He forced himself to stand up straight and look stern. Dumbledore was the most powerful wizard in all of Britain, the man who'd bested Grindlewald in single combat. There was no question that he could kill Fawley and his partner in an instant if he so chose, and he had enough political influence that he could probably get away with it. That wasn't a comfortable feeling.

“We've come to investigate Filch's disappearance.”

“Poor Argus,” Dumbledore said. “He always was a tortured soul. I'm surprised that the aurors would send someone to investigate his disappearance. He's only been missing for three days.”

“There have been reports that one of your students might be responsible for his disappearance,” Millner said. “A muggleborn.”

“Miss Hebert,” Dumbledore said. He sighed. “She's made enemies, and I wouldn't be surprised if some of them have not made unfair accusations in an attempt to cause her problems.”

“She didn't have problems with Filch?” Fawley asked.

“Less than other students, actually. She always had a sixth sense about when he was around, and she was very careful not to offend him.”

“There have been rumors about her,” Millner began.

“Miss Hebert has a rather enthusiastic view of what self defense entails,” Dumbledore said. “And she is more than capable of defending herself.”

“There are rumors that she has hospitalized several boys,” Millner said. “Pureblood boys.”

“Boys who were bypassing the defenses on the girl's dormitory with the intention of abusing her,” Dumbledore said. “She has assured us that they were injured through their own incompetence.”

“And the boy who was doused in boil potion?”

“He was preparing it to use on her, and he had an unfortunate accident.”

Fawley glanced at his partner. Unfortunate accidents? Once, maybe, but multiple times indicated a pattern.

“And did she really kill a troupe of trolls with a knife?”

“She did dispatch one troll,” Dumbledore said. “Defending other students while they distracted it with spells. It was a heroic act, really.”

“So you have a muggleborn who has been involved in multiple incidents of violence, directed
toward purebloods... why is she still here?” Millner demanded.

“Should I have expelled you after your incident in sixth year?” Dumbledore asked mildly.

Millner's face went red. Fawley couldn't help but wonder about the incident in question. Millner didn't like to talk about his time in school very much, and he was ten years older, so they hadn't shared any of the same classmates in common.

“We'd like to question the house elves and the portraits,” Fawley said. “And any students that might be able to shed some light on the situation.”

“Some of the students may be biased,” Dumbledore said. “Either for or against her.”

“We're professionals,” Millner said confidently.

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“She's mental,” the Parkinson girl said. “I keep expecting her to stab me every morning at breakast. Did you know she hexes me almost every day? And nobody does anything about it?”

“Did you ever see her interact with Mr. Filch?” Fawley asked.

“He kept trying to catch her at things, but he never could. They say that she's a Seer... she always seems to know a lot more than she should.”

“Tell me more,” Millner said.

“It's like she's got eyes in the back of her head. Nobody has ever been able to surprise her...not that anybody tries much anymore, since she's so mental that she'd probably beat you to a pulp.”

“Has she threatened other students?”

“She held a Gryffindor boy out over a balcony and threatened to drop him,” Parkinson said. “And she beat three Slytherins with a sock until it was bloody.”

“That was the boys who were trying to get in her room?”

“Oh, that's the story that Dumbledore likes to put out, but everybody knows that she really did it because she's jealous because they're purebloods.”

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“She saved out lives,” Bletchley said. “Moved like she'd been fighting all of her life.”

“Oh,” Millner asked. “She was good with a knife?”

“She killed a troll,” Bletchley said flatly. “If you'd seen how small she is, you'd know how impressive that is.”

“So you'd say she's good at killing?” Millner asked.

“I wouldn't want to go against her... but she's never really bothered anybody that didn't go after her first. She's tough, but after people stopped being idiots around her, things started getting back to normal.”

“Being idiots?”
“Trying to hurt her or her friends,” he said. “She's perfectly nice except when that happens, and really, can you blame her? I think it's every Wizard and Witches' right to protect themselves.”

“But not to kill someone,” Millner said.

The other interviews were much the same. Those who did not like her were absolutely sure that she'd killed Filch, and that furthermore she likely had all sorts of other skeletons in her closet. Those who were on her side defended her, and were convinced that she only did the things she did in self defense.

They spent more than an hour interviewing schoolchildren. Most of them seemed anxious when talking to them, which was as it should be. Even the Malfoy heir seemed nervous, and his family had the political clout to ignore most accusations.

The portraits hadn't seen anything, despite having been tasked to watch out for intruders, and the House elves were similarly unhelpful. There was not any convenient bloody clothes or anything in the laundry. The staff had already searched the school for Filch, and there had been no sign of him.

He'd apparently had a relationship once with the librarian, but everyone agreed that it had been over for years, without any evidence of ill will between the two of them. No one could recall anyone having more than the usual disagreements with Filch, which meant that he'd had a dozen conflicts with students on the day before his disappearance alone.

“We're not getting anywhere,” Millner said. “We might as well talk to the mudblood.”

Millner had a tendency to slip in how he talked about muggleborns when he was irritated.

Fawley didn't think he meant anything by it; Millner was just a member of the older generations, and old prejudices died hard. He at least tried to be civil, which was more than some members of the department did.

They summoned Taylor Hebert to meet with them in a classroom as far away from active classes as they could. They'd chosen a dungeon room with no windows and they'd moved everything out of the room except three chairs.

Then they'd put her in the room and they'd let her stew for a while. Most children her age had the attention span of gnats, and even adults started to crack if they were left alone long enough. That sense of isolation was often enough on its own to get suspects to talking.

As they entered the room, the first thing Fawley noticed was how tiny she was. She was smaller than the Parkinson girl, who had already been small. It was hard to believe that a girl this small and harmless looking could have killed a troll. There wasn't anything different about how she looked compared to a hundred other first years they'd seen in the halls.

However, as she looked up at them, Fawley felt a chill.

Every other student they'd talked to had been a little nervous; some more than others. They'd had to pull answers out of them to get them talking, to overcome their fear of just what the aurors represented. The ordinary witnesses hadn't even been made to wait.

Hebert didn't look nervous at all. She didn't even look bored. There was something unnatural and off putting about the way she sat, though, her neck turned at an unnatural angle and her arms and legs sprawled out like those of a praying mantis.

Instead, she looked as though she was interviewing someone for a job, as though they were the
ones who were going to be questioned. That kind of confidence was unnatural in a child that small; Fawley had interrogated Death Eaters who looked more nervous.

“Hello,” she said.

She leaned backward in her chair against one of the desks; it took Fawley a moment to realize that she had her hand on her wand.

“You won't need that,” Millner said sternly.

“I've got Death Eaters who want to kill me,” she said. “And the aurors' office has been compromised. I think I'll make my own decisions about that.”

Fawley glanced at Millner, who shrugged. Fawley suspected that Millner didn't see the girl as a threat, because how could a first year witch be any kind of threat to two trained aurors, especially a muggleborn, who rumor said weren't all that good with magic anyway.

The fact that they weren't allowed to do magic during the summers while Purebloods and half-bloods were probably contributed to that perception, but Fawley wasn't likely to get anywhere arguing with Millner about it.

If it let the girl feel safe enough to talk, then it was all right. After all, Dumbledore himself assured them that she only attacked those who attacked her.

“What do you know about the aurors' office?” Fawley asked.

“It's obvious, isn't it?” she said. “Aurors go missing, it's because someone knew where they would be. Who else would know that except someone in the department?”

Fawley frowned. That was a conclusion that the higher ups had only recently come to, and they were taking steps to try to address it. He didn't know what those steps were, presumably because they weren't sure he wasn't a Death Eater.

“Did someone tell you that?”

She shook her head contemptuously. “I read the paper; I can read between the lines. Anybody with two brain cells to rub together would come to the same conclusion.”

Fawley winced; Millner wasn't going to like that from a mudblood.

“It's unusual to have a Yank in Hogwarts,” Fawley said carefully. It was important to establish a rapport with the criminal so that they would be more likely to slip up and incriminate themselves. However, he'd never really understood teenage girls and preteen girls were even worse.

“Is that what we're here to discuss?” the girl asked evenly. “How an orphan girl with no family ended up in a British school instead of an American one? I wasn't aware that was a crime.”

“So is there a crime you're involved in?” Millner asked.

Falkner barely stopped himself from grimacing. Apparently the girl had annoyed Millner enough that he was going to skip the entire introductions phase and get right to it.

He stepped forward quickly until he was looming over her. “We know you murdered Argus Filch. I just want to understand why.”

He used his intimidating voice, deep and angry. Millner was a large man, which shouldn't have
mattered in the Wizarding world, but it still aroused a sort of primal fear in the average Wizard.

Hebert looked as though he'd asked her about the weather.

"I didn't," Hebert said calmly. "And assuming he's actually dead, I don't know who did."

"You're lying!" Millner shouted.

"Because I'm a mudblood?" Hebert asked. "I've heard about how the Wizarding justice system works. So if I was a rich pureblood who had a daddy with deep pockets, would we even be having this conversation?"

Millner's face flushed red and he looked like he wanted to slap the girl.

"Learn your place, girl! We've got evidence that you did it... do you think that the house elves aren't always watching? The paintings! This is Hogwarts...the walls have ears!"

"Maybe it was an accident," Fawley said softly. "Self defense, even. An old man like that, a young girl like you....but we won't know unless we hear your side of the story."

"Which night do you think he disappeared?" Hebert asked.

"Thursday," Millner snapped.

"I went to class, then I went to the Halloween Feast. They had the Dancing Skeletons, which was fun. I went to the Ghost Afterparty, took a bath and then I went to bed. I didn't go anywhere else," Hebert said. "The next day was pretty much the same thing without the parties."

"I've heard about you," Millner said. "You've put boys in the hospital. They say you killed a troll, although I'm not sure I believe that."

He waited for a moment, as though waiting for her to brag, but she just shrugged as though it didn't matter what she believed.

"Let me see your wand," he said.

She looked at him skeptically. "Two men I do not know put me in a room and demand that I disarm myself. They claim to come from an agency that I suspect is overrun with the exact kind of people who have been trying to kill me and other people like me. If it was you, what you you do?"

"We could just make you," Millner growled.

"Could you?" she asked mildly.

"Millner," Fawley said uneasily. When the older man turned toward him, Fawley gestured downward.

Her wand was pointed directly at Millner's crotch. Considering the way that she had supposedly killed the troll, the implication was clear.

He quickly stepped back and grabbed for his own wand. She was out of her seat so quickly that Fawley was reminded of Moody or some of the aurors who were known for being lightning fast.

"You can go to Azkaban for threatening an auror, girl!" Millner said.
“I'm not threatening you,” she said carefully. “I'm just being cautious. Two strange men in a room with a little girl doesn't look good. In muggle America children aren't interrogated without an adult advocate in the room.”

“Wait, what?”

“An auror attacks an eleven year old mudblood... you think the Ministry isn't going to start wondering if you're the one who's working with You-Know-Who? Even if you aren't, what's the implication going to do to your career?”

Fawley relaxed a little, although Millner looked like he was going to have an apoplectic fit. At least she wasn't threatening to cry rape.

“Or you can just call Professor Snape into the room, and then I'll happily hand my wand over to be checked.”

Fawley glanced at Millner, who looked as though she wanted to hex the girl to death. She was right, though; attacking a muggleborn right now would be political suicide, and they weren't even investigating a murder, just a missing person.

“Fine,” Millner said. “But you'll pay for this eventually.”

The girl smiled at him sweetly, and they both left the room, shuddering.

While they might not be able to prove it, there was something seriously wrong with the girl, and Fawley wondered if they were going to be the ones to investigate it, or if it needed to be kicked upstairs.
“Cutting charms and healing... you've cast a lot of those recently,” Millner said.

He was staring at me with undisguised loathing. I probably shouldn't have threatened to emasculate him, but hearing some of the comments he'd made when he thought no one was listening had irritated me. There was a casual sort of racism in what he said that told me I would never have gotten a fair hearing from him anyway.

The thought that my irritability might have something to do with guilt over Filch's death occurred to me, but I put it out of my mind as quickly as I could.

“I'm a muggleborn in Slytherin,” I said. “Wouldn't it make sense that those would be the spells I would need the most on a day to day basis?”

Snape was sitting in the back of the room. He hadn't said anything; he'd just stared at all of us with an inscrutable look. He hadn't mentioned my second wand, though, which I took to be an encouraging sign.

“So you've been attacking purebloods, then,” Millner said.

“You'd have heard about it if I'd attacked anyone recently,” I said. I lifted my hands. “I'm an ordinary student trying to make my way through school without being attacked.”

He was still holding my wand in his hands. I carefully kept my hands away from my fanny pack, but I did begin to pull the most dangerous insects I could from the bowels of the castle. Some of them were surprisingly vicious for a school setting, although Winslow had had more of them.

There were bugs clinging to the inside of my robes, too, waiting to come out. Stingers to the eyes and the ears and the genitals would distract them enough for me to go for my wand. Cuts to the inside of their arms and wand waving would become difficult.

“You don't like being attacked, do you?” Millner said. “I've heard it makes you go all mental. Is that because something happened with you? Maybe your Da did something to you?”

He was trying to get under my skin.

I smiled sweetly. “Did yours?”

His face flushed, and he lunged forward.

“Five points from Slytherin,” Snape drawled. “You will speak to the aurors with respect.”

Millner stopped abruptly, as though he'd forgotten that Snape was in the room. Maybe he had. He was still flushed, though, and his breathing was rapid. He was an angry man, and angry men were easy to manipulate.

“Everyone knew Filch was a little creepy,” his partner said. “Maybe he came on to you?”

I'd been trained in basic police interrogation techniques, even though that really hadn't been my job. Fawley was pretending to be sympathetic; most people wanted to tell their story, to explain how it wasn't really their fault.

By the time they realized they'd incriminated themselves, they were on their way to jail.
There was an implication to his question, and I wasn't certain how to answer it. His question implied that I knew what he meant; in 2011 with the Internet there was a good chance that an eleven year old might have at least some idea. In 1991 though?

I hadn't heard any of my same age classmates talking about sex, but whether that was because they were genuinely innocent of the implications, or because it was a British thing not to talk about sensitive subjects I couldn't be sure.

Even the older children didn't talk that much about it, and when they did they tended to use euphemisms. Maybe it was the fact that there were portraits everywhere listening to what they said.

My best bet was to pretend that I didn't know what they were saying and to ignore the whole thing.

“'I barely interacted with him,'” I said, shrugging. “'I can't say I even knew much about him, except that he had a cat and liked to harass the other kids.'”

“So if he'd attacked you, what would you have done?” Fawley asked. He looked sympathetic, and my overall impression of him was that he was the more sympathetic of the two men. However, his job was to find the culprit, and since I was in fact guilty, I now had to lie.

“I'd have screamed and gotten some help,” I lied.

There was a small change in Snape's expression that showed that he knew I was lying; however, the others didn't notice as he was standing behind them and they were staring at me.

“You're capable of killing by all accounts,” Millner said. “Took down a full sized troll with a knife, or at least they say.”

“I had some help then,” I said. “And I try to be law abiding. If I started killing off staff, who would be left to teach me magic? No...I'd just get him fired.”

That touched a nerve with both of them. Had my threat from earlier spooked them? What were the politics in the Ministry right now? Losing so many aurors would make it harder to get rid of the ones they had left; yet it was possible that Voldemort's minions in the Ministry were putting the heat on the good aurors. Threatening to fire them would keep them anxious and on edge, and while that would make them more alert for a little while, long term it would exhaust them.

Some of them might quit on their own, given the right kind of pressure.

“Is there anyone who can confirm your whereabouts?” Fawley asked.

“Ever since I was attacked, the castle has been on an increased alert,” I said. “The portraits are sleeping in shifts, which means that they would have seen if I had left the Slytherin dorms once I went to bed.”

Unlike the Gryffindor dorms, the door to Slytherin wasn't guarded by a painting, which meant that no one had noticed the door opening when Filch had entered.

“A disillusionment charm,” Millner began.

“Do you think that Miss Hebert has mastered a disillusionment charm at her age?” Snape asked. “And as a muggleborn orphan she does not have the means to purchase an invisibility cloak... nor have there been any reports of any invisibility cloaks going missing in the school.”

“Are there any such cloaks in this school?” Millner asked Snape, staring at him challengingly.
“Not to my knowledge,” Snape said. “And I would confiscate any that I discovered. Allowing such items would allow children to circumscribe a number of rules as well as get into... mischief.”

“We know you aren't a bad person,” Fawley said. “But everyone can do things in the heat of the moment that they regret.”

“That's true,” I said. “If they don't think things through and plan ahead.”

“So you're saying that you planned to murder Filch,” Millner said. I could see that he was getting frustrated.

Real police investigations could take hours. Wearing a suspect down enough would get almost anyone to confess to almost anything. Some people would confess to murder just to get to go home.

Their initial approach hadn't been good either. They should have started with ordinary questions; questions about my life, about school. It would have helped them establish a baseline about what I looked like when I was telling the truth so they'd have something to compare it to when I lied.

Keeping them off balance had been part of the plan, though. I could tell from the moment they walked in that they weren't real professionals. The fact that they'd been assigned to a missing Squib case when actual aurors were going missing meant that they were likely the equivalent to rookie beat cops.

They probably spent their time investigating the Wizarding equivalent of noise complaints.

Something of my disdain must have slipped out in my expression, because Snape's lips quirked. My own might have followed suit, even though I wasn't sure whether they had or not.

“You think this is funny?” Millner snapped. “A man is missing and possibly dead, and you're smirking at us?”

“Mr. Filch was a known alcoholic,” I said. “People talked about smelling it on him sometimes. Are you sure that he didn't just wander off somewhere to die in a ditch? He didn't look at all well the last time I saw him.”

“Maybe you did it for the attention,” Millner said, ignoring what I'd just said. “You want to prove that a mudblood is just as good as any pureblood. People do keep saying that you aren't as good at magic.”

Snape shifted uneasily at the epithet. This entire interrogation was putting him in a difficult situation; if he advocated too hard for me, it would look like he was favoring the mudblood. That would put his position as a spy in jeopardy.

If he failed to protect me, it would damage his relationship with the Headmaster, and maybe with me. The use of the epithet was a borderline case.

“That would require that I actually care about what anyone thinks of me,” I said calmly. “Pureblood, mudblood... those are just made up words. Power is power, and results speak for themselves. If you and I point our wands at each other and I'm the one that walks away, then doesn't that make me the better Wizard?”

“Witch,” Fawley said. “And maybe you're just luckier.”

“Isn't that a power in it's own right?” I asked. “I understand that one of the most coveted potions in the Wizarding world grants luck.”
“There's something wrong with you,” Millner said. “Anybody can see it. All of your classmates can see it; they think you are creepy and dangerous. Maybe it finally got to you, and you took it out on the one person in the entire castle who couldn't fight back.”

I shrugged. “You can think what you want, but I've already told you what happened. I went to the party, I took a bath, and then I went to bed. What more do you want me to say?”

I probably should have tried to act like a distressed eleven year old, but I wasn't sure that my acting skills were up to it. Snape would be certain that I'd done it in that case, which would be a bigger problem for me in the long term than these two bozos.

Even as the interview went on, I was having my bugs move the pieces of Filch deeper and deeper into the bowels of the castle. They'd already finished with the flesh, but there wasn't a lot they could do with the splinters of bone I had left other than scatter them in parts of the castle where no one ever went.

There were animals that ate bones; tortoises, cattle, bears... but as there weren't any of those animals anywhere within my sensory radius, the best I could do was the equivalent of flushing the bone fragments down the toilet and hope that no one ever noticed in whatever cesspit the toilets washed out to.

“Even if I'd had a reason to kill Mr. Filch, which I didn't, how would I have done it in a way that no one would see anything? You've seen my wand, so it obviously wasn't magic, and I'm too small to carry someone of Filch's size, which means I'd have had to leave him wherever I killed him. The castle has been searched, and no one has found anything, and there is a lot of evidence that I was exactly where I said I was.”

For the first time I saw some uncertainty on Fawley's face, although Millner still had a stubborn set to his jaw.

“Isn't it more likely that Filch was taken before he even reached the castle?” I said. “Aurors are going missing every day. You think that maybe a squib that everybody hated might go missing the same way, maybe just because he irritated someone as a kid who is now dangerous?”

There was an implication to what I had just said. I could see the moment that Fawley got it, but Millner was oblivious. I grinned at Fawley, who looked distinctly uncomfortable.

Of course, it was the truth within a lie. I was already dangerous, but the more I learned the more dangerous I was going to get. I had a long memory too, although I had chosen to ignore past transgressions more than once.

I wasn't feeling particularly forgiving at the moment, though.

“You're trying to confuse us,” Millner spat.

“I'm an eleven year old girl, and you are professional aurors,” I said. “If I'm able to confuse you, what does that say about full grown criminals?”

Millner looked like he wanted to hit me, but he glanced back at Snape.

“If you really have any evidence that I did anything, you should charge me and take me in,” I continued. “But bringing me in without any evidence might be...unwise.”

“And why is that?” Miller asked, his face flushing a little.
“There are those who favor muggleborns over purebloods,” I said. “And some of them are highly placed. Put an eleven year old girl in Azkaban for a crime she didn't commit...probably couldn't commit would be seen as a terrible injustice. Even people who don't care about mudbloods get upset when people threaten children because they fear it might be their child next.”

“Miss Hebert,” Snape drawled. “Kindly refrain from using epithets or I will be forced to assign punishments.”

“It's our word,” I said. “I know what I am, and I don't care what anybody thinks about it.”

Fawley sighed.

“She's right,” he said. “We're not getting anywhere here.”

Millner scowled, but finally he nodded. “This isn't over. I know you did it, and I'll find out how.”

“The question you should be asking yourself is who tipped you off,” I said. “I've made plenty of enemies, but schoolchildren wouldn't have known that Filch wasn't just off on holiday. That means that whoever informed you knew he was missing, maybe even before the staff did. Now who would possibly know that a man had been kidnapped or murdered faster than the people who'd done the deed themselves?”

“Pointing the finger at someone else is a common tactic for criminals,” Millner said. “It doesn't change the facts.”

“The fact is that you don't have anything on me, and you won't, because I'm innocent,” I said.

That was apparently that. Both men rose, nodded toward Snape. Millner dropped my wand in Snape's hand and they both left the room.

“May I see your second wand, Miss Hebert?” Snape asked when they were far enough out of the room to be outside of hearing range.

I shrugged and pulled it from my fanny pack. Handing it to him, I waited as he checked the spells on it.

He eventually handed both of my wands back to me.

“You are unwise to antagonize them,” he said. “Aurors have more discretion in our world than they do in the muggle world... there are fewer rules and they have much more power to make trouble for those they have taken a dislike to.”

“Do you think I don't know that?” I asked. “But one of them was ready to throw me in the slammer and forget where he left the key.”

“I warned you that certain behaviors could lead to Azkaban,” he said. “Perhaps you will be more circumspect in the future.”

“I try to stay out of trouble,” I said. “But trouble keeps coming after me.”

“Did you kill Mr. Filch?” he asked after a long moment, as though he was afraid of whatever answer I was going to give him.

“Killing him would have just caused me a lot of problems,” I said. “And I had no reason to kill him. Do you think I would just randomly start murdering staff members?”
“I am not entirely certain what you would do,” he said. “But I do not believe you are randomly malicious. Everything you do serves a purpose.”

“So there you go,” I said. “Killing Filch would make my life worse, not better, so why would I do it?”

“And if we asked for a pensieve of the night in question?”

“Do you really want to see a boring memory of me taking a bath?” I asked, with one eyebrow raised. “Other than that, it was pretty much just the parties and the Feast like I said. There were people around me at all times throughout the night. What would be the point?”

“I will take you at your word,” he said after a moment. “But you should listen to mine. Adult wizards have decided that the world would benefit from your absence. They are capable of making that happen.”

“I'm learning as fast as I can,” I said. “Picking up every spell, learning to fight. In the end it might not be enough, but I plan to go down fighting. What else can I do?”

“Accept help from others,” he said. “Despite your unconventional methods, you are still a child, and as such are not expected to take on the entire world.”

“I'll take on the entire universe, if that's what it takes,” I said. “And how can I accept help when everyone seems like they want to either kill or imprison me?”

“Have you considered that it might be your personality?” Snape asked dryly.

I carefully resisted giving him the finger. I could see that he knew I wanted to, though, and there was a little smirk as he walked out of the room.
For a week I thought I was in the clear. There was no further inquiries from the aurors, and I didn't receive any summons from the Ministry. Filch's bones were all in the sewer system now, with nothing left to incriminate me in the vents.

Overall, I'd gotten away with murder, but I didn't feel good about it. I'd told Snape I hadn't had anything against Filch and it was true. He'd been unpleasant, but he hadn't directed any special attention toward me; if anything, he'd been a little more nasty towards the Purebloods. Maybe it had been their obvious disdain toward him.

Rumors were all over school about what had happened to him. The prevailing theory was that he had been murdered by Voldemort, or possibly a student that he'd annoyed one too many times. People knew I'd been questioned about it, but they seemed to take the fact that I was stil at school as proof I hadn't done it.

It was a surprisingly progressive attitude, one that would have been more reassuring if I didn't suspect they'd have been just as sure that I had done it if I'd been hauled away. They seemed amazingly credulous, believing everything they read in the papers.

I had to keep reminding myself that they existed in a pre-Internet world. Content was regulated, and every other provider wasn't lying or attempting to manipulate them in some way. In some ways it was a more innocent time, and I suspect that even the muggles would be a little more gullible.

“Did you hear that they've given up on the search for Filch?” Hermione asked.

“Oh?” I asked, as casually as I could.

We were in the library again, and I was studying the human revealing spell. It was a more advanced version of the Revelio charm, which was considered hard for a second year. It was wickedly useful though; it would reveal secret passages, invisible things, secret messages and even to reveal the true appearance of someone who had changed their appearance by a spell.

There was a third spell that would reveal the presence of spells cast on objects or potions. All three spells were ones I desperately wanted, for obvious reasons. When I'd mastered them, I was going to be casting them every time I took a bath or was in the toilet.

“They've already hired his replacement. He should be coming to school today!”

Why she would be so peppy about a new school caretaker I couldn't be sure. I'd always thought of Filch as a janitor, but the House Elves had done most of the cleaning. Was he their supervisor, or was he just an extra set of eyes for the staff?

“What have you heard about him?” I asked.

“Some people are saying he's a criminal!” Hermione said. She sounded breathless. “That the only reason he's here as caretaker is because it was a choice between this and Azkaban!”

“What did he do?”

“They say he deals in stolen goods...” Hermione said. She stared at me. “Why are you looking so cheerful all of a sudden?”
“It's good to know people who have connections on the outside,” I said. “They're watching the owls now, so it's not like I could get anything good through Mail Order.”

“What could you possibly want to buy that you couldn't get here or through the twins?”

“Snape has a standing order that he is to be informed about anything that I bring into the school. He's got this weird idea that I'm going to blow up the school or something.”

More like he'd gotten even more cautious since Filch's disappearance, but I didn't mention that to Hermione. I was touched that she'd never even bothered asking me if I'd killed him or not. There had been other students who hadn't been as careful, although I'd simply told them that I didn't know what they were talking about; clearly the aurors had been asking witnesses at the school what had happened and I'd just been one more witness.

I coughed as I detected someone walking toward the gates. I'd been more cautious about watching what was going on outside since I'd been attacked. I'd also gotten a lot more messy in the bathroom. I made sure to splash water all over the floor and then to keep bugs watching for disturbances in the water.

I had them paying more attention to smell and hearing as well. I had an idea for detecting someone who was silenced by listening for the absence of sound in a particular spot. I hadn't quite managed it yet, partially because I needed a silenced target to practice with. That was one more spell I needed to work on.

“He's just arrived, I think,” I said to Hermione.

She stared at me, but didn't ask how I knew. I hated to lead her on and make her believe something that wasn't true, but telling anyone was a good way to get myself killed. In this world, every adult Cape was capable of being a Master, which meant that no one could be trusted with any secrets.

There were apparently high level spells that would keep them from spilling secrets, but it would be years before I was skilled enough to use them.

The man walking toward the gate had a familiar look to him; he looked shifty. He was short, with bowed legs and straggly red hair. He was unshaven, and his eyes were baggy and bloodshot. The bugs nearest to him smelled alcohol and tobacco.

Most of the most dangerous people I'd met had a way of looking at people in a way that was familiar. It was as though they were assessing everything around them for how threatening they were. They wouldn't dismiss anyone, not even a Kindergarten student, because in our world, even that child could have strange and dangerous powers.

They might not even be a child at all; there were Strangers and Changers who could look like someone else after all.

This man scanned everything in a similar way, but what he was looking at was different. It was as though he was looking at everything and trying to assess how valuable it was, as though he was planning to drive a U-Haul up to the castle, use an expansion charm on it, and then steal the entire castle blind.

I understood people like him, even if I didn't always like them. It was possible that I might even be able to use him.

The man was led into the castle by Snape himself, who sneered. Snape waited until he was inside the Headmaster's office before he left, as though he didn't trust the man to be alone in the halls.
“Love what ye've done to the place,” the man said as he walked into the office.

“This isn't a social call, Mundungus,” Dumbledore said quietly. “Someone has done away with Argus Filch and there was an attack on one of the students.”

“Heard about that... it's the crazy one, right, the Yank?”

“Miss Hebert is a complicated person,” Dumbledore said. “Which does not please certain parties, who prefer to keep things simple.”

“Don't like her out-Slytherin their kids,” the man said. He grinned. “Sounds like it'll be good for the little snots.”

“More importantly, I need to know if these incidents are specifically directed toward her, or if they are the beginning of a slow assault on Hogwarts itself. I wouldn't have thought it of Tom, but he has been much more subtle lately than he has been in the past.”

“Killing the muggleborn kids isn't exactly his style,” the man said. “Some of the people workin for him, though...”

“Whether it is his decision, or simply acts carried out by those in his employ, I need to find out more. To that end, I need you to take over the role of caretaker.”

“Spy on the kiddies?” the man asked. “Sounds safer than being out there, right now. It's not just aurors that are going missing. There's been dealers in questionable items going missing too...”

“Why would he eliminate dealers in stolen goods?” Dumbledore asked.

“They were muggleborns,” the man said. “Making a tidy profit trading things with the muggles and selling them to purebloods who wouldn't be caught dead in a muggle shop. It's an underground market, because the Ministry wants us to keep our distance from the muggle world. It's not exactly illegal; but the aurors are likely to make their unhappiness known about it.”

I'd suspected that there had to be a certain amount of trade with the muggle world. At the very least food couldn't be created; the small population of wizards wouldn't need that much food in the scheme of things, but it was probably more cost effective to buy it from the non-magical world than to set up Wizarding farms.

The Ministry probably had official methods of making those deals, though, and they wouldn't look kindly on outsiders horning in on their turf. Governments tended to be very protective of their power.

“Anything to isolate us even further from the outside world,” Dumbledore said. “They refuse to believe that muggles have anything to teach.”

The man chuckled. “Some of the best fences I know are muggles. You don't have to talk me into thinking they've got brains.”

“Nevertheless, the job as caretaker here will not be entirely without danger,” Dumbledore said. “There has been some measure of suspicion in Mr. Filch's disappearance on Miss Hebert. Severus doesn't believe that she would act maliciously, but...”

“Somebody who can kill a troll isn't somebody to underestimate. I'm not stupid.”

“I wish I could say as much for half of Slytherin,” Dumbledore sighed. “I'd hoped that she would
lead them to understand that their prejudices against the muggles and muggleborns were unfounded, but instead she seems to have convinced them that they are incredibly dangerous.”

“Might not be the worst message for them to get, if it makes them back off.”

“Fear and respect are two different things,” Dumbledore said. “Fear of what the muggleborn represent is what is fueling Voldemort's rise. Making it worse will only drive them to join him.”

I felt someone shaking my arm, and I looked at Hermione.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

“I was just lost in thought,” I said. “How are you coming with the Revelio charm?”

“It's fascinating!” she said. “There are different versions for the different major species. There's one for humans, for goblins, for centaurs...”

“And they are better than the general charm why?”

“Because they are easier to cast,” Hermione said. “Quicker, even though they are more limited in scope. Some people can even cast them silently and wandlessly.”

“So we should probably focus on the human revealing charm, and maybe pick up the House elf charm later,” I said. “The Death Eaters wouldn't stoop to using Goblins or Centaurs.”

Hermione thought I was studying the spells because of the invisible attack on the school lawn. In a way she was right, even though the attack in the bathroom had been more immediate.

“You need to learn these things too,” I said. “Because even if you and your family go to Europe for your summer break, I doubt dentists can afford to spend three months away from their practice.”

Hermione scowled. “You know, when I start talking about what my parents do, the purebloods start looking at me like I'm...well, you?”

I considered that for a moment. Dentists pried people's mouths opened, then forced a drill inside. They sometimes yanked teeth forcibly out of someone's head. Just looking at dentist's tools was like looking at something out of a horror movie.

“Maybe you shouldn't bother,” I said. “Or just give them the abbreviated version. Just imagine what they'd think about a surgeon!”

Cutting people open with a knife, cracking their ribs to expose their still beating heart...it also sounded terrible in the right kind of light.

Her eyes rounded.

“And what about plastic surgeons?” Hermione said. “I saw a special about them on the telly once, and it looked barbaric even to me.”

Ripping people's faces off and then pulling it back behind their head so that it wasn't wrinkled any more, but leaving them looking like some kind of strange mummy?

“The Wizarding world is kind of innocent about some things,” I said. “And maybe we shouldn't be the ones to enlighten them.”

The purebloods were already afraid enough of the muggles, although I supposed that there might
be some use to be made in those images. It wasn't like Wizarding medicine couldn't be used for torture.

There were spells that would vanish bones, that would grow teeth to the point that they would crack the skull and kill someone if allowed to continue long enough. A simple episky spell would allow mundane torture to continue long past the time that muggle torturers would have had to quit. Transmute someone's head into that of a shark and leave them in the open air, and they'd begin to suffocate. It would make waterboarding look amateurish, although speaking might be a problem.

I sensed someone coming toward us at a high rate of speed. It was Neville, and he seemed to be agitated.

Looking up, I saw him walking rapidly toward me. My hand went for my wand, but I didn't lift it. Still I was startled as he lunged toward me and hugged me tightly.

“What's going on?” I asked slowly.

He held onto me tightly enough that I was having trouble breathing.

“You did it. You did it!”

“What did I do?” I asked, pushing him away from me.

I hadn't been hugged in... a long time. It had been years and I had largely forgotten what it felt like. The fact that it felt nice wasn't enough to keep me from feeling uncomfortable with it, especially as it kept my wand arm pinned.

“My mother is awake,” Neville said. He was crying.

It took us more than ten minutes to get the story from him. Apparently Neville's parents had been tortured under the Cruciatus for long enough that they'd basically been driven into a catatonic state. They'd been unable to respond to anyone, and Neville had never really gotten to know them.

Madam Pomfrey had used the scans she'd gotten of my own brain to help with their case. Apparently I had a similar pattern in my head, but I'd gotten better, which wasn't something that had ever happened before.

She'd told me that there was some evidence of brain damage, but since I seemed to be functioning perfectly fine not to worry about it.

Wizarding magic wasn't as advanced on the psychiatric front as in other areas, so this was considered groundbreaking.

Furthermore, Dumbledore had suggested using a pensieve... pulling the memories of the torture from their mind over and over. Obliviation didn't really destroy memories; it covered them up. Pensieve memories grew weaker and weaker each time the original was taken without replacing it, like a piece of paper being written on and erased overt and over again. Eventually the paper just grew thinner and thinner.

Dumbledore had been kind enough to give me the credit for that idea, probably as a way of promoting his muggleborn agenda.

“She's still not... normal,” Neville admitted. “I went to see her and she has to take calming potions and other stuff, and she still has lapses. But she was able to recognize me, and she talked to me!”
He seemed excited, so I didn't say anything to burst his bubble. I glanced at Hermione, and saw that she was thinking the same thing I was.

It was great that she was having moments of lucidity, but it was possible that where she was now was as good as she was ever going to get. It might even be that she would revert to her former state.

Or she might get all the way better. There was no way to know, but seeing the beaming look on Neville's face, I couldn't think of disabusing him of the hope that his family might one day be back together again.

“It didn't work on my Da,” he said, looking suddenly dejected. “Probably because they tortured him longer, or maybe because he's a male and male brains are different than female.”

“You could always turn him into a woman,” I joked weakly.

He stared at me. “Do you think that would work?”

“Probably....not?” I said. “You could always mention it to the mediwiches and see what they say, but I wouldn't get my hopes up.”

The last thing I needed was to be the one who broke Neville's heart. He'd been loyal to me when he hadn't had to, despite a lot of peer pressure to reject me. That was a sign of inner courage.

He reminded me a little of Theo sometimes. He hadn't been raised by Nazis, but he had turned against his own people's native prejudices to look for a better way.

I hesitated.

While puncturing Neville's enthusiasm might cause him pain now, it would save him pain later. If I was actually his friend, I'd need to be truthful with him.

“You know this might be as good as it gets, right?” I asked slowly.

He stopped and stared at me.

“She might keep getting better.... but she might not,” I said. “But either way, you should treasure the time you have with her. It's a little like she's risen from the dead...”

For a moment he looked offended, but that look was soon replaced by a thoughtful one.

“After my mother died, there were times that I'd give the whole world just for one more hour with her,” I said. “Now you've got that chance. If it doesn't get any better than this, then you should enjoy the time you have with her. If it does...then that's the icing on the cake.”

He nodded after a moment, and then he and Hermione started talking excitedly about the things he was going to tell his mother.

As I watched them, it felt nice that there was at least a little good news. I had a curious sense of foreboding, though.

The universe didn't seem to like letting me have nice things, not without taking twice as much away. Or maybe I was just as paranoid as people seemed to think I was.

I wasn't even sure which was worse.
“They want what?” I asked.

“The Daily Prophet wants to interview you,” Dumbledore said. “The Cruciatus Cure is an amazing breakthrough, and the idea that an eleven year old girl was the one to inspire it has inflamed the imaginations of the readership.”

I stared at him. I understood what his motive was behind all of this; by reminding the world that a muggleborn had handed a cure to them, he hoped to change hearts and minds. However, the last place I needed to be was in the forefront of everyone's minds.

As far as I could tell, I was being targeted by a single Death Eater. Avery had reason to hate me, considering my blood status and the fact that I'd harmed his nephew. But the other Death Eaters didn't seem to be targeting me specifically; they were simply after all muggleborn and I'd been caught up in their net.

Putting myself out in the public eye might change that. Avery had presumably seen me when he'd attacked me invisibly, but it was possible that he'd just sent a proxy. Even if that was so, the proxy had to know what I looked like. Did he know that I was an imposter already, or would having a picture in front of him jog his memory?

His partner might see it too, and then they'd see that I was a liability. That might make the attacks on me more desperate, and more likely to succeed.

After all, how many resources had Avery really expended on me? He'd cast a few spells on a helpless squib, and he'd taken some potshots at me when the opportunity had presented itself. The polyjuice potion had presumably been to get him up the stairs, in case invisibility and Filch's status as caretaker wasn't enough. He'd whispered in some auror's ears.

Blank polyjuice potions were available for sale in Knockturn Alley. I'd heard some of the upperclassmen sniggering about it. Adding a person's hair at the end, and there was an instant change. As to why they were sold so casually, I couldn't be sure.

I chose not to think about the perversions of adult Wizards.

If the Protectorate had been running the Wizarding world, Polyjuice would have been illegal, or maybe restricted to aurors. Here it was taught to everyone as part of their core classes, essentially giving every Wizard a stranger rating.

It was grueling to make, but I suspected that I'd be able to make it in a couple of years. Most likely I'd buy some if I ever found a dealer; I wasn't sure how expensive it was. Knowing that would help me to understand how much Avery wanted me dead.

“Do you think that flaunting my presence is going to help my position any?” I asked. “It's going to be hard enough to escape once the summer comes without them all knowing what I look like. Also, the last thing I need is anything that will make the rest of the kids jealous of me.”

“You? Afraid of bullies?” Dumbledore asked, one eyebrow raised. “I'd have thought you cherished the challenge.”

“Not being afraid of them doesn't mean that I enjoy being taunted behind my back, when they know that I can hear them,” I said. “And I can tell that it bothers Hermione to hear them say things
“And yet if no one does anything to change hearts and minds, it will always be like this,” he said gently. “The world is full of injustice, and most people learn to live with it. It's not until that first brave person steps forward that anything changes. Wasn't it only recently that a young woman refused to give up her seat on a bus in your nation simply because of the color of her skin?”

Even here in the past, it had been something like thirty six years since Rosa Parks had been thrown off the bus. Dumbledore considered that recent?

It was like the Wizarding World was a fly trapped in amber, stuck in time. Wizards tended to remember the parts of the muggle world that had existed the last time they'd interacted with it; for most that was when they had been in school. Given the fact that Wizards tended to live twice as long as muggles, and that meant that to someone like Dumbledore, horseless carriages were probably still astonishing.

“You aren't seriously comparing me to Rosa Parks,” I said. “Posing for some pictures isn't like starting a movement.”

“She likely didn't think she was starting a movement either,” he said. “She simply stood up for what is right. Despite your rather... complicated history, I believe that you too have a strong sense of how the world should be.”

He didn't say I had a strong sense of right and wrong. Was that a subtle insult?

“It just seems like it's asking for trouble, just when things are starting to die down,” I said. “Why would I want to do this?”

“I could appeal toward your more mercenary side,” Dumbledore said. “There are people who this cure will help that will be grateful to you if you let them know who you are.”

“How many people could there possibly be that this happened to?” I asked. “Didn't the Death Eaters kill the people they tortured when they were done?”

Dumbledore shook his head. “They made examples of some people; it was part of their campaign to spread fear in the last war. Death is simple, but being forced to care for an ailing relative for the rest of your life; that is fearful. Given the way our community is so closely related, that means that almost everyone has a relative who is affected, however distant.”

“I haven't heard about a lot of families dealing with something like that,” I said slowly.

“How long did it take young Mr. Longbottom to share what had happened with you?” he asked. “Most families prefer to take care of their invalids in-house, hiding them away from the world as though it is shameful what they have become.”

Would it really earn me that much political goodwill? What Dumbledore wasn't saying was that if I ever had to go to trial, having people on my side might make the difference between freedom and Azkaban... or even being Kissed.

I couldn't keep coasting on my being a child forever; in just a few years I'd be old enough that I'd be just another adult, and if I didn't make friends with those in power I'd be screwed.

The thought of getting some political backing was attractive, but was it worth the risk of inflaming Avery and his partner?
Screw them. I couldn't keep living my life on the defensive. I needed to go on the attack, and this might be something constructive that I could do.

“Fine,” I said. “But I'd prefer not to have any pictures.”

“I am sure they will press for them,” Dumbledore said. “But we will try to keep your picture off the front page at least.”

“I don't like being manipulated,” I said, grimacing as I rose to my feet. “When is this going to happen?”

“Within the hour,' Dumbledore said.

“And if I'd said no?” I asked. He'd simply assumed that I'd agree, which was more than irritating. It was almost enough to put him on my to-do list.

The list was fairly short at the moment. Avery, the Death Eaters, Voldemort and the Hat.

I turned to glare at the hat, which simply sat there as though it was a simple piece of felt. I hadn't forgotten what it had done, but figuring out an appropriate response was difficult.

I could destroy the hat easily enough; there were more than enough cloth eating bugs in the castle that I could probably take care of it in a single night, assuming that it wasn't somehow magically protected.

But the hat served an important purpose in the school, and destroying the hat would probably make everyone who'd ever gone to school angry. I couldn't afford that, not right now.

Yet there wasn't any other leverage to deal with the hat. As far as I could tell it didn't have friends. It didn't eat, or drink, or do much of anything. It didn't have knees you could break, and the thought of torturing a hat was ludicrous.

Dropping it in the sewer might work, but would a hat even care about getting dirty? It didn't have human fears, which made judging what it would find unpleasant difficult. It didn't seem to want anything at all other than to shove kids into Houses. It was like trying to intimidate a laptop.

Getting it to speak about the others who had been reincarnated was on my list too. I didn't have anything to offer the hat.... maybe a cleaning?

“How do I know this isn't going to be an excuse to attack me?” I asked. “Physically or to my reputation?”

“I think it would be best if Miss Skeeter survived her encounter with you,” Dumbledore said.

I forced myself not to stiffen, and I carefully kept my eyes averted from him. I pushed my emotions into my bugs, and I hoped that no one would notice how agitated they were. Did he know what I had done? What did he plan to do about it?

“She is not a troll, although some people might disagree.”

“Fine,” I said. “Where do I meet her?”

“I've arranged for you to meet her in the charms classroom,” he said. “In light of previous difficulties, I think having a teacher present would be prudent.”
“Who are you trying to protect? Her or me?”

“The welfare of everyone on the premises is my responsibility,” he said smoothly. “Now perhaps you would like to freshen up.”

I scowled, then nodded. First impressions were important.

I'd had the classes with Glenn Chambers, even though I hadn't really bothered to pay that much attention. At the time I'd been worried about saving the universe; making a good impression with the press hadn't been high on my list.

Still, some of the pieces of advice had stuck with me. Being prepared was important. Thinking before you spoke was important; ums and uhs made you sound stupid. Avoiding jargon was important; you were speaking to the general public, not members of the Protectorate.

Keeping answers simple and succinct. The press tended to prefer sound bites anyway, and they were likely to cut what you said down into something the audience could understand anyway.

I found my best robe, and I made an effort to make my hair look presentable. Tracey had shown me a spell that made that easy, and I saw no reason not to use it, even though part of me wondered whether I was going to end up bald when I was older because of overusing it.

Finding my way to the classroom before the reporter wasn't that difficult. I was following her progress through the castle, after all.

She had blonde hair set in elaborate curls. Her spectacles were set with rhinestones. Her jaw was thick and her fingers were even thicker, and the long, red painted nails on them looked a little like claws. She had a handbag that looked like it was made of crocodile skin.

There was something about her that tickled at the back of my mind. Did I recognize her from somewhere? It made me a little uneasy, so I resolved to be on my guard.

She was being escorted by Professor Flitwick.

“She's been one of my best students,” he was saying in his squeaky voice. He was moving quickly to keep up with her. “Both of my best students this year are muggleborns.”

“That's unusual, isn't it?” she asked.

“The muggleborn lack some of the advantages pureblood children have,” he said. “Including the ability to practice magic during the summers.”

“You aren't criticizing that policy, are you?” she asked. Her head snapped toward him. “The Ministry thinks that children can't be trusted not to use magic around muggles, and that it would be a nightmare for the obliviators.”

“Ahh...no,” Flitwick said hurriedly. “I was just saying that the common refrain that muggleborn aren't good at magic isn't true at all in my experience.”

“A couple of magical prodigies isn't indicative of a trend,” she said reprovingly. “Perhaps if you had some proof, the Prophet might be interested in looking over your findings.”

Her tone suggested that she was just being polite, and that they weren't likely to print anything of the sort.
I waited calmly until they entered the room.

“Hello! You must be Taylor!”

Her voice was higher in pitch, the sound sweet and cloying. It was the kind of speech used to speak to a small child.

I nodded, and she reached out to shake my hand. I twisted my wrist slightly so that my hand was on top, and I squeezed tightly. It was a domination display, and I could see in her eyes that she knew it.

Without blinking I stared at her. It was also dominant body language, and I’d found that it unnerved people coming from a girl my age. Girls were socialized to be more submissive, even in Wizarding culture, especially in their body language. Going against that was sending a message.

She pulled her hand away.

“What do you want to know?” I asked.

“You don't mind if I use my magical quill,” she asked. She pulled it out of her bag and set it on one of the tables. I used my bugs to keep an eye on what it was writing.

I was standing with my legs slightly spread. I watched her quietly and didn't say anything. Often people would feel compelled to fill the silence and they'd say a lot more than they meant to.

Staring at me for a moment, she said, “How did you come up with the idea for the Cruciatus Cure?”

“It seemed obvious to me,” I said. “When I researched what pen sieves did, it seemed like it would be better at thinning memories that obliviation, which just covers them up. That's not the only part of the process; the rest was the result of efforts by a team of gifted and dedicated mediwizards, starting with Hogwarts own Madam Pomfrey.”

“They used the results of your own brain scans, didn't they?” she asked. “Which means that you've been through something unspeakable.”

“You can understand why I wouldn't want to talk about that,” I said. “And why I'm determined that something like that isn't going to happen to me again, or to anyone else.”

“Is that why you have a certain... reputation?”

“Reputation?” I asked. I knew what she was going for, but I was going to make her say it.

“For violence, dear,” she said. “It's said that you've murdered at least one troll, and that you have injured several of your classmates. There are people who are questioning why you are even allowed to continue at this school.”

“Surely you don't believe that,” I said. “Look at me; do I look like I could kill a troll?”

She faltered; it was as though she was seeing me for the first time.

“And besides, if you really believed that I was some kind of psychopath, someone who killed anyone who caused her pain, you doubtlessly wouldn't have your quill writing what's going on that paper over there.”
I hadn't even looked at it, but I could see what it was writing, and it wasn't flattering.

“What do you mean, dear?” she asked.

“You aren't afraid of me at all,” I said. “Which means you don't believe any of that claptrap you are writing. Is this supposed to be a piece about a new medical technique, or are you just trying to write another piece talking about how dangerous the muggleborn are?”

“It doesn't matter what I believe,” she said. “What matters is what the readers will believe.”

“I think it would be better if you wrote something a little more balanced,” I said. I took a small step toward her.

“Are you threatening me?” she asked, sounding almost delighted.

“Certainly not!” I said, making an effort to sound shocked. “I was just wondering if...certain people had sympathies with enemies of the Ministry. You know who I'm talking about, of course.”

For the first time, she looked actually startled.

“What are you talking about?”

“Everyone knows what his agenda is,” I said. “And there may come a point where people are going to have to choose sides. If you choose too soon, it might be something you regret.”

“I'm not on You-Know-Who's side,” she said quickly.

Strangely enough, I believed her.

“Didn't you just say that it didn't matter what the truth is?” I asked. “It's what people perceive it to be. If people think that you are on the side of Vold-”

“Don't say it!” she said.

“Of him, aren't you going to lose half your readers?”

“But people aren't really interested in this,” she said, gesturing around us. “They want to know the real scoop, about the dangerous muggleborn.”

“If I'm dangerous now, how much more dangerous am I going to be in the future?”

“I deal with dangerous people all the time,” she said dismissively. She stood up, seemingly regaining her composure. “So you don't want to talk about being Cruciated. What about the mystery of your background? No one seems to know anything about you?”

“I'm an orphan,” I said. “What else is there to know?”

“Oh, why there is no record of your parents being murdered,” she said. “And why there are no muggle records of a Hebert family emigrating to Britain over the past year. Where did you come from, and who are you, really? I'm going to publish something, so wouldn't it be better to give us your side of the story?”

I glanced back at Flitwick, and I felt like grimacing. The last thing I needed was for staff members to be asking those questions. If she put them in the papers, I was in deep trouble.
“Miss Skeeter!” Flitwick said. “Miss Hebert has performed a service for the entire Wizarding community! Why would you start making spurious accusations?”

Rita wasn't sure herself.

She'd come expecting to do a puff piece. That was what her editor had expected, and that was what she'd promised Dumbledore. While she did not fear the man, exactly, his political power was enough that he could cause serious problems for her.

In the current environment, it wasn't a good idea to alienate either of the two major groups who were vying for control of Wizarding Britain. Officially, the Prophet was very much on the side of the Ministry, but unofficially her editor was wary of offending the Death Eaters and their followers.

That was a good way to end up disappearing, and her editor had a very strong sense of self-preservation. Rita despised his cowardice sometimes, though. It would be better to let people know what was really happening, instead of just being a Ministry mouthpiece.

Yet her adoring fans expected a certain level of...spice. Playing it safe was a sure route to the unemployment line, and Rita didn't know how to do anything else. Even if she had to make up some of the particulars to make things juicier, the bare bones of the truth would get through, and that was ultimately important. Her editor continued to stymie her at every turn, though.

If they continued the way they were, she was going to work in a shop like a plebian.

The Cruciatus cure was a once in a lifetime event, but it wasn't something that affected all that many people. Certainly, Rita's second cousin had been affected, and there was some evidence that she was getting better, but it wasn't exactly a complete cure, was it?

The people who were waking up were likely always going to be half-people, cripples. It would have been better for everyone had they died long ago, but Wizarding medicine was able to keep people alive long past their allotted time.

It was important, but not that important, and yet still, the plan had been to write a soft piece talking about how this young girl was a shining example of a young witch. It was what her editor and Dumbledore were expecting from her. It would be the easiest thing to write.

If the girl had been ordinary, that was the piece Rita would have written. However, the moment she'd stepped into the room, something about the girl had struck her as wrong. There was a strange sense of horror that had washed over her the moment she'd seen Taylor Hebert, and it wasn't going away.

She'd done her research on the girl, of course. Before printing lies, it was important to know the truth, especially because the truth was sometimes much more juicy than any lies she could possibly come up with.

What she'd found in her research hadn't been pretty. The girl had obviously been tortured with the Cruciatus curse, probably before she'd even realized that magic existed. She claimed to be an orphan, and anyone reading between the lines would realize that she was one of the muggleborn who had families murdered before the school term had even begun.

Yet there was no record of her, and the aurors didn't know anything about the murders.
There were questions, and there was nothing that Rita loved more than answering questions. She had a nose for news, and this was news.

Still, writing a puff piece now, and an expose later wouldn't have gotten her in trouble. Yet from the moment that she had walked into the room, something about the girl had made her profoundly uneasy.

It felt as though the girl's face was tight against a skull that was vaguely wrong. The way she moved was like someone who was wearing someone else's skin, as though there was something just waiting to explode out of her skin to devour her.

It didn't just bother her human self, either. The beetle was always within Rita, and that part of her was screaming predator.

On the surface, the girl looked like any other child her age. She was wearing the same uniform, her hair didn't look that much different. Maybe it was the way that she stared without blinking, her expression unlike that of any other child Rita had ever seen.

Maybe it was the obvious attempts to be dominant, made ridiculous by the fact that the girl was tiny and a first year student.

“People have questions,” she said without looking at the diminutive professor. “And they deserve answers.”

Hebert took a deep breath. For a moment she looked as though she was going to say something acerbic; the girl had become increasingly aggressive throughout the interview, but suddenly a strange sense of calm came over her face.

“We were vacationing,” Hebert said quietly. “The jobs my parents had were no longer an issue, and it was the first time in a long time that we were going to get to be a family again. The attack came out of nowhere. I don't really remember what happened; they say the attack left me with some kinds of brain damage.”

Brain damage might explain some of her behavioral issues, and maybe even her strange body language. Still, there was something off about what the girl was saying. Where had this sudden, sad sincerity come from? Was it an act, or was the girl so damaged that it was like multiple people were living in the same body?

“How hard would it be for wizards to make muggle visitors just...disappear?” Hebert asked. “Making records vanish, officials forget. It's only surprising that they didn't make it happen to everyone.”

She was talking about the muggle murders. Rita felt a sudden surge of excitement. She'd tried to report on them, but the Ministry had completely shut her down. Her editor had refused to even look at anything she wrote about it, to the point that she'd been tempted to write an anonymous article in the Quibbler just to get the ball rolling.

She leaned forward.

“And it left you all alone?” she asked.

Hebert nodded.

If Rita squinted really hard, she could almost see a tear in the corner of the girl's eye. She made sure the quill made a note of that. It could have been a trick of the light.
Maybe writing the piece she was expected to write wouldn't be a violation of her journalistic integrity. After all, what was more likely, that an eleven year old muggleborn girl would defeat the Book and the Quill and the Hat and all of the other pretensions Hogwarts had, or that she really was the victim she appeared to be?

Her magic had appeared late, presumably around the time that she was tortured. That accidental magic would explain how she survived when her parents had not.

A story about a plucky girl rising above tragedy to bring an amazing discovery would sell well. She could spin the behavioral problems as temporary side effects of the trauma of what had happened to her. She could probably write enough about what had happened to her that she could get some of the information about the murders out. She'd have to be careful and hint instead of state everything outright, but maybe this girl could be the lever she needed to split the story open outright.

“How does that make you feel?” she asked.

It was a hack question, but children were often rather stupid and weren't particularly good at expressing themselves. Sometimes you had to pull the information out of them, and being blunt was the best way to do that.

If it made them cry, all the better. After all, emotion sold papers more than bland facts. It was Rita's command of the emotion behind the story that made her the number one reporter for the newspaper.

Of course, there were only three reporters for the entire paper, and the other two were off on assignment. Dumbledore had requested either one of the others, which had miffed Rita, but she'd understood. He'd wanted a puff piece, and she wasn't exactly known for those.

He'd stared at her during the interview as though he could read her mind. Given his power, it was possible that he actually was a legilimens.

The girl grimaced at Rita's question.

“Write what you like,” she said. “Whatever I say wouldn't be a tiny fraction of what I really feel. Sad? That doesn't even begin to describe what it feels like when you lose your entire world. I had friends that I won't ever see again, family that I've lost forever. Do I feel angry? Rage is more like it; when I'm old enough I plan to find the people who did this to the people I care about, and I'm going to make them pay.”

Rita stared at her.

The girl was talking about going after Death Eaters as though it was a certainty. She didn't show any fear at the thought; instead there was a gleam of anticipation in her eyes.

The sense of being in the room with a predator grew even stronger, and to her surprise Rita felt herself starting to sweat.

“There are those who are whispering that you might become the next Dark Lady,” Rita said finally.

“Do you think I should?” the girl asked. Her curiously blank eyes turned toward Rita, and she didn't sound as though the answer to the question mattered much to her. The girl forced herself to smile, and it looked ghastly, as though a skeleton had skin draped over it.
“I'm just kidding. I'm a regular student at this school.”

That felt like the biggest lie Rita had heard since hearing that Cornelius Fudge was actually in favor of Muggleborns. He'd just used that as a campaign tactic to get in office; he was actually as prejudiced as any other pureblood.

Rita herself was a halfblood, and she hated being dismissed by purebloods because of her blood status. It had always given her a vindictive sense of pleasure to take arrogant purebloods down a peg or two. The question was, this girl was clearly not an ordinary student. At the very least she was traumatized and clearly not in her right mind.

At worst, she was like a muggle cuckoo bird. It would lay its eggs in the nest of another species, and then allow the other birds to raise its chicks. Those chicks would push the children of the other bird out of the nest, killing them.

Was this girl a savior, or a demon?

Usually Rita's gut would give her the answer, but here she couldn't be sure.

“An exceptional one,” Flitwick said from behind her. “She's one of my two best students.”

He'd said that before; was he saying it again for the girl's benefit? Girls at that age were emotionally vulnerable. Rita had been afraid that she'd have to hold this girl's hand throughout her interview.

How did they not see what a monster she was?

It should have been obvious to every teacher. They saw enough students on a day to day basis to have an unconscious ability to know what was normal, and this girl was not. It should have been obvious from the moment that she'd first come to class.

Still, if she tried to warn the world without some kind of proof, she'd be a laughingstock. The purebloods were convinced that the muggleborn weren't really Wizards. The way they comforted themselves was with the idea that muggleborn were barely better than squibs.

Telling them that a prominent muggleborn was a magical genius would make them question anything else she had to say, and she couldn't afford that at the moment. Sometimes truth had to be doled out in small installments in order for it to be accepted.

Worse, the families of the people the Crucius cure had given hope to wouldn't want to hear that the girl was a sociopath. They needed to believe that she was an angel of mercy, someone who was special.

No one would believe that an eleven year old was dangerous anyway. Most Wizards tended to be dismissive of anyone who wasn't able to do magic; first year Hogwarts students barely made the cut. The fact that the girl had killed a troll with a knife wouldn't be seen as realistic, even though Rita had heard it from multiple sources, including Dumbledore himself.

Uncertainty gnawed at her. She had every reason in the world to write a glowing piece about the girl, and writing against her would cause her all kinds of problems. Yet her readers expected more from her than just to rubber stamp what the Ministry wanted.

Her job was to warn the public.

The girl was staring at her, and after a moment, her harsh look softened.
“I’m not dangerous,” she said. “Not to anyone who leaves me alone. People just tend to be afraid of anything they don’t understand... especially the muggleborn. I’m afraid that a lot of the rumors about me are overblown to say the least.”

The implication was that she was dangerous to those who decided to attack her. The girl could have delivered the statement in such a way as to threaten Rita herself; if she had, it would have made Rita’s course clear. Nobody threatened the press, and she would have found a way to get the story to print, if she’d had to go to the Lovegoods.

But the statement was bland, and devoid of threat. It was a statement of fact.

“And how do you feel about purebloods?” Rita asked.

“Some of my best friends are purebloods,” Hebert said. “I’m not unaware of some of the cultural implications, but I don’t think that blood status really means that much. I believe that people should be judged by their character, and possibly by the power of their magic.”

“By the power of their magic?” Rita asked. That surprised her.

“Nobody is born with magic that is stronger or weaker than anyone else,” she said. “Magical power is achieved in the Wizarding world through hard work, intelligence and practice. Those are all commendable qualities in and of themselves.”

“You don’t think talent plays a role?” Rita asked.

“Some people have faster reflexes, which might make them better dualists, or think faster, but for day to day magic any wizard can do anything, assuming they are smart enough,” Hebert said. “There’s always someone who learns faster, but if you work hard you’ll get there eventually.”

“Would that all Wizards felt that way,” Rita murmured.

Most Wizards were lazy.

It amazed Rita that so many wizards could not competently cast a shield spell. She would be dead three times over if she hadn’t kept up her skills, and in the world they were living in, there was no reason not to know basic self protection. Yet most wizards and witches would prefer to listen to the Ministry and pretend that everything was fine.

Rita reached her decision.

She’d write both stories; the puff piece Dumbledore had asked for, and the piece about the dangerous muggleborn. She’d hold the damaging piece until the girl proved that she was what Rita’s gut told her she was.

In the meantime, she would try to write the piece she was assigned now with references to what was happening to the muggleborn. If she was clever enough about how she wrote it, it might just slip by her editor.

He’d be angry, of course, but once the story was out, it was possible that she’d be able to write more of the stories she really wanted to write. Leaving the Wizarding population helpless wasn’t her job.

She’d covered the first war with less censorship, and she sometimes wondered if there were ulterior motives behind the quashing of certain stories. Were there members of the Ministry in league with Voldemort? Did they somehow have some sort of hold over her editor?
Rita forced herself to smile.

“I think we got off on the wrong foot,” she said. “Maybe we should start again. Tell me about your plans now that you have inspired a cure that has helped so many people?”

Her Quill was linked to her, so it detected her shift in mood and automatically adjusted the slant it was taking on the conversation.

The girl relaxed even though she wasn't looking at the paper. There had been rumors that the girl was a seert of some sort. It was hard to believe of a muggleborn, but maybe she really was.

Could the girl be a legilmens, or was she just somehow reading Rita's notes?

“I'd like to help everyone,” the girl said. “Not just a few unfortunate victims. First, I'd like to enjoy my years at Hogwarts in peace. If that happens, I'll likely end up as a magical researcher.”

Rita didn't ask what would happen in the event the girl wasn't left in peace. The part of her that was still screaming that the girl was dangerous didn't want to know.

Still, she'd be keeping her eye on the girl.
“Page sixteen?” I said. “Dumbledore made me go through all of that just for a little blurb on page sixteen?”

Page sixteen was the health column, but I'd expected...more, from the way he'd built the whole thing up. Was anyone still reading by page sixteen? How much of a difference would a tiny little article actually make?

“It made you look good,” Hermione said. “It's not like she did a hatchet piece on you or anything.”

She'd hinted that I'd been tortured. It would explain the strange looks I'd been getting from the other students all day, a combination of sympathy and horror.

Hermione had been careful not to ask about it, but I'd seen the question in her eyes too. It irritated me; was the nebulous potential rewards in the future worth the loss of regard I’d suffer in everyone's eyes? I wasn't a victim. I'd given that up on the stay I'd been pulled screaming out of a locker years ago.

I was never going to be a victim again.

That didn't mean that horrible things weren't going to happen to me; my luck had never been particularly good. But even having my arm cut off hadn't made me a victim. Being a victim was a mindset as much as anything. At the worst, I was a survivor, which was an entirely different state of mind.

“How can anybody believe anything they see in the paper?” I asked irritably. “I never had tears in my eyes or talked about how my parents would have been proud of me.”

“Ummm....artistic license?” Hermione said. She looked distinctly uncomfortable.

Despite all of my training, she still sometimes tended to take things that she read as the gospel truth. Having the fact that sometimes lies were printed right in front of her had to be disconcerting.

“Don't believe anything the woman says,” I said.

I'd be more angry at Dumbledore, but I'd listened in as Flitwick had gone to him to protest. Apparently, upon learning that Skeeter would be conducting the interview, he'd gotten in contact with her editor. He'd gotten him to agree to let Dumbledore look over the article before it was published, and had given him the right to kill the story if he didn't like it.

It was a corrupt system, but Dumbledore knew how to work it. Skeeter hadn't known about this back room deal, and likely would have been furious if she'd known. I'd known journalists before, and even the worst of them tended to believe that the press should be an independent entity.

Hermione nodded soberly. “I hadn't realized that it was this bad. Journalistic standards in the Wizarding world are rather poor, aren't they?”

I glanced at her and wondered whether she really thought muggle newspapers were all that much better. Maybe they were, here. Back at home, the Protectorate had wielded an unusual amount of influence over the news outlets. In an ideal world, that would have been unacceptable, but it had happened nevertheless.
The whole thing left a bad taste in my mouth, even if it had arguably worked out in my favor. Dumbledore had been pushing his muggleborn agenda, but it could have just as easily been Lucius Malfoy or one of the other Death Eaters pressuring the editor to push their own agenda.

How much of the war involved backroom deals like this?

Politics in general had always disgusted me. Politicians needed to compromise to get deals done, but the problem was that the more you compromised, the easier it became to continue doing so. You lost sight of the fact that there were occasionally points on which you should never compromise, and in the end you became something that you would not have recognized.

Political power was more corrupting than other types of power, because it required selling your soul.

“Well,” Hermione said slowly. “It's not like it's going to amount to much. It's just a page sixteen article.”

Right.

So why had Dumbledore insisted on it? Was he so desperate to change people's minds, even by a fraction of an inch that he'd take any opportunity? Were things that bad already?

I'd seen a lot of casual racism in the general population. It was there in the way that the students talked, in the implicit assumptions that they made, in the jokes they told when they thought no one was listening. Presumably they'd gotten that from their parents, but their parents were likely worse, because they weren't exposed to the muggleborn on a day to day basis.

Wizards were able to live in little insulated enclaves where they never had to expose themselves to the kinds of people they didn't like. They didn't even have to listen to ideas they didn't like. It was likely part of the reason that the Daily Prophet had so much influence on them; they weren't getting their news from any other source.

The Quibbler, unfortunately didn't count. It seemed to be a strange fringe paper full of conspiracy theories. More people read it to laugh at it than to seriously believe in what it said.

Worse, Wizards tended to live twice as long as muggles, which meant that old, racist ideas that would have simply died out in the muggle world were continued, spread to great grandchildren and propagated.

There were people who were progressive for their day, but by today's standards would be considered horribly racist. In the Wizarding world, a lot of them were still around.

Well, there was nothing I could do about it now. The article was out, and whatever plans Dumbledore had were already in motion. I'd been foolish to agree to it in the first place, but maybe Dumbledore was right. There were people who were going to be helped by the cure, and if that included people in power I might be able to leverage that to my advantage somehow.

It wasn't much consolation when people kept looking at me strangely. I wanted to snap at them, but given the fact that there were still a few boggarts left in the school, that was a good way to get wands pointed at me.

Those same looks lasted for the next several weeks, even as everything else settled back into a routine. There were no more attacks on me, although I did receive letters from several people thanking me for what I had done.
Neville had managed to drag me to both of the Quidditch matches, and while I'd been horrified about how dangerous the whole thing was to schoolchildren, it had been kind of fun. In retrospect, asking Vista to face Lung had been even less safe, and least this was entertaining.

They were examined by Snape before I received them, of course. He'd done it because I refused to open my own mail for obvious reasons, and also because he probably worried that I was doing something nefarious through correspondence.

If I'd really been doing something like that, I'd have gone through the Weasley twins, Hermione, Neville, or Millie. Most likely I'd have gone through the twins since no one knew about our connection.

I watched and took note as the new caretaker stole several things around the castle. He didn't do it often, but I wrote all of it down. Having blackmail opportunities might come in handy later.

It wasn't something I planned to use casually. Fletcher was Dumbledore's man, and he'd wonder how I knew what I knew. If I wasn't lucky he'd go to Dumbledore, even if it meant revealing the things he'd done. He didn't strike me as the type to put the good of others over himself, but I'd been wrong before.

It was time for Winter Break almost before I knew it. Settling back into school had been easier than I would have thought, even if I was using the human detecting spell on a daily basis. I didn't just use it for fear of intruders; I also suspected that any of the professors could use the disillusionment spells.

On two occasions I'd found Mundungus Fletcher trying to follow me invisibly as I made my way to a practice session with the Weasley twins. I made sure that Hermione, Neville and Millicent knew the spell too, and that they used them religiously.

It was presumably good training for what I'd have to deal with once school was out in the summer.

There was snow piled up outside, and that meant that most of my bugs were dormant or dead. The interior of the castle was warm enough for them to survive, especially the magical ones, but I'd taken to filling my fanny back with as many emergency bugs as I could. It kept them warm and left them ready to attack with, but it reduced my ability to spy on the people around me drastically.

In the future, I planned to see if there was a way to extend warming charms to others. Most likely I wouldn't be able to extend them to every bug in my repertoire individually, but it might be something to look into nevertheless.

I had bugs nesting in inaccessible places around the pipes; the hot water was more than enough to keep them alive throughout the worst of the winter, but they were sluggish and difficult to use when they left to spy for me.

That had been making me a little paranoid.

Still, my reputation was apparently enough to stop further attacks, or maybe it was the idea that the staff and paintings were keeping a close eye on me. Rumors around school were that it was as much to protect them from me as vice versa.

“I would have been happy to have you come home with me for break,” Hermione said. There were tears in her eyes, which made me feel a little uncomfortable.

“I wouldn't endanger all of you like that,” I said. “And I'm glad that you are taking your holiday in Europe this year.”
“I talked about it with my parents,” she said. “They wanted to withdraw me from school, but I convinced them that I was actually safer here than I would have been out there. They're safer when I'm here too.”

I nodded. At least her parents had been willing to listen. I was willing to bet that a lot of muggleborn parents were likely to underestimate the extent of the danger they were in, especially as they didn't get the Wizarding paper.

Not that Skeeter or the others had done any real reporting about what was happening. There were hints of what was going on in the papers that I stole from Neville from time to time, but nothing substantive. They were doing a disservice to the general population as far as I was concerned.

“I'll be looking forward to seeing you when you get back,” I said.

She nodded.

Her bags were packed, and she levitated a trunk behind her. It was funny that only a few months before she'd been amazed that I'd levitated an empty trunk, but now she was doing it casually, as though it wasn't anything.

The holiday was only two weeks long, and the vast majority of the students were going home. Within an hour of the castle being emptied, it felt as though the whole place echoed and was much larger than it was when it was full of students.

There was an eerie feeling to it. Normally it was a place that was filled with laughter, with the sounds of running feet. Now it felt abandoned.

In some ways I was safer than I had previously been. There were fewer people who wanted to shove me off the stairs, and watching my back was going to be easier when there was no background sound to mask the sound of approaching footsteps.

At the same time, there was no one around to hear me scream. Even part of the staff was leaving for the holidays, leaving them running on a skeleton staff (not literally, to the chagrin of some of the students.)

There would be no one to give me presents, and no one to give presents to; none of my friends had chosen to stay behind. Neville was spending the holidays with his grandmother, Millie with her family. The Weasleys were off doing whatever Weasleys did.

Even the younger Weasley left.

Still, it was an opportunity to redouble my studies. I found myself in the Dungeons beside the fire in the comfortable chair as often as not, surrounded by books of the darkest magic I could find that wasn't in the restricted section.

It was nice being able to doze by the fire; the heat there was enough that I could hide some of my bugs all around me to keep watch even as I dozed. I'd learned that my power worked even when I slept, and so I was actually able to relax.

The Great Hall was empty at meals, enough so that one day as I sat down for lunch, I felt an unfamiliar presence sitting down beside me.

The dark haired Gryffindor boy was staring at me.

“Potter, right?” I asked.
He nodded.

“You didn't have anybody to go home to?” he asked.

“I'm an orphan,” I said. “You?”

“Might as well be,” he said.

Ah...bad family. I'd seen a lot of that when I was in the Wards. Para human powers didn't go to well adjusted people who didn't have a lot of trauma. Most parahumans came from broken homes to say the least, unless their trauma was from some other source.

“Why are you sitting at the Slytherin table?” I asked.

“Ron isn't here, and I figure it'll piss Snape off,” he said. He grinned. “Malfoy too. School's kind of fantastic, isn't it.”

“It'd be better if I wasn't in Slytherin,” I said.

He glanced around. “The hat tried to put me in Slytherin, but I begged it not to.”

“It wouldn't listen to me,” I admitted. “I tried to get it to put me in Hufflepuff.”

He snorted.

When he saw that I wasn't joking, he laughed out loud. “You belong in Hufflepuff like you-know-who belongs there.”

“You aren't comparing me to the Dark Lord are you?” I asked stiffly.

“Everybody else does,” he said. “I don't see it myself...I haven't thought that since I saw you save Neville from falling. He speaks highly of you. Then when you saved his ma...”

“I didn't do anything there,” I said. “I just had an idea. Pomfrey and the others did all the work. I'm glad it was able to help him though. She recognizes him now at least.”

“They're taking her home,” Potter said. “It'll be his first Christmas with his mother, and it's all thanks to you.”

I shrugged uncomfortably.

“So did you really stab a troll in the bollocks?” he asked suddenly.

I stared at him for a moment, then sighed. While Potter seemed nice enough, he was still an eleven year old boy.

“Yes,” I said. “Several times. It was the best place to kill him since that's where the skin was thinner.”

“How did you know?” he asked, leaning forward.

“It was an educated guess,” I said. “I could have easily been wrong, in which case I likely would have just run away.”
He glanced down. “You weren't scared?”

“Everybody's scared,” I said. “Some people more than others, but it happens to everyone at least some of the time. The only thing that matters is what you do when you are scared. Do you run, or do you stand and fight.”

“It's easier to run sometimes,” he said.

“But you can't run from yourself,” I said. “And you'll always know that you were the one to run.”

He stared off into the distance. “Sometimes there's things you just can't fight.”

I frowned. Was he talking about the Death Eaters, or about his unhappy family life? The Wizarding World didn't have a lot in the way of social services. That was part of the reason that Dumbledore was having such a hard time placing me.

Mostly orphans were taken in by the friends of their parents, or by grandparents of other relatives. People were so interrelated in the Wizarding world that there was almost always someone willing to take them in. Only the muggleborn didn't have that option, and usually Ministry officials tried to place those with other muggleborn families.

In my case, doing that would doubtlessly result in the deaths of my and my foster family. I needed to be placed with a Wizarding family, and one with strong wards, or who had other strong defenses.

“I hear the Christmas Feast is going to be something special,” Potter said. “Hagrid is bringing in Christmas trees and everything. It's kind of boring without Ron here.”

“Big families tend to expect their family home for Christmas,” I said.

“Well, it's kind of your fault too,” Potter said with a rueful smile. “There's a Great Aunt that was a Cruciatatus victim; she's better now, and Ron's mom insisted that they all come home for Christmas.”

Hmm... the twins hadn't said anything about that.

“You want to play chess sometimes?” he asked. “Ron was teaching me. I'm not very good, but I'm sure I could teach you.”

“I can play chess,” I said. “My mother taught me.”

“So?”

“Maybe,” I said reluctantly. It would cut into my studying time, but Potter was possibly the only person the Death Eaters hated more than me. It was possible that he might know something, even though the glimpses I'd seen of him through my bugs were those of a happy, well adjusted kid who was having the kind of first year that I'd only wished I had.

His grades weren't even that bad, other than potions, and that was at least partially because Snape seemed to hate him.

I felt Snape coming long before Potter. Potter seemed startled when the man loomed over both of us.

“I wasn't aware that you had changed houses, Potter,” he said.

Potter looked up at him and grinned. “You think I should?”
Before Snape could assign points, Potter was already scrambling to his feet and heading back to his own table.

Snape stared at me for a moment inscrutably before heading back to the head table.
Reflection

On Christmas morning, I woke with a profound sense of loss.

The past few months had been fairly decent, despite the attacks and other problems that kept cropping up. After all, I was in a school and I was relatively safe. I was learning magic, and while that didn't give me the same sense of wonder that it gave Hermione, there was still a tiny part of me that was still excited every time I managed to do something new.

Keeping my mind off the things I'd lost had been my way of dealing with things for years. I'd tried not to think about Mom, about the Undersiders, about Dad...even about Emma, who had meant something to me once.

When I'd been trying to save the universe, it hadn't been that hard. I'd told myself that I'd worry about having a life once there was a life to have. Nothing mattered but saving humanity.

But now?

In all important respects I was retired. Nothing I would ever do would be as important as the fight against Scion, and I wouldn't want it to be. This fight against Voldemort was just a regional conflict, and even if he managed to take over the world, it was just one world among an effective infinity of worlds.

On a day like today, I couldn't help but think about my mother. Mom would have loved Hogwarts; she'd been a dreamer; she'd taught English literature in part because she'd loved fantasy.

While I'd been a child, she'd made sure that I'd been raised on fantasy. She'd read to me when I was little; Narnia had been my introduction to fantasy. Later she'd weaned me on Spenser's Fairie Queen, on Tolkien, on Peter Pan, Susan Cooper.

I'd stopped reading fantasy when she died. All of that wonder and magic had just blown away and left nothing but ashes and bitterness when she died.

Hogwarts.... she would have loved the ghosts, the house elves, the magical paintings. Doing real magic would have sent her over the moon. Even if she'd simply sent me here, it would have made her proud of me.

That was a thought that I never let myself entertain. Would she have been proud of me? Of the choices I'd had to make, of the choices I was still making?

I hurt people, and being overly bothered by it stopped being an issue a long time ago. There were reasons for that, of course, ones that I considered good ones, but not everyone would agree.

When I was in the Wards, life had been lonely, but at least I'd seen Dad for the holidays. It had made the pain a little easier to bear, knowing that I had someone.

This Christmas was different.

This was the first time I was completely alone. Before, even if I was on missions, I'd at least been able to call my father. Now I didn't even know if he was dead. I hadn't wanted to know, because this way I could at least assume he was alive out there.

Slowly I opened my eyes.
As I sat up, I felt a sudden chill go down my spine. At the base of my bed were a pile of boxes wrapped up in bright and cheerful paper.

How had someone gotten that close to me while I slept? Even with my bugs as sluggish as they had been lately, I shouldn't have been surprised like that. It could have been the house elves; they were stealthy enough that they were sometimes able to evade me even when I was awake unless I was paying attention.

How stupid did they think I was? This had to be a trap. There could be anything in those boxes; explosives, cursed items, anything at all.

The safest thing would be to burn them, but that wouldn't be smart in the dungeons. There were probably magical means of ventilation, but I couldn't take the risk. The last thing I needed was to get a reputation for having tried to burn down Hogwarts. I'd have to take them and put them in the fire somewhere higher up.

I slipped into my robes, keeping a cautious eye on the packages, and I pulled out my wand. Levitating the entire mass wasn't a problem, and a moment later I made my way down the stairs, the packages in front of me.

Snape was waiting for me at the bottom of the stairs.

“I see that you haven't opened your gifts,” he said. He didn't look surprised. Despite the early hour he was completely dressed and looked fresh as a daisy. Having an adult's need for sleep must be nice.

Why was he here, of all places on Christmas morning. Didn't he have somewhere else to be?

“Traps, you mean,” I muttered. “Maybe you can burn these for me.”

I let the gifts drop to the floor in front of him. He looked down at them for a moment, but he did not step back. I certainly would have.

“You aren't even interested in who might have deigned to send you gifts?” he asked.

I snorted. “Nobody would bother sending me anything. Not this year.”

“You might be surprised,” he said. “I have taken the liberty of checking every one of your gifts a minimum of three times using every spell I could find. Only one turned out to be cursed, and I have taken that to the aurors to be dealt with.”

I glanced down at the presents and frowned.

“Who would have?”

I checked the packages with my bugs. Hermione, Millie, Tracey....Neville. Strangely enough, I had a package from a woman named Molly Weasley. Since I knew every Weasley in the castle, I had to assume that she was a relative of some sort. There was even small packages from Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy.

There was a package from Alice Longbottom, and at the bottom of the pile was a package from Snape himself.

“This one is from you?” I asked. For some reason I felt like it was hard to swallow.
He nodded.

With a gesture of my wand, I summoned it to me, and I sat down on the armchair closest to the fire. I carefully opened the package.

“A mirror?” I asked. It was a large mirror, the kind meant to be hung on the wall. It was plain and utilitarian.

I frowned as I looked into it and saw only shadowy shapes. There was a brown haired man in his early thirties. He was staring at me as though he wanted to kill me. Behind him stood a man with a face that was the color of bleached bone. He didn't have a nose and his eyes were red.

“It is a magical mirror,” he said. “It is called a Foe-Glass. It shows the enemies of the possessor. The closer they are to you, the more clear the image becomes.”

I stared at him.

“This is... too much...”

“It was my hope that you would realize that not everyone is your enemy,” he said. “Although if they are close enough that you can see the whites of their eyes, it is likely that they are right behind you.”

Snape wasn't in the mirror, but there was a large crowd of indistinct shapes that indicated that I had more enemies than I had thought. I'd assumed that most Wizards wouldn't really care that much about me. Maybe I was wrong.

“How does every Wizard in the world not have one of these?” I asked. “Are they expensive?”

“This one cost me nothing,” he said. “I managed to capture it in a raid during the last war. It is one of several.”

I looked down at the mirror, which I'd leaned against the chair. It obviously hadn't helped its previous owner that much, and I had to wonder what side of the war its owner had been on.

Still, it wasn't the kind of gift I could possibly afford to turn down.

“Thank you,” I said, and for once I meant it.

“It is not infallible,” he warned. “There are ways to fool it, and even if it tells you who your enemies are, it will not tell you from which direction they are coming.”

“I understand,” I said. “But... there isn't anything you could have gotten me that would have been better than this. I.... I didn't get you anything.”

He shrugged.

“The best gift you can give me is to avoid creating so much mayhem over the next year. If this helps, then I will consider it money well spent.”

But he didn't spend any money....

He turned. “Finish up with your gifts. Breakfast will be an hour late this morning.”

It had been a long time since I'd been excited about a gift, but this was something I could actually use.
As soon as Snape left, I tore into my other gifts.

Hermione had gotten me a book, of course. She’d gotten me “Basic Hexes for the Busy and Vexed.” Flipping through the book, I found myself interested in spite of myself. There was a spell for scalping people, for turning their tongues into horns, for giving them fiery hot breath.

There might be things here I could use.

Millie had gotten me socks.

That made me snicker a little. I’d been struggling with a lack of socks all semester; scourgify apparently would get blood out, but tended to wear holes in socks and reparo only went so far.

These were warm socks too, of a nice quality. Maybe she was just tired of seeing my toes peeking out.

Tracey had gotten me underwear. None of them had Armsmaster, or any kind of designs on them, but these too were quality work and there were enough of them to get me through two weeks. They even had my name on them.

Molly Weasley had knitted me a sweater. It was a beautiful color of emerald green, with the letter T embroidered on the front in silver. Those were Slytherin colors, and after a moment I slipped it on. It was marvelously warm and comfortable.

There was a letter accompanying it.

“Miss Hebert... you have returned my aunt to me, and my family will always be grateful to you. Consider yourself one of us, and should you ever need anything, ask one of my boys.”

That was it.

Harry Potter had sent me some chocolate frogs.

Draco had sent me a wizarding chess set. Was this a gift from him, or actually from his father, and was he trying to tell me something by it?

Checking my Foe-glass I didn't see Malfoy on there, although that might have been because it was a small mirror, and from the look of it I had a lot of foes. It was possible that he was somewhere in the back.

Maybe it was a message if some kind. Was it a warning or an invitation? It was possible that I could go over and over the possibilities and never come up with an answer.

I set it aside for the moment, vowing to reflect on it more in the future.

That left only the packages from the Longbottoms. First was Neville.

Opening his package, I frowned.

“Another mirror?” I asked.

This one was much more ornate than the one that Snape had given me. That one had been a rather no-nonsense kind of mirror, bare bones as was appropriate for someone like Snape. This one was something else. It was gilded and looked like it was worth a fair bit. It was much smaller too; this one was the size of my palm.
I opened the mirror, and I blinked.

Hermione was staring back at me.

“It took you long enough to wake up!” I heard her voice say.

“What is this?” I asked.

“Neville got you a two way mirror!” she said. “He lent me the other one so you could see how it worked!”

A two way mirror... there were possibilities here.

The image on the mirror shifted suddenly. I was suddenly staring at a beautiful room with one wall that was made of glass. Outside there was a beautiful azure sea. It was a beautiful scene.

“We're not having a traditional white Christmas this year,” Hermione said. “But we're doing something different.”

The scene jostled and moved.

“This is my Mom and Dad,” Hermione said.

Her parents didn't look that much like her. Their hair was rather normal, and their teeth looked perfect. Yet there was a sense of intelligence in the way they held themselves, and in the way they they looked at me.

“Hello Taylor,” the woman said. “We understand that you've been good to our daughter.”

“Some of the things we've been hearing...” the man started.

“It's Christmas,” the woman interrupted, “And Taylor is all by herself. Hermione was worried about you, you know, She was worried that you'd burn all your presents and spend the whole holiday brooding like Batman.”

“She makes you sound like Batman,” her father muttered. “Are you sure your last name isn't Wayne?”

If my Dad wasn't such a nerd, I wouldn't have gotten the reference. The old style of comic books had gone out of style when real parahumans had come on the scene, but my Dad had made me see some of the old movies from Earth Aleph.

I was actually flattered.

“Well, dungeons are a little like caves,” I said. “And I like to fight the good fight. I don't have a utility belt, though.”

“Just a magic bum bag,” Hermione said. “Like you think I didn't notice. You pull more stuff out of there than can actually fit inside.”

“Sounds like Batman,” her dad said. “My mates always wondered if he had half his equipment shoved up his...”

“Dad!” Hermione said. Her face turned beet red.

He grinned. “I was going to say cape. What did you think I was going to say?”
“Annnyway,” Hermione said, “I knew you were going to be there all alone, and I thought you might like to see a little of our Christmas. We took your advice, and we're doing a Mediterranean trip.”

She spun the mirror again, and I could see that there was a tiny Christmas tree on a table in the corner, with a large stack of gifts underneath it.

“I'll give you your gift when you get back,” I said. “I really appreciate the book. It's really cool.”

“It's no two way mirror though,” Hermione said. “I'm kind of jealous. Magic for Christmas...what could be better?”

“Is it OK for you to be using this?” I asked. “Won't it violate the Trace or whatever?”

“I asked Neville's grandmother,” Hermione said. “And she said the Trace only detects new magic, not spells that are already in place. We still have to make sure that no muggle gets their hands on it; that really would get us in trouble.”

“I really appreciate this,” I said. For once, I actually meant it. “I....didn't expect anything this morning.”

“You've helped people, Taylor,” Hermione said. “And Wizards and Witches have long memories. You should enjoy it.”

I nodded.

“It's getting close to breakfast. I'll talk to you this evening after dinner.”

She smiled and it lit up her face. “We can talk about the gifts we got. I know about a lot of yours, of course, but there might be some I haven't heard about.”

“How did you all keep this from me?” I asked.

It worried me; was it because of my reduced range because of the cold; I didn't have nearly enough bugs to cover as much space as I would like. Or was it because I'd been so focused on my enemies that I hadn't been paying attention to my friends?

She shrugged. “We passed notes and didn't talk about it much.”

I forced myself to smile. “This means a lot. I was feeling a little down. Thanks for everything.”

A moment later the mirror went dark, and then it was a normal mirror again.

The only thing that was left was a small envelope with Alice Longbottom's name on it. I carefully opened it, and I noticed that all there was was a single piece of paper.

The words on the paper were written in a childish scrawl; it looked as though the writer had struggled to complete each and every letter. The words weren't childish at all, though.

“Thank you for my life,” was all it said.

There wasn't anything else in the envelope, but there didn't have to be.

It was funny that the thing that Mom would have been most proud of that I'd accomplished in this world had been the thing I'd put the least effort into. It had been a casual, off the cuff remark, and yet there were people benefiting from it that I would never meet.
As I gathered my gifts to put them in my room or my fanny pack, I found that my eyes burned. I
must not have slept well the night before, probably because the House Elves had almost woken
me.

My throat was tight too. I wondered if I might visit Pomfrey; it wouldn't be good to come down
with something that Wizards could cure.

Still, as I headed for breakfast, that feeling of gloom that I'd woken up with had almost entirely
dissipated, and I found myself actually looking forward to the day.
“This isn't the kind of Christmas you're used to,” I asked Potter.

We were sitting on a ledge and staring out a window at the snow. There weren't enough students for a snowball fight, but a couple of students were making snowmen. I wondered if they were going to animate them.

Could I make a Frosty the snowman type hat eventually? Maybe having hats that could animate bodies would make the Sorting Hat jealous. It wouldn't even have to be snowmen; animating corpses would likely be more useful, and wouldn't have the whole heat and fire problem.

Of course, snowmen would be easier to make than corpses, at first at least, but they were crap during the summer, so likely not. Or maybe I could get them to animate trash, a little like Mush.

Harry Potter snorted.

“Yeah...this Christmas is fantastic. Only way it could be better was if Ron had stayed around. I actually got presents this year, and people are happy to have me around.”

“Must be nice,” I said. “You should be glad you didn't end up in Slytherin. Being a half-blood would be all right, but killing off old Moldy shorts would have probably ruffled a few feathers.”

“You aren't scared of him at all, are you?” he asked, looking at me strangely. “Everybody else, even the adults are terrified of him.”

“He's a small time symptom of a bigger problem,” I said. “Most Dark Wizards are, at least as far as I can see.”

“What do you mean?” he asked slowly.

“It's a problem with Wizarding society,” I said. “Actually, in parts of muggle society too. There are people who don't get a fair chance to have a say in what's going to happen to them... a Dark Wizard rises and tells them that he'll give them that chance, but the new government he creates ends up just as bad as the last one.”

“You act like Dark Wizards wins sometimes,” he said, looking surprised.

“Of course they do... I've read the history books. It's just that if they win they generally don't get called Dark Wizards. They're considered just and right. History is written by the winners, or at least the people who fawn over all of them.”

“You've got some pretty definite ideas about how things should be,” he said. “I thought Slytherins were more flexible than that.”

“You mean that they follow whoever has the power?” I asked. “That's probably true. But you have to have somebody who thinks they know better than everyone else, or nothing would ever get done?”

“What?”

“Well... you've heard of comic book superheroes, right?”

“Like Batman, or Bananaman,” he said.
Bananaman? Whatever.

“Right. Well, Superheroes think that things should be a certain way. Usually, that's the way things already are. Supervillains believe just as strongly that things should change. Because superheroes tend to side with the government, they get all the good press.”

“So supervillains aren't bad?”

“Some of them are very bad,” I said. “But not all of them are as bad as the others. They all get the same label though. It's the same thing with Dark Lords. Somebody who is a revolutionary gets that label when they are really just trying to change things for the better.”

“I thought you said they didn't make anything any better?”

“Usually they don't. Some of them mean to, but power is addicting, especially power over other people. Even if they don't fall victim to it, their followers might, or if not them, then their descendants.”

“So you-know-who isn't bad?”

“His people tortured people until they were insane,” I said. “And he tried to murder a baby, unsuccessfully. That's a combination of being evil and incompetent that's pretty dangerous.”

He stared at me, then laughed shortly. “Trust a Slytherin to make fun of the thing that ruined my life.”

I shrugged. “Terrible things happen to everybody. The question is whether you get up, dust yourself and do something about it, or if you decide to lay down and die. I don't believe in giving up.”

“Not everybody can be...you,” he said. “Sometimes you don't have any power to change things.”

He was right, of course. When I'd been abused by Emma, Sophia and Madison, there hadn't been much I could do. I could have tried to fight back, but that would have only led to more pain.

There were things that I hadn't been willing to do, but the consequences of those would have led to jail or worse.

“Then you watch and wait,” I said. “You won't always be powerless, and there will come a time when things change. That's when you make your move.”

“You can be pretty cold sometimes.”

“I'm a Slytherin,” I said, shrugging. “As much as I didn't want to be, the hat was probably right. Personally, I think that the people I'd want at my back would have the characteristics of all of the houses. I'd want people who were smart as a Ravenclaw, loyal as a Hufflepuff, brave as a Gryffindor, and as sly as a Slytherin. Give me twenty wizards like that, and I'd have control of Wizarding Britain in a year, and the world within ten.”

“Isn't that what you-know-who tried?” Potter asked.

“He's an idiot,” I said. “Trying to rule through terror means that you always have to worry about someone stabbing you in the back. If you make people think they want you to rule them, it works much better.”
He looked at me strangely. “Aren't you doing that?”

“I'm not trying to rule anybody,” I said irritably. “I just want people to leave me alone. If they did that, I'd be fine.”

“Even if people were getting hurt?” he asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Let's say they weren't targeting you... maybe you're a pureblood, but they're still going after muggleborn. Would you do anything or wouldn't you?”

“I can't answer that,” I said. “Being a pureblood would mean that I would be a fundamentally different person. I'd like to think that I would, but there's no guarantee. The person I am now? I couldn't stand by and let people get hurt.”

“They're getting hurt now,” Potter said.

“I'm waiting for my moment,” I said. “As a first year, I'm not as powerful as some people would like to think.”

Not even me, really. It was frustrating, being this limited.

Magic had endless applications; parahumans typically only had one power, albeit often a power with multiple uses. Wizards could do almost anything, given enough time and creativity. I wanted to be able to do all of those things, but magic took hard work too, and spells were like math in a way.

In math, everything led to everything else. Without addition and subtraction, you couldn't do multiplication. Without multiplication, you couldn't do division. Without all of those skills, you couldn't even start the higher order skills.

It was the same with magic. I couldn't simply start wandlessly and silently casting spells like I was Merlin himself. Skills led to other skills, and while I had the advantage of determination and a good work ethic, I wasn't even as much of a magical genius as Hermione.

Reading ahead was only going to take me so far; some magic required practical demonstration, and the Weasley twins were only third years.

In magic, I was finding, it was better to be a master of a few spells rather than know a vast number of spells that you could barely cast.

Harry was silent for a moment. “My relatives hate me for being a Wizard.”

I stared at him. That wasn't the kind of revelation that you shared with a stranger unless it was something that you just had to say.

“Then it's not really about you, is it?”

He looked up at me, surprised.

“People hate what they don't understand, and I'm not sure I understand this thing that we do. It's got to be even scarier to be powerless. That's not so bad if nobody has power, but when somebody sees that other people do...they probably feel a little jealous.”
His face tightened.

“You don't know them. The way they treat me isn't right.”

“Are they abusing you?” I asked. “Because there are things the muggle authorities can do. The Wizards don't seem to have a lot, but being a half-blood means you have a foot in both worlds. Use what you have to in order to get out.”

“Nobody would believe me,” he said sullenly. “And I've had a talk with Dumbledore. He told me that there's magical protections on my house to keep me safe, which is why he keeps me there.”

“He can't find another place with magical protections?” I asked. “Did you tell him how bad it is at home?”

He shook his head.

“Maybe you should,” I said. “Wizards have ways of changing people's minds, and if he has to keep you with them, maybe he can make them be nicer to you. Maybe he can just terrify them into compliance, or maybe he can make them forget that they hate you. Either way, you win.”

“It won't be the same as if they really loved me,” he said.

“But at least the abuse will stop. I'm not aware of any magic that can make someone genuinely love you, although I've heard of love potions. From what I understand, those are bad ideas, though.”

He frowned and looked down at the floor. It looked like he was considering what I was saying, which was good.

I'd been lucky.

My parents had loved me. Even though my mother had died, she'd left me with the memory of that love, and that had been part of what had helped me get through the dark days ahead. Even in the darkest days of my father's depression I hadn't doubted that he loved me. He hadn't been able to show it, but I'd known.

What would it have been like to have been raised in a household without love, with people who actively despised you?

Potter didn't look like he was terribly abused, but then almost no one did. He was underweight, but he'd been filling out over the past few months.

He seemed to be gregarious, and seemed carefree and happy; was that a mask to cover his underlying pain?

I'd have liked to have helped him, but I wasn't in a position to do much. Going to his house and terrifying his adoptive parents would likely just make them turn their fear into anger, which they'd take out on him.

It would require an actual threat of retaliation from someone that they knew who could follow through, like Dumbledore to actually make a difference.

Calling the muggle authorities would just get him thrown out of the house, and then he'd be in the same situation as me over the summer break. The Death Eaters were on the rise, and leaving the protection of the house would be a good way to get him killed.
“You can't be loved,” I said. “Not at home. That doesn't mean you won't find other people who
love you. Sometimes friends can be your second family.”

I felt a sudden wave of sadness. Sarah, Rachel, Brian...they'd been good to me despite being
villains. I hadn't been as close to my team in the Wards, except maybe Golem, but they'd been
decent as well.

He nodded.

“Ron was going to stay for Christmas, but there was something about an aunt coming home or
something that interfered.”

“Oh?” I said casually.

“Ron wasn't that excited, because he'd never met her, but some of his oldest brothers remembered
her.”

So essentially I'd cheated him out of Christmas with a his friend. I'd have felt bad about that, except
that the cure had helped more people than it had hurt, and sometimes it was important to be
pragmatic about things like that.

“It's almost time for dinner,” I said. “I've heard that it's going to be something special.”

“Yeah!” he said enthusiastically, seemingly forgetting his upset about his family and Ron. “Hagrid
told me all about it. Since everybody is stuck here away from their families, they try to make the
dinner something special.”

“So let's go,” I said.

He was right about the dinner.

There were turkeys, roasts and potatoes. There was a kind of sausage that was apparently called
chipolatas. There were other foods too, although most of them were undeniably British.

There were Wizarding fireworks on the table too; some of the Gryffindors pulled them, and they
went off with a blast that sounded like a cannon; it engulfed them in a cloud of blue smoke, and
ejected an admiral's hat and several white mice.

Some of the other students also used them, and while the sound and the smoke seemed the same,
the colors were different, and the things that emerged seemed almost random, like the old toys in
the bottom of cereal cartons, from before people realized that kids would either swallow them or
just tear the box up looking for them.

Whenever anyone wasn't looking, I began slipping as many of the fireworks as I could reach into
my fanny pack. They were free, and you never know when you might need a distraction and a puff
of smoke. I was reasonably sure that my bugs would be able to activate one too. I might even be
able to activate several. It wouldn't give me much of an advantage, but sometimes there was a thin
razor's edge between being dead, and being not dead.

I saw Snape frown several times as he looked toward me. I suspected that he was noticing the
disappearing party favors, even though I was only slipping them into my pack when no one was
looking. The best time to do so tended to be when one of the other students used their firework,
because there was a human tendency to look at the source of a loud noise.

I smiled at Snape sweetly, and he looked vaguely disturbed.
I was either going to have to work on looking more sincere when I smiled, or I was going to have to work on my public persona.

Dumbledore was wearing some sort of flowered monstrosity instead of his usual hat. It looked a little girlish on his head, but from what I'd seen, Wizard fashions had diverted from muggle fashions a long time ago.

Scotsmen wore kilts, after all, and no one assumed that meant they were crossdressing. I was going to have to learn to check my assumptions when dealing with different cultures. After all, my experiences with different cultures was very limited.

I'd been in different countries during Endbringer attacks, but those had typically been frantic efforts to keep people alive, and the surroundings had barely registered with me. My only interaction with the locals had usually been to scream instructions to them, or use my bugs to find survivors.

Other than that, I'd spent my entire life in the States. While there were certainly regional cultural variations, the States were really homogeneous compared to the rest of the world.

There was a silver sickle in my flaming pudding, which seemed like a health hazard frankly. I had to frown a moment; galleons were worth five pounds, and there were seventeen sickles in a galleon. It was irritating that they didn't use the decimal system for their money, because that made mental conversions a lot harder.

It wasn't a lot of money; I had a lot more than that hidden in my room. Neither Millie or Tracey had touched it, and none of the other girls had gone after it either. I suspected that my reputation as a seer and as someone likely to seek violent revenge had led to that.

The things that came out of the fireworks apparently didn't disappear, which meant that the kids who had shot them off left laden with all sorts of Christmas gifts.

For appearances sake, I did blast one off, and I found myself in possession of a grow your own warts kit.

It was the perfect gift for someone living in a dorm filled with girls who hated her. It would make for a subtle form of revenge if used at the right time.

All in all, I found myself satisfied as Christmas ended. I had stolen more than a dozen fireworks which were now in my pack, I had a belly filled with food that was even better than the usual excellent quality of their food.

Finally, I was planning on sneaking into the restricted section of the library. Now was the perfect time; everyone was going to be in a food coma, and a lot of the paintings were off partying with paintings in other castles. Some of them were still on duty, but I could send my bugs out short term to watch before going back into my fanny pack and the warmth of my robes.

Reading those books might give me some of the answers I had; among those answers were what was in the books that made them restricted.

It had nagged at me all semester. There was no better way to make someone want to do something than to tell them that they couldn't.

I wasn't even going to enter the restricted section myself. I was going to see if I could use magic to lift a book across the line, or if they had some sort of magical alarm system. I already had my escape route plotted just in case.
If this worked out, my magical skills might get much better in a much shorter period than I'd planned for.

This was going to be great.
As we ran through the hallways, I wondered how it had all gone wrong.

Apparently the entry to the restricted section wasn't protected at all; instead each and every one of the books were individually charmed to sound an alarm when they were opened. That seemed a little like overkill, but maybe magic didn't have a terrible cost other than the time it took to ward each and every book.

The Wizard-hours that would have taken weren't something I was qualified to estimate. Apparently they thought it was important, which made it even more important that I get into the restricted section. What were they trying to hide? How useful were the books in the restricted section?

Obviously I wasn't going to be able to find out until I was able to deal with the protective spells on the books or until I could convince a teacher that I deserved a pass. That second option didn't seem like it was a thing that was going to happen.

Where in the hell did he get an invisibility cape? We were both running underneath the cape, but it wasn't exactly meant for running, and I was sure that our feet were showing sometimes. Worse, I kept worrying that one of us was going to trip over the thing.

He'd already been in the library when I'd gotten there, and I'd detected him first with my bugs and then with my spell. It hadn't given me his exact location, but it had been close enough for me to sneak up on him.

I'd figured that one of the teachers wouldn't have needed an excuse to be invisible; if they were it was because they were doing something underhanded. Yet stabbing Travers, or worse, Snape wouldn't do me any favors.

Putting exploratory bugs out on him had shown that not only was he too small to be a professor (and too large to be Flitwick.) I'd been about to tackle him when he'd opened one of the books.

That was when everything went to hell.

If Hogwarts wasn't under increased security precautions, it would have been relatively easy to get away. But that wasn't the case now. Dumbledore had put in more security precautions than I'd thought.

“He's here!” I heard one of the paintings scream.

We were running through the hall under the invisible cloak. That had the unfortunate effect of leaving our footsteps audible, even if they were less visible than I'd thought.

Grabbing Potter, I used my bugs to open a passage up ahead. This one was purposefully out of sight of any portraits. Pulling him inside, the door shut behind us, just as the animated suits of armor came moving quickly down the hallway.

We were both quiet, even though the dust in the hall made up both want to sneeze.

Grabbing Potter's sleeve, I pulled him into the darkness. If we were too close to the hallway, one of the professors would reveal us using the human revealing spell. I'd studied the spell extensively, and I knew just how far we had to go to be undetected.
Unfortunately, that didn't take us any closer to the dungeons or the Gryffindor tower. It took us into the bowels of the castle.

The castle had been built in a time when muggles still periodically liked to purge the Wizarding population, so these secret passages were part of the castle's defenses. However, some of the secret passages had been forgotten in the thousand years since that time.

There had been several passages that I'd hoped to explore over the holidays, some of which I still hadn't figured out how to open. This one required moving a torch sconce, but I'd seen other passages that required a code word, and I suspected that those were lost to time. Figuring that out might take someone with Dumbledore levels of skill.

This was one of them. It had taken me forever to figure out how to open the door, and I hadn't gotten a chance to explore, because I especially was under close observation by the staff and by the other students. That was partially because I'd been the victim of an assassination attempt once already, and also, I suspected because they were afraid of what I was going to do.

Even now I was using bugs to create a commotion in the hallways. It was only a matter of time before they thought to do a head check, and then the jig would be up. I had bugs knocking over swords on those few suits of armor that weren't animated, and doing other things that would look as though invisible feet would be making their way further into the castle.

Pushing deeper and deeper into the passage, we finally got far enough that the spell wouldn't reveal up. We were far enough into the tunnel that it was pitch black.

The place was filled with spiders, and spider webs, which meant that I had a good picture of the area around us. It was obviously old from the growths of spiders, and it was possible that the spiders here might be good to start growing a swarm.

At home I'd been somewhat limited in what I could do with my spiders because some of them would eat each other whenever I left my range of control. Here, though I was hardly ever far enough away for that to be a problem. I'd have to figure out something to do with them during the summer; I'd already caused a Bevy of Boggarts to infest the school. Some of these spiders were poisonous.

“We need to get back to our rooms,” I said quietly. “And soon. I don't know where this goes.”

“I thought you were the girl who knows everything,” he muttered.

“Where'd you get the cape?” I asked. Having him reflect on my seer abilities was the last thing I needed. No one needed to know what my limitations were, because that would mean they'd figure out where my blind spots were. The fact that my friends had been able to surprise me for Christmas was horrifying enough.

“It was a gift,” he said.

“Out of the fireworks?” I asked. If that was the case, I was going to open mine as soon as I got back into my room. I suspected not, though. I'd been watching what people were getting, to see if anything was good enough for me to ignore the use of the things as a distraction.

It had mostly been cheap crap, although there had been some nice chess sets and other items. There hadn't been anything that I'd needed.

He shook his head. “I got a note.... said it belonged to my father. Don't know who sent it.”
“It was probably Dumbledore,” I said. “This is exactly the kind of thing he'd do…give a kid an invisibility cloak when I've been attacked by invisible people. That was always going to end well.”

“It worked out all right,” he said sullenly.

At least he'd had the sense not to try to follow me around, although it was possible that had been the next thing on his agenda. Boys at this age weren't the brightest of creatures, and he was a Gryffindor, which meant he was predisposed to jumping in before he looked.

“Why were you in the restricted book section?” I asked.

“I'd gotten an invisibility cloak,” he said. “What else was I going to do with it? It wasn't like I could bother Ron or Neville with it, and the girls' stairs work even if you are invisible.”

“Tried that one out did you?” I asked dryly.

“Ron says the girls get better bathrooms than we do!” he protested. “With bubbles and…pink…and magic mirrors.”

I would have stared at him, but I couldn't see anything. I compensated by letting some of the bugs out of my fanny pack, spreading them out and letting some settle on Potter.

“Only some of that is true,” I said. “And you still shouldn't be trying.”

“Well, you shouldn't…” he began, and then he stepped back. His foot slipped and he grabbed my shirt to try to right himself. The ground crumbled underneath us, and suddenly we were both sliding downward.

Potter screamed, but I managed to remain silent, although it wasn't for a lack of trying.

Was it a trap of some kind, or simply the result of a thousand years of neglect? I barely had time to think about it before I crashed into Potter's back.

I'd thought that the darkness before was bad, but this was a blackness the like of which I couldn't remember, darker than Grue's power… I couldn't see my own hands. I pushed myself away from Potter. It was shocking how scrawny he still was, even after all this time.

Reaching for my wand to cast a light spell, I froze as I felt the surface we had landed on. It was soft, yet careful examination showed that it felt like there were scales. It was some sort of a skin, which no longer had its original occupant.

There were only two kinds of things that shed their skins like this, and if it were one type, I'd have sensed and been able to control it.

It was then that I could feel something like a strange, hot wind blowing over us. It smelled rank, like rotting meat and rancid blood.

“There's something in here with us,” Potter said.

I felt it was rather stupid of him to say anything; whatever was in here with us had doubtlessly already heard the sound of us crashing though the roof. Why give away our position if he didn't have to?

There were hardly any bugs in the chamber we were in; it was almost as though all the bugs that had once been here had vacated out of self preservation, or they'd been killed.
From my fanny pack, bugs began to scatter throughout the chamber. It took a moment, but eventually I began to get a sense of the chamber we were in. It was massive, but the thing that we were hearing, feeling, was right in front of us. My bugs encountered scales.

Spreading out, they began to get a sense of the size of the thing. It was huge; about the length of a Semi trailer, maybe a little longer. It was taller than me, and as far as I could tell, it seemed like it was the shape of a giant snake.

I froze. Either the thing could see us, in which case it would be attracted by movement, or it could hear us. It was close enough that even given its size, I wasn't sure that I'd be able to duck out of the way in time, and Potter would be dead for sure.

Desperately, I sent my bugs further and further afield, looking for an exit. Until I knew where we were going to go, moving was just likely to attract the attention of the thing.

Still, staying here wasn't an option. Sooner or later, the thing was going to get curious, and a lot of animals explored by taking a nip out of things. At the size of it, a nip would cut either one of us in two, or worse, it would just swallow us whole.

Bugs who got near its fangs died almost instantly, in agony. I grimaced, glad there was no one to see. The thing was poisonous.

How to tell Potter that we needed to leave without alerting the creature? If it was one of the Undersiders, I might be able to use my bugs somehow, but Potter didn't know anything.

“I think we should get out of here,” I murmured in Potter's ear. I spoke almost inaudibly, but I heard the sound of movement nevertheless.

There was a monstrous sound of scales sliding on stone, and the breath on our faces got hotter.

I grabbed Potter's robes tightly and prepared to dodge to the side. Alone I probably could have done it; an animal that size probably wasn't all that fast unless it was enhanced by magic. However, given the closeness of the thing and the fact that I'd be pulling Potter along behind me, I was afraid that I wasn't going to be fast enough.

I heard a monstrous hissing sound. There was a hissing and rasping reply from beside me. It was Potter.

“He says he's hungry,” Potter said.

Potter spoke snake? That wasn't a talent I'd heard about, but I was just learning about magic. It was useful now, but only if Potter kept his wits about him. How could you bluff a snake? “Tell it we aren't food. It's not time for it to wake up yet,” I said quietly. The last thing I wanted to do was to antagonize it. Obviously the snake could hear, because it was speaking to Potter, unless his speech was working on a magical level.

He hissed and spit beside me, and for the next minute, there was a conversation between them that I didn't understand. I didn't like it, and I considered my options.

My darkness powder likely wouldn't work on a snake; they were reputed to have the ability to sense things in the dark with their tongues. Also, it was already dark; we'd be more hindered than it would. The marbles wouldn't work on a thing with no legs.

The Christmas fireworks might, depending on how good its hearing was. Despite its ability to hear
Potter, it was possible that it was deaf. I had a vague recollection that snakes couldn't hear. They didn't have visible ears anyway, so even if it could hear, the crackers might do nothing but antagonize it.

I sent my bugs out farther and father, seeing a way out. I found a sudden breeze to the east, and I tugged on Potter's shirt.

“If I make a light, is that going to set him off?” I asked.

“He says that if we look in his eyes it will kill us,” Potter said. He sounded fascinated instead of scared.

“Isn't that lovely,” I muttered. Trust Hogwarts to have a monster in the caverns underneath it with poison fangs and the ability to kill by sight. It would explain why there were no bugs, assuming that there was light down here sometimes. It was possible that enough sunlight got in from the entrance that I was sensing to make a difference.

Or maybe there were magical torches that lit when the thing wanted them to.

“I think it's lonely,” he said, after another conversation with it.

“It's poisonous,” I said. “And it can kill us by looking at it. That means that even if it's friendly it could kill us without meaning to. Also, it's fifty feet long, which means it could roll over on us.”

“How do you know that?” he asked.

“How do you think?” I asked. It wasn't really answering his question, but by letting him come up with his own answer, I wouldn't have to come up with my own. “I know the way out.”

“It wants us to come back,” Potter said.

“Tell it we will,” I said.

Lying to a fifty foot snake wasn't a problem. Dying because of one was. Ultimately, I was going to have Potter say whatever he had to in order to get both of us to safety.

He spoke, and a moment later said, “He'll let us leave.”

I felt a sudden sense of relief. I'd been afraid that I was going to end up getting Potter killed, and that was likely to end up bad for me. Getting out on my own would have been difficult but possible, but with Potter would have been almost impossible.

Now we had a chance. With luck, I might even be able to pin Filch's murder on the thing. Wizards didn't tend to question very well, and if there was an obvious explanation, they'd be likely to go for it.

“Good,” I said. I pulled him along as quickly as I could.

He stumbled along behind me, but I moved without a misstep. A carpet of bugs were moving before me, giving me a mental sketch of the room by feel.

“Do you hear that?” Potter asked. For the first time he sounded worried.

He was hearing the sounds of the bugs from my fanny pack moving in the darkness. He hadn't been
scared around the snake, but now he was scared?

“It's nothing,” I said shortly. I kept pulling him behind me, and he stumbled along.

There was an opening up ahead. It felt like it was blocked by brambles.

“Don't look behind us,” I said.

The monster wasn't within sight; I had bugs behind us checking. However, the ones on the floor had already moved ahead through the brambles, exploring the forest outside.

“Lumos,” I said with my wand out.

Although I'd intentionally left the light dim, we both blinked and struggled to adjust our vision. The bramble in front of us was thick and impenetrable.

“Do you have your wand?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said.

“Make a light,” I said. He did so, and I began using my wand to cut away at the bottom left corner of the branches. It required several spells, and even so I didn't cut more than a small opening; the last thing we needed was to encourage the thing back behind us to go out and explore in the daylight.

The opening I'd made was small enough that the only reasons we could squeeze our way through was because we were both tiny and scrawny. Even so, I felt it rip away at my robes.

As we stepped out into the outside, I could see the moon up in the sky. We were in the middle of a forest, and the trees looked like trees I'd seen before.

We were in the middle of the Forbidden Forest.
It was dark, but I was picking up more bugs all the time.

Insects tended to use three main strategies to survive the winter. The first was to avoid the cold. Some did that by migrating like birds. Butterflies were widely known for doing just that. Others would hide at the bottom of ponds, where temperatures were more stable than at the surface. Some would burrow into the earth, beneath the frost line.

Some survived the winter almost unchanged. Mites and snow fleas were in that group.

Some would simply freeze, going into a state of almost suspended animation, waking when the heat of the spring resumed.

The only bugs I had now were the middle group; the others either weren't around, or would die of the cold. There was still life all around, but it wasn't the explosion of life that had been there during the fall. Instead it was more subdued.

Casting a warming charm on both myself and Potter, I said, “We need to get back to the castle. I can't imagine that a head check won't be one of the first things that they do... and the both of us are the people they'll be looking for first.”

“Yeah,” he said grimly.

He'd managed to hold onto his invisibility cloak, so we weren't entirely done. There was still a chance to get inside the castle without being detected, even though we were probably going to be caught as being out of our rooms.

It hadn't been all that long; ten minutes maybe since the alarm had been set. However, the more time that passed, the more alarmed they were going to be and the more in trouble we were going to be in. If it was just me, I probably could have bluffed my way out of it; however, I didn't know Potter well enough to know whether he would blurt everything out all at once.

It was possible that for once that might be the best option. There was a death snake beneath the school. That seemed like something the administration should know.

I sent the bugs up, but it was late enough that the castle was not lit up. None of the bugs I had available had vision that was good enough to see the castle in the middle of the night.

The forest was to the east of the castle. I wasn't particularly good with directions; I'd always had my bugs and the city to follow. In a city, the bugs were always active, kept warm in human habitations. Checking locations had been easy.

In a forest it was going to be much harder.

“Which way?” Potter asked.

The best thing I could do was pick a direction. We had warming charms which meant we wouldn't freeze to death, and in the middle of winter, it was likely that the more dangerous monsters would have gone to ground.
Still, it was possible that there were more trolls out here. I was a lot better with magic than I'd been even a couple of months ago, but I had no idea how Potter stacked up in magic. Would he back me up, or would he run away screaming in terror. Just being a Gryffindor didn't necessarily mean that he was brave after all, it just meant that he wanted to be.

“Let's go this way,” I said.

I had no idea if it was the right way, but our only choices were to either keep moving or to hole up until morning when my bugs could find the direction of the castle. The last thing I wanted to do was to find out that the giant snake had changed its mind and felt like a midnight snack.

He nodded.

I'd felt drawn to something in the center of the forest before; I felt it again. It was something that I'd meant to explore, but this was hardly the time.

Knowing that it was in the center of the forest, and knowing how far we'd walked underground, I could guess that we were on the side of the forest closest to Hogwarts. That meant that I only needed to go away from whatever it was, and we'd get back to the castle sooner or later.

Suddenly, I grabbed Potter's robes and leaned into him.

“Keep quiet,” I said.

Easing us into the underbrush was difficult, but a quiet levitation spell managed to lift some of the branches high enough that we could both slip under it. I didn't like being confined to such a small area, but hiding was going to be the best thing I could do for us.

We were surrounded my multiple groups of men.

Potter was silent beside me as we waited in the darkness.

“I can't believe he's asking us to do this on Christmas,” the first of two men stepping into the clearing said.

“It's the best time.... their guard will be down, and we'll get a chance to feel out their defenses,” the second man said. “The Dark Lord's given us enough spells not to be detected, but he hasn't figured out how to get us inside.”

“Why's the boy so important anyhow?” the first man asked.

“He made the Dark Lord look like a fool as a baby,” the first one said. “And there's a prophecy, although nobody seems to know what the whole thing is.”

“Nobody tells me anything.”

“That's because you're an idiot who can't keep his mouth shut.”

“Yeah...but do you really believe that we'll find the boy or Avery's pet project out here on Christmas eve?”

“The seer the Dark Lord is using is one of the better ones,” the second man said. “Although he could be wrong. Prophecy is tricky. I never put a lot of stock in it.”

I marked their faces in my mind.
I'd have Dumbledore look at the pensieve later, or maybe Snape, and see if he could identify them.

“She was sure we'd find them, though?”

“Yeah,” the second man said. He was shorter and stout, but there was a harder look on his face. The first man was younger and didn't look particularly bright. “Said we ought to be careful though. The Terror is with him.”

“How dangerous can a firstie be?” the first man asked. “I can take care of a little girl all by myself.”

“She killed a troll,” the man said. “Avery checked. I doubt she's going to be much against full fledged wizards, though.”

“So we just have to find them,” the first man said. “And bring them to the Dark Lord?”

“Just the boy. He said we're to kill the girl.”

I could feel Potter stiffening beside me, but I squeezed his shoulder tightly in warning. If it was just these two wizards, I might have a chance. Darkness powder and a good solid knife might be enough, although it depended on how competent they were.

However, I could hear three other groups of two in the forest. They were searching in a grid pattern, and if I engaged with these, then the others would come running. There was no way that I could fight eight grown wizards at once.

It was possible that I might have trouble with just two.

The fact that my bug count was a lot smaller than normal also made this a dangerous encounter. I didn't have the option of revealing my secret and choking them to death.

The bad thing was that the others were moving in a pattern that was getting closer to us all the time. It made me wonder if they were honing in on something, using some kind of tracking spell that I hadn't heard about before.

We didn't have a lot of options. We could continue to try to hide, but it was looking like they'd caught our scent somehow. We could run, but a spell to the back might take us out even quicker. We could fight and die.

None of those were options that I wanted to think much about.

Our best option might be to go back to the entrance to the chamber underneath Hogwarts. It was possible that Potter might be able to turn the monster against the men who were chasing us, which would be delightfully ironic. With any luck they'd kill each other off and then our problems would be solved.

The problem was that the entrance was ten minutes away. I was closer to whatever it was in the forest that had been pulling at me now.

Closing my eyes, I reached out with my power. My power had always gotten stronger when I'd felt trapped... and while this wasn't the same power, it seemed to work much the same. Magic was an expression of my mind, after all, and I had vivid memories of how it worked.

I felt them suddenly; they were an alien presence at the edge of my vision. They were bugs, but bigger than any that I'd ever used with the exception of Atlas and his kin. It took me a moment to
get control of them; they actually fought my control in a way that no other bugs ever had.

Getting control of their vision, I could see that they were spiders. It was hard to get a sense of perspective, but it looked like they were huge, at least the size of dogs, and maybe as large as horses. I desperately wanted to know what they were, but now was not the time.

Potter sneezed beside me, and suddenly the branches of the bush we were hiding under were pulled aside, and we were being dragged out at wandpoint.

One of the wizards whistled, and I felt the others moving in.

“It's Potter and his pet mudblood!” the first and dumber wizard said. He was pointing his wand at me, and he'd managed to get my wand while I was distracted.

“We're supposed to kill the mudblood,” the second wizard said.

“You think Avery would pay us to bring her to him?” the first one asked.

A nasty smile spread across the face of the second Wizard. “He's got some nasty plans for her. After all the shite she's pulled on pureblood kids, might be the best thing for her. Avery’s been a right twat over this whole thing.”

That was the problem with having idiots working with you. They couldn't follow directions. Would I be better to stay silent, or to pretend to be afraid and to cry? That might actually encourage them to kill me.

“You'd better let us go!” Potter shouted beside me. They hadn't even bothered taking his wand, an expression of contempt that they might live to regret. I was close enough that I might be able to grab it and use it. However, the wands in our face suggested that would be a bad idea without some form of distraction.

One of the men waved his wand, and Potter fell to the ground screaming. It didn't last for very long, but it felt like it was much longer.

My bugs would show up on the white snow; however, I had them moving under my dress, scattering to the inside of my robes and ready to be deployed. Some of them were moving things out of my fanny pack, including the darkness powder, the crackers, and the other things that I thought I'd need.

The knife was heavy for the bugs I had on me, so I left it in the pack. I doubted I would be able to use it.

“Gibbon!” one of the men coming through the trees said. “You found them! This is a great day for the Dark Lord!”

The second man stared at me, and asked, “Why is the mudblood still alive?”

“We figured Avery might want some quality time with her,” Gibbon said, grinning. “Maybe it'll put him in a better mood.”

“Hmph,” the other man said. “Well, we'd better get moving. Dumbledore has the castle on full alert. He must have added some alarms that the Dark Lord doesn't know about.”

“The Dark Lord didn't say that we couldn't have fun with the boy,” Gibbon said. He pointed the wand again.
“He didn’t say you could, either,” I said.

“What?”

“He told you to bring the boy to him unharmed, and you've already what, used the Cruciatuis curse on him? You think he'll be happy about that?”

“What would you know about it, you little bitch?” he asked. He pointed his wand at me and a moment later my world was full of pain.

I laughed.

It hurt; on the scale I was used to it was an eight on a scale of ten. However, I'd experienced a twelve, and no pain I experienced would ever compare.

Staggering to my feet, I forced myself to smile.

“What?” the man said, his wand suddenly going limp.

“This isn't a chance I normally give people,” I said. “But I'm feeling generous. Run away and I will let you live, for today at least. If you don't, then I will kill you. I'll kill your friends, your families. I will destroy everything you've ever loved.”

“You won't be going anywhere,” the man sneered. “It's not worth bothering with you.”

He was going to try to kill me.

“I warned you,” I said.

The bugs dropped darkness powder into my hands, and I threw it to the ground, dodging to the side. Green light flashed to the spot where I had been, but the things I had summoned were already in the trees. They dropped down onto the men. There were flashes of green light in the darkness, with the screams of dying men. I lunged forward and I grabbed the wand the Death Eater in front of me was using.

His grip tightened, but I reached up and shoved a cracker in his mouth.

I felt his grip loosen, and the man began to fall. Apparently the Christmas Crackers weren't as safe as they'd been made out to be.

A moment later it was over. The spiders began to drag the men off into the forest.

I heard Potter rooting around; he'd finally revived himself enough from the pain to try to do something constructive.

By the time the darkness powder began to lift, there was only one man left on the ground. There wasn't anything left of his jaw, and he was unconscious.

“Episkey,” I said. “Episky.”

It wasn't enough to repair his jaw, but it did stop the bleeding.

“What are you doing?” Potter asked. “And where are the others?”

“I saw some giant spiders in the trees,” I said. “It looked like they were going to attack, so I dropped some darkness powder to help them.”
“And this?” he asked.

“It might be good for the aurors to have somebody to interrogate,” I said. “We just have to get him tied up and get him to the castle. Most likely they’ll forget about giving us points if we bring them something else to distract them.”

He stared at me; his face looked drawn and worn.

I stripped him of his robes and used them to tie his hands behind him. After the death of Filch, I'd looked up the Levicorpus spell.

Casting it now, the men was levitated by one ankle.

“Let's go,” I said.

The man behind us had half his face destroyed, but I was sure that Wizarding medicine could repair him well enough that he could answer questions.

I had a feeling that this incident was going to improve my reputation with some people, but it was likely to move me up Voldemort's list. I'd been enjoying my time as being just Avery's pet project, but killing five death eaters and capturing one was going to be a setback for him.

Most people like him didn't like setbacks. They often took them personally. I was going to have to be even more careful now than I had been before.

The man was in front of us, floating. His face bashed into branch after branch. I didn't particularly care.

“What are we going to tell them about the snake?” Potter asked.

“The truth,” I said. “We were out exploring after hours, stumbled into a secret passage, and fell into a snake pit.”

“They'll kill it,” he said.

“They should,” I said. “If you didn't speak snake, it would have eaten you.”

He looked at me strangely.

“I'd have gotten away, but then everybody would have blamed me,” I said. “which probably means I'd have ended up in Azkaban.”

“She's a person,” he said. “All snakes are.”

“You've talked to snakes before?” I asked.

“Sure. Haven't you? I thought it was just a wizard thing, like jaunting.”

“Jaunting?”

“Like on the Tomorrow People,” he said. “Well, the reruns. I did it once when I was being chased.”

“Apparating, you mean?” I asked.

He shook his head. “It didn't feel the same when I did it. Apparating feels like you're being
squeezed through a tube. This was something different.”

Accidental magic he was talking about. He's apparently been awake when it had happened to him. Interesting.

“Well, I can't speak snake,” I said. “it must be one of the rare talents, like being a seer, or a metamorph....uh...whatever.”

He frowned. “That means the other wizards won't think she's a person either.”

I certainly didn't. Of course, it was possible that I was wrong. I'd been around enough Case 53s to know that outward appearance didn't necessarily reflect on the inner life.

Was the snake a person? If it was, would sending wizards to kill it be the right thing to do?

“She's dangerous, and she's going to kill someone,” I said.

“I'll teach you to speak snake,” he said.

“She won't,” he said. “I'll even teach you to speak snake so that you can talk to her.”

“I'm not sure that's something that can be taught,” I said. “I think it's a magical power.”

“You could be wrong,” he said.

Frowning, I thought about it. The snake hadn't made any waves so far, but telling the authorities would be the smart thing to do.

“I reserve the right to change my mind,” I said.

He whooped.

“But this is what we're going to tell Dumbledore and the aurors,” I said. “And they're going to ask you to share memories with them. I'm going to tell you where to start them, and where to end them. Do that, and you'll keep the snake safe.”

With luck, it might keep me safe.
“Acromantulas?” the girl said. “Is that what they were called?”

Moody scowled at the girl.

He'd been hearing earsful about her from a variety of people, and none of it was good. She was Slytherin, which was to be expected given the other things he'd heard about her. She was clever and violent and dangerous.

It was a perfect prescription for a Dark Lord in training. Nothing he had seen had convinced him of anything else. Other Wizards would look at her and they'd have seen an innocent seeming little girl. They'd remember the ridiculous rumor that muggleborn couldn't use magic as everyone else. They'd assume the was as harmless as she looked.

Moody had seen monsters hiding behind the eyes of children, and he had an uneasy feeling that he was looking at one now.

There was no guilt in her eyes, no fear. Any ordinary child would have been shaken by what had happened, even now, hours later. They'd given the boy a calming potion, but hadn't even bothered to offer the girl one. That was enough to tell him that Dumbledore and the staff of the school knew there was something seriously wrong with the girl.

“How did you know they were going to be there?” he demanded.

“I know things sometimes,” the girl said, shrugging. “I always just assumed that it was my accidental magic protecting me.”

“It stops being accidental at your age,” Moody said. “Especially if you do it all the time.”

The girl shrugged. “I get some glimpses usually relating to things that are going to harm me. It makes it easier to take... steps.”

Steps.

Moody had heard about some of the steps the girl liked to take, and he didn't like any of them. The school had covered up the boy with the boils, but Moody knew who the real suspect there was. How many other things had the girl done that hadn't even been made public?

“I've heard they were looking into you for the death of Argus Filch,” Moody said. “Sent a couple of duffers in.”

Making an accusation out of the blue sometimes helped; people who were disconcerted made mistakes, said things they hadn't meant to say.

“They didn't find anything because I didn't do it,” she said, shrugging.

She was too calm...too confident. A first year should have been quaking in her books at the sight of him. She looked at his scars dispassionately, and without any sign of revulsion. That wasn't ordinary for purebloods; it was even less ordinary for muggleborn. At the very least they tended to stare curiously.

She acted as though she'd seen worse in the past, although it was possible that she might just have
an excellent poker face. She was a Slytherin after all.

Still, he'd looked over the files, and there wasn't a motive. It was likely that Filch had run afoul of a Death Eater with a grudge. Making enemies of the last twenty graduating years of Wizarding Britain really hadn't been very bright, not when you had no magic to protect you.

Interrogating her about this might be a lost cause. If she'd done it, she'd covered it up well enough that she was confident that they'd never find him. If she hadn't, interrogating her was just going to antagonize her, which would make her a worse witness about more important matters.

“So you and Potter got lost when you fell through a hole in a secret passage; you found yourself out in the Forbidden Forest. What happened then?”

“I had a flash that the Death Eaters were coming,” the girl said. “And another flash warning me about the Acromantulas. I decided to see if the two things coming to kill me would cancel each other out.”

The girl said it coldly, as though the deaths of five men and the mutilation of one more didn't bother her at all. Moody had been out to the crime scene, and he'd found the blood covered wands that confirmed her story.

Following the tracks had showed that two more of the Death Eaters had escaped; most likely they'd apparated. There was blood that showed they'd been injured; with any luck at least one of them had died before he could get treatment for the venom.

“So you decided to kill them all,” Moody said.

“They decided to kill themselves,” the girl said calmly. “I just chose not to save them.”

“Right... and then what happened?”

“I dropped some darkness powder when I saw that the Acromantulas were about to attack,” the girl said. “And shoved a Christmas Cracker in that guy's mouth. I'm amazed that you guys let kids have those. I got a nice hat out of it, though.”

She gestured toward the hat on her head. It was a jaunty sort of beret, colored in the Slytherin colors. Moody could see a bit of blood on the brim though. He wondered if she knew, but was choosing to wear it for the intimidation factor.

“The Acromantula killed the guys who were farther away, but didn't bother with us, probably because we were small and scrawny and they had a lot to eat. I healed up the guy I just killed, as much as I could, then I dragged him to the castle using that spell that lifts people up by one foot. I'm sure the Headmaster has told you the rest.”

She wasn't afraid of Dumbledore, but she also didn't have that hero worshiping expression that a lot of the younger kids had. As a muggleborn that wasn't unusual; they didn't have a sense of who and what Dumbledore was. Moody had a feeling, though, that this girl knew exactly what Dumbledore was and it didn't bother her.

“It matches up with what the Potter kid said,” Moody said, turning to Snape and Dumbledore. He'd questioned them separately, not that this would make much of a difference. They'd had at least twenty minutes to get their stories straight.

The Potter boy didn't seem like he'd be a very good liar, even though Moody knew that all kids lied. This girl, though, would lie without question.
“Send the girl outside,” Moody said. “While we look at the pensieve memories.”

He wouldn't trust the girl not to stab him while his face was in the pool. That was mostly true of anyone other than Dumbledore himself, but even more so of the girl.

He waited until they sent the girl out, and then he asked.

“How do you believe her?”

“I am not certain that I believe them about how they found themselves in the Forbidden Forest,” Dumbledore said. “But I do believe that they met Death Eaters outside.”

“Oh, the man she brought back was definitely a Death Eater,” Moody said. “I've got a hand picked team questioning him right now, as well as they can given the state of his jaw.”

It was possible that this was the break that they'd needed. Moody was sure that there were agents in the Department, but if they could find out who, it might go a long way to restoring the balance of power. Even finding out how Voldemort was always a step ahead of them might help them find ways to ambush his people in return.

Success bred success, and the more Voldemort won, the more people flocked to his banner. Some losses would help to stem that tide, and maybe even get the higher ups in the Ministry to get up off their asses and do something.

“Let's look at the boy's first,” Moody said.

The other two men glanced at each other, then nodded. The three men plunged their faces into the pool.

Potter's memories were muddled; he hadn't seen much, and he'd been distracted by the Cruciatis, which caused all of the memories to become jagged and unreliable.

The girl's memories were clear.

The first part of the confrontation played out just as the boy had remembered, but the memories were clearer.

“Stop,” Moody said. “Repeat that.”

They listened to the Death Eaters again; this was before they'd discovered the children.

“Voldemort has a Seer?” Moody said. “One specific enough to pinpoint the general area of the children? That's disturbing.”

“That's new,” Snape said, looking pensive.

Moody scowled and turned toward Dumbledore. “Most seers aren't worth spit, but a good one can be bad in the wrong hands. Your pet seer is still here, right?”

“Sybil is right where she has always been,” Dumbledore said, “And her skills, while real, tend to be somewhat overstated.”

“Look into it,” Moody shook his head. “The Death Eaters already have too many advantages. We need to keep them from getting any more.”
The scene continued.

It surprised Moody that the girl hadn't been more aggressive. From what he'd heard, he'd have expected her to roll into the bushes and grab the boy's wand, or to do something other than simply sit there.

Being trapped at wand point would have been enough for any other Wizard, but....

“She's waiting,” he said, pointing. “Delaying. She knows that they are coming.”

The girl had her eyes closed when they'd been discovered, Was that the point where she'd seen what was coming? It was an impressive ability if that was true.

Moody watched the girl while the boy was being crucioed. Most children her age would have been screaming if they'd seen their companion being tortured right beside them, especially knowing that they were going to be next.

She simply watched him dispassionately, with a slight tightening of her mouth the only sign of a reaction at all.

A moment later she was taunting them. Interrupting their plans to further torture the boy looked deliberate. He saw that realization on the faces of Dumbledore and Snape as well.

They stopped the memory again.

“She intended for them to turn on her instead of him,” Snape said.

Dumbledore frowned. “Because she thought he would break?”

Was it because she knew the Acromantulas weren't ready to arrive yet? A delaying tactic? Letting the boy be tortured would have worked just as well; better in some ways, because they would have moved on to torturing her afterwards, perhaps doubling the time they had before she was killed.

It was subtle, but heroic.

Did it mean that she wasn't as bad as everything else he'd seen so far indicated that she was? Moody couldn't be sure. Even Death Eaters occasionally showed mercy, all but those who were irredeemable.

“She didn't mention the torture in her story,” Moody said. “Not something that I would have expected.”

The boy hadn't either, but he was a Gryffindor. He probably would have hated anything that made him look weak, especially in front of a girl.

“Perhaps she didn't think it relevant,” Snape said. “She has suffered something similar before.”

There weren't any records of the girl's family's murder, which was disturbing. It was possible that there were other muggleborn murders that the aurors had never heard about. The only thing that indicated there weren't was the Book and the Quill. It was easy to match known names with the dead. Why was the girl's family simply disappeared, when the others were made to look like accidents?

“Resume,” Moody said.

The girl staggered a little when she was hit with the Crucio. All of her muscles were tense, but
There was no visible expression on her face, though. She didn't fall to the ground, screaming. Moody had known full grown aurors who would have been incapacitated.

Staring the man directly in the eye, the girl laughed.

It obviously wasn't a real laugh, but it was enough to disconcert her attacker, who let his wand drop. The man was obviously a fool.

“Stop,” Dumbledore said. “That was most peculiar. Did it look like he miscast the spell?”

“No,” Moody said grimly. “It affected her. She probably wouldn't have done as well against someone like Riddle or Bellatrix, but it shouldn't have mattered. She shouldn't have been able to push her way through the spell like that.”

“She has brain damage,” Snape said. He was staring at the girl, whose face was frozen mid-laugh. He looked seriously disturbed. “It was scans of her brain that allowed the Cruciatis cure to be developed.”

All three men stood, staring at the scene before them. Moody turned.

His magical eye didn't give him any advantages here; these were just memories after all. But years of experience had alerted him to small details. It was an ability that had kept him alive.

“Look,” he said. “In the trees.”

The acromantula were in the trees, hidden. Only their eyes were visible, with an occasional limb being placed to look like just another part of the tree. The Death Eaters were facing away from them.

“She's not looking at them,” Moody said; the girl's gaze was on the Death Eater, but there was something about her expression, a minute change. It was almost a look of anticipation.

It fit with what he'd heard about her; how she'd often know things without looking. The Death Eaters should have seen her expression and realized that something was happening. They were likely too astonished by her shrugging off the Cruciatis.

Laughing had to have been a calculated gesture. It had convinced the Death Eater to stop his attack, and it had gotten all eyes on her.

Dumbledore gestured, and it began again.

“This isn't a chance I normally give people,” the girl said. “But I'm feeling generous. Run away and I will let you live, for today at least. If you don't, then I will kill you. I'll kill your friends, your families. I will destroy everything you've ever loved.”

“You won't be going anywhere,” the Death Eater sneered. “It's not worth bothering with you.”

He still thought he had the upper hand. It made Moody feel a little better; if this was the quality of agent Voldemort was hiring then the Ministry still had a chance.

Not that there weren't a lot of aurors who were just as stupid.

The certainty the girl had.... was it all a bluff, or was she actually the type who would try something like that?

“I warned you,” The girl said.
The image froze. The girl was already in the process of dodging to the left. The powder was on its way to the ground.

“Darkness powder... good stuff,” Moody grunted. He liked it in particular because his magical eye could see through it.

The acromantula were already dropping from the trees toward the unsuspecting backs of the Death Eaters.

It looked like the girl was telling the truth. It was amazing.

“She led them right into the trap,” Moody said. “Kept them talking long enough so that they were all in the right place, and then she executed it.”

Everything went black and they could hear screams and see dim flashes of green light. Moody had already explored the scene. He'd seen the tracks, and this memory and the locations of the flashes matched up with what he'd seen perfectly.

He could heard the sounds of two men apparating.

Watching the girl unflinchingly stopping the bleeding on a man whose face was half blown off was interesting. Seeing her lift him in the air with magic by one food and then drag him behind her like a muggle wagon was interesting as well.

“Did the girl just suggest that bringing him in might keep them from getting House points taken away?” Moody asked.

Snape nodded. He was staring at the scene in front of him, his face expressionless.

“I suspect that Miss Hebert does not care about House points at all,” Dumbledore said quietly. “Yet she chose to leave us with this memory.”

“Trying to distract us from something?” Moody asked. “Or maybe she was taunting us.”

“What will the Ministry's position be on this?” Dumbledore asked, staring at the scene frozen in front of them.

“Exactly what the girl wants, I suspect,” Moody said. “We're going to cover it up. It's Christmas so most of the students aren't around. Warn the boy not to talk about what happened. I doubt you'll have to tell the girl.”

“I think that would be best for the school,” Dumbledore said, nodding. “And the country. Were people to know that Tom was preparing for an attack on the school, there would be a widespread panic.”

“They were just scouting,” Moody said. “But I think that it would be best if you continue to upgrade the school's defenses. We need to think about what comes next.”

“I think Tom might attribute this to his men's incompetence,” Dumbledore said. “But I fear that this will have aroused his interest in the girl.”

“If they come in force against the school, what will you do?” Moody asked.

“I am not helpless,” Dumbledore said. “This school is safer than anywhere else in Britain for the students, and I will continue to make it so. Unfortunately, we live in a world where no place is truly
safe. The students would be less safe at home.”

Moody nodded.

“I've got a Death Eater to interrogate,” he said. “I'm assuming that you'll take care of our two pint-sized heroes.”

“I am uncertain who is more at fault,” Snape admitted. “Miss Hebert is dangerous, but not foolhardy. The boy on the other hand…”

“He's a Gryffindor,” Moody said. He chuckled. “What do you expect... he's the spitting image of his father.”

Snape's expression turned sour.

“Both of them shall receive adequate punishments,” Dumbledore said. “I would like to accompany you to the interrogation. Perhaps we will finally be able to take steps to win this battle of attrition.”

Moody nodded shortly, and they both left Snape alone with his thoughts.
“Twelve Death Eaters are in custody,” Hermione said. “And three safehouses destroyed.”

She'd barely gotten off the train, and all she wanted to talk about was the same thing everyone else was talking about. Nothing else had been making as much news over the past week. Rita Skeeter had apparently been run ragged along with her coworkers.

Apparently Moody was better at getting information that I'd thought. I suspected that the Ministry didn't actually know that there was a surviving Death Eater at all; otherwise his companions in the government would have been trying to spring him.

More likely the Death Eater was at some kind of black site, being drained of every last thing he knew through enhanced interrogation. I doubted that they were torturing him, not when they had access to truth potions and mind reading.

If Voldemort was smart, he was going to have to retreat for a while. He'd need to reorganize and use a cell structure for his organization, like other terrorist groups, instead of a top down plan. Agents couldn't reveal knowledge they had never had.

If I were him, I'd be obliterating my entire organization, starting from the bottom up, making sure that only the leaders knew who else was in the organization. Of course, that ran the risk that spies could infiltrate more easily, but there were costs to every strategy.

“That's great,” I said. It really was. “I really appreciated the gift you gave me. I'm sorry I didn't get you yours before you left.”

“You didn't have to,” she said.

“I really did,” I said. “It meant a lot to me.”

I handed her the package.

I'd had to ask McGonagall to transfigure wrapping paper for me during my detention with her. None of the professors had been overly critical during my detentions, even when Potter and I had claimed that we'd gotten lost and didn't remember where we'd slipped into the secret passage.

I suspected that Dumbledore knew better, but he didn't know that actual truth, because the Monster was still in the basement, alive, at least according to the bugs that I sent down there.

“It's not much,” I said. “They didn't let me out so I couldn't buy anything.”

She gasped as she pulled out the handkerchief I'd made.

Given that I'd only had a week, and I'd had to make things for several people, it wasn't a large handkerchief.

Some of the spiders in the castle made golden webs. They weren't Golden Orb Spiders; those were native to Madagascar and the climate was all wrong for them. These were more hardly and resilient than those.

There weren't as many of them as the others, and so I'd had to use the golden thread to weave Hermione's name in the otherwise white cloth.
It was a risk giving her spider silk; I certainly wasn't going to give one to Snape. However, I was reasonably certain that neither she nor Neville would reveal anything that I asked them not to.

It wasn't obvious that the handkerchiefs were anything other than ordinary cloth anyway. They were abnormally tough, but Hermione didn't seem like the kind to try to rip her handkerchief.

“You did these?” Hermione asked. “Did you use the spells in Maergaret's Homemaking guide?”

“I didn't use spells,” I said.

I carefully didn't say that I didn't use magic, because that would be a lie. As far as I knew, my insect control ability was magically based. Lying to other people was ok; even lying to Hermione if it was necessary. Lying about this would be wrong.

“You did this yourself?” she gasped, looking back at the Handkerchief. “How long did it take you? When did you do it? It must have taken ages!”

A moment later she was hugging me, while I stood awkwardly.

“I wasn't expecting anything from anyone,” I admitted. “Not this year. Getting something on Christmas Day was a total surprise.”

She grinned, letting go of me.

“So did you have a good Christmas?” she asked.

“It had its moments.”

My conversation with Moody had not been followed up on. I assumed it was because the story had never gotten out into the Ministry proper. Otherwise I would have been inundated with people making accusations about me luring the Boy-Who-Lived out into the woods to be killed, no matter how nonsensical that was.

Moody had presumably been smart, keeping it to a small group that he trusted implicitly.

Although I'd spent much of the rest of the week under close observation, I'd had my bugs working on the secret passages. I'd found a passage that led up to the abandoned girl's bathroom; I still hadn't figured out how to open it.

I didn't tell her about what had happened with the Death Eaters. Hermione was still a little high strung, and facing actual Death Eaters might have given her nightmares.

It had surprised me how well the Potter boy had taken it all, despite literally being tortured. It hadn't lasted long, but I'd seen adult men who'd had more obvious psychological effects. Maybe he was just resilient, or maybe, like me he had a past that didn't make it seem quite as bad.

That was the disturbing idea. The general perception was that the boy had lived a charmed life despite being an orphan, hidden away from Wizarding society.

Comments he'd made during our tutoring sessions had made me think otherwise.

As we were walking down the hallway, I lowered my voice.

“Have you ever heard about a creature like a giant snake that kills things by looking at it?”

“Why?” she asked suspiciously.
“I came across some legends about something like it, and I'm interested,” I said casually. “Maybe you could look into it and see what you can find out?”

“And what would you do with something like that if you found it?” she demanded.

I still hadn't decided, actually. The thing seemed to be sleeping in its chamber below the castle, which made sense given that it was winter. I wasn't sure whether it was cold blooded or not; its breath had been warm after all. But a lot of creatures hibernated in winter.

It was a good strategy for reducing caloric needs at a time when calories were scarce. The problem was figuring out just how many calories a thing like that would need. I'd once read that male African Elephants needed 70,000 calories a day. If they'd been carnivorous, that would translate into over a hundred pounds of meat a day.

When the thing awoke fully, would it need the equivalent of a full person a day to survive? Just how vicious was it? Those were questions that I needed answered before I decided whether to kill it, or use it as an ally.

“Get it some sunglasses and ride it into battle?” I said, grinning a little.

She stared at me, and then laughed.

“Where would you attach the sunglasses?” she asked. “Snakes don't have ears.”

“Magic,” I said knowingly.

It wasn't even a lie. If the snake could be an ally, we'd have to eventually see it in the light, and that meant that there had to be a way of neutralizing its gaze. Killing allies would make it worse than useless in the fight that was coming.

Our detentions were over with; the last thing Dumbledore needed was for people to ask what we'd done to get detentions over the Holidays. He'd given us a slap on the wrist, really. I suspected that he'd have preferred to have awarded us points, except that Moody and the few others in the know expected differently.

Should it get out that I'd endangered the Boy-Who-Lived, it wouldn't look good politically if people knew that I'd been rewarded instead of punished. The punishment had been almost pro-forms; I hadn't been bothered by it at all.

Potter had seemed to understand too. We'd endangered ourselves, after all, even if not intentionally.

“Harry Potter is joining our group,” I said casually.


“I've spent some time with him over the holidays. I think he'd be a good fit,” I said. “And given the circumstances, he's the only Half-Blood that's at much at risk as us muggleborn. He's practically one himself; he was raised by Muggles and didn't know anything about the Wizarding world until shortly before he came here, the same as us.”

Hermione frowned.

“You'd have though the Ministry would have taken better care of him than that; after all, he's a national treasure.”
“He’s a boy,” I said. “The same as any other. In some ways, he’s had it worse than we have.”

“Worse than you?”

“I knew my parents,” I said. “And they loved me. That goes a long way to keep you from turning bad.”

“And you think he’s at risk from that?” she asked.

“I think he’s at risk of splatting like a bug on a windshield,” I said. It was a reference that a lot of purebloods wouldn’t have got, but Hermione did.

She pursed her lips.

“Can he keep the meetings secret from everybody, even his friend Ron Weasley?” she asked.

She had a point. Gryffindors tended to be obsessed with looking brave and with fame. That made them more likely than people from other Houses to want to talk about things, especially if it involved their accomplishments.

The younger Weasley boy seemed fun loving, but he probably didn't have the motivation to join our group. Worse, he seemed prejudiced against Slytherin. While that was actually justified, I wasn't sure that he could look past my inclusion in the group.

“I already let him know what would happen if he did,” I said.

I left the implicit threat hanging; actually what I'd told him was that I'd tell Snape about the Monster in Hogwarts basement. He and Snape had never gotten along and he was certain that the man would cut the snake up into potion parts just to spite him.

No, Potter wouldn't be talking to the Weasley boy. Whether he'd be smart enough not to be followed was entirely a different matter. I had some plans to deal with that.

The longer we went on, the greater the chance that we were going to be discovered. It had been a miracle that we hadn't been discovered already. The smartest way to deal with that would be to go public with it, in a way that was socially acceptable.

“I'm thinking that if we should get discovered, we should claim to be starting an underground dueling club,” I said.

“Oh?”

“And maybe we should turn it into a legal one eventually,” I said. “Or maybe it would be better to start one in advance, and make sure nobody knows we're the ones who did it?”

After all, there might be some people who would boycott it just because it was related to me. If the idea seemingly came from a professor, things might go better.

“Won't that mean that everyone else will get better as fast as you?” Hermione asked.

I gave her a look, and she chuckled sheepishly.

The real enemies weren't the students in this school; it was the Death Eaters. Getting better in relation to them was the important thing. Still, it showed that she was starting to think strategically. Apparently I was rubbing off on her.
“It's fine sparring with the Weasleys, but you learn better when you have a lot of different styles to
fight against. Even for the people who are too good for us, we could learn by watching them
fight.”

I felt myself getting enthusiastic.

“We could probably even get Travers or Snape to supervise,” I said.

“Professor Flitwick was a dueling champion,” Hermione said primly. “Just because he's small, you
shouldn't forget him.”

She still had some house pride. Was that a good thing? I didn't know.

“Do you think people would go for it?” I asked hesitantly. I'd probably be able to convince the
muggleborn, assuming I was able to convince them of the danger they and their families were in,
but the rest of the students were a lot less likely to join.

“For the chance to fight you and not get stabbed to death?” Hermione shook her head. “Any wizard
with an ounce of pride would jump at the chance to join. Of course, there's a lot of lazy duffers at
this school.”

“Well, you'll never be able to get everyone,” I said.

There were always some people who refused to defend themselves, either out of fear or a belief that
they weren't going to be the ones affected. Those people wouldn't be useful anyway. Troops who
broke and ran left their comrades in a worse situation than if they'd simply never been there at all.

You could plan for a lack of numbers, but a lack of conviction was harder.

I had an ulterior motive for this as well. It was possible that this war against Voldemort might be a
drawn out thing; if it was, having a populace who didn't know how to defend themselves was
-going to be a serious impediment.

Whether Voldemort or the Ministry won, it was possible that either side might turn against me, in
which case I was going to need an army. I would need a group of people who were loyal to me,
people who were used to listening to me no matter how young or girlish I looked.

Voldemort had sent people to my home in order to kill me and Harry Potter.

It was a violation of the rules that I'd mostly lived by since I was fifteen. The unwritten rules didn't
really mean anything; they'd been a way to keep parahumans from killing each other before they
could be thrown into the grist mill that was the endbringers.

Yet it bothered me in a fundamental way.

He'd come to my home and he'd tried to have me killed. That made it personal.

Before I'd been fighting one of his minions, in a fight that had been petty and impersonal. This had
been ordered by the big man himself, which took him from a distant, impersonal project to
something more immediate.

The fact that his bases were being overrun was probably going to make me a somewhat bigger
priority,

I doubted that it would be soon, but sooner or later he would be coming for me. At the very least I
needed to be training harder. Having people to watch my back would be even better.

“Who should we ask first?” I asked. “Snape, Travers, or Flitwick?”

“Start with Flitwick,” Hermione said. “He likes you.”

She was right; I suspect that Flitwick saw something of himself in me. He was a creature of two worlds, having to prove himself to a Wizarding population that looked down on him just for what he was. He'd probably become a dueling champion to rub their noses in the fact that their pureblood superiority was pure idiocy.

Also, Flitwick respected competence. In that way he was like Snape, although he was less harsh with people who weren't.

We'd managed to keep Neville's disasters to a minimum, and I suspected that Snape knew we were working with him; he'd backed off of him a little, and the boy had been doing better. It didn't make Snape warm or fuzzy by any means; he was still acerbic.

He was the opposite of Mr. Gladly in a way. Gladly had wanted to be liked by all the students, and he'd bent over backwards to make that happen.

Snape almost seemed to try to push the students away.

I wasn't sure whether this was because he genuinely disliked children, which I suspected was at least somewhat true, or whether it was because as a double agent he couldn't afford to get attached to anyone.

Voldemort presumably had spies among the student population, and anyone Snape favored would make a perfect hostage for his loyalty.

Make a mistake large enough to make Voldemort doubt him, but not enough to eliminate his usefulness as an agent? Use someone he loved as a whipping boy.

It was a lot like that threat I'd made to the Death Eaters. I'd been bluffing, of course. I wasn't going to go after innocent women or children, although it was possible that their families might be following the same path they were.

Voldemort, though, wouldn't hesitate.

“All right,” I said. “We'll talk to Flitwick.”

I still needed to give Snape my gift. It was a small carving of a Lily.

I'd thought about making a rose; giving him a gift with thorns seemed appropriate. But the romantic meaning behind something like that was a little creepy. I'd seen a book in his office about the meanings of flowers.

Lilies were about purity and innocence. I suspected that he would like the irony of me giving it to him.

I'd created it by taking a branch dropped from the Whomping Willow, and using the cutting spell to carve away at the wood a piece at a time. It had taken a lot of work, but given the gift he'd given me, I suspected that it was worth it.

Cheating a little by having my insects sit on the outside of a real lily wasn't something I felt bad
about. It had been like I was sculpting from feel, and unlike a normal sculpture, when I make a mistake, I could use magic to repair it.

The final result had been something I was proud of. I had one more detention with him, and I planned to let him know that I'd cut the wood myself.

After that, I'd have my talk with Flitwick, and maybe we could get the ball rolling.
Gifts

“What is this?” Snape asked. He looked wary at the small, brightly colored box on his desk. Mc- Gonagall had taken an almost vicious delight in making the wrapping paper as bright and gaily colorful as possible.

“Your Christmas present,” I said. “I know it's a couple of weeks late, but it took me a while to make it.”

I'd already given my gift to Neville, another handkerchief like I'd given Hermione. Potter I'd given some Wizard cards. I hadn't seen Draco yet.

Staring at the box as though he thought it held a severed head, Snape looked back up at me. “I do not require gifts from students.”

“That Foe-glass you gave me was kind of a big deal. I like to pay people back.”

He was silent for a moment, and then he smirked.

I'd certainly paid Voldemort back; the fallout from that debacle was still being felt all through the Wizarding world. It was a sign of just how small the Wizard population was that the deaths of less than a platoon's worth of men had such an outsized impact.

I shrugged, and held the box out to him. Although I was pretending to not care about his opinion of the gift, I'd put a lot of work into it. Having him reject it was going to irritate me.

He opened the box cautiously, looking as though he wanted to use his wand to check it for traps. He didn't, though, for which I gave him props.

“What is this?” he asked.

He was staring at the wooden lily as though it was a rattlesnake in his hand, a combination of horror and apprehension on his face. His entire body was tense for some reason.

“I made it myself,” I said. “With a cutting spell.”

“What flower is this supposed to be?” he asked, and there was a strange edge to his voice. It was almost as though he was ascribing some meaning to the flower that I hadn't meant to give it. I'd looked through his flower book; had I made a mistake?

“A lily,” I said cautiously. “It's a symbol of purity.”

He was silent for a long moment, staring at the flower with a look that showed a sudden, old sorrow. For just a moment he looked as though he had aged ten years, but then he straightened up.

“I know what it is,” he said tersely. “Who told you?”

“Told me what?” I asked. For once my confusion was genuine.

He was silent for a moment. He studied my face, as though he was looking for any hint of deception. For once, I met his gaze unflinchingly.

“I find myself beginning to believe that you just know more than just about things that put you in danger,” he said finally.
I shrugged. I still wasn't sure what this was all about, but I'd apparently stumbled onto a sensitive subject. I'd noticed that the pages in his book talking about lilies were more worn than the other pages; I'd assumed that meant that they were a favorite of his. Perhaps I'd been wrong.

“This...must have taken time,” he said. He stared at it. “The cuts are very precise,”

“I'm getting good at cutting things,” I said brightly. “And it was good practice for later. And I wanted to do something nice for you.”

“It is not your place to be... nice,” he said. “And it could be dangerous for both of us for you to be seen giving me gifts. There are individuals who would see you dead, people who I am forced to interact. It would go poorly for both of us for this to be discovered.”

I rolled my eyes at him.

“I wouldn't give this to you in front of anyone else,” I said. “I'm not an idiot.”

“You are somewhat less of a dunderhead than your classmates,” he admitted reluctantly. “But you are not an adult. Children sometimes make foolish mistakes.”

“So do adults,” I said. “They join up with people they never should have and get involved with a bad crowd.”

“My tolerance for your impudence is not unlimited,” he said. “Some conjecture is not simply dangerous to you, but to me.”

“They sent six Death Eaters to kill me,” I said. “Here. You know that I'm not like other kids. I'm not going to lay down and die. If they kill me, I'm going to take as many of I can with them.”

The faintest ghost of a smile appeared on his lips. It was so faint that I could have been mistaken that it even existed. Was that approval, or was he enjoying the thought of what I might do to his Death Eater buddies?

“Please attempt not to drag others along with you,” he said. He was silent a moment. “Some enjoy living and do not have a Gryffindor-like tendency to throw themselves into danger.”

“I don't do that!” I protested. “Danger throws itself at me! It's like I'm a magnet for trouble.”

“On that we can both agree,” he said.

“I blame the hat.”

Staring at me for a moment, he nodded.

“The Sorting Hat is beholden to no one,” he said. “It is an artifact of a bygone age. It is as old as the oldest of the ghosts in Hogwarts, and is possibly one of the oldest minds in the world.”

I hadn't done a lot of research on ghosts; although their use as spies was obvious, I lived in a castle full of portraits that served the same purpose. They couldn't damage me physically, and they couldn't take over my mind, so I'd preferred to focus on more immediate concerns.

“I spoke with the hat,” he said. “Questioned its choice. It told me that its mandate was not just to do what was good for the individual student, but what was good for the school and for all of Wizarding Britain. It thought that you would be an agent of change.”

I shook my head.
“I don’t want to be an agent for change. I’m tired of all of that; why can’t I simply move on into obscurity.”

“I fear you would find obscurity to be rather boring,” he said. “You have chosen the only path that is in your nature.”

I looked at the lily. What did it mean to him, really?

“Your Dark Lord won’t win,” I said. “He’s too petty and short sighted. Someone like Grindlewald might have had a chance, but Tom is no Grindlewald.”

“You don’t know what you are talking about,” he said stiffly.

He’d once fallen for Voldemort’s line.

“He’s got vision and determination,” I said. “Unwavering conviction. People mistake that for charisma. Everyone wants to be significant; most people channel that into work, or family, or achievement.”

“And you know this at eleven, because?”

I ignored him. “People who feel that they can’t do that, it’s easy to tell them that they deserve better, because of their race, or their gender, or their religion. People like that, all you have to do is tell them that an enemy is attacking their group, and they have to defend it. That gives them permission to use violence.”

I’d studied radicalization, especially in reference to the Fallen. They’d worshiped the Endbringers, and while they hadn't been anything nearly as dangerous as the Slaughterhouse Nine, they had been fanatics.

“Get a group of them together, and they will feed on each other. Violence begets violence.”

He was staring at me.

“You've researched how to become a Dark Lord,” he said. There was an incredulous note in his voice.

“I've read between the lines,” I said. “And if you win, then you aren't a dark lord. You're just Minister for Magic, or the Emperor or whatever.”

“No one would accept a muggleborn dark lord.”

“You never know until you try,” I said, grinning at him.

“You just have to find the right leverage. You win by taking existing prejudices and widening them. Tell them you know how the world really is. Make them think they can make a real change. Ultimately the only thing that changes is who's in charge. They'll tell you that you are better than everyone else. If something bad happens to you, it's not your fault; it's the others.”

His lips tightened. Had Voldemort used some of those tactics against him? Was I essentially calling him a fool a sap? I didn't mean it that way.

“I'm not planning to become a Dark Lady,” I said. “That's a whole lot of work I really don't want to be bothered with. Have you considered running for Dark Lord?”

“What?” he asked, startled.
I suppressed my urge to laugh at the look on his face. He looked like a deer caught in the headlights. Hadn't the thought of taking over ever occurred to him? He might not have Voldemort's sheer power, but he was at his side constantly.

Even Hitler had generals who had wanted him dead.

“You've got the look already,” I said. “All it would take was giving the right people a little... push. Make people believe that what you're offering is better than what the Death Eaters or the Ministry is offering.”

He regained his composure. “My position is precarious enough, as apparently you seem to know. I would prefer to keep my head, instead of having the entire Wizarding world after it.”

“Well, if you change your mind let me know. Enjoy the present,” I said.

Before he had a chance to either thank me or give me detention for some weird reason, I turned and left.

Marching up into the Slytherin dorms, I headed toward the boys stairs. There were no protections on those to prevent the girls from entering, which I thought rather stupid, really. Given the nature of teenagers, it was surprising that there wasn't an explosion of teen pregnancies every year.

Maybe there was a section in the syllabus where the boys and girls were separated and we were given a lecture on contraceptive magics. Likely it was in the restricted section. Maybe it wasn't, and I just hadn't bothered to look it up.

After all, it wasn't something I was going to have to worry about for a good, long while.

It didn't take long for me to find Malfoy. He'd just returned from the holidays with his family, and he was the only one in the common room.

“Malfoy,” I said. “We need to talk.”

The look of apprehension on his face was amusing. How much had he heard from his father, who was likely in contact with their master? In retrospect, I likely could have discovered whose parents were active Death Eaters simply by their reactions in the aftermath of my adventure in the Forbidden Forest.

Those who didn’t react differently were at the very least not being kept in the loop by their parents. Those who were probably were acting as spies for their parents anyway. Deciding that I would watch everyone around me closely over the next few days, I pushed forward.

“I wanted to thank you for your gift,” I said.

The look of relief on his face was palpable.

“I brought you a gift as well,” I said, pulling the brightly colored box from behind my back.

The look of anxiety on his face was suddenly back.

What was it with these people? Why did they assume that if I was giving them a gift that it contained some sort of hidden trap? Didn’t they know that I tended to be more direct when I intended to move against someone?

He took the gift gingerly.
As I watched, he carefully opened the gift. As he opened the box, I watched his face carefully.

Snape wasn’t the only one I’d made a statuette for. I’d put effort into this one; it was a carving of an acromantula, made up as a pendant.

His face paled; I was right that he’d been informed about what had happened. I’d assumed that the chess set was a message from his father. In a way this was my message back to him.

It was a message that what had happened wasn’t a coincidence, that the deaths of the Death Eaters had been planned.

People like Malfoy respected strength. The question was whether or not he would share this message with his master, or whether he would keep it to himself. That would give me a measure of his loyalty; it would tell me whether I actually had an opportunity to turn him toward me, or whether I was barking into the wind.

Voldemort ruled by fear.

How would he deal with this defeat? It made him look bad, but it was being concealed by the Moody.

The series of defeats they were suffering was more damaging than the initial loss, though. There had been other Death Eaters captured, although some of them had escaped already. Undoubtedly this was because some of them were released either by people who were sympathizers in the government, or by people who were controlled by magic.

“What is this? He asked.

“A gift,” I said. “And a reminder.”

He understood what I was saying immediately. He looked at it more closely.

“This wasn’t transfigured. How did you make it?”

“With the cutting charm,” I said. “It was good practice for the future.”

I didn’t smile when I said it, not like I had with Snape. He paled a little. There were more than one kind of message, and he was bright enough that he got it.

It likely boggled his mind that I would have expended this much effort just to make a point. In truth, it had been my proof of concept before I’d worked on Snape’s lily. I was very familiar with the shape of spiders, after all.

The spider was actually almost as good as the lily. I’d made fewer mistakes because I’d used actual spiders as models, and because my familiarity with it had made it relatively easy. I’d made some mistakes, but I’d repaired them. It was a nice piece of work overall.

The fact that it reinforced his idea of me as slightly crazy was only a bonus.

“I’ve decided to make this my symbol,” I said. “In honor of…well, I guess you might know.”

“Is it true?” he asked in a low voice, looking around.

There was no one around us, and there were no portraits in the Slytherin common room. This was by design, as Slytherins more than those in other houses did not like being overheard while they were making various plans.

My bugs confirmed that there were no invisible watchers, either, at least not any they could hear or smell.
Wizards using invisibility was common; controlling their sound was less common but not unheard of. I doubted that most of them would think about masking their smell. I had some bugs who had acute senses of small, and this was something I was habitually doing now.

I had no intention of being surprised by invisible attackers in the bath, not again.

“Are you asking if Potter and I decided to take a walk out in the forest?” I asked.

If anything, his face paled even further. That was impressive given that his complexion was already pale to begin with.

“I’m not confirming anything,” I said. “But if it was true, what would that mean for you?”

“How did you know?” he asked.

“I know a lot of things,” I said. “The question is what you intend to do about it.”

“What do you want me to do?” he asked.

“Use your head,” I said. “Keep your eyes open. Consider who it would be wise to be loyal to; someone that you may never meet, or someone who has the ability to make a real difference in your life.”

He looked conflicted.

“You don’t understand,” he said. “What being disloyal means. It’s not just what they do to you; it’s what they do to your family.”

“And you think I’m different?” I asked.

“I think you go after people who go after you,” he said. “But you aren’t cruel.”

He’d obviously been watching me carefully; more carefully than I’d thought. Obviously, I’d made a big impression on him.

“No one says that loyalties have to be obvious,” I said. “Sometimes it is good to keep your true loyalties to yourself.”

He frowned.

“No one says you have to openly ally yourself to a mudblood,” I said. “But there are little things people can do to help. There’s a difference between being obvious like a Gryffindor, and subtle like a Slytherin.”

His look turned considering.

“I’ve looked your family up,” I said.

After my encounter with Malfoy senior, I’d been interested in what I could learn, mostly about his history, but Wizards were very interested in family histories.

“They’ve become successful by knowing which way the wind blows and turning their sails in that direction. They started with nothing, and over time they became one of the richest houses in Wizarding Europe.”

“The third richest,” he said.
“It’s smart,” I said. “And that’s all I’m asking now. Be smart, watch which way the wind blows, and do what you have to do to keep yourself and your family safe.”

He frowned and after a moment he nodded.

I stepped back, and I smiled.

We shook hands.
“A dueling club?” Flitwick looked surprised.

“I just thought that it was a waste,” Hermione said. “Hogwarts has a dueling champion as a professor, and we aren’t taking advantage of it? It’s an unused resource.”

I was letting Hermione make the pitch for multiple reasons. First, he was her Head of House.

Second, although her connection to me was well known, it was better that the request didn’t come from me. It would give us a measure of plausible deniability. Flitwick was sure to be questioned about who had originated the idea, and I wanted him to be able to be honest about it.

While the man had many sterling qualities, an ability to lie didn’t seem like one of them.

Of course, that might simply mean that he was a better liar than everyone else. The best liars cloaked their lies in truth, giving them a aura of respectability.

“I hadn’t thought…” Flitwick said. “Do you think that people would be interested?”

I’ve asked around,” Hermione said. “I thought there wouldn’t be a point in bringing it up to you if nobody was interested. There are a lot of Gryffindors who would like a chance to show off. The Ravenclaws think it’s an interesting idea. I’m sure we can get the Hufflepuffs to come around.”

She didn’t say anything about the Slytherins; we hadn’t canvassed them for multiple reasons.

For one thing, we weren’t sure that we wanted to empower people we might be facing later. Secondly, those who chose to join the dueling club on their own would be those who were probably more open minded.

After all, this was going to be a club in which mudbloods were going to be participating. The pureblood hardliners would likely refuse to participate, unless they saw it as an opportunity to hurt mudbloods with impunity. Those we’d find ways to weed out.

The ones who remained would be those who were willing to overlook their pureblood prejudice, which meant that they weren’t so firmly entrenched in Voldemort’s camp. That would give me an opportunity to know who I might eventually suborn.

The only way that things were going to change in the Wizarding world was if we could change hearts and minds. One of the problems with the Wizarding world was that people lived twice as long as ordinary muggles.
Even worse, they remained active for much longer than muggles. Dumbledore was over a hundred, and he was busier than any three people. There were wizards who were in their sixteenth decade who were still out and working.

It had the effect of concentrating power in the hands of those who were old, and this meant that ideas that had long since died off in the muggle world were deeply entrenched.

The best chance to change things was to change the minds of the children. New ideas spread in Hogwarts would propagate out, and they would last potentially for two centuries.

There would never be another opportunity to have as much of an impact as right here, and right now. Unfortunately, I didn’t have a lot in the way of political capital. I’d been focused only on survival for months now, but if I was going to be successful, I needed to do more than that. I needed to be proactive, and work at changing the situation that was making my life so hard in the first place.

This was the world I was forced to live in, and so making it someplace that was pleasant to live was only going to make my life easier. Assuming that I wasn’t murdered in the meantime, there was a chance that I was going to have to spend the next two hundred years living here.

Spending that time living with a group of racist assholes was only going to make my life miserable.

Changing their minds wasn’t going to be easy, though. As I’d told Snape, Hitler had preyed on preexisting prejudices, riding them to create the world he’d wanted. Voldemort was doing the same thing.

That was the easy way.

Actually, changing what people believed was a lot harder. It was going against the grain, and it took a lot more groundwork. Furthermore, it wasn’t the sort of thing you could just throw in people’s faces.

People would fight back against that.

Accusing them of being racists simply made them stop listening to you. Once people had made up their minds, it was very difficult to get them to change it. People loved being right, and even more, they hated being wrong. When they were confronted with the idea that they were wrong, they tended to resist and double down on the original idea.

When people had anecdotal evidence that they were wrong, they often ignored it. There was a tendency to remember the things that confirmed what you believed and to deny the things that did not conform.
Sometimes people went through mental gymnastics to keep their beliefs. Muggleborn weren’t good at magic but Taylor Hebert was?

Then that meant that something was unusual about Taylor Hebert. Maybe she was some sort of mutant, or maybe she wasn’t really a muggleborn at all. Wizards weren’t always discriminating in their entertainments with muggles after all. The dueling club would help because it wouldn’t just be me.

Hermione would be decent; I’d made sure that she had a leg up with our study group. I suspected that there would be other muggleborns who were anxious to prove that they weren’t duffers.

We’d all heard the whispers after all, and I’d seen the looks on the faces of those muggleborns who’d heard them. We’d all heard the jokes that were whispered when people thought we weren’t listening. Sometimes the jokes were made deliberately in earshot; far enough that people could pretend to be appalled if we said anything.

It didn’t happen much around me, for obvious reasons, but it happened to the others. I suspected that this was creating an undercurrent of anger. It would eventually lead to problems further down the line. Right now, the muggleborn were too afraid to do anything, but people would eventually find ways to repay the constant insults they were being given.

I blinked as I realized Flitwick was speaking again.

I never realized you had such an interest in dueling Miss Granger,” Flitwick said. “This wouldn’t have more to do with your friend, Miss Hebert?”

The man was short, but that didn’t mean he was stupid.

“Would that be so wrong?” Hermione asked. “For a muggleborn to be interested in bettering themselves? I’m sure you’ve heard what has been happening to us. What’s wrong with making sure that we have at least a chance at defending ourselves?”

“So this would be a club just for the muggleborns?” Flitwick asked.

“I think we all need to learn to defend ourselves,” Hermione said. “Pureblood, halfblood, muggleborn, in the end we’re all going to have to stand up eventually. If not for this dark lord, then for the next one.”

“I’m surprised that you didn’t ask Mr. Travers,” Flitwick said.

“You shouldn’t have to be worrying about such things at your age, Miss Granger.”
“Taylor talks all the time about wanting to be just an ordinary student,” Hermione said. “By the same token, I think we would all wish that these were ordinary times. They aren’t.”

“It’s a good idea,” Flitwick said. “I’ll speak to the Headmaster and to Mr. Travers and we’ll see what we can do. I expect that I’ll have an answer by this weekend.”
Hermione nodded.

I wasn’t anywhere in the room, of course. Being seen going in would be a tacit admission that I was behind the whole thing.

Hermione came out of Flitwick’s office.

“He went for it,” I said. “That means that we have a lot of planning to do.”
She didn’t even ask how I knew.

“Isn’t it going to be up to the professors?” she asked.

“You think they won’t kick it down to the people who suggested it?” I asked.

“Flitwick’s one of the better professors, but none of them like to take work that they don’t have to take. Offering to help will buy us points too; not house points, but it makes them think better of you.”

She nodded.

“Being a Slytherin is complicated,” she said.

I shrugged. “It’s mostly about thinking about what people want, and getting that for them. If you can do that, then you are more likely to get what you want.”
It was strange; listening to the Slytherins all these months had slowly changed my way of thinking.

I’d never been particularly socially adept; when I was young, I’d lived in my own little world. When I was older, I was focused, first on the bullying, and then on my career as a supervillain. Later I’d been focused on saving the world.

Emma had always been the one who’d been focused on being popular. She’d paid attention to what was in style, to who was interested in what. Being popular took as much work as being good at academics. It was just a different skill set, one I’d never been that interested in acquiring.

But listening in on their conversations, I’d begun to understand things I hadn’t before. Doubtlessly, the children weren’t anything as skilled as their parents in the art of social manipulations. But compared to me they were much better.
Ideally, I’d get the loyalty of someone who knew more about social manipulation than I did to act as my propaganda minister. None of the people in my inner circle currently were particularly skilled in that. I wasn’t sure if I’d be able to trust someone like that with my plans either; it would be easy for them to turn out to be a mole. That assumed that anyone assumed that I would be important enough to make that kind of an effort.

So far the attacks against me had been blatant and open, but I couldn’t trust that this would always be the case.

Voldemort was likely busy right now with his current problems. If he thought of me at all, he’d likely have his Death Eaters send their children against me.

Most likely it wouldn’t be a blatant attack; instead they’d test my supposed seer’s ability. They’d try to see what its limits were, and they’d poke and prod until they found something they could give to the people who would make the actual attacks.

“What can we do?” Hermione asked.

“Look up dueling clubs and find out what the generally accepted rules are. Even if Flitwick doesn’t want any help, it might give us a leg up over the others. We’ll start practicing with the Weasleys so that we make a good showing when it actually starts.”

As we went down the passage, I was glad that Potter and I had spent a couple of weeks figuring out how to enter from the girl’s bathroom. The solution turned out to be simple; parseltongue was useful as a code because it wasn’t spoken by hardly anyone.

It had turned out to be the solution to several of the other secret passages in the castle, some of which turned out to not have been entered in what looked like centuries. Some of them were dangerous and others were still well preserved.

According to Hermione, what we were facing was Slytherin’s monster. It was a basilisk. Given its size, it was very old; they grew throughout their lives, much like lobsters and they usually didn’t age.

The ways to kill it were relatively simple; it involved using a rooster. Like lobsters, this was part of the reason that there weren’t many that were very old. Otherwise this was considered a wizard killer.

“We shouldn’t be doing this,” I muttered.

“You want her to get hungry?” Potter asked. “She might come looking for something to eat, and that wouldn’t be good.”

I’d told him about the monster’s size and about what I’d discovered.

A monster like this would be useful, but only if it was unknown that we had it. Given preparations, wizards could deal with it fairly easily. We were wearing blindfolds now, even though the
Chamber beneath us was pitch black. The possibility that someone might turn on the lights was too strong to be ignored.

It took more walking this time; apparently this entrance wasn’t directly over the chamber the way the hole we’d fallen into had been. I used bugs to keep from stumbling, although I could feel their instinctive fear of the monster within.

I could smell it now; without the distractions of the last time I could recognize the light scent of snake.

Snakes tended to have a stronger scent when they were stressed. The fact that the smell now was light was a good thing.

I could hear it now, rustling up ahead of us.

Practicing what I’d been taught, I hissed “Bringers… food, we.”

Gamp’s law was something that in the normal course of things we wouldn’t be learning in first year. However, it had been in Maegaret’s book of household spells. Apparently, wizards couldn’t simply create food out of thin air; it could be summoned from elsewhere, or replicated however.

Apparently, a template was needed for something as chemically complex as food. It didn’t matter if a wooden chair was off a little chemically; as long as it help most of the properties of wood that was good enough. Something that you put in your body was a lot more finicky, and small variations could lead to poisonous or otherwise disastrous results.

The books Hermione had found didn’t have a lot of information about the dietary habits of Basilisks, so we had to make some assumptions.

The snake said something I could not follow, with Potter responding.

“She asked if you were stupid,” Potter said. “I explained that you were just learning.”

I grimaced. Having a snake think I was an idiot wasn’t flattering. It had been difficult learning as much of parseltongue as I had, which was probably why most wizards didn’t bother. It was probably because Speakers were rare to begin with, and so it was hard to find anyone who could speak it.

Still, I’d get better.

Pulling out the package we’d brought from dinner, I set the roast beef from dinner on the floor. I cast the spell from Maergaret’s book over and over again.

A pound of roast beef became something else, a hundred, two hundred, four hundred pounds. It required multiple applications of the spell, but that didn’t bother me.

Ordinary snakes could go without eating for weeks at a time; hopefully this thing was the same. I assumed that was the case; otherwise we would have heard about people and animals going missing. It was possible that the exit we’d found to the Forbidden Forest wasn’t the only exit but I doubted it.

Hagrid was in contact with the centaurs in the forest; the holidays had offered several chances to talk to him, and he’d been open about the likely dangers in the forest. He’d had no inclinations about a giant snake, and presumably the intelligent denizens of the forest would have had at least some idea.
Eight hundred pounds, sixteen hundred.

The snake slithered forward, and we could hear the sounds of scales against stones. We both took a long step back, and we heard the wet sounds of food being devoured.

“Thank….” The thing said; I couldn’t understand much of what else it was saying.

“She says that it hasn’t eaten since the last speaker came to feed it, decades ago,” Potter said. “She’s not clear about how long because it’s not like she has clocks down here, or a calendar.”

“Can you ask her about the speaker?” I asked.

“A boy,” he said. “Smelled like parchment and ink, like both of us.”

“Another student?” I asked. I had an uneasy feeling that I knew who the last speaker had been.

My luck wasn’t good enough for it to have been a random student. It seemed almost inevitable that Tom was the one who had done it. He’d almost certainly gone to Hogwarts like everyone else, and decades ago would have been long enough for him to have been a child.

“She didn’t know his name; I don’t think snakes care about those as much as humans do,” Potter said.

“I have a bad feeling about that,” I said. “Ask her if she’s still loyal to him.”

There was an exchange that I could not quite follow.

“She was put here by Slytherin,” Potter said. “And she’s supposed to follow the orders of the heir, who was going to be a Speaker. She thought that was the boy, but now she’s not so sure.”

I was going to have to work hard to make sure that the thing switched allegiances to me and Potter then. That meant feeding it fairly regularly, although it was possible that the summer break might not be terrible. It had been down here for a thousand years after all, and presumably it had spent a lot of that time sleeping.

“You are the heir of Slytherin,” I said.

“What?” he asked.

“It doesn’t matter whether it’s true of not. I’m betting that the boy was You-Know-Who, or at least somebody that worked for him. Do you really want them in control of a giant murder snake right beneath a school with a thousand helpless students?”

He was silent for a long moment. I couldn’t see his expression, of course, but I could imagine his confusion.

“I guess I am the Heir.”

“If you say something long enough, eventually it might come true,” I said. “We need her to work for us instead of him, and we need her loyalty.”

I considered.

“It might actually be true. How much do you know about your own geneology? I’m willing to bet that almost everyone in the Wizarding World is pretty much descended from one of the founders. There have been fifty generations between us and them, which means that everybody but the
muggleborns is probably related to everybody else.”

It might even apply to the muggleborns.

I’d heard theories that muggleborns were actually the descendants of squibs who had interbred with the muggle population.

It made sense to me; presumably the wizarding gene was either a mutation, or the result of interbreeding with almost human magical species. There had been legends that Merlin was the son of a human and a demon, and maybe that was just the origin of the Wizarding race.

In either case, it was possible that it had come from a single origin, either a mutant, or a fertile half-breed.

I didn’t bother telling this to Potter.

Just because the snake spoke Parseltongue didn’t mean it couldn’t understand English. That only occurred to me now, which was possibly a disastrous mistake.

“Parseltongue is pretty rare, though,” I said. “So the odds of you being the Heir are pretty high.”

He was silent for a moment.

“I’ve never been the Heir to anything, really.”

“Well, all hail to the king,” I said without irony.
It was a couple of weeks before the dueling club was announced, and another week before the first session was to begin. In the meantime, we’d made several more trips down to visit the snake, feeding it, and practicing my Parseltongue.

I was apparently still terrible; according to Potter my accent was thick and I was barely intelligible. My vocabulary was limited to a few words. It didn’t roll off my tongue naturally the way it did Potter. It felt like I was talking with a mouth full of rocks. Speaking snake wasn’t easy. It was almost like my mouth struggled not to speak it.

Was there other languages for all animal species?

Were there people who could speak to rats, or even worse to insects? I spent a couple of sleepless nights worrying about the possibility. An insect speaker would be able to learn things about me that I didn’t want them to know.

The only thing that comforted me was the fact that Parseltongues were supposed to be rare. Insect speakers would undoubtedly be even rarer. Only the insects near Hogwarts would know anything about me, and the odds that the one of the students was one seemed unlikely.

Still, I’d been looking up Acromantulas; apparently, they were sentient, even though they were perfectly willing to eat other sentients. I might be able to learn insect from them, which could be useful.

After all, once insects left my range I knew nothing about them. If I was able to speak their tongue, I’d be able to spy on anyone anywhere. Of course, it was possible that insects didn’t have enough of a mind to have a language; it surprised me that snakes did.

It wasn’t only magical snakes either; Potter said he’d spoken to regular snakes in the past. There had been one at a zoo, and he’d spoken to garden snakes in his own yard while he was gardening.

Was there something special about snakes, or did wizards somehow grant temporary sentience to snakes when they were around them?

The alternative was disturbing.

What if all animals were sentient? The billions and trillions of insects that I had callously sent to their deaths during my career as Skitter, had they had internal lives, a sense of self?

Eventually I had concluded that it was likely just a property of wizards, or maybe snakes. The alternative was unthinkable. Were we supposed to be like some Buddhists, avoiding walking anywhere for fear of accidentally killing an ant?

Insects, at least the non-magical ones were non-sentient. I’d felt the difference with the Acromantula, and I was betting that I’d feel the difference with other sentient insects too.

“I hope there’s a good turnout,” Hermione said. “If not many people show up, it’s likely they’ll shut it down before it really gets started.”

“I’ve got a good feeling about it,” I said.

I’d listened in on the discussions between Travers and Flitwick; they’d assumed that the club would be worth continuing with a minimum of ten participants.
I could sense at least fifty people waiting in the great hall now. More were filtering in. Undoubtedly, we’d lose at least a third of that number later on, as people realized that it was hard work, or less fun than they thought, or simply that they didn’t have time along with their other activities.

Still, there were a lot of familiar faces.

The Weasley twins, Potter, Neville, the younger Weasley, even Percy Weasley. The muggleborns were overrepresented; I’d had Hermione and the others putting quiet words in ears about the situation in the greater word. They’d talked about the need to learn to defend yourself in a world that hated you.

At first they’d been awkward, but eventually they’d gotten smoother.

The thing that surprised me was just how aware of the situation the muggleborns turned out to be. Strangely, some of the pureblood and even halfblood members of Gryffindor, Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff seemed much more ignorant.

It made sense; the muggleborns were the most affected and so they’d paid the most attention.

There seemed to be a good mix of the years, too. I saw everything from first years to seventh years. Some of it was undoubtedly Flitwick’s reputation as a duelist; a lot of people were wanting to see him in action.

As we stepped into the Great Hall, Hermione gasped at the numbers who had shown up. I tried not to look smug. Part of the reason so many people had shown up was because of our efforts at promoting it. I’d been afraid that some of the purebloods would have organized a boycott, but that hadn’t happened.

There were even a few Slytherins in the group; most of them were half-bloods. Had they come to spy on the proceedings for the others, or were they here for their own improvement?

I could see heads turning as I entered the room.

There were a lot of knowing looks on faces; at Winslow I would have been worried about another Locker, but here I figured it was something else. Everyone had to know that I would show up to something like this; it was almost inevitable.

I suspected that almost as many people were curious to see how I did as Flitwick.

“Welcome, everyone,” Flitwick said. “To the first meeting of the Inter-House Dueling club. We are open to other names, but for the moment the IDC is here to promote house unity as well as to improve the skills that every wizard should have, especially in these, dark days.”

I was surprised that he even mentioned the situation outside. A lot of the professors liked to pretend that Hogwarts was an isolated island, and that things which happened outside didn’t affect the students who were there. The fact that he was willing to admit it, even tangentially was an indicator of how bad things had gotten.

All of the students were quiet.

“We are supposed to teach the basics here,” Flitwick continued, “But there is a difference between having a basic mastery of spells and being able to use them in the heat of battle.”

Travers spoke up for the first time.
“Participation in this club will be considered extra credit for Defense against the Dark Arts,” he said. “I can think of no better way to prepare for danger than to actually face another wizard wand to wand.”

He’d proven to be a competent teacher over the past few months. He seemed to care that the children learned what they were supposed to learn, and he was good at getting the ideas across.

There were a lot of hints that he was prejudiced against muggleborns and muggles in general, but it didn’t seem to affect his grading and he seemed to be generally fair. As long as he was able to set his prejudices aside when it counted, I was willing to annoy the occasional digs that he made.

I wasn’t even sure he was always aware he was making them. It was as though he had a basic set of assumptions that he didn’t question.

Still, he was competent as a teacher, and that was important right now.

“We will organize this club by grade level. The best three in any particular grade level will be allowed to participate in the next grade up.”

I raised my hand.

“Yes Miss Heber?” he asked.

“How far can we take that?” I asked. “Is it limited to a single grade level?”

He stared at me, considering, then said, "If a student is able to fight above their weight class, they will be allowed to advance until they can no longer continue to advance."

I nodded.

I saw looks from the people around me, but I ignored them. Asking the question had been risky; I suspected given my performance against the Weasleys that I might be able to score in the low third year level in a fight. There were aspects of luck to the whole thing, though, and it would be embarrassing if I found myself stuck in second year.

“We will begin with some basic combats to see where people rank,” Flitwick said. “This will help us determine each student’s strengths and weaknesses.”

Quickly, they separated us out by year. Notably, they didn’t separate us by house, something that I was pleased to see. The simmering anger between houses had lessened somewhat, but only because the professors had tamped down on incidents in the hallways hard.

Things like this that forced people to interact with each other might help to reduce that tension. It might even create an outlet for people who wanted to blast their enemies; if they were both in the club it would be a socially acceptable pressure valve.

I suspected that this was why the Headmaster and the others had decided that the club was a good idea. Keeping order in the school was very important to them, and if a little time investment here made their jobs easier elsewhere, then they would be all for it.

I watched as the first of the students lined up.

One of the reasons I’d wanted to start this club was to get a better grip on what the difference in skill levels were between different groups of wizards. Once I was able to compare my skills to others, I’d know just how much work I had to do.

“Non-lethal spells only,” Flitwick said. “These are not duels to the death. No one is to be permanently injured or maimed.”
He glanced at me and I frowned.

I hadn’t maimed anyone in months; why was he looking at me?

“Not much is expected of first years,” he said. “But that’s not a reason to slack off. Watch what the ones who go before you do, and learn from them. Wizarding combat is all about strategy. There is a muggle game called rock paper scissors; it is one that wizarding children play as well. Wizarding combat is much like that; some spells work better against some defenses than others.”

Travers spoke up.

“Wizarding combat is an unending arms race. A wizard will discover a new defense, one that is superior from whatever came before. Eventually, someone always comes up with a new attack to counter it. Some people think that is what has happened with the unforgivable; there is no defense against avadakedavra, but that does not mean there will never be.”

Technically he was wrong.

There were defenses against the killing spell; mostly they involved the same sort of defense that were used against guns; keeping something solid between you and it, and keeping cover. Talented wizards like Dumbledore would move the environment around him to use as a defense; the rest of us had to learn to dodge.

The performance of the first few First years was terrible. Most of them barely seemed to know what they were doing, even with the few vaguely useful combat spells we’d been taught.

I was pleased to see that Hermione was easily able to overcome her opponent. So was Neville.

Potter didn’t do quite as well, but he still easily outmatched his opponent. It was impressive because he hadn’t been training all semester like the rest of us.

Finally, it was my turn.

I was facing Seamus Finnegan. He was a Gryffindor and a halfblood. I didn’t know much about him except that he was always talking about quidditch.

There was a subtle look of apprehension on his face, one that he obviously tried to quell as he faced me. What did he think, that I was going to cut off his leg?

“Begin!” Flitwick shouted.

“Expelliarmus,” I said, almost casually.

The boy’s wand flew out of his hand before he could react. He scowled, but he didn’t look too disappointed. In fact, he looked relieved.

I could hear the whispers around me about how fast I had reacted. I hadn’t even cheated using bugs. Expelliarmus wasn’t taught in our year either.

I’d had years of experience in fighting Capes. In those kinds of fights, being slow often meant being dead, unless you were lucky enough to be a brute. Even then, depending on your toughness would eventually get you in trouble. Eventually you would fight someone who was a lot stronger, or whose special attack sidestepped your defenses. If that didn’t happen, then you’d end up fighting Leviathan, and shortly after that you were dead.

The first lesson you learned as a cape was that you dodged or you were dead. It was as much a game of rock paper scissors as wizarding combat, unless you were facing a known combatant, and
even then, every Cape tended to hold something back. Sometimes it was a little used power. Sometimes it was a strategy, or a technique. Some would pretend to have limitations they didn’t actually have, all to lure an opponent into being off guard in an important moment.

So me being fast wasn’t unexpected, even without cheating. I’d been working on my speed with the Weasleys too.

Stepping aside quickly, I carefully kept my features impassive.

While I was hoping to get an accurate gauge of my classmate’s skills, I didn’t want them to be accurate in fighting me.

We quickly went through the first rounds; that was followed by a second round in which the winners fought, and then a third.

I easily defeated my opponents.

Everyone in our group, Hermione, Millie, Tracey and Neville as well as Potter were the only ones who were left.


That meant that the three of us were all moving on to fight the second years. These fights were more interesting. The first year students hadn’t really had many spells that could be used for fighting, and so some of them had almost stood around like they didn’t know what to do.

Second year students, though, had access to two spells that were useful; expelliarmus and flipendo.

This had the virtue of being more visually interesting. Seeing wands fly through the air was fun, and occasionally seeing an entire student fly was even more fun. Despite this, they were slow, painfully slow. I had a feeling that most of them had never faced another student in combat their entire lives, other than occasional scuffs in the hallways. Maybe even not then; most of these students were probably the ones who would have been bullied and probably had never lifted their wands in anger. I and the other members of the study group on the other hand had been practicing for months. Even the Weasleys had gotten noticeably faster.

While the first round had been randomly assigned, likely because the professors didn’t have an accurate gauge of people’s skill levels, the second round students seemed to be more evenly matched.

Potter lost the second round, even though he gave it a good try. Unlike most of the others he at least managed to dodge, but he didn’t have the offensive spells yet to make a good show of it. He had the speed and natural reflexes though, and I guessed that he’d be very good as a duelist once he had the basic training. Hermione won her first round.

I barely moved when I faced my opponent, stepping aside as they tried to use flipendo on me. My opponent was a pureblood, and I had assumed they would try the more humiliating option against me. It was a mistake, because that was a spell that they’d learned more recently, which meant he was slower with it.

Losing her wand in the second round, Hermione looked frustrated.
Travers had put her against a particularly strong opponent, though, one of the few second years who was known for fighting in the school halls. Even so, the fight wasn’t ended immediately, and I thought she had done rather well. It was just bad luck that the other fellow was a little faster.

My second round was against the strongest second year.

Against him, I actually had to dodge.

Still, I’d been habitually fighting against third years; I’d graduated from fighting against one of them to trying to fight against two. I hadn’t been doing well at that at all, not unless I cheated with my bugs, and I wasn’t willing to do that for multiple reasons.

Still, learning to fight multiple opponents was going to be necessary. Death Eaters weren’t going to fight you like opponents in martial arts movies where they lined up to fight one at a time.

I planned to teach my people to gang up on enemies too; basic tactics for groups in battles were something I planned to pound into their heads, at least once I could get them to respect my opinions.

Still, I was moving onto third year, and I suspected that moving past that was going to be difficult. Fourth years had access to spells that the Weasleys were only now trying to master. Still, I’d proven that I was able to fight well above my weight class. The fights from now on would be much more interesting. It was only a matter of time before I lost, but I intended to do the best that I could.

Hopefully the fighting would help us all get better, which was going to be important in the days to come.

Although the fight against Voldemort was going fairly well, the reports of cells being found and destroyed were getting fewer and fewer. They were learning and adapting. In a way, the battle between the Ministry and the Death Eaters was just as much of a game of rock paper scissors as individual battles were.

I was moving to the third round and I could hold my head high.
Interlude: Ron

Ron was worried.

He and Harry had been inseparable from the moment they'd met on the train. It had been a relationship that almost seemed destined to be.

It wasn't that Harry was famous, although that was what had made Ron introduce himself in the first place. Harry hated being famous, which was something Ron couldn't really understand. He'd lived his entire life in the shadow of his brothers, and the opportunity to stand out, to be known seemed like a gift far more than it was a burden.

It was true that a lot of people watched Harry like he was a dead man walking. Voldemort was on the rise, and the general consensus was that sooner or later he'd be coming for the Boy-Who-Lived.

That fear caused a lot of people to avoid Harry; they assumed that when Voldemort came for him he wasn't likely to be too discriminating about who he killed in the meantime.

All of that meant that Harry really didn't have anyone other than Ron. It was petty, but Ron really appreciated having someone, anyone all to himself. If that meant that eventually he'd have to face danger, well, he was a Gryffindor for a reason, wasn't he?

However, since returning from winter break, things had been different between them. Harry had been distant, and he'd been secretive. He kept sneaking off so that no one knew where to find him.

He had shown Ron his invisibility cloak, and so it was possible that he was simply sneaking around in it, but there had been a time where he would have done that with Ron too.

Ron found himself wondering if he'd done something to offend the other boy. When he was around Ron, Harry acted perfectly natural, but there was something about his expression that almost seemed haunted.

It couldn't have been the war, because for once, things seemed to actually be going right. Death Eater enclaves were falling right and left, and Ron's dad seemed to think that the war itself might be over by the end of summer.

The possibility that Harry might be seeing a girl worried Ron. He'd seen how some of his older brothers got when they were infatuated, and it was like their brains fell out of their head.

He'd never be that stupid. Girls were disgusting, and the only reason to bother with them at all was because you had to.

Everything had become clear though one day when Ron had managed to follow Harry. He'd seen him talking to the Hebert girl, and they'd been standing close together.

Was Harry an idiot?

Of all the girls in school, he had to fall for the one girl who was known to be completely mental. The fact that she was a Slytherin was enough not to date her; Slytherins were untrustworthy, and they lied a lot. They were cowardly, too, most of them. They'd attack from behind instead of head to head like any reasonable person.

Not this one, though.
She was as vicious as a Nundu, and by all reoutes would happily maim someone just for looking at her wrong.

Even worse, people were saying that Voldemort wanted her dead almost as much as Harry. That doubled the size of the target on his back.

When Harry declared that he was joining the new Dueling club, Ron had understood. Harry was going to have to fight Death Eaters sooner or later, and getting better sooner might mean that he lived just a little longer.

So Ron, being Ron, had joined up too.

He hadn't lasted past the first round. It wasn't surprising, really. He'd been more concerned with playing Gobstones than paying attention to his homework. That didn't make him that much different than most of his classmates, except that the ones who joined the dueling club tended to be a little better than everyone else.

What was surprising was just how much better Harry had done even though he knew barely any spells that would help him.

The scary thing though was Hebert.

She was utterly relaxed, showing none of the tension any of the others showed, and she was fast. Harry was fast too, but his speed was undirected.

Hebert moved like she knew what she was doing. She made beating her opponents look easy, almost as though she was bored.

“She's fantastic,” Harry said, moving beside him.

“You said she was barmy before Christmas Break,” Ron said, staring at him.

Harry looked at him. “I spent some time talking to her over the break. She helped me with a few things. She's not nearly as bad as people say.”

“What things?” Ron demanded. “What could she have possibly helped you with that would change your mind this much?”

A cagey look came over Harry's face. “She's just a lot more open minded than I would have expected.”

“I don't even know what that means!” Ron said. “She beats people up, like all the time.”

“You can't tell me you wouldn't be beating people up if you had to live with the Slytherins,” Harry said. “Especially Malfoy.”

Malfoy surprisingly hadn't been as insufferable over the past few months as he had been in the past, but he was still a git. Ron had had to deal with him when he was younger and he'd been intolerable.

Now though he was just a constant irritant. He didn't brag as much about his father, but that didn't mean he didn't make snide comments whenever he thought he could get away with it.

“You know the best way not to have to live with the Slytherins?” Ron asked. “Don't be a Slytherin!”

“The Hat didn't give her a choice,” Harry said defensively. “She says she asked for Hufflepuff.”
“Her?” Ron asked incredulously. “She’d have murdered them all in their sleep the first night. The Slytherins are the only thing keeping her from taking over the entire school!”

Harry shrugged. “Maybe... but she's fantastic at dueling.”

Harry was talking about dueling the way he usually talked about Quidditch. Ron had a sinking feeling that meant this wasn't going to be a one time thing.

Harry was probably going to be good at it, like he was good at everything else. He'd been pushing Ron to work harder, but Ron had been resisting. Why work harder than you had to; unless you were in a few, select professions, graduating with good grades didn't get you a better job than graduating with poor ones.

They weren't ever going to have an opportunity to enjoy themselves like this again. Once they were adults, they'd work in a dreary government job, or work in a shop. If they were barmy, they'd get jobs as an auror; that seemed likely the path that Harry would take. He'd already saved Wizarding Britain once, why wouldn't he keep doing it?

It was probably more interesting than the other limited options available, but the danger wasn't worth it. Ron had seen Mad Eyed Moody once, talking with his father, and he'd seen what happened to aurors.

People like Granger and the Ravenclaws were mental; they worked hard for something that didn't mean anything in the end. Nobody cared about grades once school was over.

If Harry loved doing this, Ron would follow, and that meant a lot of work was up ahead.

“Where'd she learn that?” Harry asked.

Spells were bouncing off of an area in front of the witch, and everyone in the room was stepping back as the spells were reflected in every direction.

Flitwick stepped up beside them.

“She's doing really well, isn't she, boys?”

Ron looked at him. “Are we supposed to be learning that this year?”

“No,” Flitwick said. He sounded almost gleeful. “She's a little sloppy in her wandwork, but at this age, it's astounding. I'd almost think that she'd been doing this for months.”

As her opponent, a rather competent Ravenclaw girl went flying through the air, they all winced.

“I suspect Madam Pomfrey is going to have her hands full tonight,” Flitwick said. “Well, you can't have a duel without breaking a few eggs.”

Ron wondered if by eggs he meant someone's head. The man had once had a reputation as a vicious duelist.

“Now you, Mr. Potter have a natural talent for this,” Flitwick said. “And should you choose to pursue it, I suspect you may go far. You may be able to catch up with Miss Hebert sooner than later if you apply yourself.”

He slapped Harry on the back, and Harry looked stunned.
“Thank you, sir,” he said.

Ron felt something ugly deep within him. He'd never envied Harry his fame, not once he'd seen just what it had cost him. He had envied everything else.

School seemed to come easy for him; Ron had to work twice as hard for half the result. Girls liked him, although it mystified Ron as to why he would want them to.

Was this another thing that Ron would be overshadowed in?

No.

Ron had been in the shadow of other people all his life. He was sick and tired of it.

“I'm going to try too,” Ron spoke up suddenly.

“That's very good,” Flitwick said absently. He didn't appear to even be listening.

Anger burned in Ron's gut.

“The Winners of the third year combat are the Weasley Twins and Taylor Hebert,” Travers called out.

Even the twins were good at this; they'd demolished their opponents without even trying. Was everybody Ron knew an expert at this kind of stuff?

“For the fourth round,” Travers said. “I would like Taylor Hebert and George Weasley to stand up.”

So one of them would be forced to lose. Ron felt conflicted.

Hebert was untrustworthy, a Slytherin, someone who was trying to take his best friend away. He suspected that she didn't even care that much about Harry.

She never even looked at him, although the truth was that she hardly ever looked at anyone. It was part of what made her so creepy. She always seemed to know where everyone was without looking.

Yet the twins had tormented them throughout his childhood. He wouldn't want something bad to happen to one of them, but seeing them taken down a peg or two wouldn't bother him one bit.

It was probably best to treat it as a win no matter who won.

At that decision, Ron felt himself cheering considerably. It didn't matter who won, not really. Someone was going to be humiliated that wasn't him, and that was a win in his book.

“Begin!” Travers called out.

Both combatants bowed very low toward each other.

Ron suspected that Harry didn't understand the meaning of the bow; he hadn't grown up in the Wizarding world. The depth of the bow was an indicator of a wizard's respect for his opponent. A deep bow, like both were giving now was indicative of a great deal of respect. Opponents who hated each other would barely nod.

The crowd around them burst into murmurs.
They were acknowledging each other as equals? Ron would have expected a mocking flourish from George, something to indicate that the little firstie wasn't really on his level.

Even stranger, Hebert had barely bowed at all for any of her previous opponents. Most people would have attributed that to her being a muggleborn and not knowing any better, but this indicated that maybe she did.

Had she had training somewhere?

While dueling wasn't Ron's favorite sport, he'd watched as much of it as any other pureblood. He knew the basics, at least.

“What?” Harry was asking him, pulling on his shirt. “Why's everybody talking?”

“It's the bow, mate,” Ron muttered.

Both of the combatants got into the accepted combat positions. Hebert was crouched low, lower than most duelists; presumably she thought that presented less of her to be a target. George was in a more classical pose.

Both combatants simply stared at each other for a long moment, and then they began throwing spells at each other. Both were using shields and spells were bouncing off right and left.

George was using stunners, which was a spell Ron thought wasn't supposed to be taught until fourth year. Hebert was responding, shouting out “Flipendo!” and “Expelliarmus!”

Both of them were running around, dodging despite having shields up. Ron supposed it was possible that having spells hit shields took energy of some kind; if not, why try to dodge spells? That would leave you out of breath and more vulnerable.

Everybody cursed as George threw a bunch of sand onto the floor and then used a spell to cause it to spray across the battlefield. Hebert ducked and rolled, and George followed up by throwing something onto the floor.

The floor began to melt and sink into some kind of swamp. Hebert immediately sank into the swamp and her movements slowed.

An angry expression appeared on her face, and she immediately dropped down into the swamp until only the top of her head was above the edge of the water. She continued to cast spells at George, but not her shield spell didn't have to cover much.

It was over eventually, although it took a lot longer than any six of the other duels. Hebert hit George with a tickling charm, and then used a summoning charm on his wand. As she strode out of the swamp, she kept hitting George with the tickling charm as he rolled on the floor laughing.

“Miss Hebert!” Flitwick called out sharply.

She turned toward him, her robes soaked and stinking. She looked angry.

“Mr. Weasley has forfeited his place by using an item in a duel. You have won. Perhaps you would like to return to your rooms and get cleaned up.”

She frowned, then nodded.

The professors spent the next thirty minutes trying to dispel the portable swamp, but nothing they
did worked. The Twins didn't know how to reverse it either, and for once Ron believed them.

“She just dropped down inside it,” Harry said. “Used it as cover!”

“I thought girls were supposed to be all worried about how they looked,” Ron muttered.

Harry shook his head. “I don't think she cares, really. Isn't duelling great?”

Harry only thought that because he'd never been around it before. Ron had known about it all his life, and so it seemed like old hat to him. Presumably the shine would wear off for Harry too, but probably not before Ron had been dragged to all sorts of events.

Eventually Flitwick transfigured a section of stone floor over the portable swamp. Once it had settled in the duels resumed.

The next duels went by in a flash. Ron couldn't help but watch Harry instead of the duels.

Harry's eyes were shining.

It wasn't Hebert that had him so excited. It was the duels. Ron had a feeling that Harry was going to admire anyone who was good at them, much as Ron would admire a great Quidditch player. It didn't matter that most Wizards never got into a fight in their entire life once school was over; what mattered was being able to beat your opponent in as flashy a manner as possible.

Potter was watching every duel with an intensity that Ron had never seen before, and he could almost see him learning from every one. Potter kept muttering to himself as one after the other students made mistakes.

“Watch your footing,” he muttered to himself as one girl stumbled, only to be hit by a stunner.

As another boy was surprised by a flash of light that left all of them blinded, he muttered something that Ron couldn't understand.

Looking across the room, Ron saw that the Hebert girl was watching with almost the same intensity. For once, she was using her eyes; she watched every fight like a hawk, and it was like she was assessing everyone who fought, one after the other.

Hermione, beside her was taking copious notes. Ron wondered if she was doing it at the request of the Slytherin, or because she was simply that obsessed with learning.

“Taylor Hebert, and Cassius Warrington,” Travers called out.

Warrington was one of the few pure blooded Slytherins who'd chosen to join; from the look in his eyes it was because he had a bone to pick with Hebert, and he was choosing to do it here, where he wouldn't wake up in the middle of the night with her standing over him with a bloody sock.

He'd been friends with Avery, from what Ron had heard, and he'd tried telling everyone in the school that Hebert should be expelled.

Ron felt himself leaning forward, even as Harry started pulling him back. The lackluster nature of a lot of the duels had been boring him; mostly they didn't last long, and then one person lost. A grudge match, though, that was likely to get nasty, and there was a high likelyhood that someone was going to try to cheat.

They were both Slytherins, after all.
“Bow,” Travers said.

The nods they gave each other were almost imperceptible. It was obvious that Hebert knew who the boy was. Despite that, she was standing loosely, as though she wasn't worried about him attacking.

It was a deliberate insult, and Ron could see the realization of that on Warrington's face. The boy scowled, and his expression turned ugly.

Beside him, Harry seemed oblivious to the byplay. He was watching their wands and their feet and didn't seem to notice anything else.

“Begin,” Travers said.

They did.
Warrington.

I had very little respect for him. At least the Slytherins who had attacked me earlier in the semester has done so directly. They'd had the courage to at least risk getting into trouble, even if they were only attacking a little girl.

Their was a casual kind of cruelty; still cowardly, but at least they'd done something about it.

Warrington had been Avery's friend, but he hadn't done anything about it other than run his mouth all semester. I'd ignored it, because the only people he'd been talking to had been the people who already hated me.

Letting him talk had actually been useful; I'd listened to the responses of the people he'd been talking to. Some had been enthusiastic about feeding into his delusions. Others had been more reticent, and some had rejected him altogether.

I'd considered those last to be the people to watch the most, because they were likely the smartest of the group. The fact that he'd approached them in the first place meant that he'd thought they'd be receptive to what he had to say. He wasn't brave enough to try to change the minds of people who would actually resist him.

He'd preach to the choir, but standing in front of the congregation was too much for him.

If he'd been smarter, he'd have actively been trying to undermine my reputation. He could have spread rumors, made accusations, caused all kinds of trouble for me. Instead he'd just been petty and whiny, saying enough to make people think he was loyal to Avery without actually doing anything.

So he was stepping up now?

He looked angry, and his face was red, which didn't bode well for a professional, dispassionate match. I hadn't done anything recently to make him more angry, so I wasn't sure what had set him off.

Travers called out, and the match was started.

Warringron stared at me, then smirked. He pointed his wand at the floor and mumbled something that I couldn't hear over the sounds of the students talking.

Blue light exploded all around us even as symbols appeared on the floor.

“I've spent the last couple of weeks every night on my knees creating this,” he said. “It's based on the charms that protect Hogwarts in times of danger.”

I couldn't hear anything from outside the blue force field, not with my ears anyway, although my connection with my bugs told me that Flitwick and Travers were trying to bring the field down, without success.

“Some friends of my father showed me how to do this,” he continued. He smiled grimly. “All so that we could spend some quality time together.”
I ducked as Warrington pointed his wand at me and a ball of fire exploded from his wand. I quickly put up a shield, and I attempted to grab his wand magically.

The fire bounced off my shield and struck the inside of the blue wall separating us from everyone else. It bounced off that wall, and it fizzled out.

“Expelliarmus!” I called out.

I didn't expect it to actually do anything; he seemed to have some experience in fighting unlike my other opponents other than George. I was right, he stepped aside and launched another ball of fire at me. My shield this time deflected it up toward the ceiling, and despite the scene of the open sky above, we felt plaster raining down.

Warrington then tried to hit my legs with a jelly legs jinx; undoubtedly he was hoping to keep me from moving to set me up for something much nastier.

I easily stepped aside.

“I'm not trapped in here with you,” I said. I stared at him. “You've trapped yourself in here with me.”

“You can't bluff your way out of this one, mudblood,” he said. “I don't know what trick you used to murder my father, but it won't work on me.”

“What's the matter?” I called out, as another gout of flame shot past me. I stepped to the side as it struck where my back would have been. “Can't hit a mudblood?”

He cast stunners at me; several of them bounced off the wall behind me, and I had to be careful not to be hit in the back by one. I kept my eyes firmly focused on him, and used my bugs to keep an eye on what was happening behind me.

His face was growing increasingly red and sullen, his expression determined. There was something ugly in his expression. I hadn't seen that on the face of another student since the early days of my schooling here.

I had no idea what he was talking about. I hadn't done anything to him since I'd put Avery in the hospital, certainly not enough to warrant this kind of anger.

“My father is dead,” he said. “And you are going to pay.” There were tears in his eyes, as well as a look of undiluted hatred. He launched something dark at me, something that I didn't recognize. I stepped out of the way, and then I dropped to the ground as it whipped around behind me and tried to attack me from behind.

He meant to kill me. I'd known that from the moment he'd lifted the barrier, but I hadn't known why. Had his father been one of the Death Eaters who had attacked us in the forest? The Wizarding world was so deeply inbred that it was almost certain that those men had relatives who went to school here.

I'd been stupid not to try to find out who they were; I'd need to be on guard against their children. While most people knew better than to try to fight against me, a grieving family member might not care about the consequences. They wouldn't care about being hurt or expelled, only that the person who had ruined their lives was eliminated.

If I let this continue, he was only going to escalate, and sooner or later he was going to hurt someone.
“Your father killed himself, you know,” I said.

“He did not! My father’s friends told me what happened.”

“What, that he was out working for the Death Eaters, trying to murder a could of eleven year old children? That was brave.”

“Shut up!” he screamed. He screamed and more fire exploded out of his wand in my direction.

I lashed out with a cutting spell; it flew past him and bounced off the blue wall. It hit him low in the back and he screamed and stumbled.

“He died like a little bitch,” I continued, “Crying and begging like the rest of you cowards.”

I wouldn't have said something like that in front of the crowd if they could hear what I was saying.

He screamed and lunged toward me, throwing fireball after fireball. I ducked and dodged, and I returned fire, slashing out at him with diffindo spells. I caught him on the calf, and he began bleeding heavily. Blood loss would slow him down eventually, the only question was whether or not he would get lucky before that happened.

I grinned at him, although I didn't let it reach my eyes.

“Can't even hit a mudblood,” I said. “Wouldn't daddy be proud?”

He cast several spells that left slices in the floor when I deflected them. It was only a matter of time before he tried a spell that I didn't know the counter for. I wouldn't put it past him to try the Killing Curse, and from what I'd heard those slid through shields like a knife through hot butter.

It was time to end this.

He was tiring and I took the opportunity to lash out. “Accio shoes.”

I'd just learned this spell, and I was happy for a chance to use it. As Warrington's shoes jerked toward me, he lost his footing, and he fell on his rear end. He started to slide toward me.

He dismissed the spell, and his face red, he cast another spell from the ground.

Two snakes appeared and came slithering toward me. While I couldn't assume that they were poisonous, I had to assume they were.

He was staring up at me closely, presumably to see if I was terrified. I couldn't imagine how he would possibly think that; hadn't he lived in the same dorm as me for the past few months? Did he really think that a couple of snakes would be what made me quiver in terror?

I considered my options. I could try to speak to the snakes, but I only knew a few words, and these things were conjured. Were they actually snakes at all, or were they simple projections? If they were projections, all my speaking would do was waste time and let them get within striking range.

It was better not to take the chance. I flicked my wand, and I said “Aqua Eructo!”

I focused my will, and a jet of water exploded from my wand, striking the snakes and driving them back. I stepped forward. The snakes kept trying to move around the jet of water, but every time it hit them it sent them flying.

Finally, they collided with the boy, and then I hit him with the water jet directly between the legs. I
could see the snakes lashing out and biting him repeatedly as he frantically tried to dismiss them.

“Scourgify,” I said coldly.

I hit him in the face, and the spell began to scrub away at his skin. It had never been meant to be used on flesh, and it was painful to say the least. He screamed and tried to turn away, but this just left me scrubbing at the back of his head.

“Avis,” I said, as he was hiding his face with his arm.

I’d been interested in this spell because it was the closest thing to my normal method of operating that Wizards had; summoning creatures to use against your enemies.

“Avis, Avis, Avis,” I said.

He was trying to dispel the birds that were increasingly pecking at his body. As I cast the spell over and over again, a massive swarm of birds appeared. They pecked over and over at his body. Welts and blood began to appear on his body. He flailed around and screamed, and I easily pulled the wand from his hand with magic.

“Densaugeo,” I said.

His teeth began to grow, and I leaned down toward him, watching as they grew larger and larger. They were already inhumanly large, and as I focused my will they grew even larger than that. By now he looked like a caricature of himself, almost like a cartoon character.

I was barely aware of the sounds of the crowd reappearing as the blue wall surrounding us went down. Apparently whatever Flitwick and Travers had come up with had worked, finally. I was too focused on the boy in front of me to even notice, other than peripherally.

“This can kill, you know,” I said. “If I keep letting your teeth grow, eventually they will pierce the top of your skull and into your brain. You'll be aware of it every second, and it will be a painful way to die.”

It was only then that I realized that my voice had carried across the room. The students were so quiet you could have heard a pin drop.

“Miss Hebert!” I heard Flitwick say, sounding shocked. The next thing I knew I was being pulled off my feet and levitated into the air, my wand flying out of my hand.

My hand darted toward my fanny pack until I realized that it was Flitwick who was holding me up in the air with magic, and then I stopped.

“Miss Hebert and Mr. Warrington have both been disqualified,” he said firmly. “And both have forfeited their match.”

He dismissed my swarm of birds after letting me down.

“Are you all right, Miss Hebert?” he asked in a low voice.

I looked up at him. “Why wouldn't I be? I hadn't had someone try to kill me in a couple of weeks, so it was about time.”

“You lost control of yourself for a moment there.”

“I didn't,” I said. “I just needed to make a point. I knew that you or Professor Travers would stop
I was lying out of my ass, but I needed Flitwick's approval. He didn't seem like the type who would be all right with making a schoolboy's teeth grow until they exploded through the top of his head.

“You could have been more gentle with him,” he said.

“No I couldn't,” I said.

“You understand why I had to disqualify you,” he said. “I did ask that you not maim anyone. I suspect that you could have stopped him without doing what you did.”

I saw that the youngest Weasley was staring at me. He leaned close to Potter and said “I told you mate.”

Fourth year was fine with me; they were or at least would be good enough that I'd have a workout, but not so good that they'd be regularly beating me. The kids in the higher grades were learning to cast spells non-verbally, which was going to be a nightmare for someone like me, who was just learning.

Finding a spot where I was at was a win as far as I was concerned.

“Do you think I should allow you to continue, Miss Hebert?” he asked, watching me closely. “If these matches arouse your bloodlust too much, perhaps it would be better if you watch from the sidelines.”

“No, no,” I said. “I don't mind an honest match. But if someone tries to kill me, I take a dim view of that.”

“Do you know why he tried to kill you?”

I leaned forward and spoke quietly in his ear. “He seems to think that killed his father.”

He frowned. “Why would he think that, Miss Hebert?”

I shrugged. “It might have something to do with the...incident over break.”

He stared at me for a moment, and then his lips tightened. He'd been one of the few who'd gotten the full story of what had happened. Most of my teachers had been told, if only because they were trusted and because they needed to know what to watch out for.

After all, if the Death Eaters had attacked once, it was possible that they might attack again.

Some of the teachers hadn't been told. The Divination teacher didn't know; whether that was because they thought she couldn't be trusted or because they thought she wouldn't be competent enough to protect us I didn't know.

What mattered was that Flitwick knew.

There were people nearby who were trying to listen in while not being obvious about it. The only ones who were close enough to possibly hear my voice were Potter and Weasley. Hopefully Potter could keep Weasley in check.

Flitwick took a deep breath and looked at the destruction around the Great Hall.

“We're going to have to clarify the rules,” he said. “And find better ways to protect those who are
watching. We will take a thirty minute intermission while we deal with Mr. Warrington's injuries.”

He quickly assigned three seventh years, including a prefect to take Warrington to the Hospital Ward. His legs were already swelling up and turning black from the snake venom. Apparently whatever snake he had chosen to conjure was highly venomous.

Furthermore, his breath was whistling in his lungs. He was sweating and he was convulsing.

From the look on Flitwick's face, this wasn't the normal response to a bite from one of these snakes. Apparently Warrington had changed the spell somehow, and had made it much more dangerous and possibly lethal.

Flitwick insisted on having Travers accompany the boys floating the body to the Hospital Wing. Likely he would have liked to have done it himself, but with his short legs he would have slowed them down.

“This isn't an auspicious beginning,” he muttered.

“That's what he meant for me,” I said quietly.

“I have no issues with your performance,” he said. “You are brilliant at combat. I worry about the streak of cruelty. I only wish that it had not come to this.”

For a moment he looked as though he was reconsidering the very idea of the dueling club. Having the club end before it had even started wasn't my plan, not at all.

“This is exactly why we're here,” I said, and I realized that my voice was carrying further than I'd meant it to as the entire room had gone silent.

I looked around at everyone. I might as well continue.

“Sooner or later, all of us are going to be facing snakes coming at us in the night. It might not be this year, and it might not be in school, but it's coming. We aren't here because this is fun, although it is. We aren't here for the glory, although there is glory to be found. We're here because this is what is going to keep us alive.”

Everyone was staring at me, including Flitwick.

His lips tightened, and he nodded.

“Quite right, Miss Hebert,” he said. “We will move on to the final three years once Mr. Warrington is sorted out.”

Flitwick had a discussion with Travers once he returned, and it was decided to finish up the matches, since the students still seemed interested despite the danger.

From the looks on some of their faces, I suspected that the danger only made them more interested. This was no longer a club where people did even more classwork. It was more like watching NASCAR; most of the fun was in waiting to see if someone crashed and burned.

Hopefully that wouldn't be me.
“Mr. Warrington is dead,” Snape said.

It had been a week since the disastrous first duelling club session, and Warrington had been transferred to Saint Mungos. I was now in the Headmaster's office, facing Dumbledore, Snape and the Auror Moody.

“I had nothing to do with it,” I said quickly. “He basically killed himself.”

“That's what you say about everyone who dies around you, isn't it?” Moody said. He stared at me with his human eye, while his mechanical eye whirled wildly.

I shrugged.

“You aren't bothered by his death?” Dumbledore asked.

“Should I be?” I asked. “In America, when people try to kill you defending yourself is allowed. I didn't do anything that would kill him, so why should I feel guilt?”

I frowned.

“How did he die?”

“The snakes were summoned from elsewhere,” Moody said. “They had curses inscribed on them that made their venom impervious to wizardly healing. The boy died in pain.”

“He meant that for me,” I said quietly. “The Death Eaters meant that for me.”

“It was perhaps a message,” Dumbledore said. “One intended to encourage you to become more circumspect in your dealings.”

“I AM circumspect!” I said. “I hadn't hurt anybody in months before Christmas.”

“I'm not sure you understand what circumspect means,” Moody said. “You take more risks than a Gryffindor.”

“Did the boy say anything to you?” Moody asked.

“He said his father's friends taught him to make the circle. I'm assuming they taught him some of the other spells as well. Considering that the Death Eaters are the only people I've killed recently, I'm assuming his father was a Death Eater.”

“Recently?” Moody asked, leaning toward me.

I rolled my eyes. “It's an expression. I'm eleven. How many people do you possibly think I could have killed?”

“I don't know,” Moody said. “Why don't you tell me?”

“Less than you,” I lied. “The important question is whether this was an escalation, or just them trying to save face given what's been happening recently.”

“I'd have thought the first question on your mind would be whether you are being charged or not.”
Moody said.  

“For defending myself in front of fifty witnesses?” I asked. I shook my head. “And if you were going to arrest me, I think you'd have brought more aurors.”

“You think I need help bringing in a pipsqueak like you?”

“I think you know I wouldn't go down without a fight,” I said. “And that I’d fight back even if Dumbledore here was trying to take me in.”

I likely wouldn't stand a chance, not with the three of them standing in front of me, but I might be able to escape if I revealed my only trump card, my insects. The weather was starting to warm up, and I'd been intentionally breeding as many of them as I could in the out of the way places in the castle.

The number of bugs I could control was growing toward my old levels, although my multitasking still wasn't what it had once been. Also, while there were a lot of bugs in Hogwarts, it wasn't nearly the number that could be found in a shithole like Brockton Bay.

He stared at me for a moment, then nodded.

“There's some people in the Ministry who want to press charges, but they're clearly biased toward the Pureblood faction. The liberals still have control of the Wizengamot, and so nothing is going to be done.”

That was probably going to irritate more than a few people, but it didn't bother me.

“I'm assuming that I'm still not a big priority for the Death Eaters,” I said. “Since they're still using these low cost low risk strategies against me.”

“Oh?” Snape asked.

“Getting an idiot kid to do their work for them isn't a strategy that is likely to work. But what did it cost them? Spend an hour teaching a kid a few spells.... if he fails, then he wasn't a member of the team anyway. Maybe he gets lucky and succeeds. Maybe the girl kills him and she ends up in prison... these are cheap attacks that remind people that the Death Eaters are still relevant, even though they are currently on the run.”

“You sound like you admire them,” Moody said.

“I admire good strategy,” I said.

“And what would you do, were you leading the Death Eaters?” Moody asked.

“I wouldn't attack anyone at all,” I said. “I'd have my people start using the Imperius on everyone who was anyone in the government. Do the same to the people running the papers. The Wizarding world seems to be fairly credulous, so whoever controls the Ministry and the papers pretty much controls the country.”

It was the nightmare the Protectorate had worried about incessantly. People who were under the control of Masters couldn't be trusted. There was a reason that Master-Stranger protocols had been invented.

“It wouldn't be as easy as that,” Moody growled.
I shrugged.

“You have contingency plans for when people fail to control someone,” I said. I almost said that there were ways to make people disappear, but I saw Moody watching me closely, and so I chose to stay quiet.

“Most aspiring dark lords end up in Azkaban or dead before they get very far,” Moody said. “It's not a profession to be envied.”

“Because your own minions are always jockeying for your position and you can't trust anyone not to stab you in the back?” I asked. “Or because you've set yourself against the entire Wizarding world?”

“Both,” he said.

I frowned.

“Well, I'm not planning to become a Dark Lady, so there is no reason to worry,” I said loftily.

For some reason not one of the three seemed convinced. I felt a moment of irritation.

It had been harder to keep my temper lately. I worried a little; was it my new brain and new hormones making it harder to regulate things, or was it simply a function of being eleven years old and having more trouble controlling myself.

Or was it something deeper?

I'd seen heroes who'd been in fights with the Slaughterhouse, and sometimes there were long term effects. Post traumatic stress wasn't a pretty thing, and sometimes it took effect as anger; soldiers felt fear as often as anyone else, but they learned to focus it as anger. However, sometimes that fear manifested long after the danger had passed.

Did I need some kind of psychological treatment? Possibly.

Unfortunately there was no way I could trust any counselor in this world, muggle or not. I had too many secrets, and in a world where every wizard could mind control people with a flick of their wand, no counselor would be safe.

Discovering what I was might well be enough to have be declared a non-human, and I wasn't sure what rights I might have at that point. I was fairly certain that I would no longer be allowed to carry a wand, which would be the end of me.

Worse, if my bug control was discovered, then any adult wizard, and half the students at Hogwarts would be able to work around my defenses. I'd be dead within a month.

I wouldn't be able to get psychological treatment until my enemies were dead.

“Are they likely to come after me again soon?” I asked. “Because the smart play would be to attack when nobody expects it.”

“I doubt that he really cared if you died or not,” Moody said. “This was just a way of keeping his people in the limelight. It's well known that the Death Eaters don't like you; you've put your head in the noose too many times for it not to be noticed. In the bigger scheme of things, though, he's got a lot more to worry about than you.”
"We'll stay vigilant just in case we are wrong, Miss Hebert," Dumbledore said. "I will do everything in my power to keep you safe."

"Have you found people for me to stay with over the summer then?" I asked. "Because it's only a couple of months away now."

"I have," Dumbledore said. "But I will keep it to myself. I trust my own occlumency, but leaving something that important to others would be foolish at this point."

"You could tell me," I said.

Knowing who I was to stay with would give me a chance to research them, and that would give me a chance to figure out how to work around them. It was frustrating being a child. In some ways Hogwarts was wonderful; in other ways it was like a prison.

"You have natural talent as an occlumens," Dumbledore said. "But it is inconsistent. I'm sure you would prefer not to face death eaters the moment you step off the train."

I stared at him.

"Why don't we do that?" I asked.

"What?"

"I've pissed enough people off that there will likely be at least a few people waiting on the platform when we leave school. Avery is likely to be one of them, and he's probably mid-rank in the organization. With luck, they'll be more people there waiting to murder Potter."

"With Luck?" Moody asked.

"There are two ways to deal with an ambush," I said. "Well, three actually. You can avoid it entirely. You can ambush the ambusher, or you can power through it. The train station is a place you know Death Eaters will be waiting."

"Why are you so sure of that?" Dumbledore asked.

"Because Tom's organization is flailing right now," I said. "I wouldn't be surprised if he wasn't losing members.... not the core fanatics, but the people on the outside. No terrorist organization can survive without help from the population. That's probably somewhat less true in the Wizarding world, but I'll bet there's a lot of sympathizers among the regular wizard."

The three of them glanced at each other.

"He needs a win," I said. "Something big to convince his followers that he's still relevant. Where better to attack than the train station."

"The place will be crawling with aurors," Moody growled.

"What do you want to bet that half of them get mind controlled or mysteriously reassigned right before school lets out?" I asked. "If he manages to kill me or Potter, he doesn't even have to make a big scene. It'll send the message that even in one of the safest places in Wizarding Britain that the Death Eaters can reach anyone."

"And there are wizards who will join up like sheep just because they are afraid," Moody said.

"I won't allow it," Dumbledore said.
“What?”

“You are talking about using yourself as bait,” he said. “I am not willing to take that risk, and for
the moment I am your de facto guardian.”

“There may never be another chance to make as big a strike on his organization,” I said. “The raids
on his safehouses are already tapering off, and he's only going to gain strength over the next year.
He won't be nearly as desperate next year.”

Moody stared at me with an unfriendly look.

“This isn't how a child your age should think,” he said.

“I had a tough childhood,” I said. “And it hasn't really changed all that much since I came here. It's
actually calmer here than back at home.”

“And America isn't a steaming pile of rubble,” Moody asked.

“Well, I didn't know magic then,” I said. “And there are limits to what a young girl can do.”

I frowned.

“Are there citizenship limits to who can be Minister for Magic?” I asked.

“What do you mean?” Moody asked.

“Well, in the states you have to be a natural born citizen to become president. Is it the same here?”


“Never happened though,” Moody said. “Won't happen either. Nobody would elect a foreigner.”

“Why do you ask?” Snape asked suddenly.

“No reason,” I said. I smiled innocently.

I was needling them for my own amusement. I had no intention of becoming Minister for Magic,
but the look on Snape's face made it all worth it.

“Perhaps it is time for you to go back to class,” Dumbledore said.

I nodded.

“Be careful,” Moody said. “No place is safe!”

“Constant vigilance!” I replied, grinning at him.

I'd heard him muttering that a time or two, and the look on his face was worth it too.

As I left, I heard him muttering to the others, “That girl isn't right.”

I listened to their discussion as I headed toward class. I kept an eye on my surroundings too; no
point in getting murdered because I wasn't watching where I was going.

I saw Hermione running up.

“What did they want?” she asked.
“Warrington is dead,” I said. “The snake venom was cursed so it couldn't be healed.”

Her eyes went wide.

“Dead?”

I nodded.

“That doesn't upset you?”

“Considering that he meant for me to get bitten, it does,” I said. “His being dead bothers me less than you might think though. It was really the Death eaters who killed him.”

She frowned.

I continued. “They sent him after me unprepared. I think they meant for me to kill him, so that I'd get sent to Azkaban.”

Her eyes widened again.

“Are you?” she asked.

“I'd be moving a lot faster if I was,” I said. “It was a clear case of self defense, and the Death eaters don't have the votes yet to overrule that.”

“Yet?”

“They're using the Imperius Curse on the aurors,” I said. “It's only a matter of time before they go after the members of the Wizengamot. Having their own people declared innocent will get them a lot of power.”

Truthfully, the only way to stop the Death eaters was going to be to kill as many of them as possible, and then cut the head off the snake. Given their ability to control people, their organization now was a lot like a hydra; cut one head off and two heads appeared in their place.

Hermione still seemed dazed at the news that Warrington was dead.

It had probably all seemed like a game to her before now. She hadn't been around for most of the attacks on me. She'd heard about them, but not even all of those; nobody knew about Filch, and the only ones who knew about the Death Eater attacks were probably the Death Eater children.

She's watched the fight between me and Warrington though, and no a boy she'd known was dead.

“We're adding some new members to the study group,” I said.

Now that the dueling club was a thing, the Weasleys were enjoying their new status as the crack duelers of their year. They wanted to work even harder to stay ahead of everyone else.

“Who?” she asked.

“Potter,” I said. “And the youngest Weasley.”

“Him?” she asked disdainfully.

I shrugged. “Potter, George and Fred think they can keep him under control.”
“He's got a big mouth,” she said.

“It's not quite as important that we keep it secret as it was before,” I said. “That's not to say I want anybody babbling. But if he does start bragging to people, we'll find ways to deal with it.”

“He won't like how you deal with it, will he?” she asked. Hermione sounded almost gleeful.

She had a mean streak buried deep down; possibly it was the reason that we got along as well as we did. For all that she liked to pretend to be a good girl, she had a ruthless nature that I sometimes felt a little guilty for exploiting.

In a better world, Hermione would have been allowed to get through school unmolested. She would have sunk or swam with her own charm. In all likelihood, she'd have kept her head down, made good grades, and then become successful in the Wizarding World. She might have been Minister for Magic.

However, this wasn't a world where she could afford to be a normal schoolgirl. She was going to have to fight in one fashion or another, sooner or later. Whether it was when Death eaters showed up at her door, or when they assaulted Hogwarts as the last stronghold in a Wizarding Britain that had otherwise been conquered, it was going to happen.

Helping her, and others like her learn to stay alive, that I couldn't regret. And if that took a certain degree of ruthlessness, then I'd foster that too.

There was all the time in the world to foster her gentler nature once Voldemort and his servants were dead and in the ground.

I'd put the idea in Dumbledore's head. While he was holding out based on morality, I suspected that Moody was a lot more pragmatic.

There would be complications, of course. Operational security was paramount. If the enemy learned that you planned to ambush their ambushers, they'd likely ambush you in return. That meant that operations would be limited to Moody and his team, and I had no idea how large that group was.

Moody probably kept them separate from everyone else; otherwise he was risking someone suffering from the Imperius.

Sooner or later they'd follow my plan, and maybe we'd finally be able to cut the head off the snake once and for all.
“I think they were just being nice,” Hermione said anxiously.

I was staring at the two cards in front of me with consternation. Neville and Potter had both sent me Valentine's day cards.

“Neville sent me one too,” she said. She frowned. “Does that mean that he's fickle?”

“It means that he's a nice person,” I said. “Who thought I wasn't going to get any cards and that would upset me.”

“But... it doesn't?”

“I slipped these into Pansy Parkinson's stack and watched her open them,” I said. “I've seen ghosts that had more color than she did.”

She'd opened the first one without really looking at it, and only realized what she was holding with the second card. She'd screamed and thrown them away from her like she was holding a bomb.

“I think Neville sent one to Myrtle too,” Hermione said. “And she's acting all... weird.”

She'd been fifteen at death, and Neville was still eleven. I'd have been creeped out myself; and I was a little creeped out now.

“He says she's been stalking him,” she said. “All morning.”

I frowned. “My guess is that she never received many of these when she was alive, and probably none in the last fifty or sixty years. Maybe she thinks he's in love with her?”

“When it's more of a friendly think?” Hermione asked. She looked relieved.

“We're too young to be worried about romance,” I said. “Potter probably thought he was being nice.”

“He got a huge stack,” Hermione said. She glanced over at the Gryffindor table where a group of boys were still gathered around Potter's stack.

“If he was smart he'd have gotten a Pansy.... I mean patsy to check his mail.”

Pansy gave me the finger from all the way across the table. She'd moved as far away from me as she could manage. She used the American gesture; apparently she'd gone to the trouble to learn that just for me. Apparently she'd been straining to listen in on our conversation as well.

Fortunately for her, the teachers had already left the room. We'd been given an hour to socialize.

“Tonight's the first study session,” I said. That was code for our little group. “We'll see how Weasley fits in.”

She made a face.

“He's been an ass every time I was around him.”

“He grew up with Fred and George,” I said. “You can't tell me that didn't warp him a little.”
She nodded.

“And only one girl in a family of however many of them there are? He may not know how to talk to us,” I continued.

“That's not an excuse,” she said, but the tenseness of her posture had relaxed a little.

It was important for allies to get long. Strife in the ranks was something the enemy could use to get a foothold in your organization.

Not that I had an organization, of course.

Yet.

Fred and George had people clamoring after them to help them with the dueling club. Hermione had even had some offers. That was likely part of the reason that she had a half dozen cards herself. The blush on her face told me that she considered them more than just friendly acknowledgments of each other; at this age that was all they should be.

“Well, we should be getting to class,” I said.

The day went quickly after that. It seemed like hardly any time at all before it was the evening, and time for our study group.

“George? Fred?” the Weasley boy almost shrieked. “What are you doing here?”

“We heard you were going to ask young Taylor here out for a date,” George said. “And we wanted to see you get disemboweled.”

The youngest Weasley's face turned a chalky white, almost as much as Pansy's had earlier.

George grinned.

Potter murmured something in the boy's ear, and he turned red.

“You've been teaching The Terror?” he squeaked. “She's a Slytherin!”

“She's not a real Slytherin,” Fred said., “She's actually a Gryffindor spy. Why do you think she gets into so many scrapes with them? A real Slytherin would have just kept her head down and kept quiet.”

The boy frowned. “That's not really a thing. You told me you had to wrestle a troll to pick your house too.”

“And Taylor did,” George said. “Or at least stabbed one in the googlies. That makes her an honorary Gryffindor.”

He didn't mention the fact that the others had chosen to fight too, even Draco. It was just that my heroism made for a better story. People always got that part wrong.

“What about all of these others?” he asked, staring at everyone suspiciously.

Millicent and Tracey were here, as was Hermione and Neville. So far, our group had five Gryffindors, one Ravenclaw, and three Slytherins. We still needed a Hufflepuff.

“There's more of us than of them, mate,” George said. “But we don't do houses here.”
I stood up and walked toward them.

“You know the real reason we're here, Ron?” I asked.

He stared at me and shook his head.

“Because we want to survive. Me and Hermione are Muggleborn.... the Death eaters are trying to kill us all. Millicent, Tracey and Harry are Half bloods. They'll be next.”

He frowned.

“But we're purebloods,” he said. He stared at me for a long moment. I could almost see the gears grinding away in his brain. “But our Dad is on the side of the Ministry.”

He wasn't as dumb as he sometimes liked to pretend then.

“And sooner or later they'll be coming for you, too,” I said. “That's how evil wins, when good men look away because it does not yet affect them.”

“We're first years,” he protested weakly. “Why does it have to be us that fights?”

The fact that he was asking the question told me that he was already halfway convinced. I just had to keep pushing.

“I've had the cruciatus curse cast on me twice this year,” I said. Technically one of those times hadn't been me, but that wasn't the point I was trying to make. “I'm not the only one.”

Ron's head snapped around.

“You?”

Potter shrugged, then nodded.

“We had a hard Christmas break,” I said. “I've chosen to reveal this to you, because right now the only people who know about it are the kids of the Death Eaters involved.”

“Warrington,” Ron said.

“Yeah,” I said. “His father died and he didn't like it that much.”

“You killed his father?”

“He killed himself,” I said. “When he came after me. The point is, he came after me and Harry here, at school. They didn't get in, but they could have.”

I'd already told the twins; they'd heard vague rumors being spread by some of the Death Eater kids. I doubted that it could be kept secret for much longer, not after people were questioning Warrington's death and why he'd chosen to attack me in the way he did.

“No place is safe,” I continued. “So we have to be ready.”

“We can't fight adults!” he said. “I barely know any magic!”

“I'll teach you non-magical things you can do to survive,” I said. “Which mostly means getting away.”
Potter was surprisingly good at evasion. He'd mumbled something about Harry Hunting when I'd asked him, but he'd refused to say anything else about it.

“The best thing you can do is surprise them and then hide,” I said. “And even that won't keep you alive if they know the human revealing spell. That means that you have to try to incapacitate them, and then you need to run until you are out of range of that spell. You have to keep running after that.”

The boy stared at me, his eyes wide. He was listening, though, and not attempting to argue, which I considered a good sign. I doubted Crabbe or Goyle would have even understood what I was trying to say.

“Hogwarts is fractured,” I said. “It's not enough to have the traits of one House. If you want to survive, you'll need to be as brave as a Gryffindor yes, but you'll also need to be as cunning as a Slytherin. You'll need to be as smart as a Ravenclaw.”

“And the Hufflepuffs?” he asked.

“As hard working,” I said. “And that's the kind of loyalty you'll need from your friends. People who have each other's backs have a greater chance of surviving. People who don't...”

He winced.

Good.

Potter had described him as bright in some ways but unfocused and undirected. He apparently had some social skills issues, but then so did most of the people in our group. I suspected that we'd self selected for that; the popular people were too busy being popular to even bother with a study group.

So we were a band of misfits. It was something I could work with.

“The fact that you are here means that you are a little smarter than the rest of them,” I said. It was a lie, of course. He was here because he was Potter's friend, and it bothered Potter to have to keep secrets. Still, boosting egos was good for morale.

The military broke people down and then rebuilt them the way they wanted them. I couldn't do that to the boy yet; he hadn't agreed to the process, and at the moment he'd go running to his parents.

He had a deep seated sense of insecurity according to his brothers; likely that was in part their own fault. It was also likely where many of his less desirable traits came from.

Yet according to them he was loyal enough that they'd thought he might be a Hufflepuff, and we were going to need that. I just had to win his loyalty, and that would take time.

He frowned, but he straightened up.

Being told that you were special was Cult making 101. Finding disaffected people who believed that they'd been cheated out of what life owed them, and telling them that you had a way to get them what was due, that was what every revolutionary group did.

“This will be hard,” I said. “But in the end we will survive.”

Some of us, likely. The last thing I wanted to do was start giving them Legend's speech about how many of us were likely to die. I doubted that schoolchildren would accept that.
Even Hermione was just coming to grips with the concept of death. She'd known it academically for most of the semester, but Warrington's death had driven it home. I'd caught her giving me concerned looks.

“We fight because we have to,” I said. “And when we don't have to anymore, we'll go back to playing exploding snap. Except me…”

Potter leaned over. “She figured out how to kill someone with ten decks of cards and some gum.”

He only thought he was joking. Also, gum wasn't involved.

“So how are we going to get better?” George asked. “You don't have the same kinds of spells we do, but you're fast enough to fight both of us.”

“One time out of three,” I said. “I figure that fighting two gifted third years might give me a chance against a fifth or sixth year, at least until they start doing that thing with the silent spells.”

That was going to be a bitch to work around. I'd seen it in some of the upper year duels. Although none of them had been particularly gifted, it was a huge advantage not to be shouting out the names of your attacks like one of Greg Vedar's anime heroines.

“Just fighting you has made us better,” George said. “Practice and all. But we need new blood, or all we'll be doing is getting used to each other.”

“That's why I've called someone else in,” I said.

I nodded, and Terence Higgs stepped into the room.

George and Fred stiffened, and they stepped forward.

“What?” they asked, almost in unison. While they were more open than most, Quittich rivalry went a long way in their world.

“I want to be part of your group,” Higgs said. He looked uncertain, even though he was the oldest student in the room by a year.

“Why?” Fred demanded suspiciously.

Higgs closed the door carefully behind him.

“My uncle was murdered by Death Eaters three days ago,” he said. “My family swore allegiance to them yesterday.”

I could hear almost everyone in the room freezing. Admitting that was a bombshell, one that could get every member of his family placed in Azkaban. The fact that he was admitting it to enemies was even more telling.

“They didn't want to,” he said. “But it was the only way to keep the other kids safe. Sooner or later I'm going to have to fight.”

“So we're going to teach you how to kill aurors?” George asked harshly. His tone wasn't as severe as it had been moments before.

Higgs shook his head. “I loved my uncle. He was the one person in my life who convinced me that it was all right to be a good person. If the Death Eaters killed him, then I'm going to fight them, with, or without your help.”
His eyes were moist as he stared at us, but his mouth was firm.

“Taylor came to me, and she offered me this,” he said. “And I'm ashamed that I didn't help more in the past.”

I'd been spying, looking for Death eater kids who were communicating with their parents. Most of them did so through letter; I'd read a few of them, and the contents had been eye opening. Most of the letters had been burned shortly after reading, so I'd had to read them using bug vision, which wasn't the best.

“How she knew...” he shook his head.

I turned to the others. “Are we going to accept him?”

George frowned, then stepped forward and held out his hand. He was followed by Fred, and then surprisingly by Potter, then Millie and Tracey. Ron was the last, and he seemed somewhat reluctant.

However, eventually he agreed to do so.

It took a little while to get everybody focused on what we were going to do.

“I'm going to teach you the Reductor curse,” Higgs said. “It blasts things into pieces.”

He looked at me uncertainly, and I wondered if he thought that I planned on using that spell to blast people into a fine mist. His mouth firmed, though and he nodded.

“You've already got the stunning spell, and the shield spell,” he said. “But I've been studying ahead. My parents got me a tutor over the summer break, and I'm a year ahead of where I should be. I'll teach you the Banishing charm, which is the opposite of the summoning charm, the fire making spell, the full body bind curse, and whatever else I think you'll need.”

He looked around at us.

“All of you have talent,” he said. “It was the lack of having the right spells that kept you from going farther. Except maybe for Taylor... in her case it was being meaner than the snakes that tried to bite her.”

Everyone laughed uneasily at that. It was still a little early to be making jokes about the death of a student.

Professor Travers had already been pulled off the dueling club as a result of it, and Snape had replaced him. The Board of Directors had tried to shut the dueling club down, but there were enough traditionalists who believed that the club represented core Wizarding values, whatever those were, that dropping the club wasn't going to happen soon, unless there was another incident.

I suspected that Travers wasn't going to be back next school year, which was a shame. According to the older students, he was the best student they'd had in a while, even if he was something of a blood purist.

Speaking up, I said, “This is more than just a study group, you know.”

Everyone turned to stare at me.

“We've got a purpose, we have each other's backs. I'd fight for any of you, and I hope you'd do the
same for me. That makes us an organization.”

It made us a gang, really, but I wasn't sure that Hermione would approve of framing it that way.

“Organizations need names,” I said. “At least once other people know about them. Maybe we can think of some names that might represent what we aspire to be.”

“The Mongooses!” Ron said suddenly. “Because they kill snakes!”

I cleared my throat, as did all of the other Slytherins in the room.

“Sorry?” Ron asked tentatively.

I'd listened in on his conversations with Potter sometimes, and it still amazed me how sometimes he sounded like an idiot, while other times he was incredibly astute. I suspected that when he actually focused on something he was good at it, but that most of the time he just didn't care enough to bother.

With luck, he'd live long enough for me to beat that tendency out of him. With luck, all of us would.
“I think that we should call ourselves Crucible,” I said quietly.

There had been several names passed around, but all of them had been as horrible as would be expected when it was pre-teens trying to come up with them. Hermione, despite her competence in other areas had proven terrible at naming things. She kept coming up with embarrassing acronyms.

Some of the names would have been good except for my own personal history. Calling ourselves the Protectorate, or Cauldron just brought up associations in my mind that were unpleasant.

“Why's that better than Cauldron?” Ron asked.

He'd proven to be a boy of his word over the last month, doing his best to catch up with everyone else. The fact that we met three times a week while the dueling club met once a month meant that all of us were rising in the ranks. It was simply a matter of doing more work.

Hermione kept notes for us when we watched the matches between the other students. Spells used, tactics, mistakes made; she took notes both from me and from Potter, who was proving to have a tactical mind.

We then tried to use what we'd learned in our practice sessions. Sometimes the study group did actual studying; the older students didn't help us with that, considering it to be cheating, but we helped each other in the things we were weak in.

Still, Ron tended to be opinionated.

“There are two meanings to Crucible,” I said. “First, it's a pot used to melt things at high heat. We are trying to meld all the houses into one cohesive whole. It can also mean a severe trial in which different things interact, creating something new. The American Marines cal their final test the Crucible.”

“Wasn't there an American play called that,” Hermione asked. “About burning witches?”

I frowned.

Well crap.

The naming had been going nowhere, but our skills were getting a lot better. I'd been fighting multiple opponents for the past month; without my bugs it usually didn't end well for me. I was getting better though, and in the meantime, they were learning group tactics.

Working together, I suspected that they might be able to take down even adult Wizards. Against someone like Flitwick or Dumbledore they'd have been meat, but that wasn't the stick they were being measured against.

Still, although the boys worked at transmuting various kinds of furniture and I'd been teaching them about the virtues of seeking cover, our biggest limitation was that we had to work in small spaces. An ideal situation would have been for us to stage war games all through the castle.

Teaching them how to hide, to snipe and then move, that was my ultimate goal, but I still hadn't found the ideal space for that. The Forbidden Forest would have been ideal, but that would have left us vulnerable to real sniping from actual Death Eaters.
The same thing could be said of the outer grounds. I wasn't about to trust whatever nebulous defenses the castle had; they seemed to be stronger in side the castle anyway.

I'd been trying to get the Weasley Twins to transmute me a treadmill, but they'd never seen one, and they thought it was some kind of weird muggle torture device. In a way they were right.

I still couldn't run around the castle, and yet I'd proven to them that endurance was important. Out fights were taking longer and longer as our defenses got better, and sometimes the difference between winning and losing was who flagged later.

It wasn't a matter of magical power; it was simply that as you tired your reaction speed tended to slow, and in Wizarding combat, speed and accuracy were everything.

“We'll figure something out,” I said. “They can't all be bad.”

“School's about to end,” Hermione said. “It may have to wait until next year. Has Dumbledore told you who you will be staying with yet?”

I shook my head.

“He still thinks someone will try reading my mind, and he's not ready to teach me occlumency yet.”

Personally I suspected that he was afraid that having my mind entirely blank to him and Snape would be a disaster.

“I've hit up Fletcher, though,” I said. “And he says he can get me a book on it before the end of the semester. He's tripling the price that he's paying in Knocturn Alley, though.”

“That's highway robbery!” Hermione gasped.

“That's the black market for you,” I said. “He's risking his position by moving contraband, so he deserves a profit for it. The Twins have been buying things from him too.”

Some of the things they'd been buying had been for me. I suspected that Fletcher was reporting everything I bought to either Snape or Dumbledore himself, and so anything that seemed more dangerous I had to get through intermediaries.

That meant that I owed the twins favors.

They'd long since given up on the idea that their training me was a favor; we'd moved past that. They were developing a reputation as duelists in the school, and apparently that had been getting them some attention from the girls. I wasn't sure they entirely knew what to do about that, but they seemed to be enjoying it, so I wasn't going to argue.

Neville was passing Snape's class, and Hermione was learning how to be a version of me. All of my associates were benefiting from our arrangement, which was a good thing.

Even Ron was doing better at dueling. He hadn't moved up in the ranks yet, but he was reaching the top of his grade. I suspected he'd have been proud of himself if he hadn't kept comparing himself to the rest of us.

Hermione was possibly the brightest witch in her year, despite all appearances. Harry seemed to be naturally gifted in combat. The twins were two years older and gifted at causing chaos. Riggs was older than any of us.
Only Neville, Millie and Tracey were on Ron's level, and he barely seemed to notice them. He only saw us, the people he compared himself to.

Other than Ron, I was the only one who was suffering socially. People had been talking about Warrington's death; I suspected that it had taken some students a while to really process it. Many of them had taken to isolating me even more than they had before. It didn't feel like bullying; it was more like they were afraid to be around me.

It didn't bother me, really. I'd been alone for much of my life, even when people were all around me. Even before Emma had turned on me, I'd been a chatterbox, but I hadn't had many close friends.

Now I had a few friends and everyone else left me alone, and that didn't bother me much. It gave me more time to study and prepare instead of spending all of my time watching my back.

I hoped to get the book on occlumency before the end of term. It was almost certain that Dumbledore was going to put me with a Wizarding family. Not only would placing me with muggles be an almost certain death sentence, but he probably wouldn't trust muggles to handle me.

If I was staying with Wizards, then I most likely would be able to use magic. The system was designed that way nominally due to the secrecy rules, but the fact that it gave pureblood kids a leg up didn't hurt any.

Studying occlumency over the summer would let me teach it to the others next year. I had a sneaking suspicion that some of the Pureblood parents were going to be teaching their children Legilimency over the summer, and we'd need to counter that.

A child spy who was able to look into the minds of other students would know what other students' parents were telling them. My spying on people's letters was a less efficient version of that. Having several agents like that in the school would be invaluable.

I'd tried to get Fletcher to get me a book on Legilimency, but he'd told me that had been specifically forbidden by Snape. It was frustrating, but I planned on trying to get some training as soon as I could.

Sometimes I wondered if there was some sort of penalty for trying too much too fast, but I hadn't heard of anything. I suspected that most kids didn't have the emotional maturity to handle the higher level spells, and they had to be taught the basic theory of magic before they tried various higher difficulty spells.

Seeing that the others were gathering in the room, I spoke up.

"Today I want to talk about the basic strategies for entering a room," I said.

They all stared at me like I had grown a second head.

"Imagine that a Death Eater had been waiting in here, planning to kill all of you," I said. "Just walking in would have gotten you killed. There are ways to make that less likely. Can anyone think of any?"

They all frowned and they were silent for almost a minute.

"A mirror?" Hermione asked finally.

I smiled and nodded.
"And if there are a group of you, moving from hallway to hallway checking for enemies, there are ways to have one person watching to help keep everyone safe as you move forward. I'm going to show these to you today."

They'd questioned my tactical knowledge at first, but I'd managed to put them off until they'd finally learned to simply accept it.

"Let's get started," I said.

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"I can't believe they are putting you and Harry on the train," Hermione said.

The last month had been punctuated by increasingly vicious attacks on various Ministry officials, often in their own homes. The fact that most of these were known to be the most loyal and tenacious people in their departments hadn't been made public, but I'd learned about it from various stray comments made by Dumbledore and Snape.

Final exams had been easy for everyone. Even Ron was feeling confident, for all that he'd grumbled endlessly about having to study.

At least he'd kept up with his dueling. He'd finished as top of first year, and the rest of us had finished at the top of our respective years as well. Snape had insisted on keeping me with the fourth years, though.

"They're going to pull both of them off before the train stops, right?" Ron asked.

I was sitting in the compartment with Ron. Harry, Hermione and Neville, Millie and Tracey. Higgs and the twins were in another car, in part because there wouldn't have been room for them, and in part because the twins had their eye on a pretty pair of Ravenclaw girls. Higgs was sitting with the Slytherin Quidditch team.

I nodded.

Word had been spread that the Death Eaters had plans to kill me and Harry. The papers hadn't said anything about me at all, but they'd made a huge deal about Harry.

That had given Moody all the excuse he needed to triple the auror presence at King's crossing. Unfortunately, there was no way to find out how many of those aurors had been recruited to the other side. It was possible that this was going to end up as a bloodbath; if Voldemort had subverted two thirds of them and told them to kill the other third, this could get very ugly very quickly.

Moody had arranged for a gas explosion to seemingly happen in the station; with special charms on the exits designed to obliviate anyone who passed through them. Under the kind of heavy use they'd undoubtedly get they wouldn't last very long, but it would keep the obliviators from having to work themselves to death.

No one was yet sure whether Voldemort wanted to break the Statute of Secrecy and go to war with the muggles, or to simply rule them from the shadow. That would have seemed like a basic part of the platform to me, but it was possible that he was playing both groups off against each other.

"It still doesn't make any sense," Hermione said. "They've got people who are going to polyjuice into you... into all of us, so why have us get on the train at all?"

I suspected that the train renewed the Trace every time that we rode it, but I wasn't going to
mention that to Hermione. I could be wrong after all.

“Average polyjuice potions don't last long enough,” Harry said. “Or at least that's how Dumbledore explained it to me. He figures that there are kids on board who will be watching us, and telling the Death Eaters somehow.”

“Probably by mirror,” I said.

It wasn't like wizards were likely to be using cellular phones; I had a vague thought that they might exist in this time period, but that they were huge.

“It's an eight hour trip,” Hermione said after a moment. “I guess that makes sense. They'd want people to think that we're just in here, unguarded.”

“They'll apparate in once the train stops,” I said.

Apparently apparauling onto a moving vehicle was more disorienting than onto a stable platform. It wasn't impossible, but if they were going into combat shortly afterwards, they'd want to be at their best.

Disillusioning themselves on the train would have been the smartest thing, except that the train was packed with students; it would have been almost impossible not to be detected by someone simply bumping into them.

The whole thing made me uneasy.

I'd urged them to ambush the ambushers, but now that it was public knowledge that they were after Potter, they had to know that the aurors would be waiting. The entire thing might be a ruse to gut the aurors; if I was Voldemort, I'd have put a bomb in the station set to explode before the children arrived.

My followers would have been encouraged to show up late.

One bomb would destroy a lot of Wizarding Britain; hundreds of Wizarding parents, all of whom were in the opposing parties, and the aurors, gone in a moment.

Then I'd deny responsibility; I'd blame muggle terrorists. I'd pass new laws requiring that the orphaned children be taken in and educated by proper Wizarding families, and if I was actually against the muggleborn, well, they could disappear very easily.

There were a thousand ways this could all go wrong; the problem was that the ball was always in the attackers court. They had the element of surprise, even in a situation like this, because while we knew where they would be and when, we didn't know how they planned to attack.

Was this actually an assassination attempt on Harry?

Killing him would deal a blow to the morale of Wizarding Britain. People had built up a mythology about the Boy-Who-Lived. He'd become almost a talisman against Voldemort and his crew.

Those who'd gone to school with him knew different, but most adult Wizards worshipped him. It made Harry distinctly uncomfortable, but there was going to come a time when we needed that fame.
The Wizarding World was a sleeping giant. Most Wizards could barely defend themselves; they'd let the skills they'd learned in school atrophy, except whatever they used in their jobs.

However, I was convinced that in the same amount of time that it took to train a soldier to shoot a gun, I could train every adult wizard to become an army. It wouldn't matter how powerful Voldemort was if he faced an army of ten thousand enraged Wizards.

That was why I was worrying that he was going to go for a total kill scenario at the train station. This was the sort of operation where he ran the risk of wakening that giant. If people knew he was threatening their children, many would run away, but there were a lot who would fight. The last thing he needed was to empower his enemies, to light a fire of anger in them, or to make them brave because they were protective parents.

There was something I was missing.

The smart thing to do would be to kill Potter without hurting anyone else. That way they'd ruin the morale of the common people, but they'd claim that they had been merciful to the other children.

But killing Potter on the train station would inevitably have casualties. People would die, and most likely children would die. That ran the risk of starting the kind of war that he didn't want to start.

An uneasy feeling in my stomach, I closed my eyes and I expanded my senses outwards. It was the beginning of summer in Scotland, and the numbers of bugs had increased to the point that I had large swarms available to me.

I expanded my senses out as far as I could, looking in every direction.

It took me almost a minute; at this speed bugs kept entering and slipping out of my grasp almost before I could use their senses.

However, I tensed as I saw shadows from above. The insects had a natural fear response; usually something like that was a predator bug, but these were moving too quickly to be birds.

I'd been a fool, assuming that he'd attack the train station.

The train station was well protected and so was Hogwarts. Terrorists rarely attacked hard targets; they preferred to go after soft, easily attacked targets.

The Hogwarts Express was worse than defenseless; there were a certain number of people already on the train who would be happy in taking it over, especially if their parents told them to.

“They're going to attack the train,” I said suddenly.
“How many of us can you hide under your cloak?” I asked Harry.

Although the figures above were blurred, they were still casting shadows on the ground. Undoubtedly they thought they hadn't been detected.

“Three, maybe four in a pinch,” he said.

Looking around, I grimaced. There were too many of us here to protect that way.

“Ron,” I said. “Go up and stay with your brothers. They'll be focusing on muggleborns, so you'll probably be all right if you keep your head down and your mouth shut. Tell your brothers what's happening, but keep it quiet. We don't want to start a panic.”

He stared at me, his face white, but he nodded.

“They're in the second train car.”

We were at the back of the train. Moody had wanted that because it would make attacks from other students come from only one direction. I'd already planned on that anyway, of course.

He hesitated, glancing at Harry.

“I'm going to do everything I can to keep Harry alive,” I said. “But I can't do that if there are hostages all around me.”

He nodded, and he was gone a moment later.

Turning to Millie and Tracey, I said, “Go and stay with Flora and Hestia Carrow. They're fairly decent. If you are questioned, don't be afraid to call me a mudblood, or psychotic... anything to make them think that you are on their side. What you are going to tell them is that you hate me and that you were forced to be my roommates.... and only tell them that if you are asked. They aren't going to have a lot of time to do this, and that means they'll be in a hurry. I doubt they'll question you very hard.”

They nodded, and got up without questioning me.

“They're in the first car,” I said.

That left me with Harry, Hermione and Neville.

“They're going to be after the four of us. Me and Harry for obvious reasons, Hermione because it would hurt me to lose her, and Neville because his mother has taken the cure. We can't just go and hide among the crowds.”

We couldn't do it for the same reason Moody hadn't been able to keep disillusioned troops on board; the quarters were too cramped.

“We are going to have to get off the train,” I said.

There were six Death Eaters coming; presumably Voldemort had assumed that without a swarm of Acromantula to protect me, I'd be easy meat. Worse, because of my dueling performance, they weren't likely to underestimate me.
There were things I could do to kill them that I didn't dare to do; there were enough kids on the train that using explosions would kill some of them; that would set the entire Wizarding world against me.

The only option was to get on the train while seeming to be on the train.

Reaching into my fanny pack, I pulled out four packets of Darkness powder. I would have the bugs drop them in the back four train cars as I was leaving. Not only would that convince the Death Eaters that I was there, but it would focus them away from the cars in the front, where our friends were.

There was a knock at the door.

The trolley witch was at the door.

“Would anyone like something to eat?” she asked.

I stood up.

“Death Eaters are about to attack this train,” I said. “They are on brooms and are disillusioned. Could you please send a message to the aurors?”

She looked at me for a moment, and then her face tightened. Apparently she'd been informed of the upcoming attack, presumably for just such an attempt as this one.

She pulled out her wand, and murmured something.

Three silver cats appeared, and I felt a strange warmth just being in their presence. It reminded me a little of being around the unicorns. For just a moment I felt a surging warmth of hope, and then they were gone.

“We'll just have to see about slowing them down until help comes, won't we,” she said. She put her wand to her own throat.

“ALL STUDENTS ARE TO RETURN TO THEIR COMPARTMENTS,” she said. “AND PREPARE TO BE BOARDED.”

I'd never really looked at the trolley witch before; she'd always just been a part of the scenery. Now, though, there was something sinister about her expression.

“The train protects its own,” she said. “People forget that.”

A moment later she was gone.

I blinked. Somehow she'd gotten onto the roof of the train without my understanding how, and she stood there ignoring the wind. Her trolley was with her.

She looked upward, and then she pulled a pumpkin pasty from the trolley. She tossed it up in the air, and then there was a massive explosion.

I'd managed to get bugs onto the brooms of all six of the Death Eaters, and I could feel them dodging around the explosions.

The trolley witch began to throw more and more of the pasties, and they were getting closer and closer to the disguised Death Eaters.
Flashes of green light began to lash down toward the top of the train.

I could see the frightened faces of students at the window.

“We need to get out,” I said. “How many people can ride a broom?”

“At our size we might be able to get three on a broom,” Harry said. “But it would be slow. They'd catch up to us in no time.”

“Then we need to get two of their brooms,” I said. “They probably know that we're in the last car; I'm sure some of the seventh years have mirrors and would have told them. That means that we can't be here.”

“Doesn't Malfoy have one of those trunks that are expandible?” Neville asked. “I heard him bragging about it the other day. You can put people inside of there.”

“We can't hide in the luggage,” Potter said. “They'd be looking for something like that.”

“Higgs just taught us the shrinking charm, though,” I said. I'd heard that shrinking a human being was complicated and dangerous, but it might be possible that people in an expanded space weren't actually inside normal space at all. There had to be a reason why Moody couldn't see inside my fanny pack.

“You want us to get inside the trunk, and then shrink it,” Hermione said flatly.

I nodded.

“Would you rather face that?” I asked.

The trolley witch was incredibly fast. Somehow none of the green bolts managed to hit her. Likely it was because the spells themselves were slow, which meant that from a distance they were easy to anticipate and dodge. It was going to get harder for her the closer they got.

“Let's go, then,” Hermione said.

A moment later we were making our way up the train. Along the way, I dropped bits of darkness powder.

Five cars up, we reached Malfoy's compartment.

Opening the door, we saw a group of boys huddled up the window. Malfoy whirled as he saw us.

“Give us your trunk,” I said, in a voice that allowed for no argument. My wand was out and pointed at him, so that might have had something to do with his acceptance.

He pointed, and a moment later, we had the trunk down. Harry and Neville were pulling things out of the trunk, and then a moment later, Neville and Hermione were climbing into the trunk.

I closed my eyes and hoped that I wasn't about to crush one of my few friends in this world.

“Reducio,” I said.

Draco's face paled even more as he stared at the trunk, now small enough to slip inside my fanny pack. Before I could worry about the implications of putting an enlarged space inside of another enlarged space, I slipped it inside.
No matter how well this worked, there was only a limited amount of air inside that trunk. It was likely that we had less than thirty minutes before they started to suffocate.

We left before the boys had a chance to say anything.

“T'm the better flyer,” Harry said. “That means that you'll have to be the gunner.”

I nodded.

His being the better flyer wasn't in question; people were ready talking about how he'd likely make the team next year. He flew rings around everyone else, including me.

“Our weight is going to slow things down, though,” he said. “I hope you have a plan.”

“Yeah,” I said. “They're going to expect us to be huddled in the back. We aren't going to do that. We're going to head to the front of the train, and then we're going to attack them from behind. We only need to get a single broomstick, and then we need to keep them from knowing that we've left, for a while at least.”

“That's a lot,” he said.

“It can be done. Let's go.”

We made our way up through several more cars before I thought we were far enough.

The Death Eaters had landed on the roof of the train, presumably because trying to fire from a broom was too unstable to get a clear shot. They were still disillusioned, but I could see their shields dealing with the exploding pastries.

I had bugs on them, and on the roof of the train, it was loud. I was going to depend on that.

Opening the door as quietly as a could, I gestured for Potter to lift me up. He grimaced as I put my shoe on his shoulder, but a moment later I was on the roof of the train.

The one disadvantage to this was that I couldn't actually tell which direction they were looking. I had bugs in their clothes and on their wands, but I couldn't see their faces or their expressions.

It didn't matter.

Crouching low and moving as silently as I could, all I could hear was the whistling of the wind and the sounds of exploding pastries.

I scuttled forward, and I reached into my fanny pack, pulling out my best knife. I'd made several by now, and this was the pinnacle of my art.

The bugs on my opponent alerted me that he was already turning; presumably I'd made a noise that had alerted him. It was too late, though.

My knife lashed out, and I hit the subclavian artery in the front of the shoulder. This had the bonus of being his wand arm, which would make it harder for him to simply use the killing curse on me.

His disillusionment vanished, and now I could see the expressionless mask staring down at me. I shoved my knife into his armpit, then stabbed him in the side of the neck.

That did the trick; blood fountained everywhere, and he stumbled and fell, sliding off the side and falling off the train.
I grabbed his broom, and I could feel the Death Eaters behind me turning; they'd seen their compatriots body flying past them out of the die of their eye.

I dodged as a barrage of green light flew past me.

A moment later, I was back in the space between cars. If they were smart they'd keep some people up top while sending some others down below to trap us.

As we slipped back into the car, I said, “Hold onto the back of my shirt.”

Potter complied, and as I saw the door opening all the way at the other end of the car, I send an explosion that rocked the car for a moment.

I threw darkness powder, and as soon as I did, I pulled Potter down. Green light flashed above us dimly, where our heads had been.

I scrambled forward and I opened the door to the compartment to the right. It had four Slytherin fourth years, but a quick set of stunners made short work of them. In the dark they were helpless anyway. I used some quick spellwork to lift their bodies and I arranged them to look like they were sleeping.

Pointing my wand at the window, I used a shrinking charm on it, and with a groan, the air inside the chamber was suddenly buffeted by the wind from outside. The window itself was still inside the frame, although tiny now, and likely the wind would pull it out any time.

From the way the men inside the hallway were moving, I suspected that they'd lit a Hand of Glory. My use of the Peruvian Darkness Powder was well known, and they'd have brought the counter to that. With luck it wouldn't matter.

“Up,” I said, and the broom in my hand was suddenly levitating.

Harry crawled on in front of me.

“Wrap us up in your cloak,” I said. “After I enlarge it.”

A quick spell later, and the cloak was more like a tarp than a cloak. We both struggled with it, trying to cover not just ourselves, but the broom as well. We put the front of the cloak so that the wind would help to drape it over us. It would leave our backsides uncovered, but there wasn't a lot that we could do about that.

A moment later we were outside.

I enlarged the window, which appeared back in its frame.

“Go low,” I said into Harry's ear. “Otherwise they'll be able to see us from underneath.”

It wasn't really from underneath that they could see us, but from behind, but he got my meaning. We dipped own low, and from above, there was only a shadow from behind as the cloth whipped and fluttered madly behind us.

We dipped until we were only a few feet from the ground.

They were checking the compartments one by one, convinced that sooner or later they'd find one of us. The ones up top were still distracted by the trolley witch, who'd somehow managed to transform her hands into blades and was using those to deflect spells. Who the hell was she?”
“Let's get the hell out of here,” I said. “Away from the tracks. Hopefully they won't know where they lost us, which will cost them time, and make us harder to find.”

We stopped and floated in mid-air, I grabbed one side of the cloak to keep it from slipping away, and Harry grabbed the other. We let the train pass by us as we sat, invisible.

As we passed the compartments behind, I used my bugs to drop darkness powder in them one by one.

We only had thirty minutes before I had to pull Harry and Neville out, and we only had a single broom. I didn't know the geography of Scotland; not only was I an American, which was notorious for its lack of interest in the rest of the world, I had been educated at Winslow, which had a particularly bad educational system.

Harry was from Surrey apparently, and I really had no idea where that was either.

As we flew so low over a passing lake that I could feel the spray of water on my legs, Harry said, “This is a Nimbus 2000. I've never gotten to fly one before, but they're the fastest brooms on the market.”

Apparently Voldemort hadn't wanted to spare any expense when he'd decided to murder us.

“It'll go a hundred miles an hour with one person,” he said. “And the two of us probably weigh about the same as one adult.”

That was likely true.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“Don't you know?” he asked. “I thought you were the Seer.”

“There are limits,” I said irritably. “If I knew everything, I'd just murder the Death Eaters in their sleep.”

“That was pretty horrible, what you did back there,” he said quietly. “I never really believed the troll story until now. I thought it was just something that Draco made up.”

“It was him or us,” I said. “It's always been that way. Kill or be killed. You think I wanted to do that?”

We were silent for several long minutes. I was acutely aware of the fact that Hermione and Neville might be smothering inside Draco's box, but we had to get far enough away that the Death eaters couldn't find us.

With any luck, they'd waste ten to fifteen minutes searching for us on the train cars due to the darkness powder. That would put them ten to fifteen miles ahead of us, and given our broom's speed, it would make us as much as another twenty five miles away.

However, there were undoubtedly ways for them to track us.

“Find us a cave,” I said.

“Right,” he said.

We were above another mountain lake now.
We'd find a cave, I was sure. The only question was how long it would take them to think of writing a letter to us, and how long it would take the owl to reach us.

Would Dumbledore and company find us first, or would I have to murder a couple of more of them in a last stand?

If we survived this, I could only hope that my summer went better.
“Did you see what she did to Nigel?” Thomas asked. He was sweating despite the wind whipping into his face.

It felt like a nightmare.

An easy job, they'd been told. Fly down to the train; the kids they were supposed to kill had been deliberately placed in the last car. Slip in, kill them, slip out. It should have been as easy as taking gold from a bowtruckle. Given that bowtruckles had no interest in gold...

Done while disillusioned, no one should have even known they were there until the Potter kid and the Terror had been found dead.

They'd have left a message for all of Wizarding Britain. The Boy-Who-Lived was a talisman, a symbol of hope to the masses. Kill him, and people would learn that there was no hope. There was only compliance or death.

Even more so, the Hogwarts Express was considered sacred ground. Having the deaths occur there would shock people. It would remind them that their own children were not safe, and if Hogwarts, the safest place in Wizarding Britain couldn't protect their children, then no one was safe, even in their own homes.

Of course, the better Wizards might be able to protect their homes with Fidelius charms, but those were very difficult, and it was rare for Wizards to be skilled enough to cast them. Furthermore, even if they did protect their homes, there was only so long they could hide there. They'd have to come out sooner or later for food.

Copying food was well and good, but it didn't preserve the original forever. Food got old and rotten, and food preservation magic was still in its infancy.

Killing two first year students should have been a task for a single Death Eater. Instead, the Dark Lord had sent six. He'd sent others to distract the aurors at the train station too six of them should have been overkill.

Instead, the Trolley Witch had been waiting for them, and she was a nightmare. They'd managed to escape mostly unharmed, due to good shields and quick reflexes, but the Terror had lived up to her name by murdering Nigel while their backs were turned.

The Killing Curse was kinder. It killed without pain, instantly and mercifully. Thomas had never held with using the Cruciatius curse like some of his peers. No matter what the muggleborn had done, it was better to put them down mercifully than to torture them.

The world would be better without them, but no one had ever said that it was necessary to be cruel.

“Shut up,” Jurgen said. “They're Wizarding kids. They'll screw up and use magic sooner or later, and then we'll have them.”

They had agents in the Trace department; as soon as the owl was sent complaining about the use of magic, they'd finally be able to put this whole mess behind them.

Fortunately, the aurors couldn't apparate into places they didn't have a good mental image of, so wherever they ended up killing the kids it would take a while before the enemy reached them.
Unfortunately, that also meant they couldn't simply apperate to the terror and kill her for what she'd done to Nigel.

There had been so much blood. He'd slipped under the train as he fell, and he'd still been alive at the time.

The look in the Terror's eyes hadn't been human either. She'd stared at them as though she could see straight through their disillusionment, and there hadn't been the slightest bit of shock or horror at what she was doing. She'd killed a pureblood as easily as Thomas might have killed a bug. It hadn't bothered her at all.

It was almost as though she didn't realize that pureblood were the only actual humans.

“How in the hell did they get past us?” Gerald asked. “We had people watching. I went through that whole damn train, and we didn't see anything.”

“It doesn't matter. We'll get them, and then the Dark Lord will reward us, as well as Nigel's family,” Jurgen said. “And we'll make them pay.”

Thomas shivered. Jurgen was one of those who liked to play with his victims. His parents had come from Germany, and there were things he'd learned there that made Thomas afraid of him. It wasn't the killing; it was what came before that bothered Thomas.

Jurgen pulled out a mirror shard and he stared at it.

“The bird's been sent,” he said. “It should be passing by soon.”

Soon was a relative term when it came to owls. Some seemed to take their sweet time, while others seemed to appear at their location faster than should have been possible given their visible flight speed.

They spent the next thirty minutes hovering, stuck in their own thoughts. Thomas didn't dare say too much; free thought wasn't particularly valued in the Death Eaters, not unless you were a rich pureblood. Being a poorer relative meant that sometimes you had to bow and scrape.

Even though Jurgen wasn't a proper British Wizard, he'd proven himself to be cruel enough and good enough at what he did to be higher in the organization. He didn't have patience for fools.

None of the higher ups did. You never wanted to say anything that an enemy could bring up to the superiors. It was a cutthroat world, and the only benefit of joining the Death Eaters was that it meant being part of something bigger.

It meant a chance to change a world that had been going deeply, horribly wrong for most of his life.

Young wizards didn't have a chance in their world, unless they came from the best families. Older wizards had all the best jobs, and because they stayed hale and hearty until shortly before they died, that meant that they kept their jobs for decades... some for as long as a century or more.

Thomas had heard that muggles were so short lived that their whole careers were over in thirty or forty years. Young people would have a chance in a world like that, especially since muggles got sick and died all the time for practically no reason at all.

But in the world they lived in, it was hard to get a meaningful job, and even harder to advance, since the people above hardly ever left or died. There was a line of wizards waiting for every good job, and for every one that got it, a dozen would be forced to live like paupers, forced to scrabble
by only on their magic.

It was hard enough being a poor pureblood. Now that the muggleborn thought they deserved their share of the good jobs, it was even harder. Even worse, the muggleborn were willing to work for wages that no pureblood would ever dream of accepting.

It drove wages down for everyone.

Worse, they were given benefits, like a full education at Hogwarts that most of them didn't even pay for. They lived off the backs of hard working, honest citizens, and they didn't give back.

Finding out that he wasn't the only one who had felt this way had been a relief. With the Death Eaters, he'd found a community of people who had understood the danger just as he had.

He hadn't been willing to kill people, not at first, but eventually he'd understood why it was necessary.

The muggleborn were a plague on the world, one that wouldn't stop until they'd eaten every last scrap and destroyed everything that was good and wholesome.

If the muggleborn were allowed to continue, they'd have every Wizard living in a tiny muggle house that looked exactly the same as every other muggle house. Muggles were slaves to something called a Tellyvision that hypnotized them and made them fat.

They ate crappy food and lived horrible lives, and if the muggleborn were to get their way, Wizard lives would be no better. They'd destroy everything that made the Wizarding world great.

He'd heard that some of them even lived halfway in the muggle world. A Wizard could live like a king there, if he wasn't worried about the Statute of Secrecy.

Using magic to copy things and then sell them to muggles, then use that to live high. They took money from honest, hard working Wizard shops, and gave it to stinking muggles, who by all reports didn't even have souls.

They didn't care that there were six or seven billion muggles who would love to murder every wizard man woman and child the moment they realized they still existed.

Only creatures with souls could do magic, and even among those there was a hierarchy.

Muggleborns weren't good at magic, and that was because they only had a sliver of a soul. He'd even heard rumors that they'd gotten their powers by stealing them from the children of Wizards. There had been more and more squibs born of late, which was all the proof he needed that it was true.

He wasn't entirely sure that creatures like House Elves and Goblins had full souls; if they did, why not allow them to use wands? Clearly it was because they were dangerous and could not be trusted.

They were doing God's work in stopping the muggleborn, and killing the Potter brat was part of that. Killing the Terror was just an added bonus.

Keeping something like that in a school with proper pureblooded kids wasn't just an affront to common decency, it was a constant danger. She'd started out by beating multiple boys, and now she'd killed the kid of someone Thomas knew.
Avery had offered a reward for whoever killed her, one that was half as large as the one on Potter's head.

Potter was the only thing standing between the Dark Lord and the return of Wizarding Britain to its roots. It was a pity that he had to die. It wasn't even his fault; from all reports he was a fairly decent kid. He was a half blood, of course, which meant that he wasn't as good as a real person, but some half bloods weren't too bad.

It was the fault of Wizarding Britain, for making him a symbol and setting him against the Dark Lord. They should have known better.

The girl, though; her James wouldn't mind killing. She'd murdered Nigel, and there hadn't been a trace of a soul in her eyes, only hatred and anger.

"Here it is," Jurgen called out.

The owl flew past them, ignoring them as it shot directly toward its target. Thomas felt a rising sense of excitement as he fell into formation.

They ducked down, flying among the trees. The canopy here was open enough to fly easily, and there was no point in flying above the trees, because they'd never see where the owl went.

This was the thing that would finally get him out of the bottom ranks. He would be recognized and that meant good things for his future. Once the Dark Lord took over, he'd be the one strutting around with all of the power, not...

There was a sudden gout of blood from in front of him.

Jurgen's body was falling to the ground, his head falling separately. Blood was fountaining from his neck as his heart beat rapidly for a few moments before death.

Thomas pulled back on his broom, and he barely managed to avoid being decapitated himself. He stopped in mid air and he squinted as he saw the thing that had killed Jurgen. It looked like spiderweb, but it seemed to be made of razor sharp metal instead of being an actual web. In the dim light it had been almost invisible, but now that blood was dripping from it, he could see it clearly.

The others had pulled up before being struck by it, although for some of them it had been close.

Now they were down to four.

"What the hell?" Samuel screamed.

Thomas held his wand up and a moment later it shone as brightly as he could make it. For a moment he was blinded by his own light, and then he saw it. Now that they were looking, they could see that the entire forest around them was draped in spider webs. All of them glistened in the setting sun.

There was nothing back the way they had come, but it almost looked like the forest in front of them was covered in thin lines of web. There wasn't space to fly over it, not without going over the canopy, and below was filled with underbrush.

Was this some diabolical trap set by Moody? If that was the case, then they should apparate away
right now. They'd lost two of their members, and losing any more would be...

A blast came from among the dense underbrush, and a moment later Samuel exploded into a gout of blood and flesh and gore.

Thomas immediately brought up shields. It wouldn't do anything against the Killing Curse though, and everyone knew that the girl had enough hatred within her to cast that, so he dove down. The other two death eaters did the same, but one of them, the younger guy that he didn't know very well backed up and got tangled in wires that hadn't even been there a moment before.

The boy dropped his wand, and his body dropped, his legs kicking for a moment even as his neck snapped. His body shook convulsively, even as his face turned purple with a lack of oxygen.

Thomas lashed out with a cutting spell, and the boys body fell, but Thomas knew it was too late. The fall itself was likely to have killed him; they were thirty feet up, and this wasn't a Quidditch pitch with softening charms on the floor of the forest.

It was only Thomas and Malcolm now. As a bolt flew over his head, Thomas lashed out with the killing curse at the place in the underbrush where the bolt had come from, but there was too much underbrush. While the killing curse sliced through shields like butter, places like this weren't where it performed the best.

Instead he cast a blasting curse into the underbrush. With any luck he should be able to kill her, and then he'd pick the Potter brat off easily.

Returning without killing one of them, in a fight where four of his teammates had been killed, that would mean hours of being tortured. The Dark Lord was already convinced that he had a mole in his ranks, and coming back empty handed wouldn't do him any good.

Thomas apparated to the forest floor even as he heard screams from up above. Gerald's body came falling heavily, and as it fell beside him, Thomas realized that something had happened to Gerald's eyes. It looked like it had been stung by thousands of insects, causing his eyes to practically implode.

What kind of curse had she used to do that?

Gerald's tongue was swollen, and it looked like he had already been choking on it when he'd fallen from his broom.

The girl wasn't a girl at all. She was like the Trolley Witch; an inhuman abomination. She was the trap that Moody had set, and even if he was punished for hours, it would be better than what the girl had planned for him.

Discretion was the better part of valor.

The girl could be hiding anywhere in the forest, and the attack would come from wherever he least expected it.

Grabbing his broom, Thomas grimaced. He'd be tortured, but going back to tell the Dark Lord was the better of his two choices.

This wasn't where he was meant to die, not to some prepubescent mudblood.

Thomas gathered his will.
He felt a pricking sensation on his wand hand. Looking down, he saw a bee land on it. He tried to shake it off and gather his will again, but he felt another prick and then another.

Looking down, he saw a massive swarm rising from below. It was dark and writing, and it looked like the sea. It was only a moment until it enveloped him, and he felt a moment of panic.

He should have apparated, but instead he flew straight up toward the canopy above. If he could get over the trees then the terror wouldn't be able to see him, and he'd be able to apparate home.

Something snagged at him, and pulled him off his broom.

He was falling suddenly, and a moment later he was in the middle of the bugs. The world around him turned chaotic and dark, and he couldn't see or hear. He felt stinging on his eyes and hands, and bugs entered his mouth.

Suffocating, he didn't have the ability to focus, not enough to apparate, and especially without his wand.

Where had his wand gone, and where....

As he hit the ground, everything turned dark for a moment. He lost consciousness, but then he woke in incredible pain.

He had broken bones; he'd had them before from Quidditch, but never so many, and now he couldn't feel his waist.

There was a shadow above him. It took him a moment to realize that it was the girl. She was using a blasting spell on the bodies, one after the other. She was destroying them, but why? Everyone would know what she had done. There would be no hiding it.

There wouldn't be enough of any of them to reconstruct.

As she approached him, he realized that she wasn't a child at all. She was a demon.

There were bugs crawling all over her, including her face. As she stared down at him, they covered every part of her face except her eyes, which glittered in the dim light.

She hardly seemed to realize that he was alive at all. He tried to call out as she lifted her wand.

It didn't matter. Everything went dark.
“We didn't see anything,” Harry insisted. “Taylor made us hide in a cave while she went out to face them alone.”

What he wasn't saying was that I'd had them hiding under the expanded invisibility cloak, inside Draco's box turned on it's side. The inside had been large enough that they'd have cover, and they could blast away at anyone who found them.

It would have left them vulnerable to anyone who thought to just close the box, but if the Death eaters had gotten that far, I doubted that they would have had much of a chance of survival anyway.

“You're telling me that an eleven year old girl went out to face six Death Eaters by herself?” the auror asked him skeptically. I assumed that he'd been vetted by Moody himself, since he was allowed in the room alone with Harry.

All of us had been separated and were being questioned one after the other by the aurors.

“I don't know what happened,” Harry said. “There were some screams, and the sounds of explosions, and then nothing. It didn't last very long.”

I'd barely had time to transfigure the metal webs back into ordinary spiderwebs and have the spiders gather them up by the time the aurors had arrived.

“What did she do then?”

“Came back,” he said. “Told us the Death Eaters had vanished.”

“You didn't see the blood out in the forest?” the auror asked.

“She wouldn't let us out of the cave,” Harry admitted. “Not until she was sure the people coming were on our side.”

I'd been a little sloppy when I'd been doing cleanup, and I'd missed a man's decapitated head.

A fist slammed on the desk in front of me.

“What happened to the Death Eaters?” Moody was asking me. He stared at me with his artificial eye. It was probably supposed to intimidate me, but I'd known people in my old life who'd looked almost as bad as he did.

I shrugged.

“They're gone, and they aren't coming back. Isn't that good enough?”

We'd been having this discussion for what seemed like hours, and I could see that Hermione and Neville in the other rooms were flagging. Harry seemed to be filled with energy, though. It couldn't be adrenaline; I wasn't sure what was keeping him so chipper.

Maybe it was just because every minute that he was with the aurors was a minute he didn't have to go home.

“There's no way an eleven year old girl kills six Death Eaters on her own, without help,” he said.
“I never admitted to killing anyone,” I said coolly. We'd been over this multiple times. It was an old law enforcement technique; interrogate someone long enough, and eventually they'd break, and admit to anything just to get out of the room. “Except for one Death Eater on top of the train.”

That one had been witnessed by the Trolley Witch and Harry; lying about it would get me nowhere.

“I've seen Potter's pensieve memories of that,” he said. “You knew just where to cut him, didn't you?”

“Like I said, I came from a bad neighborhood.”

“Which neighborhood was that again?” Moody asked suddenly. This was something he hadn't asked before, and I forced the alarm it roused in me into my bugs.

“I didn't say,” I said. “It was a little place near Boston. You wouldn't have heard of it.”

It was safe enough to name the region; a skilled linguist could have narrowed it down that much just by listening to me speak. It wasn't as thought I could pretend to be from Texas, not at this late date.

“Try me,” he said. “I've been a few places.”

“If you've seen Potter's memories, why are you still holding us?” I asked, changing the subject. I couldn't afford for him to take this line of inquiry.

“I haven't seen yours,” he responded, challengingly.

“And you won't,” I said. At his look, I explained. “Let's say for the sake of argument that an eleven year old did defeat five Death eaters. There's no way even a full grown adult wizard could do something like that, not unless he's had the kind of training and experience that someone like yourself or Dumbledore has.”

He nodded slowly, staring at me. Could he do legilimency through his artificial eye.

“So she'd have to use every dirty trick she could think of, and then some,” I said. “Your department is filled with people loyal to the current dark lord. Once they got hold of that, it would be easier for them to kill the girl the next time.”

“So you want to keep your tricks a secret,” he said. “Even how you managed somehow to decapitate a man when there wasn't a spell like that in your wand?”

I'd used Death Eater wands for some of the later spells I'd cast. I'd cast the transmutation spells on the webs with my second wand. I'd realized that I'd never be able to completely clean the forest floor in the time I had, and so I had used my primary wand for a few spells.

“You can do a lot with the right equipment,” I said, shrugging.

Hopefully he'd think I was talking about magical tools. Given that he was a wizard, he'd probably think I'd used some sort of magical sword or something.

He was silent for a moment.

“You've killed more people than half the prisoners in Azkaban,” Moody said. “And there are people who are calling for your head.”
“For protecting Harry and the others?” I asked. “If I'd been alone, I'd have just ridden my broom into muggle Britain and vanished until next year.”

“They'd have sent owls to you until they finally got you,” he said. “If it turns out you can kill five Death Eaters, then next time he'll send ten.”

“Not until he figures out what I did,” I said. “He can't risk something like that happening again. It's going to hurt his reputation as it is, and his morale. If he keeps sending people into the blender, eventually people are going to start deserting.”

“Is that what you see yourself as?” he asked. He shook his head. He gestured at himself. “You won't be lucky forever. Nobody gets through things like this unscathed.”

His entire body was a mass of scars, presumably from curses that couldn't be cured by Wizarding science. I wondered if plastic surgery might have helped; not that he seemed like the kind who would try something like that. His appearance made him more intimidating after all, and that probably made him a better interrogator.

He probably could have gotten a much better prosthetic leg though, even way back here in the early nineties. Meshing Wizarding Healing with muggle science would probably create some amazing results. It might even be possible to make a lifelike prosthetic that actually had feelings through magic, much like some of the best Tinkertech I'd seen.

“There are people who want you expelled for unauthorized use of magic,” Moody said. “I'm sure you can guess who they are.”

“Could I have a list?” I asked sweetly.

“It would not help your case for members of the Wizengamot to start ending up disappearing,” Moody said. “As it is, Potter is going home, so are the others. You are going to be incarcerated until it can be decided what to do with you.”

“Killed you mean,” I said flatly.

I'd viewed as much of the Ministry as I could on our way here. I suspected that I could find my way out, although I wasn't sure what defenses I'd have to face. I cursed myself for not learning the disillusionment spell sooner. It had seemed useless when the human revealing spell was so easy.

However, if no one was looking for you they wouldn't bother with the spell.

Moody had taken my wand and my fanny pack this time. He wasn't taking any chances.

He was carrying a wand, though. I eyed his wand and I measured the distance between us. The desk would be an impediment, which was probably why it was here instead of a formless room as was usual.

I could use the desk as cover, though.

There were bugs in the vents; I wasn't sure if I would be able to get enough to him to work as a distraction long enough for me to get his wand though. He was reputed to be one of the best aurors, and while I hadn't seen him fight, I suspected I'd have a hard time getting the drop on him.

“You won't be killed,” Moody said. “It'll be my people watching you.”

I snorted.
“The Death Eaters are going to want vengeance on me. Leave me with no wand, and tied up in a room whose location they know, and I'll be dead by morning.”

“We'll put you in a room under the Fidelius charm,” he said. “Only I and Dumbledore will know its location.”

“And if both of you die, then I'll starve to death?” I asked.

“Suspicious little thing aren't you?” he asked.

“You've got the Ministry to watch your back,” I said. “I have no one. Even the Wizards who consider themselves on the side of muggleborns tend to look down on us.”

“Crying racism?” he asked. “I'd have thought better of you.”

“Says the person who's not a muggleborn,” I said. “This society is sick and reforms are needed.”

“That's what every dark lord always says,” he said.

“Why do you think there's so many of them?” I asked. “People are unhappy, and when that happens, someone always rises up claiming to give them what they want.”

Before I could say anything, Moody lifted his wand.

I woke up in a cell somewhere. I could hear water dripping, and yet it was dark. Presumably that was to demoralize me.

I still had my bugs, though, and many of them didn't need lights to get around. I could use their senses to get a measure of the room I was in. There was a toilet, and a sink, a bed and that was about it other than a single door. There were no windows, and while there were vents, there was nothing remotely small enough for me to get into even at my current size.

There were bugs outside, but while I could control them, it was as though when they got within a certain radius of the room they forgot where they were. That was going to make it difficult to use them to do much.

The best I could do was have them look for a key and possibly pass it as close to the door as possible.

I spent the next three days looking not just for a key, but for anything I could use as a key. I explored the Ministry with my powers; there were parts of it that were outside of my range, but not much, and I learned more than I would have ever thought.

They had rooms filled with magical devices, and I spied on Unspeakables doing secretive research into things the government didn't want the Wizarding public to know. There were secrets here; not many of them were spoken out loud, but some of them were, and I began making mental notes.

Blackmail didn't bother me; compared to what I'd done in the past blackmail was the kinder option. It was like the difference between assassinating a leader and going to war. One way would kill a single man, the other would kill millions.

Of course, sometimes killing that single man wouldn't change anything, and might even inflame the hearts of the masses into war, so it wasn't as simple a choice as it seemed.

Still I listened in to conversations, and I had my bugs write down names, people I thought were
Death Eaters, who I thought were controlled, and who I thought were simply sympathizers. It was possible that I wasn't right; only in a couple of places did I hear actual damning speech. It still gave me something to investigate, assuming that I was released.

The arguments in the Wizengamot raged fiercely. There were people who believed that not only should I be expelled, but that I should spend my life in Azkaban. Many of them blamed me for the death in the duel.

Others wanted me Kissed. I wasn't going to put up with that, if I had to call every insect in the place to rain hell and havoc down on the entire Ministry.

I had my supporters too. There were people saying that I should be awarded the Order of Merlin for saving the Boy Who LIved, saying that I was a hero.

The lines were closer than I would have liked.

Finally the decision was made. I was to be released, but no mention of my role in the killings was to be made to the press. The attack on the train was to be blamed on werewolf terrorists, and the official story would be that Harry Potter had been carried away by his protective detail.

The Ministry would look good, and I would be forced into anonymity. The consensus was that I was becoming too famous, and that giving me more attention was a terrible thing.

However, Travers was going to lose his position for not controlling me, and Dumbledore was going to be censured. It didn't seem to be anything that would have any binding power, though.

By the time the door finally opened, it had been four days, and my legs felt weak; I'd been spending so much time in my swarm that I'd hardly moved the entire time.

Dumbledore and Moody were on the other side of the door.

“Give me my wand and my fan...er...bum bag,” I said.

“You don't want to know how the trial went?” Moody asked.

“I know how it went,” I said. “The only question is what happens to me now?”

Dumbledore shook his head. “I had a perfectly acceptable family lined up for you. They had children, and there was a possibility that you might be able to enjoy a normal life. After what has happened, they were understandably reluctant to accept you.”

“Because I protected Harry Potter?”

“Because you are an unrepentant mass murderer,” Moody growled out. “If I had children, I wouldn't want them within a continent of you.

“So what are you going to have me do?” I asked. “Intern at Azkaban or Gringotts?”

If I could do to either of those places what I'd done at the Ministry, I'd be even farther ahead of the game.

“No,” Dumbledore said. “I had to call for help from someone who is otherwise unsuitable.”

“Who?” I asked.

“Remus Lupin,” he said.
“Oh...it's because he's a werewolf, right?” I asked. I'd seen his name on a list in Werewolf Support Services, which was a division of the Being Division of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures.

“How did you know that?” Moody asked. He stepped toward me angrilly.

“His name is a little on the nose, don't you think?” I asked. At Moody's look of confusion, I said, “Remus was one of the brothers, Romulus and Remus who fought over the control of Rome. They were raised by wolves. Lupin literally means wolf. Is his name a pseudonym?”

It was like a Cape name, intended to broadcast to the world his true nature. Was calling yourself Remus Lupin any different than me calling myself Skitter, or Weaver?

“I assure you that Remus Lupin is his birth name,” Dumbledore said.

I stared at them both. His name wasn't a pseudonym?

“So is werewolfism hereditary?” I asked, confused.

“No. He was bitten.”

“ Weird.” I said.

Of course, it was strange that we had a Professor Sprout teaching herbology, but I'd just assumed that was a pseudonym too. Maybe her family had been farmers or something.

Maybe her name had inspired her to go into herbology.

Or maybe no one would have taken a Professor Sprout seriously if she was trying to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts.

“It does not bother you that he is a werewolf?” Dumbledore asked carefully.

“If I understand right, that means he's only got a problem a few nights a month, right?” I asked. “My bigger concern is whether or not he's working for the Death Eaters.”

“You don't know?” Moody asked.

“My abilities can be spotty sometimes,” I said. “Which means I have to stay on my toes.”

“I assure you that he is not,” Dumbledore said. “I have used every means at my disposal to determine that he will be safe for you to stay with.”

“All right,” I said. “But I still want my wand.”

Moody scowled and tossed my wand and fanny pack onto the floor in front of me. Was he afraid of my taking it directly from his hands? It wasn't like I ever intentionally hurt my allies, at least not if it wasn't absolutely necessary.

I crouched down, keeping an eye on both of them. Grabbing my fanny pack, I flipped through it. I had a few remaining pieces of Peruvian Darkness Powder, but my knives were gone.

I'd slipped my extra wand down the back of Hermione's shirt before the aurors had stormed into the cave. Fortunately, Moody hadn't seen her; he'd been focused on me.

“Where are my knives?” I asked.
“They have been confiscated for the good of Greater Britain,” Moody said. “As evidence. You aren't getting them back.”

I scowled.

“Fine. Take me to see this Wolfie McWolf-face, or whatever his name is.”

If the man was any kind of Wizard, I might be able to wrangle some training out of him over the summer.

If he was enemy, I'd have to be on my guard.

“He was a friend of Harry's father,” Dumbledore said quietly. “And I would take it as a personal favor if you do not stab him.”

“I'll try,” I said.

If my bugs had had fingers, they would have been crossed behind their backs.
Remus Lupin looked sick.

He was a tall and lanky man, but his face was pale and although he was young, his skin had premature wrinkles. His brown hair already had slight traces of gray. His robes were shabby and worn. He looked exhausted.

If he was a classmate of Harry's parents, then he shouldn't look this old.

If I was an actual eleven year old, then I wouldn't have noticed, likely, but I wasn't. This was not a healthy man.

Dumbledore was standing beside him, and the look he was giving him indicated that maybe there was more to this man than initial appearances would indicate.

“Miss Hebert,” he said.

I nodded to him. My wand was in my hand inside my robes.

While I was sure Dumbledore thought this man was safe, there was nothing in this world we lived in that could be certain, not when every Wizard could be a mind controller or shapechanger.

The bugs didn't smell polyjuice on him, but there was a sick, acrid scent to him, something like a dog that was ill. If that was the smell a werewolf had, it'd be useful to know. It was possible that given his general look that he was sick with something else.

“Mr. Lupin,” I said, nodding.

“I must admit that I have no idea how to raise a child,” he said.

“I barely remember how to be one,” I said. “Treat me like an adult, and I'll return the favor.

He frowned. “I fear that's not what Dumbledore here wanted for you. He fears that your circumstances are doing you mental harm.”

Making me a sociopath, did he mean? He might be right.

Dumbledore wisely remained silent. He'd made his position clear during those times I'd spoken to him. He'd wanted me placed with a normal family where I could socialize with normal people.

“I've had to be on guard for the past few months, surrounded by enemies,” I said. “That can be a little wearing.”

I hadn't really been able to enjoy myself much, not really. There had been places and times where I'd found small pieces of joy, but they'd been few and far between.

“Perhaps we'll be able to find a place for you that is more to your liking,” he said.

I nodded.

Anything would be better than being constantly on my guard. Unfortunately, I couldn't really trust this man. At best, he was a spy for Dumbledore, there to find out as much about me as he could and report back to his master.
At worst, he was working for Voldemort, possibly even against his will.

Yet despite knowing that, I couldn't help but instinctively like him. He reminded me a little of my father. My father had been a man downtrodden by life, one who'd fought the system and lost. He'd done everything he could to make his city better, and nothing he'd ever done had mattered.

This man had that same slump in his shoulders. It was a combination of a lifetime of defeats and an indomitable will that despite everything he was going to keep fighting.

“The hardest part will be getting out of here,” Lupin said. “There will be people watching for us, and there are anti-apparition wards up throughout most of the Ministry.”

“Have Dumbledore accompany us,” I said. “Is there a way to track where someone has apparated to?”

“No,” he said. “Not unless you grab onto them as they go.”

“So it's not a problem,” I said. “Apparate us somewhere random, and then do it again several times until we get to where we are going.”

“As you can see, there is nothing wrong with Miss Hebert's mind,” Dumbledore said.

“Your trunk,” he said.

I pulled out my wand, pointed it, and I shrunk it. I made to put it in my fanny pack.

“Your trunk isn't expanded on the inside, is it?” Lupin asked.

I shook my head.

“Good.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Putting an expanded space inside another expanded space can sometimes be unstable. Sometimes the things inside get crushed into a fine paste. There are Wizards who have tried living in expanded trunks, only to end up crushed to death when the spells failed.”

I winced.

I'd been luck with Hermione and Neville. I'd have to make sure that I was never in that kind of a situation again.

“There are some spells I'd like to learn over the summer,” I said. “Things that will help me protect Harry and myself better.”

Disillusionment was the first spell I wanted to learn. It wasn't perfect, but there had been times when I would have been able to slip away without fighting if I'd had it. If I could cast it on other people, it might be even more useful.

Lupin glanced at Dumbledore. Undoubtedly the man had suggested that he limit what he taught me over the summer.

“We'll discuss it later,” he said.

I'd have an entire summer to get his trust, and with luck I might be able to wheedle some training
out of him.

“Let's go,' Dumbledore said.

I nodded, and I stood between the two of them as we stepped out into the greater Ministry.

I'd seen all of it before, through my bugs, but it was more impressive with my own eyes. My vision through bugs was often looking down on the scene from above. In my current form I wasn't very tall. It was likely that I would never be as tall as my original body.

There was a fountain in the main hall. It had a noble looking Wizard, with his wand pointed up in the air. Beside him was a beautiful witch. Surrounding him, and lower down were statues of a goblin, a centaur, and a house elf. The non-humans were looking adoringly up at the Wizard and the Witch.

The message given by the fountain was clear to everyone who entered the Ministry. Wizards and Witches were the pinnacle of creation, and all other creatures were lesser. The fact that they hadn't even bothered to have a muggle made me wonder. Was it because a muggle would be indistinguishable from the Wizard, or was it because muggles weren't considered good enough to even adore Wizards from afar?

Except for certain Christian groups who had fundamental issues with the concept of magic, I suspected that most muggles these days would react to Wizards the same way people in my world had reacted to Capes. They'd have feared them, accepted them and idolized them in equal measures.

I doubted that even those Christian groups that didn't approve would try to bring back the Inquisition. The world had moved past that. More likely they'd have simply been worried about the state of the souls of Wizardkind and tried to get them to voluntarily stop using magic. They might even get some converts.

There would always be the radical, lunatic fringe, of course. However, that was true of any group.

The Statue of Secrecy might be entirely unnecessary. When it had been instituted, ordinary people had been superstitious and vindictive. In the minds of the Wizards, muggles were still that way, and in their imagination the response would be the same as it had been in the sixteen hundreds, except with better weapons.

But I'd lived in a world where people had powers, and they'd been accepted. Part of that had been the Endbringers, and through the continuous public relations efforts of the Protectorate. But that just meant that integration would have to be handled carefully.

It would require some sacrifices on the part of the Wizards. They were essentially self governing now, and the people in their government would essentially lose their jobs. That was the reason that the Statute would continue to be enforced even if the people in power knew that it would be safe.

People in power never wanted to give it up.

“Hold on tightly,” Lupin said.

I grabbed his left arm, and a moment later it felt as though we were being pulled through a tube.

I blinked as I realized that we were in a small cottage. It wasn't very well kept up, and the whole thing looked just as shabby as his robes. The man wasn't rich, it was clear.
I'd heard about the limited employment opportunities offered to werewolves. It didn't make sense to me; unless you had a night job, it wouldn't even interfere with work, so why bother?

“We aren't staying,” he said. “I'm going to grab my things and we'll be leaving. There should be a team of aurors arriving in...”

There were several pops as people appeared all around me. Lupin had his hand on my wand arm, and he tightened it.

“They'll be coming,” he told one of the aurors. “So you'd better be ready.”

The man nodded grimly.

“People know where I live,” Lupin said. “Which was the entire point of parading me and you through the halls of the Ministry. They'll be coming to kill you, and we're going to leave a little surprise for them.”

It took him only a couple of minutes to grab his bags. I could hear popping sounds coming from outside.

“That's our cur to leave,” Lupin said. He grabbed my arm, and the world compressed all around us. It felt like something was wrong; the squeezing sensation lasted much longer than it normally did, and the pressure grew until it was hard to breathe or even think.

We emerged onto a street by the docks.

“They were putting up an anti-apparition jink,” Lupin said. His face was pale. “They responded a lot more quickly than I thought they would.”

Given that I'd killed between six to twelve of their men, the only surprising thing was that they hadn't responded even faster.

“'It'll illegal to apparate to another country,” Lupin said quietly. “And countries have ways of watching for that. We can't be sure that You-Know-Who doesn't have agents in France, so we'll have to be careful.”

“I'm going to disillusion us both,” Lupin said. “And we're going to sneak aboard a muggle ferry.”

He pointed his wand at me, and tapped me on the head. It felt as though he'd cracked an egg on my skull, and I felt a cold sensation surrounding me. Looking down, I could see that my clothes and skin were taking on the exact color and texture of the surrounding environment.

I'd seen Tinkertech that could do things like this, and there were rumors that the US military had been trying to reverse engineer tinkertech to do exactly this, using cameras.

Lupin whirled his wand around himself and he disappeared as well.

I could still sense him through my bugs; I could hear and smell him perfectly well. He was effectively invisible, though.

“Which ferry are we going to hitch a ride on?” I asked.

The port that was around the corner was filled with a variety of ships. Taking the ferry made sense because it would have been harder to hide on one of the smaller ships.

“The one with all the cars on it,” he said. “You know what cars are, right?”
“I’m a muggleborn,” I said dryly. “I wasn't raised in a cave in Africa. What are the odds that they’ve got someone waiting for us?”

“There are sixty three ferry crossings a day across ten routes,” he said. “There's a chance that he'll have someone waiting, but...”

“We'll deal with it when we can,” I said.

I found myself wishing that my foe-glass was smaller; I'd have liked a look at it about now, but it was packed away and shrunk inside my luggage. I'd tried using my bugs to look at it before, but it typically only showed the bugs nearest enemy, which were typically spiders or one of the cats that roamed Hogwarts.

We walked down the slope toward the docks.

“I don't know much about you,” Lupin said quietly. “You're an American?”

“Born and raised,” I said.

In one sense I was telling the truth, even if I was in the body of a British girl.

“You've killed,” he said. “That doesn't bother you?”

“I like living,” I said. “I like for my friends to stay alive. If people insist on trying to kill us, I've got a right to defend myself. I don't like having to do it... I'd rather that people just left me alone. But from the moment that damn hat put me in Slytherin, this was all inevitable.”

In my career as a warlord, it had been a long time before I'd killed anyone. It had gotten easier over time, but it wasn't supposed to be easy.

“I'm good at pushing things off,” I admitted. “At doing what needs to be done, and worrying about it later.”


“Which may be why he's so passive in all of this,” I said. “He's got enough power to take on half the Death Eaters at once, and if he did, we wouldn't be in the mess we are in. Even politically he's got a lot of power that he's not using.”

“It's complicated,” Lupin said. “His position isn't as secure as you might think, and if we lose some of the swing votes in the Wizengamot, the government may fall to the Death Eaters without a single spell needing to be cast in anger.”

“So he lets them keep imperiusing the members until the whole government is a puppet of the opposition?’ I asked.

I actually liked Dumbledore, somewhat. That didn't blind me to his faults.

Reaching the Ferry, which was backed up against the pier, we moved cautiously.

“Be careful,” Lupin said. “If they do have someone waiting, they'll be watching for us.”

We walked beside a truck as it was being loaded onto the ship, moving carefully around the people who were waving the truck into place.
It took forty five minutes for all of the trucks and cars to be loaded into place. According to Lupin, we were looking forward to a three hour trip across the water, and then we'd have to dodge Wizards in France who'd be watching for us.

I'd have preferred to have gone through the chunnel, but apparently in this time period it wasn't finished yet.

The last of the cars was finally settled into place, and the ferry began to move. I felt myself relax a little.

There were a lot of people on the ferry, but I'd been watching all of them carefully. Most of them seemed like ordinary muggle tourists. None of them had the distinct oddness of dress that most purebloods affected, pretending that they knew nothing about muggle fashion.

Of course, if they were really trying to catch us undercover, they'd be more careful that that.

I closed my eyes and focused.

What would be different and distinctive about Wizards, something that I could use to differentiate them from the muggles?

No one seemed to be paying any sort of undue attention to their surroundings.

If Voldemort had sent a team, he'd almost certainly have sent more than one person; after all, I'd killed five of his people by myself.

The fact that he'd need to have a team of at least ten meant that he probably didn't have enough people to cover all the ferrys, much less the airplanes, private boats and other ways of getting across the channel. Still, I couldn't help but feel paranoid.

I caught a glance between two rough looking men, men who didn't look like they should have known each other.

“They're here,” I murmured to Lupin.

“Who?” he asked.

“The man in the wool overcoat and the other one in the leather jacket,” I said. “There are likely others that I haven't spotted yet.”

I felt something wash over me.

“They've spotted us,” Lupin said. He grabbed my arm, but nothing happened.

“It's an anti-apparition jinx,” he said.

People that I wouldn't have thought would be working for Voldemort started making their way in our direction. There was a woman with a stroller; now that I looked more closely, what she had in the stroller wasn't a baby at all, but was something twisted and hideous.

A heavyset man with a reddened face was coming too.

“You should get under the truck now,” Lupin said calmly.
I glanced at the empty space where I knew he was, and then I didn't argue. I was at a disadvantage here on the water; there were bugs, but not so many terrestrial bugs as I would have liked.

The human revealing spell was good at revealing intruders, but it wasn't specific enough to reveal how many people people were hiding or even exact locations. It was possible to work your way through...

The woman with the baby carriage turned, pulling out her wand and pointed it at the man in the coat. Green light flashed out, but the man in the coat managed to dodge, ducking behind a car while returning fire.

Suddenly light was flashing everywhere as people began launching spell after spell at each other.

They'd used me as bait. I wasn't sure whether I should be angry or admiring of them. They'd had people waiting just in case the Death Eaters came running, or maybe they deliberately slipped the information to someone they knew was compromised.

It wouldn't have surprised me if they'd used the vote against me as a sort of test to see who had been taken over; it would have been easy enough to compare someone's previous voting record to their current one and get an idea of whether something had changed.

Master Stranger techniques relied on having a baseline as well.

The battle seemed to go on forever, and there wasn't a lot that I could do. From my position under the truck I didn't have an angle on any of the Death Eaters, and I wasn't entirely sure who was on our side anyway. The last thing I needed to do was attack and kill an auror and end up in Azkaban for a real crime.

The muggles on board were screaming and huddling, and all I could think was that the obliviators would be working overtime with this.

The fight took almost five minutes, and the end result seemed to be seven stunned and captured Death Eaters and three dead Aurors.

People were already popping in to obliviate the muggles and to clean up any superficial damage that had been done by the battle. By the time we reached France no one would know that anything had happened.

As I slipped out from under the truck, Lupin dispelled the disillusionment.

"From all reports, I thought you'd insist on participating in the battle," he said.

"I'm not a Gryffindor," I said irritably. "I don't kill people just for the glory."

"This lot will give up more information," he said. "And maybe things will be calmer by the time we return."

I nodded.

"Say, do you think I could get a beret in France," I asked. "My friend Hermione admired the one I wear some time, and wanted one like it."

"We're meeting up with her family," he said. "Dumbledore thought it important that you interact with other children outside of school, and he felt that as your friend, Miss Granger needed a little more protection than most muggleborn students, so we're killing two birds with one spell, so to
speak.”
Nice

“We've heard so much about you,” Mrs. Granger gushed.

Looking at Hermione, I could see a guilty look on her face. Her parents wouldn't be greeting me with such enthusiasm if they'd known the whole story. Most parents tended to give the side eye to a kid who was known to beat up other children; I'd spent the last school year murdering adults, most of whom were publicly known.

“It's nice to meet you,” I said solemnly.

The Grangers had picked us up in a rented nine seat minibus. I'd slipped into the third row along with Hermione, and her parents were sitting in the front, with Lupin in the middle set of seats.

Mrs. Granger was twisted around in her seat. She stared curiously at Lupin. “And this is your...?”

“Bodyguard,” I said. “And yours. There's been troubles, and they wanted to keep us safe.”

Her face tightened. “Mr. Dumbledore told us a little about that. It's part of the reason we're taking the whole summer.”

She never should have let him in the car without knowing exactly who he was. Even Hermione seeming to recognize me wasn't enough, not in a world where anyone could be polyjuiced as anyone else. We'd have to work with them on operational security.

"I've got a partner in my business,” Mr. Granger said. “Other than my wife. Summers tend to be slower for us anyway, since so many people are on holiday.”

Both the Grangers were dentists, apparently. Although they were making light of the financial hit they would take, I could see from the look on Hermione's face that she knew as well as I did that it would be a strain.

Of course, they weren't having to feed her for most of the year, so it wasn't as bad as it might have seemed at first, and the Wizarding World was taking care of her health care. Was health care as expensive in muggle Britain as in America? I wasn't sure.

“So what are we planning?” I asked.

“We'll be traveling all over the country,” Mr. Granger said.

“We'll be going to the French version of Diagon Alley,” Hermione said excitedly. “Can you imagine all the books?”

“Won't they be in French?” I asked.

“I speak French,” she said, surprised. “Don't you?”

“I'm an American,” I said irritably. “We barely speak English, much less other languages.”

There was a strange sense of triumph on her face as she stared at me. Was that a hint of a smirk? I couldn't help but wonder uncharitably what she would think if she knew that I could speak snake?

I still wasn't very good at it, even after several months of practice, but at least I could make myself understood, if barely.
“Well, I'm sure that they will have a lot of joke products that aren't sold at home,” Hermione said.

“You like joke products.”

“I've got some friends who do,” I said. “And if you're clever you can repurpose things in useful ways.”

“That won't be until the end of our trip,” Mrs. Granger said. “We went to Paris last year, and Mr. Lupin says it's best if we avoid the obvious places.”

Neither of Hermione's parents showed any indication that they knew what I'd meant, which told me that Hermione definitely hadn't told them anything important about me. It was confusing; the fact that they were taking a months long vacation indicated that they knew about the danger they were in, but apparently Hermione hadn't given them any context.

Was she afraid they'd pull her out of school?

That would actually put her in more danger, unless they decided to relocate countries. I wasn't sure their medical licenses would transfer, either.

“Let's go, then,” Lupin said. He was watching all around with a wary look on his face. Just because we were in France didn't mean that we were entirely safe.

If I'd been Voldemort, I'd have hired a muggle private Investigator. Of course, it wouldn't be as easy now to track us as it would have been in my time. In my time, it would have been a matter of a little work on the Internet by someone who knew what they were doing to track the Granger's credit card receipts, their hotels, and everything else.

With no Internet, people tracking us would have to work a little harder.

“You didn't tell anyone where you were planning to go,” I asked Mr. Granger.

He looked down at me, startled, then shook his head. “My partner was upset that I wasn't leaving forwarding information, but Mr. Dumbledore was insistent. He seemed to think that wizards could easily control our friends and family into telling them where we'd gone.”

“I told several people that we were going to Poland,” Mrs. Granger said. “I always wanted to go to Poland.”

“We aren't going to Poland,” Lupin said shortly. “They've got a werewolf infestation there and it's not particularly safe.”

Also, the Death Eaters were likely going to Poland. If Voldemort bothered sending people after us instead of just waiting until the summer was over, then he'd waste manpower.

“Say, Hermione,” I said casually. “Do you still have those things that I left for you?”

I'd stolen several brooms, wands and other items from the Death Eaters before I'd made sure they were dead. I'd shrunk them, and hidden them on Hermione, who hadn't been forced to go before Moody and his all seeing eye. He'd only been interested in interrogating me.

She nodded. “They went back to normal after I got home to my parents.”

“And you brought them?”

“The customs agent looked at me funny,” she said. Leaning over, she murmured, “There were
bloodstains on one of the handles.”

“It was getting dark,” I said defensively. I’d missed an entire head; I could hardly be blamed for missing a few blood splatters.

“I wouldn’t approve,” she murmured again, “But if we’d had these in the first place, we might have simply been able to run. I’ve looked at the prices on new brooms, and they are frightfully expensive.”

I’d looked too, a cheap broom cost at least two hundred galleons, which was worth about a thousand British pounds, or about two thousand dollars. Given inflation, by my time, it would have been worth over three thousand dollars, or about as much as a crappy used car.

Unfortunately, a cheap broom wouldn’t be fast enough to help us escape anything. The top of the line models were worth a lot more; the people I’d asked had just shaken their heads. Apparently only the richest families could afford one.

In my mind, it was probably like owning a sports car; it was functionally faster, and it looked better, but at least part of what you were paying for was the status it gave you.

“It's not a good idea to buy used brooms either,” Hermione said. “Because they often aren't safe.”

“Like the brooms we had before Malfoy got us new ones?” I asked.

She nodded.

I could see Lupin stiffen. Apparently he knew enough about Malfoy to be wary. The Grangers didn't react at all.

I'd been like Hermione at her age; even at fifteen I hadn't told my father about my career as a super villain. I'd put him in danger by doing that, though, even if it would have been more difficult.

Mr. Granger made a terrible joke, and Hermione giggled. Her mother was watching both of us and smiling.

I felt a sudden sense of melancholy.

Hermione lit up when she was talking to her parents, and they were just as joyful when they talked to her. It was utterly innocent and it was as though all the worries that had slowly been accumulating over the course of the last year just vanished.

I'd had that once, when Mom was still alive. I could remember laughing and being joyful. I'd lived in the moment then; I hadn't worried about anything because I'd had an absolute certainty that my parents would be there for me always, and they would always love me.

Mom's death had begun the end of my innocence, and Emma had hastened its demise. Lung and Coil and the Slaughterhouse had killed it off forever.

I'd spent so long trying to save the world, all the worlds that nothing else had mattered. Time spent with my own father would have meant less time training, or looking for the Slaughterhouse Nine. I hadn't been able to stand the thought that my slacking off would mean the deaths of everyone I had ever loved, and even people that I'd never known.

Over the past year I'd been completely focused on survival, or on learning more magic so I could survive.
The fact that it was likely that I would never see my father again wasn't something I'd let myself think about. Even if we hadn't been close in years, I'd always thought there would come a time when we could become a family again.

Now, even if I somehow found a spell that would let me jump universes, and another one that would let me find the one universe in a practical infinity where my father was located, I no longer looked anything at all like his daughter. Would he even recognize me?

Would he still be alive in the seven to ten years that it would take me to learn that much magic?

Even if I found the universe he was in, an entire planet was difficult to find someone. It was obvious that Wizards didn't have any spells that easily tracked people, or the Death Eaters would have been rounded up shortly after the first one had been caught.

It might be possible to buy a Wizarding owl and write him a letter, though, assuming I could find the right dimension.

What were the limits on those owls?

Did they have to fly directly to their targets? If so, a letter to Australia might take a very long time. Or did they take shortcuts along the route; if they did, was it possible that one could find my father even from the dimension that I was in?

It wasn't something I could even try now; the chance of my owl being intercepted was far too high, and it might not even be the Death Eaters who did it. I couldn't trust anyone with knowledge of my origins; even someone as seemingly loyal as Hermione could have her mind easily read, or been mind controlled into revealing what she knew.

She was laughing still, and it was bittersweet watching her with her family.

Lupin was watching me, and I saw a strange sort of understanding on his face. I quickly pushed my emotions into my bugs, and everything immediately felt better.

Was that part of the reason that I'd been so emotionally flat all year? In my old life I'd actually felt my own emotions, even if I'd been able to push my reactions into them. Was I pushing my pain and anger, depression and loneliness into my bugs as a way of staying focused?

What kind of long term effects would that kind of emotional numbing have on my psyche?

Was I even feeling my own emotions at all? While I still had my own memories, the hardware my mind was running on was Millie Scrivener's brain. I'd assumed that some of my personality changes were due to having an eleven year old brain, but what if it was more than that?

Anti-social personality disorder often had hereditary causes. What did I really know about the Scriveners; I hadn't really given much of a thought to them since I'd woken up in that alley. Was the brain I was using influencing me, or was it the fact that I was becoming addicted to pushing my emotions into my bugs.

Were the bugs at Hogwarts the most depressed bugs in the world and I just didn't know it?

Was I even me any more?

When Lupin turned back to say something to Mrs. Granger, I deliberately allowed my emotions to seep back into my bones.
It was a stark contrast.

Moments before my mind had felt clear and sharp. Now everything felt dull and gray. Now, melancholy filled me, and I forced my features to remain impassive.

“What part of America did you come from dear?” Mrs. Granger asked.

“It was a place near Boston,’ I said. “You wouldn't have heard of it.”

“I've heard nice things about America,” she said.

“Most of America is great,” I said. “But there are places that are terrible. I guess that's true everywhere. I spent some time in Chicago before I came here.”

“I'm sorry to hear about your parents, dear,” she said.

“I'm sure they'd be happy to know that I'm all right,” I said. “And safe, at least for the moment.”

My real dad would have felt that way, and I'm sure the Scriveners would have too, at least until they realized that I was really a kind of eldritch abomination wearing their daughters skin.

I'd been lucky that hadn't shown up as my boggart; my face melting away to show my real face underneath. That might have given people a few too many clues.

Talking about the gangs where I'd grown up with around Hermione's parents might make them cautious around me, yet it wasn't fair to keep them in the dark either.

“I'm glad Hermione had good parents,” I said to Mrs. Granger. “I think that makes things easier.”

“We were afraid that she wouldn't make any friends,’ her father admitted. “So we're very glad that you befriended her. She tells us that she'd made several friends because of you.”

Hermione flushed.

“She'd have made friends eventually,” I said. “Once she realized that she didn't always have to be the smartest person in the room. That was all that was holding her back, really.”

“Taylor and I are neck in neck for top of our classes,” Hermione said proudly.

“But Hermione no longer has to let everybody know that,m and that's made all the difference,” I said, giving her a glance.

It had taken her a long time to stop her habit of bragging about her intellectual abilities; I'd called her on it every time I'd heard it, and there were still times when she backslid.

Draco’s bragging had lessened as well, but not as quickly. Partially that was because I had less contact with him, and partially because he was less motivated that Hermione. Still, he'd done a lot on the basis of a few conversations I’d had with him, and I expected that he'd continue to get better.

I'd had Dumbledore arrange for him to have his trunk sent back to him with an anonymous letter of thanks. The last thing he needed was written proof that he'd sided with me against the Death Eaters.

It was possible that he'd complain to his father, but his father was undoubtedly smart enough not to
let his compatriots know what had happened. Hopefully Draco had been smart enough not to say anything.

Most likely his father would have instructed him on the value of keeping quiet.

I listened to Hermione chattering away like a monkey about her school year. I noticed that she avoided any subject that involved danger. She didn't mention that I'd killed a boy in a duel, or the deaths of the Death Eaters over the holidays.

How had the Ministry explained the attack on the train? What had Hermione told them?

When things finally got quiet after forty five minutes, I finally asked.

“Where are we going then?”

“La Londe Les Maures,” Mr. Granger said. “It's a seaside resort in southeastern France on the French Riviera. Have you ever been scuba diving?”

“No,” I admitted.

“Well, there's snorkeling, and windsurfing, beaches, and there's a tropical bird garden. We'll be visiting some vineyards.”

“Taylor won't be drinking,” Lupin said. “I have a feeling none of us would be comfortable with that.”

“She's an American,” Hermione rushed to say. “And they are a little more prudish about alcohol.”

Was Lupin worried that I might stab someone if I was drunk?

Little did he know that my aim was terrible when I was drunk; it was one of the reasons that I'd rarely ever bothered to drink when I was in my last body. The fact that I was underage hadn't been a factor at all.

Still, I stuck my tongue out at him. He grinned at me, and the smile made him look a little less sickly for a moment.

Maybe this could actually work.

After a moment of consideration, I said, “But I don't have a bathing suit!”

“We'll get them when we get there,” Mr. Granger said. “She's grown enough in the past year that I doubt that her old bathing suit would fit her anyway.”

I was smaller than Hermione, and I had a feeling that I'd never be tall. I hadn't seen either of Millie Scrivener's parents standing up, but neither one of them had seen particularly tall.

I wondered for a moment how Lupin was paying for all of this. For all I knew there was a bounty on the heads of the Death Eaters I'd killed, or maybe Dumbledore was paying for this out of his own pocket.

In any case, I had some ideas about how Lupin could use magic to make money in the muggle world, and I'd broach them with him when we were alone.
My only worry now was how I was going to hide a wand on the beach. Could you shrink a wand?

Not mine, of course, but one of the extra ones I'd stolen?

Still, being able to relax on the sand for once without worrying that the world was going to end... that sounded nice.
Putting on my old identity was like slipping into a coat that no longer quite fit. My first year at Hogwarts had required that I always be on my guard, and that I keep a distance between myself and everyone else.

I'd been creating an image of myself as someone dangerous and competent; I was that, but there was more to me than that.

At first I'd been alert for attacks that never came, but as the summer had progressed I found myself relaxing a bit. I'd never completely relaxed; the possibility that they'd wait until the middle of the summer to attack had occurred to me more than once.

Yet it never happened.

It had been amazing just to lie on the beach and simply be in the moment, even if I'd been amusing myself by having the crabs under the water stage mock battles with each other out of the sight of everyone.

These were experiences I wouldn't have had even if I'd stayed in my own world. There I'd have been working to repair the damage Scion had done to the world, assuming that people hadn't just abandoned it altogether. Even if Scion had never attacked, I'd have been busy working for the Protectorate.

Even if they'd let me go to college, the summers would have been filled with work. I never would have had months of uninterrupted rest and relaxation.

If it wasn't for the fact that I was likely never going to see anyone I cared about from my old life ever again, I'd have thought that this was a blessing. It was the first time in years that I'd gotten to relax and just be a kid.

I'd spent my days with the Grangers, and my nights practicing fighting with Lupin. He was enormously better than the students I'd fought, and I'd lost more times than I'd won. I hadn't cheated, because there, in the silence, I was free to lose. I didn't have a reputation to maintain, and failure wouldn't result in me being in more danger.

I could finally relax a little, and actually be myself.

I'd been free to laugh, and play, and be the child that I hadn't had a chance to be even the first time I'd been through this. It should have been boring; most teenagers found spending time with children to be tiresome. But Hermione wasn't most children, and the Rangers were actually interesting people.

They'd taken us to museums that were actually interesting, and to see things that I'd never seen before.

It had been a shock to realize that beaches in France were topless, but it hadn't seemed to bother Hermione, so I assumed that she'd experienced it before. It wasn't mandatory, though, which I was happy about.

Hermione had even stopped having nightmares. Apparently the Death Eater attack had affected her more than I'd thought, because I'd heard her moaning in her sleep for the first couple of weeks. The nightmares had become less frequent with time, and within a month they were gone.
“At least we weren't attacked on the train platform,” I muttered to Hermione.

She was sitting in a compartment in the middle of the train, along with Neville and Millie and Harry. I hadn’t seen Tracey.

“The Ministry has tightened up security this year,” Hermione said. “I’m not surprised at all.”

The aurors in the first and last cars, with two more riding on top of the train certainly seemed alert. I wondered if they'd taken pepper up potions or some other kind of stimulant.

“The Death Eaters have been quiet all summer,” I said. “Probably regrouping and reevaluating their plans.”

It's what I would have done if I'd been Voldemort. The kind of losses he'd already taken weren't sustainable, not given the limited population of Wizards. I'd have probably started using imperiused patsies and maybe hired foreign mercenaries.

My guess was that he'd spent the summer cleaning house. I'd have been imperiusing as many people as I could to find out who the traitor was; someone like him wouldn't have been able to believe that an eleven year old child had been able to slaughter so many Death Eaters, so his first and natural assumption would have been that someone had helped me.

He'd assume that traitors had given away the information about the attack on the train, and that someone had helped me slaughter his men. Given that Moody's men seemed more interested in capture than killing, that would suggest that it was either a third party, or someone within his own ranks who was getting rid of competition.

If that was the case, it might mean that someone was preparing for a coupe within the Death Eaters, and something like that would be terrifying for Voldemort.

The name he'd chosen for himself revealed his own fear. Flight from Death?

Why call yourself something that meant you were running. Why not simply call yourself Death?

Thanatos was a classic, although that could also mean a desire for death.

The truth was, I wasn't good at coming up with names, but sooner or later people would have named me something. Of course, if you were terrifying enough, even Bob could become a name to be feared.

“Are you excited about the school year?” Hermione asked.

“Personally, I think Lupin could have taught me everything I needed to know,” I said. “But I can't leave you and Harry by yourselves.”

I wouldn't saddle Lupin with the task of raising me either. I'd come to respect him over the summer, even on the days before the full moon when he became irritable and snappish.

The fact that he'd had to leave once a month hadn't escaped the Grangers, but they hadn't asked questions.

I'd given him a few tips about raising funds in the muggle world with magic. He'd told me that they were in a gray area, legally speaking, but he'd looked thoughtful.

It would be easy enough for him to buy salvaged cars and repair them magically. He'd never be
able to sell them as new, now without magically changing memories and documentation. He assured me that actually would be illegal. Even as salvage could easily sell them for ten times the price he bought them for, possibly as much as fifteen hundred pounds a transaction.

Finding the cars would be harder in this pre-Internet world, but I'd suggested that he find a Squib car dealer or auto mechanic. If he couldn't find one, then convince one to be his front man, to do all the leg work and take half the profits.

At five hundred galleons each, he might be able to make up for some of the income that the Ministry and Wizarding society had cheated him out of.

I'd had some other ideas, but Lupin had assured me that most of them would be highly illegal and end up sending him to Azkaban.

The door to the compartment slid open.

Pansy looked in.

“Taylor!” she said, her voice artificially sweet. “I'm surprised to see that you came back this year!”

We'd heard through the grapevine that people had withdrawn their children from school in the aftermath of the train incident. I could understand the impulse, but unless they were going to leave the country, it was even less safe in their homes.

“I'm surprised that you passed last year,” I said mildly. “Weren't you worried about not passing?”

She flushed.

“At least I'm not a werewolf,” she said.

“What?” I stared at her.

“You and Potter and Granger disappeared during the werewolf attack,” she says. “Everybody is just horrified about how the boy-who-lived was infected.”

From the look on Neville's face, he wasn't sure whether to be relieved or insulted that people weren't talking about him too.

Harry scowled. “That's a lie! It wasn't werewolves at all! It was the Death Eaters and Voldemort!”

Pansy shook her head.

“Poor, deluded little boy. You just don't want to admit the horrible truth. It was in the papers over the summer, so everybody knows about it. That's probably why so many kids aren't coming back to school They don't want to be in class with three werewolves.”

“Say Pansy,” I asked. “Is werewolfism contagious when you are in human form?”

“What do you mean?” she asked suspiciously.

“Well, if I were to bite you right here, and right now, would you become a werewolf, or maybe something halfway, like a were-poodle?”

Harry grinned. “She looks like the kind who'd become a poodle. Wanna try?”

Pansy sniffed. “You can't make fun of me... werewolves aren't real people.”
“Whoever said I was a real person in the first place?” I asked. “Do you think that the boggarts are all out of the castle? Do you think some of them might have slipped onto the train?”

I smiled at her, channeling my best Jack Slash grin. I cocked my head, and began walking toward her with a jerky motion.

Her face paled and she staggered back, falling onto her rear. She stumbled to her feat and slammed the door shut, and we heard the sounds of footsteps racing off into the distance.

No one else came to disturb us, but as I closed my eyes and listened in to the conversations in the other part of the train, it amazed me to find that the students had bought into the Ministry line that it had been werewolves who had attacked the Hogwarts Express.

They really did believe that I and my little group were werewolves, and even Harry's House was uncertain about dealing with him.

The door opened again, and Ron Weasley slipped inside.

“You'd tell me you were a werewolf, wouldn't you mate?” he asked Harry. “When my brothers told me, I thought they were lying like usual, but I heard it from Romilda Vane and a couple of Hufflepuffs.”

“It's a lie,” Harry said tiredly.

“Then why didn't they let you have any visitors over the summer?” Ron asked. “I tried to send you a letter, but they were all returned.”

“The Death Eaters were trying to kill me,” Harry said. “So the Ministry was sending all my mail back just in case something cursed got through. And it was Death Eaters that attacked the train, not werewolves.”

I wondered if anyone had tried to send me any packages over the summer. If they had, it had probably been a bomb.

I'd have to find out whatever spell kept us from getting our mail and learn it myself. If I could use that and if I could find some way to evade the Trace, then I'd be able to slip into the muggle world entirely, and I'd be able to do whatever I wanted.

Lupin had taught me the disillusionment spell over the summer. He'd been reluctant, but when I'd explained to him that it might save lives, he'd finally agreed.

I think he'd caught the underlying meaning; I might not have to kill so many people if I had other options for escape.

That was the law in the Muggle world, after all. Self-Defense only applied if you had no way to escape. If you did, it was your duty to try.

Listening in to the children in the other cars for the next few hours, I realized that there was an element of unease to many of their conversations. They spoke more quietly this year, and it was only with their closest friends that they spoke about overheard conversations between their parents.

Almost everyone had parents who'd discussed pulling them out of school. Many of them had parents who'd talked about leaving the country. That was less true of the Slytherins, of course, but even among them there were some. They were quieter about it.
I'd taken to checking my foe glass all summer; I'd checked it shortly before packing today. It had looked like Avery and several figures I hadn't recognized were closer than they had been all summer. They weren't so close as for me to be terribly worried.

It was dark by the time we reached our stop.

A prefect stopped by our compartment.

“You don't go with the first years,” he said. “You go to the left, where there are carriages.”

I nodded.

We disembarked.

I still felt uncomfortable letting the House Elves manage my luggage; part of me was afraid that people would interfere with it before the House Elves got to it. I'd just have to go over everything thoroughly when I got to my rooms.

“Are those thestrals?” Hermione asked, blinking.

I'd mucked their stalls out enough to know more about them that I wanted to.

“There's nothing there,” Harry said. “Are they pulled my magic?”

“Thestrels,” Hermione said. “Only people who have seen death can see them.”

For some reason everyone turned and looked at me.

“How can you not see them?” I asked. “You were all at duelling club last year.”

“He didn't die until later,” Hermione said. “And none of us saw that.”

“What about you?” I asked Harry.

“With the Acromantulas?” Harry asked. “It was dark. I didn't see anything except a guy with his jaw blown off.”

“So you've seriously been hanging around me for months, and you've never seen anybody die.”

“It seems incredible, but no,” Hermione said. “Some blood on a broomstick doesn't count when it comes to thestrels.”

As we approached, I stepped up beside one of the thestrels. I patted its side.

“They know ye,” Hagrid said, walking up.

“Aren't you watching the first years?” I asked.

He shook his head. “The Aurors have taken over. Wanna make sure the sprogs get to where they're going. New security this year.”

I nodded.

“You be careful this year, Taylor,” he said. “I've heard that it isn't just the Death Eaters that have it out for ye. There's people who'd love to see ye in Azkaban.”

Not all of them were Death Eaters either. Some of them were sympathizers, and others were just
uncomfortable with the way I interfered with the status quo. Unfortunately, some of them had the power to make problems for me.

“Thanks, Hagrid,” I said.

I patted the Thestrel on the side.

“I'd be happy to help you with these,” I said. “As long as it isn't poop duty.”

“There won't be any of that this year,” Hagrid said. “The Ministry is serious about security, and there's a curfew after dark. No student is to be out on the grounds.”

I nodded.

After what had happened last year, I'd had no intentions of being out where Death Eaters could take potshots at me. It had been easy enough for one to apparate outside whatever protections the school had and then walk onto the grounds.

“Let's get you in the castle, where it's safe,” he said.

As we made our way up the trail, my bugs smelled disillusioned people all along the trail. I suspected that these were the aurors who were providing security, but I couldn't be sure, so I kept my wand in my hand until we reached the castle.

It was a relief to step inside the door; a single Killing Curse from a disillusioned imperiused patsy could have ended me before I'd had a chance to respond. The only reason they likely hadn't tried it was because of the aurors, and because they would have assumed I could see the attack in advance with my seer powers.

As I sat through the opening feast, everything felt unreal. The summer itself had already felt like a dream, and getting back into my role as the person who everyone feared didn't feel like something I was going to relish.

Partially it was because I hadn't been suppressing my emotions much over the summer. I'd been getting better over the school year, but it had been terribly slow.

I found myself tired as I went to my room; Tracey still hadn't shown up, so I could only assume that her parents had planned to home school her.

Mildred didn't know anything about it; they hadn't been in contact all summer, since her parents had decided to take her to Venice for vacation. I had the impression that this wasn't their normal way of doing things; they had been afraid and had friends in that area that people didn't know about.

Despite my exhaustion, I began going through my trunks methodically. The last thing I needed was some cursed item giving me an incurable and fatal condition. Cursed items could be some of the deadliest things around; I'd heard that there were curses that no wizard had the cure for.

So it was with some trepidation that I found a box in my trunk, one that I hadn't put there.

It was plain and nondescript, about ten inches on a side. It had been stuffed haphazardly into my chest, which was now filled with all kinds of clothes that Lupin had gotten for me over the summer. I levitated the box and put it on the floor.

“Get Snape,” I said tersely.
Lupin wouldn't have left me a box without telling me; he was sensible enough to know that I'd never open one without knowing ho it was from. That meant that this was likely from someone who didn't mean me well.

I stared at the box. I had an uneasy feeling I knew what was inside; my bugs could smell rotting meat inside. The fact that it smelled tantalizing when filtered through their senses was vaguely disturbing.

Snape arrived shortly afterwards.

“This box shouldn't have been in my trunk,” I said. “And I haven't learned cursebreaking yet.”

He nodded grimly.

He spent the next ten minutes performing a series of spells and actions that I watched carefully. Was this what cursebreaking was, and if so, was he any good at it?

Eventually, he said, “I have detected no curses on the box, nor poison on its surface. I will lift the lid off now.”

I pulled out my wand and cast a shield spell.

He levitated the lid of the box off the wand, and floated it to its side. A moment later he leaned forward; if there was hesitation he hid it well.

His face turned grim.

“I fear that I must summon the Headmaster,” he said.

I leaned forward.

Beside me, I could hear Millicent begin to scream.

Tracey's head was in the box, staring up at us, an expression of agony and horror permanently imprinted on her face.
The Death Eaters hadn't sent their kids to school this year.

When I'd noted that people had been missing from the train; it had seemed natural to me that some parents would hold their kids back, even Slytherin parents. The fact that it was a certain subset of Slytherin parents had escaped me, especially since Draco had come to school.

Was leaving Malfoy a gesture of trust toward me?

Or was Lucius Malfoy on his way out of the organization, and he hadn't been informed of what was going to happen until it was too late?

Apparently he'd passed along my idle threat of killing the kids and they'd taken it seriously.

I was sitting in Dumbledore's office. It was late; about one in the morning. The aurors had gone over my room with a fine toothed comb. There were some of them who had been looking for things to hang me with, but most of them had been angry and upset, which I thought was a good sign.

“What do you intend to do, Miss Hebert?” Dumbledore asked.

He was looking at me quietly. His eyes had lost their usual twinkle.

“That's not the question,” I said. “The question is what you will do? They killed a child, and not just any child, but a half blood. They did it under your watch, and if this is allowed to continue, I have no doubt that this school will be closed for good.”

Wizards tended to be callous about their children being injured, but death was another matter.

“I have been cautious in applying myself,’ Dumbledore admitted. “The allure of power has been something that I have struggled with, and I fear that it would be all too easy for me to fall prey to it.”

“The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing,” I said. “Edmund Burke was right, you know. Every time you stay your hand, allow a Death Eater to live, you are responsible for every death they cause afterwards.”

He looked much older than usual. His face seemed almost gaunt in the firelight.

“It is a slippery slope,” he said. “Who am I to decide who lives and who dies?”

“Who else is there?” I asked. “Look at the world around you. The blood purists are winning. Every time they kill an auror, they replace him with one of their own. Every muggleborn they kill is a life that will not have a chance to contribute to society.”

He looked down, and I shook my head.

“Tracey was more of an acquaintance than a friend. She was never really able to get over her initial fear of me. She was Millicent's friend, though, and she came along because of that. Killing her was a message not just for me, but for everyone. Bow down, or have your head removed.”

He sighed.

“I understand, and this will be answered,” he said. “I will not allow another child to be killed under
my watch, not as long as it is in my power to prevent it.”

“The only way to stop this kind of thing is to strike back in kind,” I said. “Hard and fast enough that they will not want to ever try that again.”

“It is not that easy...” he began.

I handed him a list.

“These are people that I know to be death eaters. Some of them I'm sure you know about; some of them you may not know about.”

I handed him a list of names that I’d gathered together from my time looking over children’s shoulders as they wrote letters, and my time in the Ministry.

“This isn't all of them, of course,” I said. “It's a list of twenty five names that I am fairly certain are Death eaters.”

“Fairly certain isn't enough to act on, Miss Hebert,” Dumbledore said.

“Isn't it?” I asked. “I understood that Wizarding law tended to be looser about the rules than muggle laws. If you were to hit those with seats in the Wizengamot first...”

“Then they'd think that it was politically motivated, and I'd risk turning my own faction against me,” he said.

I stared at him, and he had the grace to look embarrassed and look away. I'd had enough of excuses; people always talked about the reason that they couldn’t take action, but they never actually did anything.

We were both silent for several long moments. I stared at Dumbledore as he stared at the fire. He looked exhausted and as old as I had ever seen him.

“How did the box get into my luggage?” I asked finally.

“There was an unfamiliar House Elf,” Dumbledore said. “No one recognized him.”

“They'd make perfect assassins you know,” I said. “If the Death Eaters wanted you dead, all they'd have to do would be to have a house elf slip poison in your soup. They couldn't even say no if they were commanded to do it.”

“I am taking steps to address this,” Dumbledore said.

“Are House Elves expensive?” I asked.

“Very,” Dumbledore said. “And you may not have the loan of one of the school's elves.”

He'd been talking to Snape then.

I doubted that Millicent's family was rich enough to have one, but I had no doubt that she'd have lent it to me if I asked.

“If you start that kind of warfare, they will retaliate in kind,” Dumbledore continued. “So I would ask that you think long and hard before you start it.”

“It was just a theoretical question,” I said airily.
Dumbledore looked as tired as I currently felt. “Go to bed Miss Hebert. Tomorrow will be a long day.”

I nodded.

He escorted me back to the Slytherin dorms, and as he left, I turned to head up to my rooms. Millicent was in the infirmary, under the effect of a sleeping draught. There was talk of obliterating her for her own good, she was so upset by what she'd seen.

I was surprised to see Draco waiting for me.

He was pale.

“My father didn't know about it until afterward,” he said. He hesitated, then looked around. “You knew about my father.”

I nodded coldly.

“I'm aware of his allegiances.”

Draco hesitated a moment. “He told me to tell you that Avery will be waiting for you outside.”

“Your father would betray his own people like that?”

Draco shook his head.

“He's going to be killed anyway, after everything he's done,” he said. He looked sick and pale. “But this is a gesture of goodwill.”

Avery had cost Voldemort, and he had to know that this was going to cost him a lot more than anything else he'd done. Tracey had been a half blood, which meant that a lot of people who'd thought they were going to be safe were now going to reconsider. People were protective of their children, and this was exactly the sort of thing that would turn cowardly wizards into lions.

Malfoy was playing both sides against the middle. He wasn't giving me any information that I wouldn't have known anyway, not if I was the kind of seer I pretended to be. Most likely Voldemort had told Avery to challenge me, and having Draco deliver the message had been a punishment for Malfoy for one crime or another.

The fact that it was going to be a trap wasn't even in question, and Malfoy would assume that I understood that.

“I remember favors,’ I said.

He looked relieved. Apparently he'd been afraid that I'd take Tracey's death out on him. The fact that he'd still come indicated a certain amount of bravery or possibly stupidity.

“I hope you didn't have trouble because you lent me your chest.”

“I told my father that you took it. He said to tell no one, and he obliterated Crabbe and Goyle before they could tell anyone.”

“You've seen how his friends deal with things they don't like,” I said, nodding toward my room. He paled even farther. “Your father is likely right.”

“They wouldn't...” he began.
“She was a Slytherin,” I said. “A Slytherin and a halfblood. You think it would bother them to put your head in a box?”

He paled even farther.

“Go to bed,” I said.

“What are you going to do?” he asked.

“Aurors are going to come to you tomorrow,” I said. “And you are going to tell them that you fell asleep here. You never saw me leave, and you never saw me come back. This conversation never happened.”

“What?” he asked.

“Or you might find out that your father's friends and I have something in common.”

He frowned, then I saw my meaning dawn on him. He nodded.

“Get a blanket and pillow,” I said.

He turned and went up the boy's stairs.

Pulling my foe glass out, I stared at it.

Avery was close, along with two others that I didn't recognize. Maybe Voldemort really meant for Avery to die or maybe he wanted to know what I could do against Wizards who were ready for me. Most likely the people with Avery were liabilities to his organization, people who had helped in the murder and so deserved almost as much punishment as Avery himself.

There were more than one way that this could be a trap. It might be more than physical; if they could catch me murdering my enemy, they'd be able to get me sent to Azkaban, and possibly killed on the way.

I'd escape on the way, of course, but they had no way to know that. I'd studied the ways in which the Supervillains in my world always escaped, and I suspected that Azkaban couldn't be as hard to escape as the Birdcage.

It didn't matter.

I had to respond to the murder of my acquaintance in a way that made it clear what would happen if anyone attacked my other friends. Otherwise none of them would be safe.

I closed my eyes and allowed my actual emotions to flood back into me. First came rage. Tracey had been a child; she'd never hurt anyone, and she'd been Innocent. Then came guilt.

Being emotional wouldn't help; I pushed my emotions back into my bugs and I straightened my shoulders.

Before I could think about it too much, I disillusioned myself. I slipped outside, and I headed for the girl's bathroom. A quick hissed command to open, and I was on my way down to the Chamber.

I tied my blindfold on and I closed my eyes.

“Hello,” I hissed in Parseltongue.
“Hello, Stupid Speaker,” the basilisk hissed. “Is it time to feed yet?”

Apparently snakes were language snobs almost as bad as the French.

I shook my head.

“No. I ask help.”

“Oh?” the basilisk asked.

“Need kill egg breaker,” I said. “Help me?”

I could almost feel her eagerness.

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“The bitch will never be able to resist,” Avery was saying. I'd seen his face in the glass often enough to know exactly who he was. “A direct challenge like that. We'll finally be done with it once and for all.”

“It'll be over after tonight, yes,” one of the men behind him said.

I wondered if they had orders to murder Avery no matter what happened. If Voldemort could kill us both, it would solve a lot of his problems. He'd be able to blame the murder on a rogue faction, and claim that he'd killed him and provided the justice that the Wizarding world couldn't.

“I think so too,” I said. I stepped out from behind Hagrid's hut. Hagrid was gone with the aurors, which was probably why they'd chosen this location.

They'd failed to provide hidden people either inside or behind the hut. Most likely it was because with only three of them, they'd been afraid I'd pick them off one by one. I'd been careful to check with every sense my bugs could muster.

Green light flew toward me, but I threw my darkness powder down.

Every one of them had a hand of Glory; I could sense all of them lighting theirs.

That meant that they could see but I couldn't; perfect.

“Coming after me, that I could understand,” I called out in the darkness. “But the moment you came after my friends, you sealed your death warrant.”

My voice rang out across the lawn, even as they charged around the corner.

“I'd like you to meet my friend,” I said in a conversational voice. The basilisk reared up behind me; I could tell from the bugs I had on her.

They dropped dead almost at the same time, even as I dropped to the ground in case or more of them managed to get a shot off. They didn't though.

I'd have preferred to caused more pain; Avery had done enough that he'd deserved a lot worse than a quick and painless death. However, I was tired, and he wasn't worth it.

“Shall I eat?” the basilisk asked.

“No,” I said. “Eggs.”
The last thing I needed was for the Basilisk to get a taste for human flesh. I had a suspicion that it had tasted it before, but after a thousand years the memory was likely a little hazy.

As it turned out, the Basilisk loved the taste of eggs, considering them a treat, even though I had to make a lot of them to feed its ravenous appetite. Most likely it had eaten eggs when it was small, but once it had gotten large it had no longer been able to find anything with eggs large enough to taste.

When it was satisfied, it slithered away, and I set about the work of sending the message that I'd planned to send.

Getting rid of the tracks was the first task. I'd figured out how to do that a long while back, and I set to it with a gusto, using Avery's own wand.

Next was the massage that I meant to send. I began shrinking bodies, and then I was going to have to hurry to Hogsmeade while disillusioned. I couldn't cast any spells between those locations, so I was going to have to be ready.

De-shrinking the broomstick I'd gotten from the Death Eater from the train, I mounted it and disillusioned myself.

I was going to have to channel my inner Bonesaw for this one.

*************

“Where were you last night?” the Auror demanded. His face was red, and he looked as though he wanted to punch me.

Professor Sprout was the one who was watching us silently from the back. Snape and Dumbledore were still dealing with the aftermath of Tracey's death, and Flitwick was busy consoling students.

I should have been exhausted, but I'd taken a pepper up potion so that I would look fresh and not like I'd spent all night decorating Hogsmeade with body parts while disillusioned.

“In my bed, asleep,” I said calmly.

“Is there anyone who can corroborate that?” he asked.

“Dumbledore himself sent me off to bed,” I said. “My roommate was in the hospital because of the shock of seeing her friend's murdered corpse. I saw Draco Malfoy on the way up to my room; he was sleeping out in the common room.”

“We've spoken to him,” the auror said. “It's suspicious that he was there to provide you with an alibi.”

“I'm sure the paintings did too,” I said. “They were supposed to be on alert last night after what happened.”

The fact that I had had known how to sneak by them while disillusioned wasn't relevant.

“Your roommate was so upset at the death that she had to be sedated,” he said. “But you went to bed as though nothing had happened. You don't think that's suspicious?”

I shook my head. “I've been in a running battle with the Death Eaters all year. It was likely to happen sooner or later. She wasn't really my friend anyway, she was more Millicent's.”
“I think you are lying. We can order Veritaserum,” the auror said. “You don't even have parents who can object.”

“I'm a natural occlumens,” I said. “I wouldn't want you to waste your time. What's this all about?”

“There were brutal murders in Hogsmeade last night,” the auror said. “You were the person who had the most reason to kill them.”

“Me?” I said. I smiled. “I'm just a little girl. What could I possibly have done?”

“Spread body parts all over town,” the auror said grimly.

“Check my wand,” I said. “You'll find no killing curse.”

“We'll check both of your wands,” he said. “Moody told us.”

I shrugged.

I'd done most of the cutting work with Avery's wand. I'd snapped all of their wands, and I'd used them to further desecrate the bodies.

Having both ends of their wands shoved into an eye socket was meant to make an impression.

This was about respect.

I needed everyone to believe that not only had I been able to overpower three Wizards, but that I'd been able to torture them without anyone seeing what had happened.

Handing over the wands, I watched as he performed a number of spells on them.

He seemed almost disappointed as he handed them back to me.

“We aren't finished with this,” he said.

“You really think I'm capable of something like this?” I asked.

He stared at me. “Dead certain.”

“You'd think you'd be more polite then,” I said.

He frowned, and then a look of outrage appeared on his face. “You can't threaten an auror.”

“I wasn't threatening anyone,” I said, lifting my hands. “I was just wondering why you'd threaten someone who could kill multiple wizards. That wasn't me, of course, but you've already decided it was.”

“Get out of here,” he said.

I left Snape's office, which had been converted into a temporary interrogation room, and turned back to the Slytherin common room.

Everyone was waiting, staring at me.

“You've all heard what happened last night,” I said.

From the looks on their faces they had.
“They've been coming for mudbloods for a long time, but no one said anything, because it didn't affect than,’ I said. “But what about now? Tracey was one of you; she was a half blood, but she came from a good family. Her entire family was brutally murdered because they wouldn't turn her over.”

I'd overheard that from the aurors.

“How long will it be before even being a pureblood isn't enough?” I asked. “When will they come for you or when will they ask you to step aside when they kill your mother, your sister, your brother?”

They were all watching me quietly.

“The smart thing was to keep your head down,” I said. “But that was before they started coming after your kind of people.”

I paused.

“Sooner or later, you'll have to pick a side,” I said. “That's what all this is about. It's not the mudbloods verses the purebloods; you think the Death Eaters will let purebloods rule when they take over? They'll rule and everyone else will kneel.”

“Think about it.”

I turned and headed for my room before anyone could say anything. The potion was wearing off, and I needed to collapse onto my bed while no one was looking.

Classes were canceled for the day.
News

“Death Eaters desecrate Hogsmeade!” the headline screamed.

The pictures splashed all over the front page barely showed anything. It was difficult to understand what you were seeing at first, and then the whole picture suddenly sprang into focus.

I'd used every bit of artistry I remembered from following the Slaughterhouse. I hadn't expected the papers to show much of it but it had been meant to send a message to the Death Eaters and possibly to the aurors.

I could hear people gagging all over the Great Hall.

Apparently what little was shown in the picture was more than some people could handle.

The evening papers had just come in, and people were still eating when they opened their papers. I was surprised that the school hadn't confiscated them all.

I calmly continued eating as I read the article.

Apparently the leading theory about the deaths was that it was the work of Death Eaters, although there were some people who thought it was the work of werewolves.

I'd have thought that I'd left no doubt that it wasn't an attack by a violent beast, but Wizards were apparently gullible. Unthinking monsters didn't artfully arrange things; only thinking monsters did.

People were staring, not just at me, but at Hermione and Harry at the other tables. Nobody was bothering with Neville.

“Last night wasn't even a full moon!” I heard Hermione shout indignantly. “Hasn't anybody read the textbooks about werewolves?”

Hmm... nobody was sitting near me. I'd assumed that was because of the lower number of students this year, but apparently people were still believing the werewolf rumors. Or maybe rumors of what I had done to the Death eaters had spread before the Death Eater kids had left.

Having this attributed to the Death Eaters....had that been Voldemort's plan all along, or was it fortunate happenstance?

He'd managed to avoid some of the public relations damage from his former failure; the incident with the acromantulas wasn't known to the general public, and the incident on the train had been attributed to werewolf terrorists.

However, he had to work with the damage to morale within his own ranks. Having so many of their members killed by a small girl would be crushing, and undoubtedly there were members who were reconsidering their loyalty. He needed to win, and he needed it to be visible.

With this, he'd steal my message and make it his own.

Undoubtedly, very few people would even know that Avery had come to meet me, possibly only Lucius Malfoy and Draco.

Everyone else in his organization would think that he'd done what he'd done to send a message.
He might even send a message to the newspaper later, explaining that the Death Eaters were not responsible for Tracey's death, and that it had been a copycat trying to use their organization as an excuse.

He didn't even have to make up much of a story. Avery had struggled with an unhealthy obsession with me, and he'd done what he'd done to hurt me.

It blunted my message to the people at school, but it was useful in that it might divert the attention of the aurors.

I'd gotten my message across anyway; Voldemort knew that if he continued to escalate against my friends that I'd find ways to make his life a living hell, or I'd find a way to end it.

He was likely to spend a while regrouping and consolidating his power. He had time, and I had little doubt that he'd get stronger as memories faded.

I looked up; both Dumbledore and Snape were looking at me with disquieted looks. I smiled and waved a piece of bacon at them.

Snape scowled and Dumbledore looked troubled.

I'd given Dumbledore a chance, but even if he was honest, he couldn't protect my friends. A school was too soft a target; a determined attacker would get in sooner or later.

Finishing my meal, I stuffed some bacon in my pouch. The basilisk liked bacon too; it rarely got cooked foods.

The food enlargement spells were turning out to be highly useful.

As I stood up, Hermione stormed up to me, followed by Harry and Neville.

“They had the nerve to ask if I did this!” Hermione said, waving her rolled up newspaper. “If I was a werewolf I'd have eaten them all last night!”

“Well, it wasn't Harry,” Ron said. “I was with him last night.”

“It could have been a wereweasel,” Draco said, walking by. “I think there are some red hairs on the bodies...oh, that's blood, my mistake.”

He sneered at Ron, but he did not look at me at all.

On the surface he looked like he always did, but I could tell that his posture was stiff and he looked like he wanted to run. He was trying to bolster my story, such as it was, which meant that I couldn't punish him, even with little things like I did with Pansy.

“Shut up Malfoy,” Potter said. “This isn't funny. Hogsmeade is right outside of Hogwarts! If the Death Eaters are this close, then nobody is safe!”

Draco glanced at me, then shrugged.

“Glad you're the one they're after, and not me.”

“They're after all of us,” I said.

The room went quiet.
“Why do you think they did this?” I asked. “This wasn’t some random act of violence. They did this to make your parents afraid. They’re telling your parents that they need to bow down, because they’ve got every one of us as hostages.”

People were staring at me now.

“They didn’t just kill Tracey,” I said. “They killed her mom and her dad, her little sister and her brother. They murdered them because they wouldn’t give her up.”

“That was your fault,” Pansy said quietly.

“Was it?” I asked.

Personally I agreed with her, but that didn't fit the narrative I was creating.

“They'd have come for her eventually, just like they'll come for every one of you. Maybe the pure bloods will be able to join up, but what kind of life will you have? As a Death Eater, they'll threaten your family as a way to keep you loyal.”

I stood up higher.

“They'll throw you at aurors like Mad Eyed Moody, and at Dumbledore, thinking that it doesn't matter how many of you die, because all it takes is one man who gets through. How many of you would like to face the other side of Dumbledore's wand?”

“So what do we do?” a Slytherin third year asked.

“Learn to fight,” I said. “Because sooner or later you are going to have to. That, or run.”

“Miss Hebert,” Snape drawled from behind me. “Kindly stop trying to start a revolution. The Headmaster would like to speak with you.”

I nodded. I'd expected it, really.

There had been only two paths that the man could take; pretend that nothing had happened, or face up to it. The fact that he was calling me in now wasn't necessarily indicative of which path he would choose, but there was some hope.

I followed him down the hall.

We were silent until we reached Dumbledore's office.

I seated myself without being asked.

“Miss Hebert,” Dumbledore said. He stared at me for an agonizingly long moment. “I told you yesterday that I would handle the Death Eater problem.”

“Like you've been handling it?” I asked.

“These things take time,” he said. “I did not expect you to take manners into your own hands less than an hours after we spoke.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked. “It was the Death Eaters who killed those men; the papers said so.”

“It's taken more than a day to piece enough of them to identify them,” Dumbledore said. His eyes
were hard. “But all three of them were Death Eaters.”

“Is that what the tattoo on their arms means?” I asked. “I was curious. I've seen that tattoo on a few people in the Wizangamot, but nobody seems to care.”

“Are you admitting that you did... that?” Dumbledore asked.

“No,” I said. “I may have Seen a thing or two, but I wouldn't be surprised if things like that keeps happening.”

“What do you mean?”

“Vigilantes arise when the people in power don't protect the people,” I said. “The rule of law can only be firm if it is enforced. Right now, people don't feel protected.”

“Is this something you have Seen?” Dumbledore asked.

“I don't see the future, usually,” I said. “But it's obvious. I wouldn't be surprised if you see other people in masks doing the work that the aurors don't.”

“Is that what you think happened?”

“It's how these things work,” I said. “It's like a riot. There are people who won't break windows or destroy things on their own... but if one other person does it first, they might.”

Both he and Snape frowned.

“Other people might not do it if one other person does it, but once two do...and down the line, three, four, or more. I'm sure you have seen something like that at dances.”

“This isn't a dance,” Snape said irritably.

“Isn't it? I asked. “Isn't war a dance; you anticipate your opponent, move in tandem with how you think they will move. If they anticipate you, it becomes a thing of beauty.”

“Do you think war beautiful, Miss Hebert?” Dumbledore asked. He sounded almost disappointed. “Because I was involved in the last Great War, and I can tell you that it was horrible.”

“It's only beautiful from a distance,” I said. “Up close, it's blood and death and destruction. War should never be the first resort, but there are times that it is inevitable.”

“So you think this will keep happening,” Snape said.

“You think it won't?” I asked. “All it takes is for the right people to get the idea, and then it will start.”

“So you are saying that you did not do this,” Dumbledore asked.

“When the Aurors ask you,” I said. “You can tell them that I've always only defended myself.”

“That's not an answer,” Dumbledore said.

“What do you expect me to say? Admit to some kind of atrocity? Hasn't it occurred to you that Voldemort wanted Avery dead just as much as I did?”

Neither asked what I meant. Obviously they knew what I was talking about.
“He had every reason to kill him, and every reason to take credit for it. I'm going to assume that it was a peace offering for the death of my roommate.”

“And that means that you have no intention of...further action?” Dumbledore asked.

“I've always said that I just wanted to be left alone,” I said lightly.

I was lying, of course.

Conflict between me and the Death Eaters was inevitable by this point. They hated what I was with every ounce of their beings, and I'd killed enough of them that every member probably knew at least one person I'd killed. Many of them were likely family members.

“Were we to discover that you were the one to do this, I would be forced to expel you.” Dumbledore said. “Which would not be a healthy option for you, not at this point.”

“If you do so, what do you think I will do?” I asked.

Both of them stared at me silently.

“This is the safest place in Britain,” I said. “And I just had an entire summer without incident, when I wasn't being attacked. You put me out there, and I won't have much of a choice. Most likely, I'll die, but I won't go alone.”

“I am not asking you to leave,” Dumbledore said. “But I can assure you that I will be taking action. The information you gave us is being double checked as we speak, and once we are sure...,' he said.

If it was true, then that was what I needed.

I needed time to get stronger, and having Moody's people and Dumbledore harass the Death Eaters would take attention away from me. If I was lucky, I might get an entire school year free of interference. I couldn't depend on that, of course, because a sudden attack after months of inactivity might be their smartest move.

“Then we have nothing else to talk about,” I said. “If people believe that their government can protect them, then they'll be happy to leave it to them.”

By people I meant me.

I could see that they both understood me.

Hopefully, Snape would send my message to Voldemort. Letting him know that I didn't plan to go after him any time soon would mean that he wouldn't feel forced to take action himself. I doubted that I'd survive something like that.

I stiffened.

Aurors were entering the building, and they were heading in our direction with a sense of purpose.

I rose to my feet.

“I'd better get back to class,” I said. I carefully didn't reach for my wand; both Dumbledore and Snape were undoubtedly able to stop me without much effort.

Dumbledore nodded. “As long as we understand each other.”
“There are aurors coming,” I said. “They don’t look happy.”

The fact that they didn’t try to stop me from leaving meant that they weren’t trying to betray me. I stepped out into the hall, and I disillusioned myself.

I moved quickly toward the closest secret passageway. If the aurors were coming for me, I wouldn’t make it easy for them.

I’d been hiding supplies in the Chamber for a while; sooner or later the Ministry was going to come for me, and I was going to need a literal bug out bag.

My plan to escape was simple; I could disillusion myself, and I had a broom down there. Once I was out in public, I’d have to watch my magic usage, so I’d been slowly accumulating some useful items. With a broom, it would be simple for me to get to France, and from there, I’d be able to move wherever I needed.

Lupin had gotten me a small book filled with maps. He hadn’t known why I wanted it, but he’d seemed relieved that I’d had a seemingly normal interest.

I’d had him buy me a few other things as well.

Escaping wasn’t the problem; the problem was what I would do afterwards. I could start a guerrilla war against the Death Eaters, but I wasn’t ready yet. If it weren’t for the Trace, I might have more of a chance.

I moved farther away; if they were coming for me they weren’t going to find me easily.

The group of four aurors were grim faced and they moved directly toward Dumbledore’s office. The gargoyle let them in without asking for a password.

“Sir!” the first auror said.

“Are you here for Miss Hebert?” Dumbledore asked. “I fear she has already fled.”

The man shook his head.

“I have news. An hour ago Minister Fudge was assassinated by the muggleborn wife of a Ministry official.”

“What?” Dumbledore asked.

“She’s claiming to be part of a muggleborn terrorist organization,” the man said. “And they say they won’t rest until every pureblood is dead. She says they were responsible for what happened in Hogsmeade too.”

I closed my eyes.

Obviously the woman had been mind controlled.

Voldemort was trying to change the narrative; if he could create a fictional danger, it was possible that he could gain the loyalty of the people.

“Who is taking command?” Dumbledore asked.

“The Wizengamot is being called to a vote,” the man said. “You have been asked to attend.”
Dumbledore nodded. His face was grim.

He should be.

The Death Eaters wouldn't have risked killing Fudge unless they were certain that they had the votes to put one of their people in the office of Minister.

If that happened, I might need my bug out bag sooner than later; the whole reason why I'd gotten away with as much as I had was because of the support of Dumbledore and his people. Had the scales finally tipped in the other direction?

There was nothing I could do but wait.
Election

Everyone was huddled around the Wizarding radio waiting for the results of the election. I could see anxiety on the faces of my classmates; although they were Slytherin, they had as much reason to worry about this as I did.

“The votes are in, folks,” the announcer said excitedly. “A new Minister has been chosen.”

It was only to be a temporary appointment until elections could be held at the end of the year, but the results of this election would affect everyone.

“Dolores Umbridge has been chosen as Minister for Magic!” the announcer shouted.

“Damn,” I heard Bletchley say.

“I don't know her,” I admitted. “Is she a Death eater?”

“No,” Bletchley admitted. “Not as far as anyone can yell. That's probably why she was chosen. I doubt that Dumbledore had the votes to get one of his people in office, but he worked hard to block the Malfoy vote.”

“There were a couple of others up for the position who would have been even worse.”

“Is Umbridge that bad then?” I asked.

“She hates non-humans,” Bletchley said. “She's tried to push several bills through the Wizengamot but she's never had any success, even as the aide to the Minister.”

Most people were still shunning me, but the people I'd protected during the troll attack still spoke to me.

“The new Minister is going to speak!”

We could hear the sounds of the crowd quieting down as a woman spoke in an amplified voice.

“The Ministry of Magic exists to protect its citizens,” she said in a prim voice. “A task that I fear it has failed in repeatedly under previous administrations.”

Hadn't she been part of the previous administration?

“My administration will be different. No longer will rogue werewolves be allowed to attack our school; no longer will children be murdered and mutilated. Bloodshed has been allowed on the very threshold of Hogwarts itself, and it will no longer be tolerated!”

She paused.

“My first act as Minister will be to depose Albus Dumbledore from his position as Headmaster of Hogwarts. He has allowed children to be murdered on his watch, and he has failed his sacred duty! He was a hero in his day, and perhaps it is time that he retire to his well deserved laurels.”

“My second act is to propose legislation to control the werewolf scourge that has been afflicting our nation. Werewolves have proven themselves to be traitors in addition to being monsters.”

When several people turned to look at me, I stared at them with a cold look. Some of them paled
and turned away quickly.

“We will root them out wherever they are, and we will contain the threat! I am giving all werewolves one week to leave Great Britain. After that, any who remain will be sentenced to Azkaban!”

Everyone was silent, staring at the radio.

Werewolves had always been looked down on by Wizarding society, but I knew that several of the Slytherins in the room had relatives who were werewolves. Some of them might even have people they cared about as werewolves.

“Anyone who would threaten the stability of this Great Nation must be prepared to pay the ultimate price, ahem!” she continued.

“We will once more have peace and harmony,” she said. “But we must work together to eliminate disreputable elements. The muggleborn do not understand our way of life! They cannot be blamed for their weakness, but they cannot be allowed to disrupt our nation.”

“A new class in Wizarding culture will become mandatory for all muggleborns at Hogwarts, effective immediately,” she said. “And anyone who intends to hurt or threaten real wizards will be punished to the full extent of the law.”

Real wizards meant purebloods in political doublespeak.

“We will not tolerate insurrection. We will not tolerate attacks on our values. Those who try to enter our world with bad intentions will be stopped! I pledge the full force of the Ministry to protect our way of life!”

“Thank you,” she said. “And we will speak again.”

“It might not be so bad,” one of the fifth years said to another. “Maybe if the muggleborns learn the right way to do things, then people won't have to fight so much.”

His companion glanced back at me.

“You think she's going to learn the right way to do things?”

“We'd be better off if she was a werewolf,” the fifth year said. “Werewolves are stupid. I think a werewolf who bit her would get sick.”

“You think the Dark Lord was like her when he was young?”

“He was probably nicer.”

When they saw me looking at them, they paled and hurriedly got up.

None of this was good. Things had been bad enough for the muggleborn and the werewolves before the death of Fudge. It sounded like Umbridge was planning to increase the pressure.

That was likely to force people to fight back, which would be taken as further proof that they were enemies of the state.

“Well, nothing we can do about it now,” Flint said. He looked at me. “I've been meaning to talk to
you.”

“I’m not interested in being beater,” I said. At his look, I said, “I’d probably hurt somebody, and I’ve got more important things to do.”

He stepped up close to me and spoke in a low voice.

“If you want people to follow you, you have to get them to like you,” he said. “And nothing is more popular in school than a Quidditch star. The way you're going, nobody is going to want to get within a thousand feet of you. That's a bad place to be when people come gunning for you.”

“People don't have to like you,” I said. “Fear works just fine, and respect works even better.”

“They'll be coming for you sooner or later,” he said. “You'll need people to watch your back.”

“Why do you care what happens to me?” I asked.

“You saved the team last year,” he said. “Bletchley is actually my friend. Also, I like my intestines inside my body. A lot of us know you had a problem with Avery's da, and suddenly he's dead and scattered all over Hogsmeade?”

“I'm just a second year,” I said. I forced myself to smile and he shuddered.

“Think about it,” he said. “Tryouts are in a week.”

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“I would like to introduce you to the new Headmaster of Hogwarts,” McGonagall said. She didn't seem particularly pleased.

The new Headmaster was an enormous man, so large that he dwarfed everyone else except Hagrid. He was almost seven feet tall, and he was heavily muscled, which was unusual for Wizards.

“This is Finnegan Rowle,” McGonagall said. “Your new headmaster.”

The applause was muted.

The man stood, and he scowled.

“It is my understanding that your former headmaster was entirely too lenient with you all. He literally allowed some of you to commit murder.”

He glared at me when he said that.

“That will stop immediately,” he said. “Discipline will be enforced, and those who are sent to my office will regret it! The system has been entirely too lenient and that will be changing.”

Was he a death eater, or just an ass? I'd find out eventually, but even if he was a death eater, killing him would bring the entire weight of the Ministry down on me.

“All detentions will be supervised by me,” he said. He snarled. “And there are chains in my office.”

He was actually making things worse for himself. I knew the professors, and even Snape wouldn't leave students to be tortured. That meant that professors would be reluctant to do detentions at all,
and discipline would be worse than it would have otherwise been.

Dumbledore had been too lenient, but this man was making a mistake too. At the least he shouldn't have been so blatant about it.

“I will speak to Miss Hebert in my office,” he said.

“She can't have done something already?” McGonagall said.

“No, but unless I lay down the law early, there is no telling what she is going to do.”

“Miss Hebert,” Gallstone said. “After dinner.”

I nodded.

I wasn't close enough to hear their conversation, but Gallstone had assumed that I'd be listening. How much did she know about my supposed seer powers?

After dinner, I headed for the Headmaster's office.

Professor Snape stepped in behind me.

“I won't hurt him,” I said. “But I won't let him hurt me either.”

“I'd prefer not to trust your idea of self defense, Miss Hebert,” Snape said. “And I wish to see his...methods for myself.”

“He's not...” I began, then glanced at all of the paintings around us in the hall.

“Unlike you, I do not have the benefit of limited omniscience,” he said. “And not all wizards know each other, as much as muggleborn might assume otherwise.”

“There's only ten thousand of you,” I protested. “And you all go to school together. There's a pretty good chance that you know him.”

“I do not,” he said. “But I must work with him. The Ministry has assigned him, in all of their Wisdom.”

As I stepped into the Headmaster's office, I saw the chains hanging from the back wall first. There were several other objects whose purpose I couldn't be sure of, but they reminded me of trips to the dentist office.

“Miss Hebert,” the man said. “Sit down.”

I slowly sank into my chair. My hand was on my wand; this was an obvious attempt to intimidate me, but why?

“I don't like you,” he said. “And would you like to know why?”

“Because you're a pureblood?” I asked. Playing the race card this early in the discussion was a sign of weakness on my part, but I really didn't know what he wanted.

“No,” he said. “It's because I see you wasting your potential! You are violent much like a mad dog, attacking anyone who gets in your way. And you know what happens to mad dogs?”
I stared at him without speaking.

“Mad dogs get put down,” he said. “And that's what will happen to you. I've seen your school records, and you are a gifted young witch, possibly the most gifted in our age.”

“That hardly fits the whole muggleborn not having magic narrative, does it?” I asked.

“There are exceptional individuals in every walk of life,” he said. “And the cream will always rise to the top. That does not mean that the rest are salvageable.”

He stood up, looming over me.

“The Hogwarts curriculum is a joke. Every year a new defense teacher? Classes on music, on muggle studies?”

“Muggle studies might be useful,” I said.

“How many wizards are going to live among the muggles?” he asked. “For every one who does, the Statute of Secrecy gets strained more and more. It's already strained to the breaking point, and you want us to send purebloods out among them?”

He shook his head. “It's better for each kind to stay with their own; you may think I know nothing about the muggle world, but I do. How are Wizards going to live there without records, without a muggle education? They'd never be able to get a good job there, and the temptation to cheat would be almost overwhelming.”

He did have a point, although I suspected that it could be done.

“Memory charms,” I began.

“It's not safe for us to live among them either,” he said. “Repeated obliviations can cause... problems. The only way to keep muggles and Wizards safe are to keep them separate.”

“What does all of that have to do with me?” I asked.

“You're a natural troublemaker,” he said. “Even if you weren't out murdering people, you think that Wizarding society should be more muggle.”

“You don't know me,” I said calmly. I'd pushed my anger and irritation into my bugs. “How could you know that?”

“Because that's what all of the muggleborn want. It's perfectly natural to want things the way you grew up, but if we made our world the same as the muggle world, then we'd lose something incredibly special.”

I didn't agree with him. By it's nature the wizarding world would never be like the muggle world. Adding in the things that made the muggle world an improvement could only make things better.

There were things that the Wizarding World did better, and it wasn't just health care. There seemed to be no sexism here, and no prejudice against skin color. Because every Wizard could maintain a good status of living, there were no truly poor wizards, not in the way that the muggle world had. No wizard was ever going to starve.

“What do you want me to do?” I asked.

“Be a normal student for once,” he said. “Don't kill anybody, and don't hurt anyone. If you do, I
won't lock you in these chains; I'd be watching my back for the rest of the term. I will call the
aurors, and I suspect that you know how well that would go for you.”

Was he trying to say that I would be killed, or just that I'd end up in the Wizengamot.

“I won't have you being the standard bearer for those muggleborn terrorists,” he said. “If I had my
choice, you'd be expelled right now, but Dumbledore still has enough supporters in the school
board that I have to show just cause.”

He leaned forward.

“Please give me that cause,” he said. The smile he was giving me wasn't particularly nice. “And
should I go missing, everyone will know you did it. You'll end up in Azkaban then as well.”

I stood up.

“I'm not sure why you think I'm some kind of terrible person,” I said. “I just have terrible luck.”

“Terrible luck?” he asked.

“Death Eaters tend to die around me,” I said, glancing at his sleeve. His expression didn't change
though.

“But except for that time with the troll, and the time with the duel, and a few schoolyard incidents,
I've been a model student.”

“And the rumors about your being a werewolf?”

“You can watch me next full moon,” I said brightly. “I promise I won't eat your face or anything!”

He paused and stared at me assessingly.

“I don't take well to threats,” he said.

“If I'm not a werewolf, it wasn't a threat,” I said. “And I'm not. The Death Eaters on the train never
touched us, and even if they had, werewolves are only contagious on nights of the full moon.
Professor Travers taught us that last year as first years.”

Travers had been an ass, but he'd been a good defense teacher.

“Move along, Miss Hebert,” he said. “And reflect on what we've talked about.”

“I've got to get to Defense class,” I said brightly. “Don't want to miss my first day.”

As I left I listened in.

“She's as bad as I had heard,” Headmaster Rowle said. “I fear she is lost.”

“Are you sure this is the best tact to take?” Snape asked mildly. “In my experience, Miss Hebert is
capable of responding to reason, if it is expressed properly.”

“That is the problem with this school,” Rowle said. “Children think that adults should cater to
them. That's not going to happen on my watch.”
I frowned. It still wasn't certain that the man wasn't a Death Eater; there were pictures of former Headmasters in the office, and it wasn't smart for them to speak about anything truly damning.

I barely slipped into my seat on time.

A handsome man stepped into the middle of the room.

“I'm sure you all know who I am,” the man said. “My fame extends from the shores of darkest Africa, to the Great Wall of China. I am the award winning author of over a dozen books, and I am your Defense Professor.”

We'd been briefly introduced to this man this morning, before learning about the Headmaster.

“Gilderoy Lockhart is my name,” the man said, bowing deeply.

He smiled and beside me a heard Hermione sigh dreamily.

I stared at him suspiciously.

“For our first lesson of the day,” he said, “We will speak about the scourge of Wizardkind... Cornish Pixies.”

Something in a covered cage was eating my bugs faster than I could send them. I tensed, and my hand went to my wand.

He pulled the cover off the cage and opened it.

After that it was chaos.
“That was rather more...enthusiastic than I expected, Miss Hebert,” Lockhart said.

Cornish Pixies apparently had blue blood. I hadn't known that; it was an electric blue that didn't appear in nature.

“They were coming right at me,” I said absently. “Had to defend myself.”

“Couldn't you have stunned them?” he asked faintly.

“I suppose,” I said. “But I've read that they reproduce like cockroaches, and if you let them get loose next thing you know the whole place is infested with them. We had a boggart infestation last year you know.”

“I've heard a little about that,” he said. “Weren't you involved?”

I shrugged.

Everyone else in the room seemed shocked. They really shouldn't have been; they'd gone to school with me for a year.

I was proud that Hermione had gotten off some shots as well, even though the others hadn't done nearly as well.

Most of them had frozen when the pixies were released. The few who hadn't were dueling club alumni, and I needed to keep an eye on them.

“Am I in trouble?” I asked.

Part of me almost wished I was. I had a plan to escape Hogwarts, and I could likely make my way in France reasonably well now that I knew where the magical neighborhoods were. If it didn't mean leaving Hermione and Neville and the others, I might do it anyway.

After all, why should I save people who were too stupid to save themselves?

Voldemort was a big deal in Britain, but I doubted that he'd get much traction in the wider magical world. The Americans would set things right if he caused too much trouble.

There was pixie blood all over my robes. I cleaned it with a spell.

He shook his head.

“Five points to Slytherin for a rather enthusiastic defense. I fear I'll have to change my lesson plan for the other classes though... those were the only pixies I had.”

“You've got bodies,” I pointed out. “Some of them aren't even completely exploded. Why not do an anatomy lesson?”

He stared at me for a moment, and then smiled.

“An excellent idea Miss Hebert. When life gives you lemons, make lemonade.”
“I’ve heard that Cornish Pixies also are used in some potions ingredients,” I said. “You might ask Professor Snape if he could use any of the rest of this.”

He frowned thoughtfully. “You are full of ideas, young lady.”

“My life is full of lemons,” I said wily. “You either roll with it, or you get rolled.”

He stared at me for a moment.

“It’s good to have practical lessons,” I said. “Are you going to bring other monsters for us to kill?”

“I think this will be the only time,” he said carefully. “I’d thought the rumors about you to be exaggerated.”

I shrugged.

“All lies,” I said. “I’m a perfectly normal twelve year old girl.”

“I have trouble believing that,” he said.

“Ask anybody,” I said.

I heard a few incredulous guffaws in the background, but I chose to ignore them.

“I had planned to have a pop quiz,” he said finally. “But it looks like we are well out of time. Please study the first three chapters of my book Wanderings with Werewolves.”

We all nodded.

As we stepped out of the room, Hermione turned to me.

“He’s really pretty, isn't he?” she asked.

“Yes?” I said dubiously. He wouldn't have been my type even in my old body, and in my new body that sort of thing hadn't even been on my mind.

It would have been disgusting anyway.

“But I remembered what you said about people lying, even in books,” she said. “And these things in the newspapers about us being werewolves has really made me doubt some of the things that I've read.”

“OK?” I said slowly.

“I think he's a fraud,” she said in a low voice.

“Oh?”

“I've read all of his books three times,” she said. She flushed a little. “And at first I was really, really impressed. But I started to notice that the timelines don't match up.”

“That's interesting,” I said.

“Supposedly he fought the Wagga Wagga Werewolf in Australia at the exact same time that he banished a banshee in Thailand.”

“Maybe he apparated?”
“It gets more dangerous the farther you go. Maybe Dumbledore could apparate that far, but nobody else. Most wizards can barely apparate the length of Britain in one go; it’s part of the reason we use portkeys.”

“Maybe he used a portkey,” I said.

“He was also rescuing the Giant Fire Crab in the forests of Fiji and fighting vampires in Romania on the same day too,” she said. “There’s other discrepancies.”

“Maybe he got the dates wrong,” I said. “It could be human error or maybe his editors made a mistake.”

“Not this many,” she said. She scowled. “And I really wanted to believe that we had a good defense professor this year. Professor Travers was decent last year, even if he was a little...”

“Opinionated?” I asked mildly.

“What if he made it all up?” she asked.

“Maybe he exaggerated a few things to make it sound better,” I said. “They call that artistic license.”

She stared at me.

“Are you actually Taylor, or are you a transfigured Death Eater?”

“You should have your wand out when you ask me that,” I said. “But I’m really me. Why?”

“Why are you defending him like this? I’d have thought you’d be the first one to be suspicious.”

“I hope he’s as good as he says he is,” I said. “Because we’re going to need that going forward. If he’s a fraud, we’ll deal with that when it comes to it, same as if he’s a Death Eater.”

If he was a Death Eater, it was likely that this was going to be my last year at school. I didn't say it, but I could see understanding on Hermione's face.

Stupid no murdering rule.

“I’ll keep an eye on him,” I said. “But there isn't really anything we can do about it now. I don't think the Headmaster likes me, so if I run to him complaining that the Defense Professor is a fraud, he probably won't listen. And maybe he'll be good.”

“It was irresponsible to release the pixies,” she said. “Especially when he knew how you'd react.”

“Maybe that was the point,” I said. “It was our class that he released them in. Maybe he was trying to see how I would react.”

Judging me by my own actions. It was manipulative, but I could respect the urge. He'd heard rumors about me, and he'd experimented to see whether they were true. It wasn't a bad thought process. It also made me think that he wasn't a Death Eater; they wouldn't have had to test me. They'd have known how I would react.

Still, it was possible that he was going to be a fraud. I'd have to pay attention in the future to how he taught the class. If he was good, I didn't particularly care if he'd embellished his actions.

Hermione's lips tightened. The idea that books would lie offended her on a fundamental level, and
she was outraged that a man would be reaping benefits from being a good liar.

I didn't care personally. The Wizarding public was gullible; that was probably because in the absence of decades of television and radio and with basically only one outlet for news they were more credulous.

In all likelihood, the muggles of this time were probably more credulous than they had been in mine. The generation before that had probably been even less so. I'd heard somewhere that forty percent of the men who fought in World War Two couldn't read.

A population like that would believe anything, which is why people like P.T. Barnum had been able to sew half a monkey on a fish, and people had believed him.

Wizards only had the benefits of a fifth grade education before starting a school that didn't educate them at all in anything other than their specialty. While there were credulous educated people too, not having a basic understanding of political science and history would make anyone less prepared to deal with what they read.

Even Umbridge's strategy was suspect.

It was likely that she was ramming through legislation as fast as she could while she still had support due to the “emergency” at a time when she still had the votes.

Yet she was likely to create more problems than she solved by scapegoating the werewolves.

It was likely to drive them into the arms of Voldemort, simply as a way of protecting themselves. Scapegoating the muggleborn might actually create resistance movements.

She should have implemented the changes more gradually, but it was likely that she was doing it in part to placate a panicked public. People liked to see the people in charge doing something; it made them feel safer.

Even if it didn't accomplish anything, in the eyes of a politician, doing something was always better than doing nothing.

In reality, sometimes doing nothing was the best thing.

“’I heard you were asked to be a beater this year,” Hermione said. “Are you going to try out?”

“Millie told you?” I asked.

She nodded.

“No,” I said.

“It's a good way to become popular fast,” she said. “In fact, I've heard that Harry is trying out.”

“A year ago, I'd have said it was just an excuse to get me up on a broom where someone could hurt or kill me,” I said. “But that's no longer true.”

“So why not?”

“Being a Beater will make me popular with the Slytherins,” I said. “But how will the other houses feel about me?”

She frowned.
“How will Harry and the twins feel when I give them broken arms and black eyes, knock some of their teeth out?” I asked.

I shook my head. “I already have a reputation as somebody who is crazy and unstable. Seeing me up on the pitch beating the hell out of people will just make that worse.”

“You do that in the Dueling club,” she said.

“It's accepted... wizardly,” I said. “Beater...that's just going to remind them of what I did with a sock full of galleons that time.”

“All right,’ she said. “I just thought you might enjoy yourself.”

“I might, but it's not worth the risk of losing friendships over,” I said. “And I suspect that before this is over we're going to need all four houses if we're going to get through this with minimum casualties.”

“Maybe you could be seeker,” she said.

“Take the K out of that word, and what do you get?” I asked.

“Seeeeeer?”

“Right. It wouldn't be fair to anyone. How fun would the game be if I caught the snitch in the first five minutes each time? How soon would it be before everyone hated me?” I asked. “Even if I was somehow able to shut it off, which I wouldn't because that would leave me vulnerable, would anyone believe that I had?”

She frowned, and then sighed.

“It's not fun if one team always wins,” I said.

“So how are you going to get everyone on your side?” she asked. “And what are you going to do with them if you have them? We're just school kids.”

“School kids have killed Death Eaters before.”

“You've killed Death Eaters,” she said dryly. “A lot of people don't even believe that you're actually a school kid.”

I carefully kept my expression neutral.

“Some people think that you are actually an auror polyjuiced into the form of a little girl, or that you are the reincarnation of Grindewald, which is ridiculous considering that he is still alive. Some people think you're the Queen of Boggarts, or that you're a little girl who's been possessed by a demonic spirit.”

The last one was a little too close for comfort, but I didn't let my face show any expression.

“But I know what you are,” Hermione said.

“What's that?” I asked.

“A Genius,” she said. “I mean, some people are geniuses at math or physics, and some people are geniuses at.... uh....hurting people.”
I stared at her flatly.

“Just the people that need to be hurt,” she said hurriedly. “I know you’d never hurt an innocent person.”

“Right,” I said.

There were extenuating circumstances for that one time I had. It had been a mercy killing.

“Are you ready for the class in Wizarding Culture?” she asked. “I'm actually kind of excited.”

“I'm not,” I said. “They've had a couple of days to prepare it, so it's probably going to be half assed and insulting.”

“Well, they've lived as Wizards their entire life, so they have to know something about the subject.”

“They'll put a pureblood in the position,” I said. “and he won't know what we don't know. All he'll know is what muggleborns do that annoy purebloods.”

“Well, won't it be good to at least learn how not to annoy them?” she asked.

“Maybe,” I said. “But a halfblood would be a better professor. Someone who knows how both worlds work would be able to tell us just how far apart those worlds are.”

“Maybe you're wrong,” she said. “At least this professor hasn't published any books.”

“We'll see,” I said.

We headed for the classroom we'd been assigned. Wizarding class had been shoehorned in during a period that normally would have been free time for us.

That means that the pureblood kids would have three hours a week where they could study or relax that we didn't. The fact that it would make studying for OWLS harder probably had nothing to do with it.

If the muggleborn suddenly started struggling with their classes, that couldn't be blamed on the administration, right?

Stepping into the classroom, I heard Hermione murmur beside me.

The classroom was at least twice as large in each dimension as it normally was, presumably to accommodate the larger numbers of students.

As I entered, the first years turned and stared at me, murmuring to themselves. Apparently I already had a reputation. The older students however were very careful not to make eye contact. They were very quiet.

I suspected that they were afraid that I would sit by them. Whether it was because of what I might do, or because my roommate had been sent to me in a box and they were afraid of what becoming my friend might mean, I didn't know.

I was the only Slytherin in the room, but the other three houses were equally represented.

I took a seat next to Hermione in the Ravenclaw section, and I heard an audible sigh of relief from the other sections. I turned to stare at them, and people paled, turning away quickly.
“Welcome class,” a woman said.

She was a tall and slender woman. Her face was long, and not entirely attractive, but her robes were immaculate and hung well on her frame.

“My name is Morana Burke,” she said in a sing song voice. She spoke slowly and loudly, as though all of us were in Kindergarten. “I will be your professor today.”

I glanced at Hermione, who looked perplexed.

“The Wizarding world may not have any of your televisions, or electricity, but it's got charms of it's own. There are also dangers; it's easy to offend people when you don't really mean to. The way I spoke to you just now? How did it make you feel?”

Everyone was silent for a long moment, as though they were afraid she would take points for what they were inevitably going to say.

Hermione raised her hands slowly.

“Like you thought we were stupid,” she said. “Slow.”

“But I just introduced myself,” she said. “How could that be a problem?”

“It was the way you introduced yourself,” a male fourth year said, without raising his hand.

“And that's the problem with the Wizarding World,” she said. “Sometimes it's not what you say, but how you say it. There's a lot of little assumptions that people don't understand, and it creates friction.”

“And what makes you an expert on what we don't know?” I asked.

“I married a muggleborn,” she said. “And I watched him struggle for years, even with my help. I've been pushing for a class like this for a long time, and this is the first year that they called me up and decided to give it a try.”

“I thought this was just a way for the Ministry to humiliate us,” a seventh year said.

“It is, I think,” Professor Burke said. “But I've been given free reign over the curriculum, and I'm going to work hard to make this a class that will actually be of use to you. This won't be a class like muggle studies.”

“Oh?” I asked.

“When I was in school, muggle studies was a class created by people who didn't know the first thing about muggles, or their information was outdated by fifty years. It didn't really prepare me for the world my husband lived in, and I want something better for all of you.”

“How will this help us?” a third year girl asked.

“Some of you will be in the opposite of my situation. You'll marry into pureblood families, and you'll have to deal with the in-laws for the rest of your lives. Others will have to do business with purebloods. At the very least, it would be useful to know when they are insulting you.”

I saw a lot of people sitting up, suddenly looking more interested.

Maybe this wouldn't be a waste of time after all.
Beside me, Hermione began taking notes.
In the absence of the Death Eater's kids, life quickly settled into a routine. There was no one left at the school who would try to bully me; the Slytherins knew me well enough not to try, the Hufflepuffs were too intimidated. The Ravenclaws seemed to think of me as an interesting specimen to study, and the Gryffindors pretended that they weren't afraid of me, but they didn't try anything either.

Given that, it was easy to settle into the role of being a regular student.

I followed the news, of course. There were stories of aurors battling werewolves all over the island of Britain; how many of those were actually Death Eaters I couldn't be sure.

There were terrorist attacks in a number of areas, with the Muggleborn Liberation Front claiming responsibility every time. I suspected that most of them were disguised Death Eater attacks, designed to put more pressure on the new government to force them to make life more difficult for the muggleborn.

Curfews were put into place, ones that affected everyone except the government.

Wizards were used to having their freedoms, so the curfews were unpopular.

Still, things at Hogwarts had never been quieter. My guess was that Voldemort was spending time rebuilding his forces, while occasionally launching terrorist attacks to keep the government lunging at shadows.

The new Headmaster was a humorless bureaucrat, but he was good at discipline.

The same couldn't be said of our new Defense Professor.

“Now as I was saying,” he said. “Fighting werewolves is tricky business. In their wolf form they are simply beasts, but they are smarter than ordinary animals. They have a native cunning, and if they cannot get you head on, they will attack from the shadows.”

The more I watched him, the more I was certain that Hermione was right. Lockhart didn't have a certain look in his eye; someone who had done everything he'd claimed to have done would have had a hardened look. Those kind of experiences changed a person.

I'd seen that kind of look in Moody, in Snape, even in Dumbledore, although he did his best to hide it.

Lockhart, though seemed soft.

Half the girls in the class seemed enraptured by him, while the boys seemed disgusted.

“There was a rumor that Miss Hebert and Miss Granger were werewolves,” Lockhart said. “But last week certainly put those rumors to rest.”

I'd shown up to a nighttime Quidditch game, along with Hermione.

Potter was their team's new Seeker, and he seemed to be doing amazingly well. He was an ace at flying, and he seemed to have a natural eye for seeing things moving.

Flint had been angry that I had chosen not to join the team, but he hadn't pressed the issue after I'd
looked him in the eye for a long while.

“More importantly,” he said. “Werewolves are simply wizards during the day. You can deal with them as you would deal with any other Wizard.”

“And how is that?” I asked.

Lockhart had mostly ignored me during the first few weeks of classes. Apparently my first incident with the Cornish pixies had spooked him.

“With a Stunner, my dear,” he said, smiling widely. “After which, you simply call the aurors.”

“I'm a muggleborn,” I said. “How do you call the aurors without a telephone.”

“Well,” he said. “There is the patronus spell, which is exceptionally good at sending messages. You can also communicate through the floo network.”

“I don't think many of us can cast a Patronus,” I said. “And we won't always be near a fireplace.”

“In that case, your best bet is to run,” he said. He looked at me for a moment. “Murdering a fallen adversary is a good way to end up in Azkaban, after all.”

“Even if it's a werewolf?” Malfoy asked.

He seemed to have an irrational fear of werewolves. I hadn't understood until I had learned that one of the most notorious werewolves in the country was an associate of his fathers. Fenrir Greyback wasn't simply a Death Eater; there were unsavory rumors about him that made Draco's unease perfectly sensible.

“The Ministry right now might look the other way,” Lockhart said. “But they might not. It depends on your connections.”

That... was actually useful information.

“So you're saying that the justice system depends on whether people like you?”

Lockhart smiled sadly at me.

Was he implying that no one liked me?

“I'm afraid that has always been the case,” he said. “But never more than now. The current administration is...very much determined to prosecute those who do not abide by the rule of law.”

He frowned pensively.

“Why several of my adventures would now be considered illegal by today's standards,” he said.

He frowned, then said, “But class is ending, so read chapters three through seven of Magical Me, and write a one page report on why I am the most amazing hero of the modern age.”

I could hear some Ravenclaw girls sigh; I would have preferred to believe the Slytherin girls to be wiser, but some of them had an expression on their faces that I didn't like.

“Can I speak to you, professor?” I asked.

As the other students filed out of the room, he nodded. He looked a little anxious.
“I’m doing an independent research project,” I said. “But some of the books I need are in the restricted section.”

“Books are in the restricted section for a reason,” he said. “Have you asked your other professors?”

I shook my head.

“It’s a defense project, so I thought it wouldn’t be right going over your head. Besides, who better to help me than the Hero of a thousand battles.”

“Hero of a thousand battles... I like that,” he said. “You don’t mind if I borrow it?”

“Feel free,” I said.

“What is this project?”

“Last year there was an incident in dueling club. Someone attacked me with cursed snakes.”

He nodded sagely.

I’d noticed that he’d shown no interest in renewing the dueling club, which had been canceled at the end of last year, once Travers had been fired.

“I want to know how to protect myself from that... and maybe learn how to teach my friends.”

I was lying, of course. What I really wanted to know was how to curse animals in the first place. If I was able to deliver curses through bugs, then I would have a massive advantage. It would be the kind of game changer that would make everything easier, at least until people understood my power.

“That seems like advanced magic,” he said. “If it were any other student, I’d be inclined to say no. However, you have a greater need to defend yourself than the other students.”

The other professors knew better than to let me have access, but with a little luck...

He scribbled out a permission slip.

I’d used my bugs to read the titles on the spines of every book in the restricted section, so I knew what books to ask for.

Heading for the library, I stepped up to Madam Pince.

She stared at the permission slip.

“What is this?” she asked as though it wasn't obvious.

“Permission slip,” I said. “I’ve got a special project.”

She stared at me, intensely enough that I wondered if she was a legilimens. Presumably she was waiting for me to back down, as though I was trying to pass along a forgery.

Most people were intimidated by silence and would be tempted to fill the silence with anything, often incriminating themselves because they were nervous.

I simply waited, any anxiety I was feeling pushed into the insects in the walls.
She examined the slip for what seemed like forever before leading me back to the stacks. She hesitated as she waited to lift the rope.

I watched her carefully. If there was some spell she used to deactivate the books, I wanted to know it. I didn't see her do anything, though. It was possible that there was some other mechanism that I could not see.

“You aren't allowed to take the books out of the library,” she said.

I nodded.

Stepping inside, I moved to pull the titles that I wanted. I had no way to know which books would have what I needed, although I'd found references in books in the general library that would help lead me to the books I needed.

Picking a half dozen books, I handed them to Madam Pince; she stared at me suspiciously before taking the books behind her desk.

I watched what she did through my bugs. There was a series of wand movements, but she did it silently, which was a problem for me. I couldn't learn a spell like that from wand movements alone.

I'd watched her with other students doing the same thing, so I was reasonably familiar with what she was doing.

She handed the books to me, and I headed for one foe the tables. It was time to get researching.

I actually planned to do what I'd told Lockhart along the way. It was possible that they'd use cursed animals against me again, and learning how to protect myself from that would be just as important as learning to use the spells offensively.

For the next two hours I made notes. It was a Friday and I had more time than usual; something I planned to use to my greatest advantage. Sooner or later, Snape would hear about what I was doing and he'd put a stop to it. I had to get as much information as I could, and then I would have Lockhart give permission slips to Hermione, to Harry and to Neville.

By the time I was done, I would have a pretty good idea of what I needed to do, even if my spell casting skills weren't up to the challenge. After that, I'd have to work on getting good enough to actually do what had to be done.

It would give me a secret defense that would make sudden Death Eater attacks much less terrifying than they had been in the past.

I felt a young, blonde haired girl sit next to me. I'd seen her at the sorting but I didn't remember her name. She was a first year, and a Ravenclaw, and she didn't seem like an important person.

“I've never spoken to a boggart before,” the girl said. Her voice had a strange, dreamy quality. “I think it's quite interesting.”

“I'm not a boggart,” I said. I didn't look at her. There was a particularly interesting passage involving a spell designed to cause someone to cough up their own entrails.

“That doesn't seem to be the consensus,” the girl said. “I've seen a few of you from a distance, and a couple of them even changed forms.”
“There was an... incident last year,” I said. “And a lot of people are afraid of me.”

“More than one,” she said. “From what I hear. You're quite famous, aren't you.”

“Maybe,” I said, looking at her. “Is there something you want?”

“To meet a boggart,” she said. “And to find out why you are infested.”

“What?” I asked flatly.

“You were infested once,” she said. “Some kind of worm creature burrowing into your brain. At first I thought it was some sort of mutated aquavirus maggot, but it was too large.”

I felt a chill down my spine.

“And is it still infesting me?” I asked.

“No,” she said. “But something like that, I'd think it would keep looking.”

What did she know, and how did she know it? It was possible that she was just saying random things that I was ascribing meaning to, but real seers existed in this world, and it was possible that people with other wild talents did as well.

After all, I'd heard of parseltongues and metamorphmagi. How many more wild talents existed, and how could I take advantage of them?

“Who are you?” I asked.

“Luna Lovegood,” she said. “My father owns the Quibbler.”

Ah.... the local conspiracy rag.

Still, it was the one source of news that wasn't under control of the Ministry, which made her an invaluable contact.

“Look,” I said. “I don't have much time with these particular books, but I'd like to talk to you later.”

She peered over my shoulder at an illustration on the book.

“Are you sure you aren't a boggart?” she asked. “This seems like the kind of book a boggart might study.”

“People are trying to kill me,” I said. “So I have to learn how to defend myself.”

“You are quite violent,” she said. “It's probably the aftereffects of the maggots. That can't be good for the brain.”

“You just said I wasn't infested,” I pointed out.

I didn't even have my own brain. I doubted that I had a corona.

If I didn't have access to my passenger now, there was no way it would find me, not in this body, not on this world. She didn't know what she was talking about.

“Or maybe you're really a ghost,” she said.

Again, I felt a chill up my spine.
“Ghosts can't read books,” I said. Pointedly I turned a page.

“A ghost pretending to be a normal girl,” she said. “Which is like a boggart, really, except that it used to be someone and a boggart didn't.”

“I'll tell you what,” I said. “Tell Hermione Granger that I sent you. We've got a study group that meets three times a week, and you might be a perfect fit.”

With the defense club gone, I'd had to reinstate our old group.

I'd expanded our membership to several of the more trustworthy Slytherins, as well as to some of the muggleborns from Wizarding Studies classes. It was going very well, even though the group was unsanctioned by the school, and there was some worry that the Headmaster wouldn't approve.

“I'd enjoy that,” she said. “I think a lot of the girls from my year are infested with Mesopotamian ear worms. Hermione seems to be free of them.”

“Right,” I said.

I hadn't detected any insects inside anyone, except for a couple of kids who had lice. I'd caused those to abandon them at night, and I'd fed them to some of my other insects. The last thing I needed was for the staff to be looking for insects or even thinking about them.

Finding lice on some of the children might cause them to start using insect repelling spells, and that would be very bad for me.

“Well...” I said.

She stared at me for a moment, then nodded.

“I will speak to you later, Miss Boggart,” she said.

She rose and sauntered out of the library.

I frowned. There was something about the girl that bothered me. It took me a moment to identify it.

Unlike every other first year, she hadn't been afraid of me at all.

I looked back down at my book. Lovegood was a mystery to be solved another time. The project I was working on wasn't something that would bear fruit immediately. It might not even be something I was capable of for another couple of years, but if I didn't start now, it was possible that I might never learn it.

I might not be at this school next year, after all.

I could see the writing on the wall. The restrictions on muggleborns weren't as draconian as those against werewolves, in part because werewolves were a tiny portion of the population, and so there wasn't that much disruption in exiling them.

Muggleborn were a different matter, which meant that restrictions had to seem reasonable.

 Freedoms would be restricted a little at a time, each time pushing the boundary just a little bit further. Once people got used to the new order, it would be pushed forward again.

I fully expected to be exiled from the school over the next couple of years, and from what I understood, a library like the one at Hogwarts simply didn't exist, at least without paying
an arm and a leg to simply buy the books you needed.

After two hours, I sighed and rose to my feet. I slipped my notes into my pouch, and I handed the books back to Madam Pince.

I wrote a short list of books on a note, and heading back to the Slytherin dorms, I found Miles Bletchly in the common room.

“Hebert,” he said.

He was one of our study partners in the group, but he still maintained a certain distance in public for the sake of his family. We weren't certain that some of our classmates weren't being blackmailed into being spies for the Death Eaters. It would be easy to threaten someone's family.

I slipped him the note under the pretense of shaking his hand.

“Ask Fletcher if he can get these books,” I said. “I'll get you the money later.”

Bletchley and a couple of the other Slytherins were perfect for this. As Slytherins they would be expected to be interested in books on the darker magics. Fletcher was a smuggler, but if he knew that I was the one asking, he'd likely run to Dumbledore.

My connection to them wasn't clear, not in the way that it would have been if Hermione or Neville had asked for the books.

He nodded.

“I'll see you on Tuesday,” I said quietly. “You know the place.”

“Yeah,” he said. He looked down at his book, even as he slipped the note into his pocket so adroitly that no one would have noticed.

There was a lot in the books that I didn't understand; despite all my work, there was a lot of theory that I was missing. Having the books would help a lot once I'd mastered that theory.

Once I did, everything was going to change.
“Muggleborns freed from Azkaban!” the headline screamed.

Everyone was talking about it; apparently a team of muggleborn terrorists had broken into Azkaban; they’d not only freed every Muggleborn imprisoned by the Umbridge administration, but they’d freed some others who were certifiably guilty of crimes.

A couple of others had escaped in the chaos, including a pureblood named Sirius Black, and Bellatrix Lestrange, Volemort's second in command.

An entire host of other Death Eaters remained in custody, so it didn't seem like a play by Voldemort, but I couldn't be sure. Several of the Death Eaters had been murdered in their cells, likely revenge for their crimes against whoever had killed them.

Of course, if this was a false flag operation the ones who had been killed could have been killed due to disloyalty, or simply to make the illusion of a muggle resistance more plausible.

“This is going to be a problem,” I said to the others in Wizarding Studies class.

The Professor had already left the room, and I was standing up and facing them. She'd been called out to speak to members of the Ministry through the flu network. I could hear her now, arguing that her curriculum was what the Ministry had asked for, even though it clearly was not.

“It's got nothing to do with us,” a muggleborn fifth year boy said. “We didn't do it.”

By definition it was true. Anyone with a muggleborn parents was a half blood, and they wouldn't be in this class. None of the students in the room were likely related to whoever did it, but it wasn't going to matter.

“It's going to make the government paranoid,” I said. “And that means that they'll crack down, hard. I wouldn't be surprised if we started to see aurors patrolling the hallways, or worse.”

The weather outside was getting unseasonably cold. I could see frost on the window despite the fact that it had been a warm autumn day only an hour ago. I began pulling my bugs inside the castle; there was no point in letting them get killed by an unseasonable cold spell.

“They wouldn't do that!” a fourth year girl protested. “This is the United Kingdom! We have rights!”

“Well, you haven't been listening in class, have you?” I asked. “The Wizards pay lip service to being part of the UK, but they've really carved out their own little secret country in the middle of the muggle world. It's not like going from the UK to America...it's more like going from America to Iraq.”

In this world, the Americans had gone to war there for some reason; it was one of several differences I'd already noticed. Most things were almost identical, but apparently Scion and the parahumans had a bigger impact than I'd realized.

“Women have more rights among Wizardkind,” I said, “Because a wand more than makes up for being smaller and weaker. But muggleborns... we don't have the same kind of rights we're used to here.”

“Nobody does,” a sixth year boy said. “The courts are corrupt, and it's more about who you know
than what you did.”

“We don't have any connections,” I said. “And the system is going to keep us from getting any. And this... I wouldn't be surprised if we didn't see some pretty bad legislation over the next few days, stuff that we aren't going to like very much.”

“I hope you're wrong,” the sixth year said, “But I don't think that you are.”

The room burst into muttering, and as it was a large crowd, it was some time before we got people to be quiet again.

“We need to keep our heads down,” the sixth year said. “Don't draw attention to ourselves.”

I nodded.

“They'll be looking for an excuse, from all of us,” I said. “But especially from me.”

I'd been working on my exit plan for the last two months since school had started. I'd included provisions to take Hermione if Necessary, and maybe even Harry and Neville and Millie, although it would be incredibly difficult if I was to try to take all of them.

My head snapped around; Headmaster Rowle was headed our way.

“We'd better leave,” I said. “Or they'll assume that we're conspiring against them.”

We were, in a way, but I didn't tell them that. Voldemort had decided to make his own cause more popular by turning the people against another enemy.

I could do the same thing.

I'd been working to network over the past month and a half; it had been hard at first; people were reluctant to talk to me for some reason, but eventually some of my fellow muggleborns had begun to thaw to me, which had led others to follow suit.

Already, even the seventh years were listening to me, not like I was a little girl, but like I knew what I was talking about.

Personally, I thought that I did, but only time would tell. In the meantime, I needed to get the class to stay as safe as possible.

Everyone began filing out of the class.

Professor Burke had a habit of leaving class a little early, almost as though she was encouraging us to talk among ourselves while maintaining plausible deniability. That wasn't the case today; I could still hear a Ministry official raking her over the coals in the headmaster's office.

Apparently the class hadn't been intended to be the positive experience that it had proved to be, and they were demanding that she crack down harder on us.

It made sense that she might have secret urges to help us; in the course of her class, she'd shown a familiarity with the muggle world that most purebloods would never admit to having. She loved to make comparisons that made things clear to us.

I'd wondered whether or not she was really married to a muggleborn; if she wasn't, she was very good at emulating someone who had.
I followed the others into the hallway outside.

“I don't like the look of those clouds,” the boy in front of me muttered.

I could feel the cold air outside; it felt odd somehow, and my bugs were feeling.... something they couldn't identify. It made them afraid and they only remained in place because I forced them to.

The sky was turning dark, and I could see my breath in the air.

There was something coming; I shifted my awareness from the ongoing drama inside the Headmaster's office to the highest open windows in the castle. I sent bugs out to see what they could see, and what they saw worried me.

Cowled floating figures were circling the castle; was this a Death Eater attack?

I pulled out my wand. I hadn't been aware that Wizards could fly without a broom. If that was a spell that was available, I wanted to learn it.

Three of the creatures creatures broke away from the others, and they levitated over the walls.

While the walls were proof against creatures coming through the gate, obviously flight was less protected against. Was that an intentional flaw in the defenses, or had no one thought of it?

They were wearing dark hooded cloaks, and their faces were concealed. Occasionally a flash of rotting skin was exposed.

“Dementors!” I heard a seventh year yell.

I staggered for a moment.

The world around me vanished suddenly, replaced by a hellscape filled with the bodies of Scion's victims. Smoke burned my lungs, bringing with it the sickly sweet smell of burning flesh. I would have expected to hear the screams of the dying, but I didn't, because there weren't any wounded.

I was alone on a world where I had failed to protect everyone.

Images flashed through my mind; Leviathan, the Simurgh, Behemoth, the Nine. They flashed faster and faster through my mind, even as I felt a wave of overwhelming despair pass through me.

I shoved it away; the moment my emotions passed into my bugs, the world cleared around me, and suddenly I could see again.

Children were screaming and climbing over each other. A few had dropped to the ground even though the Dementors hadn't reached them yet.

The dementors almost seemed to enjoy the terror they were creating; they didn't seem as though they were in a hurry. Was this their natural state, or had they been told to do this to create the maximum amount of terror?

My mind raced.

Travers had taught us about these things last year, but it had been a while.

They were like boggarts, but infinitely worse. They were seemingly unkillable, and only a high level spell was able to repel them. It wasn't one that I had bothered to learn, since it hadn't seemed useful. I was regretting that decision now, of course, especially since it seemed that my classmates
didn't know it either. I could see a couple of the seventh years struggling with the spell, with tiny sparks of light coming from their wands, but none of them were able to be very effective.

These things ate souls, and if I was right, this part of the castle didn't have anyone in it but the muggleborns.

I pulled out my wand. I pointed my wand at a stick on the ground. Transforming it into a variation on my club wasn't hard, and a moment later I stepped forward.

These things were blind; they hunted by emotions. If that was true, then I would be invisible to them. I couldn't depend on that, but it might give me the edge I needed.

A dementor had picked Colin Creevy up by the neck, and was bringing him close to his face.

I'd found the boy annoying, especially since he'd followed me around with his camera almost as much as he did Harry. He seemed obsessed with celebrity.

I stepped up to it and smashed it in the face with my club. I did it over and over again until it dropped the boy and lashed out at me. I ducked and smashed it in its torso.

My club crushed wetly into its side.

Were these things actually immortal, or were they just immune to magic? Had anyone actually tried mundane ways of killing them?

A second dementor had a struggling seventh year. I smashed it in the back of the head.

I struck at its joints; even if it didn't have physical pain, at least physics would still apply. It lunged toward me, dropping the boy.

The third dementor lunged toward me as well; apparently they were able to communicate among themselves, and they were intelligent enough to realize that they were under attack.

I ducked and weaved, and lashed out with my club, even as the other students pulled the younger ones back.

The entire world narrowed as I struggled to fight all three of them at once. Contrary to what Hollywood fight movies would tell you, three on one were very bad odds. The fact that I was invisible to them, that I was smaller than they were, and faster was the only thing that made it viable in the first place.

All it would take was for one of them to get hold of me and it would all be over.

I could vaguely sense Hermione and some of the older children trying to blast spells at us; they were hampered by the need to avoid hitting me, and nothing they did seemed to have any kind of effect.

They ate souls, and all that remained of what was actually me was a soul. If I died here, this was it; no afterlife, no chance at another world, just eternal oblivion.

It was a sign of just how crazy Wizards were that they thought that this was better than simply killing people.

I could hear my own breath rasping in my lungs as I ducked beneath an arm lunging at me from behind. They were getting closer, probably because they could hear the sound of my breathing,
which was getting louder and louder. A summer filled with swimming couldn't make up for a year and a half of sitting in classrooms.

Sooner or later I was going to have to release my insects, but I doubted that they'd do much good. These things didn't seem to breathe, and they didn't have eyes. Insects could maybe eat their bodies, but that would take hours, and I doubted that they would sit still for that for long.

I was tiring and they weren't. The end of this was a foregone conclusion, unless I simply decided to cut my losses and run. If I did that, they'd turn on the other children.

Many of them had run inside, but a few were still on the ground, moaning. If I stopped fighting, they'd lose their souls, and I didn't want to be responsible for that.

Whoever had set this up was going to die, and in pain. It was a vow that I made for myself.

"Expecto Patronum!" I heard a shout in a rich, full voice.

A silvery wolf exploded out of a wand, and the dementors hissed, and immediately backed off.

I stared at them warily, even as I watched behind me with my bugs.

Headmaster Rowle was standing in the middle of the students, his face looking enraged.

"Go back!" he shouted. "This is not the place for you! You will stay outside the walls or you will not be here at all!"

The things tried to lunge forward, but the wolf interposed itself between us and it. It pushed them back over and over, and eventually it pushed them over the walls.

Rowle stared at the walls suspiciously.

"Is anyone hurt?" he asked.

I looked around; my arms and legs felt like they were made of lead, even though it hadn't objectively been that long.

I was going to have to work on my martial arts skills; they'd apparently grown rusty with disuse.

Every child on the ground was still alive, and some of them were starting to wake up.

"We'd have been dead if it wasn't for Taylor," Hermione said.

"Who was responsible for this?" I demanded. I rose to my feet and caught my breath. "Were you planning to wait until they'd Kissed a lot of us, and the rest so terrified that they'd leave the school?"

His face flushed red and he scowled.

My hand tightened around my wand. Part of me wanted to blast him right now, in front of a group of twenty of the Muggleborn who'd stayed behind to fight.

"You've been through something traumatic," he said. "And so I will be merciful. If you make an accusation like that again, we will be having words."

"If I can prove it, we won't be," I said. "Why are there dementors outside the castle?"
“I was going to make an announcement at dinner,” he said. “The Ministry has put up the dementors to guard the school against the Muggle Liberation Front. Also, there's some worry about Sirius Black and some of the others who escaped.”

“And the dementors happened to attack the corner of the castle where only the muggleborn were at?” I asked. “Doesn't that seem like something that would take an inside job to arrange?”

“Miss Hebert...” he said. “I warned you once.”

“This is what they think of us,” I said. “Maybe it wasn't Headmaster Rowle...maybe it was the Ministry. They want us as dead and gone as the werewolves.”

Dead werewolves had been popping up all over Britain. It was thought to be the work of people who blamed them for the attacks, although it could have just as easily been the work of corrupt aurors. No one had taken credit.

No matter what happened, it was likely that a number of the muggleborn parents would withdraw their children from school. Once they did, it would be easy to pick them off one by one.

“This won't happen again,” he said.

“This was an attack on the school,” I said. “By the Ministry itself!”

“You are paranoid,” he said. “If it was a few rogue dementors. If they'd really meant to finish you off, wouldn't they have used all of them?”

We were both speaking to the students, some of whom were filtering back outside now that the danger was gone.

“Plausible deniability,” I said. “They wanted us dead, but for it to not be their fault.”

Rowle pulled out his wand, and my wand snapped up.

“Put down your wand!” he snapped.

I didn't until he put the wand to his own throat.

“All students are to return to their dormitories,” he said, his voice magically projected everywhere.

To their credit, the students who'd remained to try and fight stared at the two of us uncertainly. They didn't move.

“Go!” Rowle shouted.

I nodded slightly, and they began to file one by one inside the castle. Hermione was the last to do so; she looked back at me with a troubled look on her face.

“Not you,” Rowle snapped, even though I hadn't moved to go. “We're going to have a discussion.”

He made as though to grab my arm, and my wand snapped up. He looked down at it, then in my eyes, and he took a step back.

“Come to my office,” he said.
“Were you trying to start a riot?” Rowle asked.

I stared up at him and didn't say anything. I was used to having to look up at everyone, but he was a very large man, and he was clearly used to using his size to intimidate people. He loomed over me, standing just a little too close, although I noticed that he carefully kept his hand away from his wand.

It shouldn't have worked; even the smallest Wizard could beat the largest muggle. Human nature was what it was, however, and it had apparently worked often enough for him to keep using it.

“Do you really think being hauled off to Azkaban would do your classmates any good?”

“They wouldn't be...”

“If I was what you think I am, I'd have them sent to Azkaban or possibly home in pine boxes,” he said. “I'm no Dumbledore, but I could have taken the lot of them.”

If he was really that confident, he wouldn't be so cautious with me... unless it was because I was an unknown quantity. I'd been known to kill six Death Eaters, and he hadn't really seen me fight. That kind of caution spoke well of him; it suggested that he was a little less stupid than some of them.

Either that, or he simply didn't have a lot of confidence in the kinds of Wizards produced by this school, which might be another sign of not being stupid.

“The Ministry just tried to kill us,” I said.

“I agree,” he said.

“What?”

“Dementors don't go off plan like that, not unless they are offered a temptation they can't resist or they are ordered to. I can't imagine that any muggleborn is particularly happy right now, not with the way the political world is... which means that they'd make substandard targets.”

“You knew...”

He shook his head and scowled. “I don't know why you think that we're your enemies. Most purebloods don't agree with all this claptrap. Muggleborns are Wizards too; it's not like they are muggles.”

I let that pass. He hadn't answered my question.

“There are elements of the government who don't agree that muggleborn deserve the same rights as everyone else,” he continued. “I had no idea that they would go this far, but I suspected that they would try something.”

“And that's why you were already on your way to us?” I asked.

He shook his head and scowled.

“I just knew that leaving a class of over a hundred children without supervision was a terrible idea,” he said. “We're lucky you didn't burn down the castle.”
“You don't think much of children, do you?”

“I was a child once,” he said dourly. “That was enough. Where do you think the evil in Death Eaters and their ilk comes from? They never outgrew what comes naturally to them as children.”

Ah. So children were evil.

“So what do you intend to do about it?” I asked. “They just tried to murder possibly a quarter of the students remaining in Hogwarts. Whatever you think of muggles, do you think they’ll leave their children in this school once they found out what happened?”

“Nobody was hurt,” he said.

“Wizards think like that,” I asked. “Because they can heal from almost anything. Muggles are a lot more fragile, which means they were even more protective of their children. If you don't believe me, just ask professor...”

He waved his hands.

“I'll think of something. The important thing is that you don't spread rumors that I had anything to do with this.”

“Why?” I asked. “It would probably make you more popular in the government.”

“I don't care about that,” he said. “I came here to turn boys into men, and girls into women, not to kill them.”

Presumably to make them less evil?

I stared at him assessingly. It was possible that I'd misread him; I still wasn't sure.

“Is the Ministry going to remove the dementors?” I asked.

He stared at me, and then said, “I'll protest, but they'll insist that this was a tragic mistake, that they are doing everything they can to keep the students safe.”

“Then teach us the patronus spell,” I said.

“That's a high order spell,” he said, “Difficult to learn. Ask Lockhart.”

“Do you really think Lockhart can cast it?”

There was the slightest wince on his face before it smoothed into impassiveness.

“Perhaps have Flitwick teach it in his classes,” I said. “To everyone who can learn it, but especially the muggleborns since we've been targeted.”

He frowned, then nodded.

“I'll speak to Filius,” he said. He stared at me. “As for you, I'm going to have to have you in detention.”

Looking at the chains hanging behind him, I shook my head.

“Not the chains,” he said. “Those are just for the worst of the worst...the Weasleys if we can catch them. But if I'm not seen to discipline you, I will have no authority whatsoever.”
I realized that I was shivering.

“What’s wrong with you?” he asked. He reached out and grabbed my arm, then hissed.

Pulling out his wand, he pointed it at me. Immediately I felt warmth surrounding me.

“What is this?”

“It's cold around the dementors,” I admitted. “And once I stopped moving...”

This body was smaller than my last, and that meant that the cold penetrated faster. I didn't have enough body fat to keep myself warm. The cold had penetrated all the way to my bones, even with the warming charm, I felt chilled.

“We'll get you down to Pomfrey,” he said. “Do you need chocolate?”

“Chocolate?” I asked. Was he like Dumbledore? I'd always wondered if those candies he offered everyone were laced with something. I was probably wrong.

“To deal with the aftereffects of dealing with the Dementor's affect on people,” he said. He stared at me. “You didn't feel it at all, did you?”

“You have to have happy memories for them to steal,” I said. I met his gaze. “And I haven't had that many since I moved to this world... the Wizarding World.”

“And before that?” he asked.

“I grew up in a tough neighborhood,” I said. “I haven't been happy in a long time, and I know how to deal with that.”

He didn't look convinced, but he gestured for me to follow, and we headed for the infirmary.

The room was filled with weeping students. It looked like a war zone. Some of the students had been trampled in the panic as the others tried to get away; others were dealing with the emotional aftereffects of what had happened.

Heads started to turn as soon as we entered the room, and voices quieted, although I could hear some of the students still moaning in the background.

Everyone was staring at me.

Hermione wasn't here; the students who'd fought and not been injured had all been sent to their quarters. These were those who'd been left lying on the ground, the wounded, and the most vulnerable.

I saw a sudden movement from my left, and my hand went to my wand. Before I could raise it, I was enveloped in a hug by Colin Creevy. He sobbed into my shirt, and muttered something, I assumed thanking me.

I stood stiffly in his embrace. The cold must be affecting my reaction speed, or the exhaustion. I felt suddenly drained, as though I'd been running for miles. Slowly, Colin pulled away from me and looked up with me, with something in his eyes that it took me a moment to identify.

It was gratitude.

One student, I didn't see who, began to clap.
The others rose to their feet, those that were able, and they all began to clap. I heard them cheering, and it took me a moment to understand.

This felt strange.

I'd had moments like this in my own life; there'd been a moment in a school cafeteria when students had stood up for me against the world's premiere heroes, forming a human shield.

But this was the first time it had happened in this world. I'd had more rejection here than I'd had at home; for being a mudblood, for being violent, for being different. It shouldn't have mattered; they were just children, and their opinion should have meant nothing to me. For some reason, though, I felt a lump in my throat.

Rowle must have sensed my unease, because he said “Being on the side of what's right often means no one notices or cares. But then there are moments like this...appreciate it while it lasts.”

Rowle waited until the applause had died down before gesturing for Madam Pomfrey.

“Miss Hebert got chilled when she was fighting the dementors,” Rowle said. “Take care of her as you will.”

“Are you injured, Miss Hebert?” she asked, moving suddenly to my side. “I've been hearing some unbelievable stories about you.”

I shrugged.

Most of the stories about me were unbelievable, including some that were outright ridiculous. That Luna girl still thought I was some kind of mutant boggart.

“Nothing that can't be fixed,” I said.

She pointed her wand at me, something I wouldn't have allowed from another wizard without an explanation.

“Some muscle stiffness,” she said. “Bruises on your left arm and right knee. Your core body temperature is low; that's why you are shivering.”

She made several notes on a sheet of paper, which she handed to me. I looked at it, but didn't understand anything on it, except that there was an outline of a human body that looked a little like the targets used on a gun range. She's made marks on the places where I was presumably injured.

“I'll be fine in a little bit,” I said. “Why don't you help those who need it?”

“I've got the sixth and seventh years helping with the minor sprains and injuries,” she said. “With those who are emotionally more stable handing out chocolate. Take a bed, Miss Hebert, and someone will be around to you shortly.”

The beds were all taken up, so I sat in one of the visitor's chairs.

Students surrounded me almost immediately, hands reaching out to touch me as they thanked me over and over. Some of them had questions.

I didn't like being crowded like this; it would be easy for someone to slip in and attack me in the middle of all the well wishers.

“Back off,” I heard a male voice say. It was one of the seventh years, and he pushed his way
through the others. “She needs help just as much as any of you, so back the hell up!”

It took a little bit, but everyone seemed to get the hint. They backed up, leaving a ten foot ring
around me.

“I'm sorry about that,” he said. “I don't think anybody's really themselves right now.”

He pulled out his wand, and looking at my paper, I proceeded to cast spells on the parts of me that
had been injured. I felt a sudden absence of a pain I hadn't even been aware of.

“I don't know what to make of you, Hebert,” he said. “It was all I could do to stand up out there
and you... it was like it didn't affect you at all.”

“You don't give in to despair,” I said after a long moment when I realized that he was looking for
some kind of an answer. Everyone huddled around us was listening too. “You fight through it, and
you beat it.”

I knew it wasn't that simple. I'd seen my own father's depression, and there had been times in my
life where I'd been so depressed that it had been hard to move. But these kids needed something
more than the idea that working through despair was a long and arduous task. They needed
something to aspire to.

Miss Yamada had even questioned whether my throwing myself at Lung on my first night as a hero
had been an unconscious form of committing suicide.

Looking up at everyone, I said, “I've had some experience with all of this, and I can tell you one
thing.”

Everyone stared at me expectantly.

“We're going to have to help each other,” I said. “In America, the muggle military has a saying...
Leave no man behind.”

I saw people looking down at their feet. These weren't the people who'd tried lobbing spells. These
were the people who had run, or who had been trampled, or those who'd simply collapsed.

“I can't fight,” One girl said. “Not those.”

“Then you help somebody else run,” I said. “Get to a door and enlarge it so they can't get through.”

“I'm not brave,” she said.

“You don't have to be brave to help people,” I said. “You just have to do it. Things like this are
going to happen in this world, more now than ever.”

Helping people at a risk to yourself, even when you were afraid was the very definition of brave.
But I couldn't let them think that bravery was something that was inborn; it was the result of
choices people made to overcome fear.

“Maybe I'll just go home,” a fourth year said.

“And how will you explain missing three and a half years of school?” I asked. “What kind of a job
will you get without an education?”

I saw the realization on the faces of some of the crowd, while I could see that others had already
thought about it.
“This place is a trap, even when there's not a war on,” I said. “They make it so that we can't ever go back to the muggle world; they cut our ties and they make us live completely in their world.”

“We could still go home, at least until this is all over,” One sullen boy said.

“They've been killing muggleborn before they come here,” I said. “How are you going to defend yourself at home? By yourselves? They'll start picking through everybody who goes home and you'll all be dead in a week.”

There was a sudden murmuring of dismay from the crowd.

“They've backed us into a corner,” I said. “And the only way we're going to survive is if we are better than they are. That's not just morally. Most Wizards don't even know the shield spell by the time they graduate. We all need to know the patronus, shields and other spells... enough that we can get away if we are attacked.”

I could see some resistance on the faces of some; I'd have had an easier time convincing those who had stepped up to fight in the first place. I could see a sort of resigned acceptance on other faces.

“How?” I heard a girl say. “Lockhart isn't teaching us anything like combat spells.”

“Then we have to take things in our own hand. How many of you were in the dueling club last year?”

A smattering of them raised their hands; mostly those who had collapsed without having a chance to fight. I had an ugly suspicion that those were the children who'd had the worst childhoods, given what I knew.

None of the others raised their hands, or even admitted to have attending.

“We need to do something like that again,” I said. “In secret, because if some people in the Ministry hear about it, they'll make it out like we are a muggleborn army training to take over.”

“Is that what we'd be doing?” a small boy asked.

“No,” I lied. “We'd just be learning to protect ourselves.”

Eventually the Wizarding world was going to have to change. The statute of Secrecy was going to be incredibly difficult to maintain once cell phones started uploading suspicious activity to an Internet the purebloods did not understand.

If I were running things, I'd have muggleborns joining the muggle military and intelligence agencies. With key people in place, it would be easier to keep track of what governments knew, and to be able to make changes as necessary. Once those people retired, they'd be able to train aurors to be better at their jobs as well.

The seventh year said, “You sound like somebody who wants to overthrow the system. You know...after today, I'm kind of OK with that.”

I looked around.

“There will be traitors among us, people who will try to sell us out to the Ministry or the Death Eaters.”

Everyone shook their heads.
“What if they threatened to kill your family?” I asked. “That would be different. If we were to start teaching each other, it would have to be something that no one knew about and no one could talk about.”

“You just told it to all of us,” the seventh year said. “Kind of hard to keep it a secret.”

“There are ways,” I said.

I'd had something like this in the back of my mind for a while, and I'd researched what had to be done.

“How many of you might be interested?”

A hand went up, followed by another, and then another. Pretty soon, almost everyone standing around me had raised their hands.

“What's going on?” I heard Pomprey say. She'd left the room to get some more potions, something that I'd made sure of before I'd started my treasonous remarks.

“Go back to your beds this instant!” she said. “Miss Hebert will still be here tomorrow, assuming young Mister Jeffries knew his healing as well as his marks say he does.”

“Mark Jeffries,' the seventh year said. “I think this is going to be an interesting year.”
“I found it when I got lost,” Colin said. “And I...uh....needed to use the loo.”

“So it becomes anything you want?” I asked.

How had I missed something like this? It wasn't on the twins map, and I hadn't ever really noticed any of the bugs on the wall, probably because the space beyond wasn't actually in real space at all. When Colin had showed it to me earlier in the day I'd been flabbergasted.

“Nothing living,” Colin said. “And I don't think everything in there is real. I tried taking some things out and they vanished.”

“All right,” I said.

I'd already tried this out but I was speaking for the benefit of the others. It was time to show them what I had learned.

I closed my eyes, and then I paced back and forth in front of the wall. I'd found that it was important to have a coherent image in your mind of what you wanted, or things could get a little weird.

A door opened, and we looked inside.

I heard the others gasp.

Inside was a representation of Brockton Bay after Leviathan had hit. There were bodies on the ground, and the devastation looked like a bomb had hit. Above was an eternally clouded night sky. The smell of the ocean in the air was unmistakable... salt and rotten fish, and other, worse scents.

“Bring everyone in,” I said.

The whole thing only stretched two city blocks, but it was enchanted to look like it extended further, It smelled like it was going to rain. I felt a wave of nostalgia; it was exactly like I remembered.

They slipped into the room, more than two dozen of them. All of them looked a little apprehensive, which made sense, considering what we'd forced them to do. We'd gotten fifty members to agree to join, which was surprising when they learned what the contract they'd signed was meant to do.

No one would speak about this on pain of the worst curses our seventh years could think of. I'd had several of the older students ready to obliviate anyone who refused to sign; they'd never know that they'd refused the call.

I'd been convinced that less than half would join; we were asking for a lot, and I was sure that at least some of them would turn away.

We'd lost only two of them. Each of them had signed the pledge, some more firmly than others, but none of them had turned away.

Was it because the Ministry had pushed them into a corner? Or was it because of some quirk of human nature than said that the bigger the sacrifice, the more valuable the thing was that you were making the sacrifice for.
Was it personal loyalty to me? Since I'd stood between the entire class and the dementors, the muggleborn had been looking at me differently. It was useful, but it made me strangely uncomfortable.

Even back at home as Weaver, while I'd had the fear and respect of people, I'd never had this kind of devotion.

The twenty who had stood and fought had joined thirty of those who had been in the Hospital\ They were a ragtag group, a mixture of grades ranging from second year on up. The only first year was Colin Creevy. I suspected that the other first years had been convinced that they wouldn't have anything to offer.

The only non-muggleborns here were Harry Potter and Neville.

The door closed behind the last straggler, and I looked outside, even though I didn't have to. There was no one in the hall outside, and this was one of the halls that didn't have paintings.

I turned to them, and I could see the look of apprehension on their faces.

“We're going to learn Urban Warfare,” I said. “It's the nastiest, ugliest kind of warfare there is. Most muggle wars are fought from a distance... drop a bomb and it's quick and easy. You never even have to think about the person you have killed. Even guns kill, often from such a distance that the person you are shooting barely seems human.”

I stepped toward them.

“We don't have that option. Wizard spells are slow and imprecise, and that means that you need to be close enough to see the whites of their eyes before you can be sure of hitting them.”

“Are we joining the army?” Colin was the youngest and he looked it. He looked tiny compared to everyone else, and he looked even more nervous than most. There was a look of hero worship when he looked at me, though.

I'd have preferred that he not have sent those pictures off to the Daley Prophet and the Quibbler, but he'd been certain that it would only do the cause good. Whether they would be published or not, and what kind of story was going to come of it was still to be determined.

If we were lucky, public outrage would cause the dementors to be withdrawn from the school. I doubted we'd be that lucky. Undoubtedly the Ministry would be quick to claim that it was a mistake, or maybe they'd claim that muggleborn had somehow lured the dementors into the castle themselves.

“We're learning to survive,” I said, taking a deep breath.

I gestured, and four seventh years stepped forward.

I pulled some dark cloaks from a pile by my feet, and I handed them to them.

“The first thing I want to do is show you what real combat is like,” I said. “And to do that, we need enemies. These boys are going to play Death Eaters, and you.... you are playing yourselves. Good luck.”

I'd gone over strategy with all four boys already; I'd taken them through this location and I'd told them what they needed to do.
All four boys whirled their wands around themselves, and a moment later their bodies shimmered and they disapparated.

There was a sound of pounding feet, and a moment later four of the children standing and staring went down due to invisible stunners. The others were still staring. That didn't bode well for their reaction speed; we were going to have to work on that.

“I think you'd better run,” I said.

They scattered in panic. Half of them were down in the first minute.

I was pleased to see that Hermione, Neville and Harry were not among them. Our training last year had been one on one, not in group tactics, but at least it had taught them how to move and how to dodge.

Ducking slightly to the side, I avoided a stunner that one of the seventh years launched at me. He was known to be a joker, and I'd been expecting something like this. I pointed my wand behind me without looking and directed a stinging hex at him.

No more spells were directed at me.

Using my bugs, I was able to keep track of everything that was happening. Some of the students tried hiding, but against an invisible enemy it was useless.

It took five minutes to get the last of them. Hermione was the second to fall, and Harry was the last. He was surprisingly nimble and fast, and some of the others had already woken up and were watching as it took four seventh years to finally bring him down.

I made a note of the others who had lasted the longest; they were the ones who had potential.

When everyone finally woke up, I said, “If those had been real Death Eaters, you'd have all been dead.”

“We can't fight Death Eaters!” Colin said. He sounded a little panicked.

He wasn't the only one. I could see that a lot of the confidence the group had been showing when we'd stepped into the room was gone. I couldn't afford to leave it that way. These kids weren't recruits to the Wards. They hadn't signed contracts to join up to a paramilitary organization. That meant that I needed a lighter touch.

“I'm going to show you how,” I said. I paused. “What do you know about wolves?”

“They're like dogs, right?” A fourth year asked. “But meaner?”

If this had been a group of purebloods they wouldn't have known even that much. But the muggleborn had watched television; their image of wolves was formed by innumerable dramas and possibly from nature documentaries.

“They hunt in packs,” Hermione said. “Attacking from all sides.”

“Unless you are fighting Dumbledore or the Dark Lord himself, most Wizards will go down if they face enough spellfire. You probably will never be good enough to beat a Death Eater by yourself. But ten of you?”

“You supposedly beat six Death Eaters as a first year,” a sixth year said. He stared at me.
“I cheat,” I said bluntly. “I don’t care about honor, or being heroic, or any of that claptrap. When people are trying to murder me, I murder them back, and even better. The Bible says an eye for an eye... I don't believe that. If they take my eye, I'm going to take both of their eyes, their hands and their feet.... and probably their friend's just in case.”

I saw some people wincing, but others seemed more open.

“I don’t expect you to be that way,” I said. “I’ve been through some things, and your lives have likely been better. But you have to be pragmatic if you are to survive. You know what our motto is...”

“Sly as a Slytherin, brave as a Gryffindor, Smart as a Ravenclaw, and Loyal as a Hufflepuff,” everyone said.

Hermione had been the one who'd come up with it; she'd said that we needed something to show that we were more than just our Houses. The house system was designed to pull us apart, and we needed unity.

“It'll take qualities of every house to keep us alive. We can't just be better than them, we have to rub it in their faces. They think that Muggleborns aren't good at magic... we'll be the top of our class. They think we are lesser? We'll prove them wrong.”

“How?” Colin asked. “They get to do magic during the summer, and the purebloods have tutors.”

“We help each other,” I said. “If one of us is bad at something, the rest of us help to lift them up. If we see someone being bullied, we will not stand for it; if you aren't brave enough to do it yourself, come and get a teacher or get someone who can.”

I'd been thinking about this for a while now.

“The system is stacked against us. Being allowed to do magic during the summers gives the purebloods a huge advantage over the rest of us; so does having family libraries and tutors. The only way to counteract that is through hard work.”

Hermione stepped up next to me.

“You all signed the contract,” she said. “And you know what it means if you tell anyone outside of this room. The official story is that we considered creating an organization, but we decided that we didn't have time.”

“If there is someone you want to nominate for membership, come to us, and we will consider it,” I said.

I very specifically hadn't signed the contract, and I wasn't bound by any of its tenets. No one had questioned that, which I considered to be a good sign.

The fact that no one questioned two second year girls making decisions for the seventh years was a miracle in and of itself. We looked ridiculous next to the sixth and seventh years. In the regular world they would have looked at us as children, but no one here was looking at me that way.

“Now, it's time to learn tactics,” I said. “Let's split up into squads of five. I want people of different years in the same squads; that'll force those in lower years to catch up.”

“It won't hold some of us back?” Jeffries asked.
“I'll have more advanced training for you later,” I said. “You will be the leaders and you need to learn how to lead.”

I had plans for these kids. I'd have felt guilty about it, but the alternative would have been even worse. At least I planned to help them defend themselves.

“All right,” I said. “The first thing that I'm going to teach you about cover. You know what the only thing that can stop the Killing Curse is?”

“Harry Potter?” Neville asked.

Everybody laughed, and the mood in the room suddenly changed. I'd been right to bring him along. Despite being a pureblood, he was well liked by the people who knew him.

“Besides that,” I said. “Actual physical barriers can stop it. I've wondered why Wizards don't use tower shields to stop it; I'd have thought that it would be easy enough to enchant to levitate in front of you.”

“It blocks the vision,” Jeffries said. “And won't stop a lot of spells.”

“The muggle police make transparent plastic riot shields,” I said. “Why not use those?”

“A good wizard would just blast the shield, and then hit you with a Killing curse after,” A sixth year said. “Or transfigure the shield into something else.”

“And while they're doing that, you've got time to use the entrail expelling charm on them,” I said. “It seems like a win to me.”

“What if you're facing more than one wizard. They could crack it a lot easier than a regular shield, right?” Colin asked.

“What if you used a hardening charm on it?” Hermione asked. “Then it might protect you from other things too.”

“It's something we'll need to think about,” I said. “But the truth is that you won't have a shield most of the time. That means that you will have to learn to use the terrain around you. How many of you have seen action movies?”

Everyone raised their hands except Neville and Harry.

“Some of the things you see in those movies is wrong. Using two guns just means missing with both of them. Bullets will go right through a car door; if you want to hide; a car will provide concealment but not protection. If you want protection, hide behind the wheels or the engine block. There's other things, but the thing they get right is people hiding behind things when the bullets start flying.”

“It doesn't seem very Wizardly,” a sixth year complained.

“I'd rather be a living muggle than a dead Wizard,” I said. “And a living wizard is even better. How to most Wizard battles seem to go?”

“One on one,” Jeffries said. “Best man wins.”

“And you're hoping that your man is the one who is just a little quicker than theirs,” I said. “We don't have that kind of luxury. If we want to win, we have to fight like muggles.”
“We don't have guns,” Colin said nervously.

“Just because I'm an American doesn't mean that I'm obsessed with guns,” I said. I looked at everyone's expression. “Oh... it's not because I'm an American.”

Apparently everyone just assumed that I'd use guns.

I could see the appeal, but guns were too complicated to transfigure unless you were already an expert. They required parts that worked together to very small tolerances. They were loud and noisy, and I still wasn't convinced that a shield spell wouldn't work against a bullet.

I suspected that it would, actually. A supersonic rifle round might be able to kill a wizard before he had a chance to cast a spell, but this was Britain. Back at home I could have gotten guns and explosives easy.

Here I wouldn't even know where to start looking.

I had other ideas already, though. Ambushes while disillusioned, with overwhelming force. Multiple wizards with waves of blasting curses acting as artillery. Wizards on brooms as a hit and run strike force.

But first I had to teach them the basics. I had to teach them teamwork, how to move, to take cover. There was a lot to cover and I couldn't be sure how much time we were going to have.

“Let's just split into groups,” I said tiredly. “And let's see if we can't turn the lot of you into the kind of people the Ministry is going to be afraid of.”

“Why the Ministry?” Jeffries asked.

“Because we aren't going to be able to make the Death Eaters afraid,” I said. “And we scare the Ministry more than the Death eaters do.”

“What?” This time it was Hermione who spoke.

“Think about it. If the Dark Lord takes over, it'll pretty much be like it is now, at least for them. As a pureblood, all you have to do is keep your head down and don't make too many waves and you'll be fine. The half-bloods will have it worse, but really the only ones it'll be a disaster for is us.”

“But why would they be afraid of us?” she asked. She looked confused.

“Because we represent everything changing. They're afraid that we'll demand some of the stuff we've gotten used to... electric lights, television, ball point pens. More importantly, if we gain power, they fear that means they'll have to lose it. They've been resting on the accomplishments of their ancestors for the past thousand years, and the thought that they might actually have to work to find their place in the world terrifies them.”

Power was the one universal constant. No matter what world I was on, I was sure that it would always be the same. The people who had power would do anything they could to maintain it.

“Groups of five, people!” I said.

All I could hope was that it was going to be enough.
“This was clearly the work of the Death Eaters,” Minister Umbridge said. “I can state unequivocally that nothing is more important to this administration than the safety of our children.... even children of a....lesser status.”

“It's a load of bollocks,” Tonks muttered to Moody.

“Could be true,” Moody said quietly. They were working as security for the event, even though nobody really thought the Death eaters wanted Umbridge out of office. She was too useful for them.

“In fact,” Minister Umbridge said, “I am proposing new legislation for the protection of the poor muggleborn children. After the unfortunate incident, seven muggleborn parents chose to withdraw their children. In each case, the children and their families were found murdered.”

The reporters gasped, even though it shouldn't be news at all. The story about the muggleborn murders before school had begun had broken, and no one had seemed to care that much. It wasn't their children after all.

This, though... people didn't particularly care about the muggleborn children, but once the dementors had finished with them, it seemed likely that they'd have gone on to murder pureblood children. That was something that had everyone up in arms, and was threatening to overturn the government.

“The muggles would like to protect their children, but against Wizards they are helpless, and so I am sponsoring legislation to make it a law that muggleborn children be fostered by Wizarding families.”

“And if their parents don't agree?” Rita Skeeter asked.

“It's for their own protection, and that of their children,” Umbridge said sweetly. “How could anyone argue with that? Still, muggles can sometimes be stubborn, and so means will be taken to minimize problems.”

“Raise them like Wizards, kill off their own culture,” Moody muttered. “Time they're out of school they won't even remember what the muggle world's like.”

“Dumbledore will stop it, won't he?”

“He's busy these days,” Moody muttered. “I'm not sure what. He keeps it hush hush... but he seems to think its important.”

“But this....”

“She might be right,” Moody said. “They've been murdering them off, and it's possible that summer will end up being a blood bath. I don't have to like it.”

“What about the Hero of Hogwarts?” the editor of the Quibbler asked.

Umbridge sniffed disdainfully. “She's a disturbed young girl with a history of violent behavior. The fact that it came in useful this once does not make her a hero.”
The Quibbler had shown pictures of the fight over the last several days, each more dramatic than the last. Their readership had exploded since the Daily Prophet had censored all references to the event.

Enough children had written about it that people were intensely interested.

Rita Skeeter had looked like she was going to burst a blood vessel when she'd discovered that she wouldn't be allowed to report on the story. Tonks had seen her in the Ministry protesting loudly.

“I think you might need to go back to school,” Moody said. “The kids there have been a target more than once, and the Ministry has ordered us to put more aurors on the case.”

Tonks nodded.

She was a newly minted auror, one of a very small class, but her metamorphmagus abilities had put her in high demand.

“Why me, though?” she asked. “It's not like I can pretend to be one of the kids, and as an auror, I'm just another face in the crowd.”

“You just graduated,” Moody said. “Which means that you know most of the kids, including her.”

“Taylor?” Tonks asked. “I wasn't ever close with her; she was in another house and a firsty when I was a seventh year. Most of what I knew about her was rumors and speculation, and that one time I saw her walking in from the forest with a broken arm after fighting a troll.”

“That's more than most aurors know,” Moody said. “Most of them tend to either underestimate her because she's a child, or they listen to the rumors and assume that she's some kind of a demon in kid's clothing. You should be able to be a little more objective.”

“And you think that she'll trust me more because I was a student she might recognize?” Tonks asked. “She seemed pretty suspicious last year.”

“I've heard that she's relaxed some over the summer,” Moody said. “She hasn't killed anyone this school year, at least not as far as I've heard. She did try to brain a few dementors, so she might just be getting started. I'd like for you to find out if that is true and if there's anybody on staff who's working for the Death Eaters.”

“I can do that,” Tonks said.

They both stopped whispering and listened to Umbridge finishing her speech.

“If we all work together we can create a better world,” Umbridge said. “One where our weakest and lowest members are just as protected as their betters.”

She smiled genially, even though the response from the crowd was tepid.

“Where's she going to get Wizarding families willing to sponsor the muggleborn?” Moody asked. “Everybody knows they are being targeted, and most Wizards are terrified their family will be next. Hosting muggleborns would be putting a target on your back and on those of your children.”

“She'll have to open orphanages,” Tonks said. “And then there will be a lot of muggleborn dying due to mistakes...”

“And she'll claim she did everything she could to stop it, but that maybe it's for the best, since the
Death Eaters won't be targeting the school anymore. There's people who will privately feel relieved."

“Are we sure she's not a Death Eater?” Tonks asked.

Moody shook his head. “Even the Death Eaters don't like her, not really. But with the Wizangamot deadlocked, she was the only candidate everyone agreed that the other side would hate.”

Tonks looked over the crowd.

“It doesn't look like anybody's convinced.”

“The Prophet will spin it the way the Ministry wants, and that's all that's important. Most wizards believe whatever claptrap the paper gives them, and that's enough.”

Tonks shook her head.

“I'll go, but I'm not sure how much good I'll do.”

“Watch and learn,” Moody said. “But don't do anything in the castle that you don't want the girl knowing about... I'm not sure she's a seer, but she seems to know everything close up to her. It makes her a lot more dangerous than she ought to be.”

“Also she's good at stabbing and hitting things,” Tonks said. She stared speculatively at the dispersing crowd. “I wonder if we should be teaching our aurors that.”

“You get that close to something that's trying to kill you, you've already lost,” Moody said. “Muggle soldiers get taught to fight close up, but not that much, because they do most of their fightin with their firelegs. The girl fights like that because she doesn't have anything better.”

Tonks frowned but didn't argue with him.

After all, she'd find out for herself soon enough.

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“Why are we doing this again?” Ron Weasley wheezed as they ran around the castle.

“Taylor says that learning how to run away is the first step in learning to beat the Death eaters,” Harry said. He was much less winded than Ron, and much more cheerful, which Ron resented.

“It's always Taylor this, Taylor that,” Ron grumbled. “If it wasn't for Quidditch, you wouldn't talk about anything else.”

“She says we can use Quidditch to learn how to kill people on brooms,” Harry said.

Ron stopped running.

“And that doesn't make you think she's barmy? She's actually killed people... a lot of people.”

“She did it to save my life,” Harry said, stopping beside him. “They were coming to kill me, and she could have just stepped aside and let it happen.”

“You think she hasn't killed people before?” Ron asked. “You don't get that good with a knife without stabbing a few people.”

“She said she came from a bad neighborhood,” Harry said. A disturbed look came over his face.
Ron stared at his friend. He'd been keeping secrets again; he knew it.

“What?”

“She showed me some... pictures... of what it was like once,” Harry said. “It was bad...really bad.”

“It'd have to be to make somebody be like her,” Ron said. “Even if she did save your life, I'm not sure she's all there, you know. Have you seen how she moves? It's like she's a spider wearing a human's skin.”

He shuddered. He hated spiders.

He didn't hate Hebert, although he was jealous of the times that Harry up and vanished. He knew he was spending time with her; Harry hadn't said anything, but he often came back limping and looking as though he'd been beaten with sticks.

Ron remembered what that had been like when he'd been part of the dueling club. It hadn't been fun, but he had to admit that he'd gotten a lot better at fighting. After his performance in the dueling trials last year, most of the Slytherins had stopped hasseling him; all of the except Malfoy.

He'd been walking taller too, which he had to thank Hebert for.

Still, as a teacher she made Snape look lazy. She was ruthless and treated every session as though she was teaching them how to not die.

Given the events at the end of the year maybe she'd been right.

Still, he had no idea why he'd been left behind.

“I didn't show how I felt about it because I don't think she'd like pity,” Harry said. “I don't think any of us knew what to say.”

“All of you?” Ron asked.

“Me and Hermione and Neville...” Harry trailed off.

“You've all been hanging out without me?” Ron asked, offended. “With my brothers?”

“No,” Harry said. “It's not like that.”

“Did I do something wrong?” Ron asked. “I didn't think she cared that I thought she was crazy. She kept you alive, and that was enough for me to consider her kind of like a friend.”

“It's your Dad,” Harry admired.

“What?”

“She's pretty sure that the Ministry set the dementors on the mughgleborn. Your Dad is pretty high up in the Ministry...”

“There's no way my Dad would do anything like that!” Ron protested. “You've got to tell her!”

“I've tried,” Harry said. “But she's paranoid about people spying for Umbridge. She thinks that Umbridge wants us all dead so the Death Eaters will leave Hogwarts alone.”
“That's even more barmy than usual for her. Umbridge is the Minister for Magic! They don't do things like that!”

“I'm not so sure,” Harry admitted. “I've see some things, and you know how much she knows.”

“She's not Merlin,” Ron said. “And she doesn't know everything. She can make mistakes just like anybody else.”

“I know,” Harry said. “But talking to her... it's like she's not even a kid really. You remember the aurors that were at school last year?”

Ron nodded.

“Remember the old one that we talked to a few times? He'd fought Grindlewald and then the Death Eaters in the last war. There was a look in his eye that she's got.”

“She's twelve,” Ron said skeptically. “What, you think she was out fighting monsters when she was eight? She didn't have any magic!”

“I know,” Harry said. “But I just have this feeling.”

“Well, she's mental all right,” Ron admitted, “But that doesn't mean she knows any more about the Wizarding world than you do.”

Harry shrugged.

“As long as she shows me how to kill Death Eaters, I don't care what she does.”

Ron gaped at his friend. It shocked him hearing Harry say it out loud, even though he'd seen signs that he'd been obsessing ever since the incident on the train. It had bothered him that he'd been sent away, but Neville and Hermione had been allowed to go with Harry.

“You're twelve,” Ron said finally. “You shouldn't be thinking about killing anybody.”

“You weren't there!” Harry said. His hands were trembling. “They were coming, six of them, and they were going to murder me, and there wasn't anybody who was able or willing to stop them except her. I had to sit and hide and do nothing other than listen to their screams as she did Merlin knows what to them, and if she'd screwed up just once, they'd have been coming to that cave to finish us off.”

Harry hadn't talked about this before; he hadn't wanted to even when Ron had asked.

“I thought I was going to die!” Harry said. “Me and Hermione and Neville. You wonder why she still hangs out with us? It's because every one of us owes her.”

“The whole Muggleborn class owes her,” Ron muttered.

Harry stared at him then paled.

“The whole school does,” he said after a moment. “You think they'd have stopped when they killed the muggleborn? Some of them were already running for their lives. The Dementors would have followed them, and then they'd have been in the middle of the rest of us.”

“There were only three of them,” Ron said. “The professors would have stopped them.”

“And when every student in the entire school was terrified, you think that all that emotion wouldn't
have pulled the rest of them in?"

“Rowle stopped them, not Hebert,” Ron said. “He'd have gotten there after a few kids were killed and he'd have stopped it.”

“And that's why we're in trouble,” Harry said.

“What?” Ron asked, bewildered.

“As long as it's only a few kids and not me, it's all right,” Harry said. “That's what the adults are thinking too...hide in the middle of the crowd and hope the Death Eaters take someone else. Well, I don't have that choice. I killed their leader when I was a baby, and they want me dead for that. I've got to fight, and I can't hide, not for long.”

“They haven't really tried to kill you, except that once,” Ron pointed out weakly.

“And how many times did the aurors or Taylor stop it that they didn't even bother telling us about?” Harry asked. “I lay in bed at night wondering about that.”

Harry had been having nightmares since coming back to school. Ron had suspected it was about the train, especially when he'd heard some of the things Harry muttered in his sleep. He'd respected his friend's need for privacy. Maybe he'd been wrong.

“You want to talk about it, you can come to me,” Ron said. “You don't have to go to her just because she was there or whatever.”

“Oh, I don't go to her,” Harry said. He laughed bitterly. “Do you know what it's like trying to live up to her expectations?”

“I was in the group last year,” Ron said quietly. “She made my mum look like the sweetest, kindest lady ever.”

“Your mum IS the sweetest lady ever,’ Harry said.

“She's nice to YOU,” Ron said sourly. “But get her alone with us and it's all barking orders and telling us what to do. You only think she's nice because anybody would look nice compared to your aunt.”

“She's nice compared to my Aunt Marge,” Harry said. “I think the Dark Lord is probably nicer than her.”

“None of us want to look weak in from of Taylor. Me, Hermione, Neville...nobody,” Harry said. “So we put on a stiff upper lip and pretend that we're tough like she is.”

“You're kids, mate,” Ron said. “She's some kind of she-ogre. Why would you want to be like her?”

“Because she always survives,” Harry said. “No matter what happens. I want to learn to be able to do that too.”

“Anybody would be upset if they went through what you did. That doesn't mean that you can't talk to people about it. I'm not going to judge you, even if you want to get all weepy and start crying.”

Harry stared at him suspiciously. “That sounds a little judgmental.”

Ron shrugged. “I might make fun of you a little bit if you start acting like a ponce, but I won't mean it.”
“That makes it a lot better,” Harry said.

“Hey, at least I'm not some demon in a little girl suit that has you planning out ways to murder people.”

“Important life lessons,” Harry said. “Knowing how to murder people doesn't mean you're going to do it, just that you could if you wanted to.”

“I could bash you in the head with this rock,” Ron said. “Would that make me any better?”

“If I was a polyjuiced Death Eater, then yeah,” Harry said. “Knowing how to use your surroundings will help keep you alive.”

“You got that from her,” Ron said sourly.

“Maybe,” Harry said. “But it's good advice. I don't agree with her about everything; I think she's a little too fast to hurt people, and I think she enjoys it more than I'm comfortable with. But I believe that she means well, and that she wants to protect me and everybody at this school. If she didn't, she wouldn't have thrown herself in front of three dementors and risked her soul.”

“I just worry that she's going to have you getting into fights you aren't ready for,” Ron said.

“That's why running away is the first lesson,” Harry said. “And it looks like we've rested enough. Let's get back to it.”

Ron groaned, but he followed Harry as they began their course around the castle.

In the distance they could see the dementors surrounding the castle, like an unholy cloud.
“It's not working,” I said, frustrated.

I wasn't the only one; we'd been working on this for weeks, and a third of the class still wasn't able to summon even an silvery mist, much less a corporeal patronus.

After a year and a half of being in the top of the class, it was humiliating to be unable to do this, most important spell. How would I protect my people if I couldn't drive the dementors away? They'd almost gotten me the last time.

“It takes emotion Miss Hebert,” Flitwick said. “A pure, happy memory.”

“And what if you don't have any of those?” I asked.

I'd tried memories of my mother, but those were tainted by her death. Memories of my father were tainted by his inevitable slide into depression. My relationship with the Undersiders had always been complicated, and my time with the Wards hadn't been particularly happy.

My life here hadn't been happy either.

There had been happy memories, but they had always been fleeting, and none of them were pure.

“Not everyone is capable of this spell,” Flitwick said gently. “Which is why it will not be graded.”

At least he did not try to assure me that everyone had good memories. He didn't give me a look of pity either; for that I was grateful.

Those who were failing in the task tended to be those who had more troubled lives. Despite that, most of the class wasn't able to produce anything more than a silvery mist, and I doubted that would last under the onslaught of the fear in the dementor's presence.

There was a big difference after all between doing it in a classroom, and doing it in the field.

“I would have liked to have used a boggart as a substitute for a dementor,” Flitwick said regretfully. “But as you know, there have been... issues.”

The Hogwarts Boggarts had been getting smarter, or so it seemed, at least those that were copying me. Worse, he'd tried bringing a couple into the room, and rather than turning into dementors one had turned into me, and the other into Umbridge.

Most spells at Hogwarts were just a matter of saying the right words, and making the right hand motion. Feelings had never been my specialty; even before I was able to offload my actual feelings into my bugs instead of just my reactions, I'd been good at tamping them down.

This... required that I open up in a way that I wasn't comfortable with.

Hermione had gotten it in the second week, and the pitying looks she kept giving me were beginning to grate on my nerves.

Even Harry was doing better than I was. He'd managed to pull up a soft white mist only a few days ago. Given the bits and pieces I'd heard about his background, it was stunning that he was able to do as much as he did.
Malfoy was one of the ones who couldn't produce a patronus, like me. That seemed to irritate him endlessly, given that Ron Weasley was showing minor progress and liked to throw it in his face.

“I'm amazed that second years can manage it as it is,” Flitwick said. “I'd always thought that this was something that only fifth or sixth years could manage, but I am happy to see that I am wrong.”

I glanced at Malfoy and he scowled.

If Hermione and I tended to switch back and forth for first and second place in class, he and Harry jockeyed back and forth between third and forth.

Harry hadn't done nearly so well the year before, but since the Death Eater attack on the train he'd applied himself with a vigor I normally associated only with Hermione.

“It will be considerably harder to maintain the emotions under the sort of mental assault you will feel with dementors,” he said. “So I encourage you all to keep working at it. Ordinarily, it would be a matter of academic interest; after all, most Wizards never even meet a dementor in their entire lives. Given the current situation though...”

He shook his head.

“I want a foot on the other uses of the patronus spell,” he said. He looked at me. “Focusing on the uses as a messenger, not on creative ways of using them to kill people.”

I shrugged.

Why did everyone think that I was obsessed with killing people? It wasn't like I spent every waking minute thinking about how to kill the Death Eaters.

Just most of them.

Class was dismissed, and Hermione stepped up to me.

“I'm sure you'll find a good memory,” she said. “I use my last Christmas with my parents.”

“My mother died,” I said.

“Friendships?” she asked.

“They betrayed me, or they died,” I said. “Or I'll never see them again.”

She looked hurt.

“Not you,” I said quickly. “It's just... I'm not built that way. Maybe when I was younger.”

As we stepped out of the classroom, I saw Snape waiting for me.

“I'll talk to you later,” I said. “I need to have a word with my Head of House.”

We both waited until everyone had moved down the hallway, well out of earshot.

“I asked you once not to start a revolution,” Snape said quietly. “It seems that you chose not to listen.”

“I'm not sure what you are talking about?” I said. I pushed any anxiety into my bugs and kept my face impassive.
“You have followers now,” he said. “Fifth years are looking to you for permission to do things.”

“They think I know how to keep the Ministry from killing them,” I said. “And they don't trust Dumbledore or the staff here to do it for them.”

“Do you?” he asked dispassionately.

“I believe that we should at the very least give them the tools to defend themselves,” I said. “Leaving them helpless is like putting a death eater with a wand in a room full of muggles who have never heard about magic.”

“I'd have thought you'd rate the muggles chances a little higher.”

“Under the right circumstances, with the right muggles,” I said. “But surprise is a power multiplier. If it ever comes to a battle between the muggle world and this one, the muggles will lose.... at first. But they'll learn, and the battles afterward won't go nearly as well.”

“Against those who would subvert their leaders?” he asked.

“There are ways to tell,” I said. “Ones that don't involve magic.”

The Protectorate had strategies in place for dealing with Strangers and with Masters, and those would be the Wizarding worlds strongest categories. Most Wizarding attack spells weren't that much better than a gun or a bomb. It was their ability to mind control leaders from in secret that made them horrifically dangerous.

He stared at me.

“That would be of great value to certain parties,” he said carefully.

Another teacher might have dismissed what I said as idle bragging. Snape didn't/ He'd taken me seriously from the moment we'd met, something which I appreciated about him.

“Why are you here?” I asked. “Really? It can't be to question me about the existence of a non-existent revolution.”

There wasn't a revolution, not yet. It would require time and for me to have pieces in place. The thought that I'd be sending children off to die should have bothered me, but it didn't. All of them were slated for death anyway; all I was doing was giving them a chance.

“You've heard about the new Ministerial Decrees?” he asked.

“Where they're planning to take the muggleborn from their families?” I asked.

I'd been hearing about nothing else for the past few weeks. Nothing definitive had been done yet, but all of the muggleborn were worried about it. It had been stalled in the Wizengamot; apparently Dumbledore's people had been doing their best to squash it, and the Purebloods were horrified at the idea that they might be forced to house mudbloods in their own houses.

“What will you do if they pass?” he asked.

“Are you asking if I plan to overthrow the government, set myself up as the new Minister for Magic and go to war against the Death Eaters?” I asked, amused.

He stared at me for a long moment, apparently wondering if I was joking of not.
“Or maybe just assassinate the Death Eaters and their leaders, ending with him?” I asked. At his look I shook my head. “I probably won't do that this year.”

Ultimately, of course I planned to kill them all. It was the only way that I and my friends could live uninterrupted lives. Right now wasn't the time for it; I still needed to gather more power.

After all, even if I killed Voldemort, I'd have to go after the Ministry next. Neville kept pushing for peaceful solutions, but I knew that it would never end until a fundamental change was made.

“You think that the Dark Lord didn't believe that he was in the right when he began?” Snape asked quietly.

“Tom's always been a little sloppy,” I said. “Instead of cursing the Defense position, he should have put his own agent in; he could have influenced an entire generation of students.”

“I'm sure it's not as easy as...” he began.

“Lockhart?” I asked.

Most likely the reason they'd struggled to find competent instructors was because of the curse; otherwise the moment they'd found one they'd have kept them. The curse on the position, if it was real was actually rather clever. By ensuring that an entire generation of wizards were unable to use magic effectively, he'd have made it easier for his people to take over.

An armed populace was one that was difficult to conquer after all, especially if you didn't have superior weapons. It wasn't like the muggle world, where a few rednecks with rifles weren't going to be able to stand up to tanks and planes.

One wizard was much the same as the next in their capabilities. The only real difficulties were in skill.

I was doing everything to close that skill gap with my people. Already the grades of the muggleborn were skyrocketing as they worked together in study groups. We were keeping the groups small, groups of four to five, usually led by one students from an older grade.

Just the process of teaching was helping some of the students remaster the basics, and our sessions three times a week were helping even more.

“Why is it that the entire muggleborn population seems to vanish sometimes?” Snape asked, staring at me.

I shrugged. “I'd have thought you'd have been happy not to have kids underfoot all the time.”

“If I've noticed, others have too,” Snape said. “It's only a matter of time before it gets to the Minister's ear.”

“The Minister?” I asked. “Why should she worry about what a few schoolchildren do?”

“She sees you as an inconvenience, someone who supports changing the natural order,” Snape said. “Should you become more than that... accidents have been known to happen. Unlike with Death eaters, if you kill aurors, the entire weight of the Ministry will come down upon you.”

“So what should I do?” I asked. “Sit down and wait to die?”

“Be more circumspect,” he said. “Continue whatever you are doing, if you must, but cloak it under
“Some socially acceptable aegis.”

“People have been telling me that since I came here,” I said. “Don’t make waves, keep up the status quo. The whole reason that the Wizarding world is in the position it is in is that not enough people have stood up for what’s right.”

“That may be...” Snape began. “But...”

“It’s like the way things are is a river...it will sweep any one person away. But plant a boulder in the right place at the right time, and the course of the river may change. If that boulder is followed by enough smaller rocks, the river will change.”

“And you see yourself as that boulder?”

“Someone has to be,” I said. I hesitated. “Mark Twain once said ‘When the mob and the press and the whole world tells you to move, your job is to plant yourself by the river of truth and tell the whole world....’No, you move.’”

He was silent for a moment.

“So you are determined to continue on this course.”

“I have to do it,” I said. “And not just for the muggleborn. Every half-blood has dealt with the casual racism the purebloods spew without even meaning to.”

“You won’t be able to stop that,” he said. “No one can.”

“Maybe,” I said. “but I can try.”

With that, we didn't have anything else to say.

That night I slipped out of my rooms and headed for the Room of Requirement.

I’d had enough of the humiliation of being a failure with the Patronus charm. I needed to master this if I was going to protect my friends. I had no illusions that the Ministry wouldn't hesitate to send the Dementors to find us and kill us and worse, devour our souls.

I found myself in a smal room; it looked like any other classroom, except that the door behind me was closed and would not open until I allowed it. I didn't want any witnesses for my failure.

I tried the spell again.

“Expecto Patronum!”

I’d tried every memory I could think of. Mom, Dad, the Undersiders, my times with Emma before everything had gone wrong. I’d been surprised at how few good memories I’d had; I’d always thought that I was a happy child until Emma had turned on me, but even before that I’d lived in a city on decline.

Seeing the sadness on my father's face had affected me even as a child.

Flitwick had told me my wandwork was impeccable. My pronunciation of the spell was perfect. The only flaw was the emotions that supposedly fueled the spell.

“Expecto Patronum,”
“Expecto Patronum,”

“Expecto Patronum!”

There was never even a hint of silver emerging from my wand. I wasn’t sure why I’d expected anything else. Every other spell had come relatively easily for me; why was this spell different?

Over and over again I tried to cast the spell, and always it failed.

I found myself getting angrier and angrier and for once I couldn’t offload my emotions into my bugs, because this spell required that I actually felt my emotions.

Was that the problem? Had I offloaded so many emotions that I was no longer even capable of feeling any more?

“Expecto Patronum!” I yelled, frustrated.

My anger kept growing.

Voldemort, his Death Eaters, the Ministry, the bullies... the more I thought about the people who had done all of this to me, the more angry I got. Scion, Cauldron, Contessa. I felt rage filling me, anger and even hatred.

“Expecto Patronum!”

I felt a sense of wrongness explode from my wand, as a wave of black bugs exploded from it. I could feel the malevolence within them, the desire to devour everything, but most particularly me.

They resisted as I took control of them; they wanted nothing so much as to devour me and destroy me.

I pushed them away from me, and they hovered, a malevolent man sized cloud.

What were they capable of? I couldn’t tell; they were the manifestation of my anger and rage, just as a normal patronus was to be the avatar of my hope and joy.

A hole opened in the wall; the Room was responding to my unspoken need.

A mouse stumbled out, looking scared. A moment later my cloud lunged at it, and in the space of seconds all that was left was a small skeleton.

It took me a while to figure out how to dispel it, but then I had some thinking to do.

Something like this I could use. I hadn’t even been aware that the Patronus could be perverted like this. What was this called, a Dark Patronus?

It had taken my bugs days to devour Filch. With this, I could do it in less than a minute. If if hadn’t been for my control of insects, it would have turned on me, and I’d have been dead.

Luna Lovegood’s mother had died during spell research. Had something like this happened?

What other spells could I pervert? Surprise was a force multiplier, and I doubted that Voldemort or anyone had an easy counter to a Dark Patronus.

Even better, ordinary Patronuses were known to be used to send messages. Would I be able to send my patronus out to seek out and find people?
It might make for the perfect assassination tool, although if it was discovered it might make people start to take precautions against insects. Still, it was another weapon in a toolbox that was woefully empty.

Everything was stacked against us, and we needed every weapon we could get. A few schoolchildren wasn't going to be enough; we needed allies.

The goblins had a history of revolution. Could I somehow subvert them?

What about the werewolves? The Death Eaters had control of some groups, but they were humans before they were werewolves, and I was willing to bet that not all of them were willing to follow a mass murderer.

There was so much to do, and there was so little time.
“The muggleborn are evil,” the man on the radio said. “Most people just aren't willing to come out and say it.”

The muggleborn were all around me, listening to the radio. We’d known this broadcast was coming, but we'd wanted to judge how bad it was for ourselves.

“How can you say that?” the host asked. I’d listened to him before, and he was blandly pleasant, but he wasn't exactly known for asking the hard hitting questions. “Aren't they just our brethren? We've gone to school with them. Some of us have married them. You can't just make a blanket statement...”

“Look at the statistics, Harold,” the other man said. “The muggleborn are only twenty percent of our population, but they commit eighty percent of our crimes.”

I was willing to bet that a large part of that was because the muggleborn were targeted. The purebloods probably made deals behind the scenes that kept their precious children out of the crime listings. Without connections, the muggleborn went straight to jail.

“They make up more than half of those incarcerated in Azkaban,” the man said. “And they commit the majority of the Misuse of Magical objects violations; these are serious issues that endanger us all. But ultimately that's what they intend.”

The purebloods probably didn't even know what muggle items did; of course the muggleborn and halfbloods had more of that type of interactions.

“What?” the host asked.

“The Muggleborn agenda is to have us reveal ourselves to the muggles and to subjugate ourselves to them. They'd tear down everything we've tried to build, and they'd bring every Wizard down to live like animals, to live like muggles.”

“You think muggles live like animals?” the host asked.

“They spread across the world like an infestation,” the man said. “Breeding to the point that they do not have enough food to feed their children. Then you know what they do?”

“What?” the host asked. He sounded suspicious.

“They breed some more! Then they start fighting among themselves. Muggles are murderers who destroy entire peoples...in the Muggle Second Great War, eighty five million of them perished, and it wasn't a drop in the bucket compared to their numbers. In the last century they have killed over a hundred and twenty three million of themselves. I can only applaud their initiative, and I would hope for them to get even more efficient in murdering each other if it weren't for the fact that sometimes good, honest Wizards are caught up in their wars.”

“There have been some deaths,” the announcer said cautiously.

“And what do you think will happen if they learn about us? They will attack us with bombs and firelegs, with everything they have because ultimately they are unable to face the fact that we have souls and they do not.”
“That hasn't been established,” the announcer said faintly.

“They do not produce ghosts,” the man said. “What more proof do you want? Once a muggle dies, that is it, but a Wizard lives on. We have proof that they are nothing more than smart apes, and the thought of the vast nothingness that awaits them will infuriate them. Muggles can't stand to see others having more than themselves.”

“Surely you can't think that the muggles could defeat Wizards?” the announcer asked, incredulous.

“Even ants can kill a muggle if there are enough of them. There are six thousand muggles for every Wizard, and while most of them are idiots, there are occasional muggles with a low, animal form of cunning.”

I wondered for a moment if he was talking about me. I was famous enough now that he might have been.

“We were talking about the muggleborn, though,” the announcer said hastily. “There are those who say that they are essential for the survival of Wizardkind. The dangers of inbreeding alone...”

“Inbreeding?” the man interrupted. “You're talking about that discredited muggle science claptrap.”

“You don't believe in the science of breeding?” the announcer said, sounding surprised. “Haven't you ever bred dogs or maybe nibblers?”

“Wizards aren't dogs!” the man snapped. “The only way to keep our species strong is to keep it pure. Diluting our blood with muggle filth will only lead to more Squibs. Back in my day, families knew how to deal with squibs.”

I heard a slight gasp from behind me. The older students knew what the man was talking about, even if the younger ones looked confused.

There had been a time when Squibs were simply... disposed of. Not all of them had been sent out into the muggle world. Some had simply found their way into an unmarked grave.

If it had been up to me, I'd have used Squibs as spies into the muggle world. Put them in the military, in coroner's offices, in positions that real wizards would feel were too demeaning, but that would be a step up from where the squibs were now. I'd have then given them an honored place in Wizard society to keep their loyalty.

It was almost as though the Wizards were trying to get groups to revolt.

I saw a third year whispering in a first year's ear. The first year looked like he wanted to cry.

Turning the radio down, Hermione scowled.

“They played this interview yesterday....they go on like this for the next thirty minutes. They won't even admit that the radio came from the muggles, and now they're using tape?”

“They're probably stupid enough just to go over the whole thing again line by line.”

“I've got a transcript of the rest of it if anybody wants to hear it,” Hermione said. “It's even more disgusting than this was.”
Everyone was looking at me expectantly.

“What do you want me to do about it?” I asked. “I'm not exactly in a position to get rid of some Ministry stooge.”

“You think he works for the Ministry?” Hermione asked.

“You don't think it's convenient that they're trying to drum up hatred toward the muggleborn just as Umbridge's muggleborn protection law is stagnating in the Wizengamot?” Harry asked.

For all that he hadn't done well as a First Year, he wasn't stupid.

“Wouldn't that just make more families unwilling to take us in?” she asked.

She'd been really upset when she'd first heard about the law; she felt that her family would rather move to Australia than have her taken from them. I had advised caution.

The Minister wasn't a King. She had to get support from the Ministry, and at least for the moment she didn't have the votes.

Harry had wondered if he could get himself reclassified as a muggleborn. Apparently his family life wasn't happy. He'd likely have been happier in an orphanage than at home. Unfortunately, that wasn't true of most of the muggleborn. They loved their families, and the thought of being separated from them wasn't just painful, it was terrifying.

“It doesn't matter if the law works,” I said. “It just has to look like it's working. They'd be happy to shove us all into an orphanage somewhere, with signs leading the Death Eaters right to us.”

“So what can we do?” she asked.

“I don't know,” I said. “Killing Umbridge wouldn't necessarily kill the bill, not unless we were sure of who her successor would be. The fact is, nobody knows.”

It was one of the things that was keeping me from going after her myself; the possibility that whoever came after her would be far worse. She was at least not in the Death Eater's pockets, even if her policies were favorable to them.

Six weeks ago they would have been horrified at my causal mention of killing the Minister for Magic. Now, nobody around me gasped or even looked surprised. Some of them even looked a little disappointed. A lot of kids had taken the proposed law very personally, and I suspected that if Umbridge were to meet some of them in a dark alley, it wouldn't go well for her, especially know that I'd been training them.

“Also, if we tried and failed, or even if we succeeded and were caught.... how much would the Ministry blame us and punish muggleborn who never even thought about going against them. You think it's bad now?”

“So it's hopeless?” I heard a boy ask from the back of the room.

I shook my head.

“We've got to watch for our opportunity and then do whatever is best for us. Nobody else is watching out for us and so we have to do what's best for each other. That may mean sitting this out while the Ministry and Death Eaters destroy each other, and then killing whoever is left. It may mean stepping in before that.”
There had been a time weeks ago that this kind of talk would have shocked them, horrified them even. But I'd been working on them a little at a time, pushing the boundaries of what was acceptable just over the line often enough that this became the new normal. Then I'd pushed the line even farther.

It wasn't brainwashing like the Slaughterhouse had used; that had required constant exposure to horrors that would break a man's mind.

I'd just been running them through scenarios that were disturbing while convincing them that this was what the Ministry and Death Eaters had planned for them.

Sometimes I wondered if what I was doing was alright, but I didn't do it very often. Putting them in stressful situations together would improve unit cohesiveness. It would save lives. The fact that it tended to isolate them from the other students wasn't really my concern, not when lives were on the line.

Listening to broadcasts like this had only made my job easier.

They had to believe that I was going to improve their lives. They had to believe that not joining me was going to make their lives measurably worse.

The first dementor attack had established that without my having to do any work at all.

The deaths of the ones who had tried to leave had cemented the idea that they were alone and helpless. I was just giving them a way to take control over their lives, to feel less afraid.

The fact that I actually intended this to improve their lives was irrelevant.

“This only proves what I've been telling you,” I said. “We can't trust the purebloods, not the adults at least. We can trust some of the halfbloods, but knowing who to trust is hard to tell, unless you are Harry Potter.”

Everybody chuckled.

“All we've got is each other,” I said. “And we have to keep our eyes on the long term goal. They claim that we want to burn down the old order and create something new.... are they right?”

“Pretty much?” Neville asked timidly.

“We won't stop until every Wizard has equal rights,” I said firmly. “Until they leave us in peace. We aren't against the purebloods, or the halfbloods. We just want what's ours by right. If that means access to computers and telephones, who's going to tell us no?”

I had other plans, but they weren't ready for those yet.

“This is what we're up against,” I said. “Why I've been teaching you tactics all this time. Against a trained auror or Death Eater, we don't have a chance, not one on one. As a group, it's possible that we might be able to bring him down.”

They'd seen how that worked when I'd had a group of second years take on a sixth year. It hadn't been pretty, but the older boy had eventually gone down.

“Has anyone learned the anti-apparition jinxes?” I asked.

Several of the older students nodded. They were beyond my current level of understanding, but we
needed the ability to trap Wizards if we were to ambush them.

I had a team of sixth years working on writing up a book of curses and jinxes to be used in warfare. My contribution was to be muggle tactics. It would be our version of the anarchist's cookbook.

“We've sat around long enough,” I said. “Let's get back to work.”

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“I think the Headmaster approves of us,” Hermione said as we left the Room. “He's got to know that we're involved in something, but he hasn't investigated at all.”

“We've cut down on discipline problems,” I said. “Which means less of a headache for him. He doesn't want to know.”

The muggleborn had been walking with a lot more confidence since I'd started training them. They'd taken my anti-bullying message to heart, and they'd started to speak out against it wherever they found it...not in the presence of teachers but on their own.

The other students had learned that trying to bully a single muggleborn meant facing upwards of a dozen, and so they'd stopped even trying.

The fact that I was their leader was an open secret around the school, and I'd been getting looks from the students who weren't in my group.

I doubted that Tom Riddle's group had been anywhere nearly as large as mine when he was in school; of course, the Ministry had practically thrown them in my lap, and I was never one to turn down an opportunity.

“I've got the reports on the new aurors at school,” Hermione said.

I'd been developing quite the intelligence network. Having the muggleborn students asking classmates might seem to be primitive, but we didn't have the kind of family connections that the pure and halfbloods did. We had to take whatever information we could get. They'd also taken to casually asking vendors at Hogsmeade, professors and anyone else they could corner, including the aurors themselves.

I glanced at the papers.

As usual, Hermione had annotated the sources for the information at the bottom of the paper. That way, if we got bad information, we could figure out who was responsible, and we could begin to work out whether it had been an accident, or if it was the result of malice.

“She's a metamorphmagus?” I asked.

“She's barely out of school,” Hermione said. “Some of the students knew her from last year, which is why her file is thicker than some of the others.”

“Hmm...” I said, reading halfway down the page. “That's embarrassing.”

Hermione flushed. “She was a bit of a wild child.”

Maybe it was something we could use, but the impression I got was that this Tonks wasn't easily embarrassed. I'd seen her around, but she hadn't approached me yet, even though she always seemed to be watching me.
“And the others?” I asked.

“And the others?” I asked. “Some of them are Ministry plants,” Hermione said. “They aren't here to help us; more to gather dirt on us to use to help Umbridge's campaign.”

I didn't have to ask how she knew that; the aurors had rooms in the castle, and we'd run an operation where our best stealthy students had gone through their rooms while the rest of us had worked at distracting them. I'd supervised both ends at the same time.

I'd already had the information through my bugs, but it had been real world practice, and a way to bring some of them further into the fold. They'd committed an actual crime now, and it was human nature to feel that you were committed once something like that happened.

They'd used Colin Creevy's camera to take pictures of the documents in question, and they'd barely gotten out undetected. The excitement of their first real operation had buoyed them up for a week.

“How's morale?” I asked.

Again, I knew, but I wanted to make sure that Hermione had a grasp on it. In a war like this, no single person could be irreplaceable, not even me. It was entirely possible that I might die, and I wanted these kids to have a chance to make it on their own if I was no longer around.

“It was low after Umbridge's announcement,” Hermione said. “But people are feeling better about things now. They have confidence in you and they believe in what we're doing.”

The youngest of the aurors stepped out from behind a suit of armor.

“And what exactly are you doing?” she asked.

I'd known she was there, of course; she'd been trying to follow the students to the Room of Requirement for the last three weeks. I had teams whose whole purpose was to frustrate her in her attempts to do so. She'd been getting closer and closer.

“Study group,” Hermione said smoothly. “We're trying to prove that the muggleborn aren't as helpless as the Ministry likes to think.”

That was the official reason that we all met. I'd taken Nape's advice to heart, and I'd officially registered us as a school group with Rowle. Officially we were the Muggleborn Against Discrimination.

Harry had liked the acronym, and it was scads better than what I and Hermione had come up with.

Somehow Muggleborn Under Discrimination Being Loud Out Of Desperation hadn't gotten out of committee. The older students had thought that M.U.D.B.L.O.O.D. Would have been somewhat offensive. Simply being M.A.D., had been thought to be the better alternative.

“That's a ...revolutionary idea,” Tonks said. She looked at me. “People are saying you are the person to ask if there are any questions about what's going on in the school.”

I looked at her, then shrugged.

“What do you want to know?”
“Do you really believe that what you are doing is right?” Tonks asked.

We were standing out in the hallway, and most of the others were dispersing quickly. The auror hadn't seen the Room of Requirement or how to enter it, and that was the most important thing. Still, I was unhappy that she'd managed to get as close as she had, and we were going to have to work on some different procedures in the future.

“Advocating for muggleborn rights?” I asked mildly. “I'd think that wouldn't even require an answer.”

Officially we were just a student group just like any other. I wasn't sure how much stock in it people gave, but as long as the fiction kept the administration off our backs I didn't care.

“I've spent much of the last year training with the aurors,” she said. “There's a way that dangerous people move, and now I'm seeing it everywhere that I look in this school. Curiously, it's only the muggleborn students.”

She was a little more perceptive than the others; I doubted that the other aurors had even noticed. Of course, my information suggested that Umbridge had made sure not to send the cream of the crop to guard the school. It was considered scut work by the aurors, and the better aurors were out looking for werewolves and Death Eaters.

“Well, that's a little racist,” I said.

She stared at me. “What?”

“Saying that muggleborn move like predators... are you sure that you aren't projecting your own insecurities on us?”

“No!” she said. “And you know what I mean.”

“Maybe people are just copying me,” I said. “I seem to have become a lot more popular since your Ministry tried to exterminate us.”

She flushed. “That was a mistake.”

“You're naive if you think that it wasn't deliberate,” I said. I tilted my head and I looked at her. “My only question is whether you agree with your leader's agenda or not.”

She frowned and then leaned forward.

“Let's say you are right,” she said. “What do you think someone like that would do if she thought that a rebellion was brewing in this school?”

“She'd come in with jackbooted thugs and try to restore order,” I said. “Throw the leaders into Azkaban, maybe have a few of them accidentally Kissed.”

“You know that and you still...” she asked.

“She tried to murder every one of us,” I said. “And she's going to keep doing it until someone stops her.”
“Are you threatening the Minister for Magic?” she asked disbelievingly.

I shook my head. “Hopefully that will be when she's voted out of office, in which case we just have to stay alive until then.”

“And if that doesn't happen?” she asked, watching me closely.

I shrugged.

“We'll have to cross that bridge when we come to it. My job is to keep these kids alive. I'd have thought that you'd have been happy with anything that furthers that... unless you see your job as something else.”

“I uphold the law,” she said.

“They rushed your training, didn't they,” I asked. “It's normally three years and they pushed you out into the field in one. Why is that, do you think?”

“The Ministry needs aurors,” she said stiffly.

“They've been dropping like flies,” I said. “And the ones who are left aren't exactly people you can trust. They've put you in a job you are barely qualified for, because they think that you can be trusted. Can you?”

“What can I do?” she asked.

“Be trusted to follow the Ministry line?” I said. “Even if they tell you to line us up against a wall and murder every last one of us? You know half the kids here; do they really look like revolutionaries to you?”

“Can I what?” she asked.

“If they aren't why are there a half dozen of them hiding in the shadows watching us?” she asked.

She'd missed half of them, which I was pleased about. It meant that my training wasn't entirely in vain. Letting some of them be seen would sometimes make the mark overconfident.

“There's been attempts on my life on multiple occasions since I've been here,” I said. “My friends worry.”

“Right...” she said, her tone disbelieving.

“Let me turn the question around,” I said. “Are you sure that you are the one who's doing what's right? Working for a Ministry that would happily murder children in the interest of expediency?”

“That was an accident,” she said, although her voice didn't sound completely sure.

“Ask the dementors,” I said. “You've got the authority. Find out who ordered them to kill us. Maybe then you'll have something I'm willing to listen to.”

With any luck she'd ask while on Hogwarts property and I'd hear the answer as soon as she asked the question.

“But be careful,” I said. “If your bosses find out that you are asking questions... well, if they're willing to kill kids, then a full grown adult would be nothing to them.”

She stared at me, and she looked a little pale.
“You aren't a child,” she said.

I shrugged.

“I'd think that I'm the perfect child,” I said. I smiled at her, but it didn't reach my eyes. “Children are willing to do things that adults would never believe them capable of. The morals aren't fully set yet, you see.”

“Even if I were to find out something incriminating,” Tonks said in a low voice, “You've already explained why I couldn't do anything about it.”

“You could tell Moody,” I said casually. “And he could tell Dumbledore.”

She stiffened and stared at me.

“I'm a seer,” I said, lying through my teeth. I hadn't been sure until I'd seen her reaction, but it had been an educated stab in the dark. Her profile didn't fit with that of the other aurors here. They were washed up has beens, incompetent clods, or people whose careers had stalled and were entering a death spiral.

She was considered bright and an up and comer. She didn't fit, and with her mutation she'd have been perfect for undercover work. She was exactly the kind of auror who would be wasted here unless she'd been put here for some other reason.

I couldn't be certain, but I suspected that Moody reported directly to Dumbledore, and his people reported directly to Moody. That was why they'd been so successful against the Death Eaters last year, because the leaks in the department were somewhere higher in the chain.

“I don't know what you mean,” she said stiffly, but she looked around to see if anyone else had heard. There were no paintings here, and everyone else including Hermione were out of earshot.

“What do you think he could do?” she asked finally in a low voice. “He's struggling as it is to keep the Muggle Protection Bill from passing.”

“He never should have let Umbridge in office in the first place,” I said. “An actual Death Eater would have been more competent and more circumspect, and would have been easier to remove politically.”

“I'm here to discover the truth,” she said after a long moment. “Whatever it may be.”

“If that's true, you'll find that you have a lot of friends here,” I said. I glanced over at the visible students and gave a quick nod of my head. They began vanishing into the scenery.

She started as disillusioned students began appearing all around her. I was watching in case she had an unfortunate reaction, but she managed to restrain herself.

“On the other hand,” I said... “We at the Muggleborn Against Discrimination take it very poorly when people try to threaten us.”

“Are you trying to threaten ME?” she asked incredulously.

I shook my head.

“I'd never threaten a duly appointed officer of the law,” I said. “I'm just saying that it's the right of every Wizard to defend themselves and their families. It's just that my definition of family is a little...
larger than that of most purebloods.”

If she'd been a Ministry stooge I'd have never bothered giving her a warning. As Dumbledore's agent, she deserved a little courtesy.

Dumbledore was apparently better at politics than he was as a headmaster. He was the one who'd almost singlehandedly kept the Muggle Protection Act stalled, and I'd heard rumors that he was involved in secret activities with the aurors. I had a suspicion I knew what that was.

At the very least he was useful in that he drew attention away from us. The Death Eaters undoubtedly considered him Enemy Number One, which took some of the pressure off me and allowed me to concentrate on training my people.

We weren't ready yet for a skirmish, much less a war. But eventually we would be.

Hogwarts was one of the most defensible positions in all of Wizarding Britain, and I had a team working on a defense plan. They were learning as much as they could about the castle defenses. I'd had Fletcher bring us books on strategy and tactics, supposedly for a game that was becoming popular among the muggleborn.

We'd even set up tabletops with Wizarding chess figures charmed to do battle without the chess board. The fact that the tabletops looked just like Hogwarts hadn't seemed to occur to anyone, and there was a faction of muggleborn who had even grown enthusiastic about our fake strategy game.

I'd based the rules on vague memories of a game Greg Vedar had prattled on about. I'd been only half listening, so we'd had to fill in the gaps ourselves. I was satisfied that we'd done a pretty good job though.

Seeing the battlefield from above was something I could do with my skills, but I was teaching the others to think strategically, and not just tactically.

It was also a good way to disguise any strategy discussions; we'd cloak them in the guise of being a silly geekish game.

Weirdly, we'd had requests from some Ravenclaws to join in. They wanted to be seen as the smartest kids in the room so strongly that they had to join in. Some of them had even come up with strategies that hadn't occurred to the rest of us.

We had scenarios in other places too; Diagon Alley, the Ministry, the houses of people that were suspiciously similar to those of certain Death Eaters.

I'd used my connections to find out as much as I could about those households, and we'd run scenarios in the room of requirement, with teams acting both as guards and as infiltrators. We'd play through the scenarios on the board first, and then in the room if we thought we had a winning strategy. Sometimes we were surprised by things that hadn't appeared on the board; other times things went swimmingly well.

The game was getting more and more popular among the students; I'd planned on it being an esoteric game that no one would pay attention to, but we were getting more and more spectators all the time. It was the novelty of it, I suppose. Wizards seemed starved for entertainment, given their lack of mass media. There were only so many games of exploding snap you could play, after all.

I'd seen Rowle wandering through the gaming rooms, looking over people's shoulders. He never complained, although he sometimes looked thoughtful. Snape hadn't seemed interested, but Flitwick had been enthusiastic, suggesting the idea of gaming leagues.
I'd have objected, but cloaking training in the guise of play actually tended to motivate children better than almost anything else; if they approached this with half the fanaticism they did Quidditch, we'd be an unbeatable army in the space of two or three years.

Even better, despite what I had told my people, I knew that we were going to need the help of at least some of the half-bloods before everything was over and done. I'd have to be very careful in evaluating who to let in, and at least this fostered a sense of camaraderie between them and my people.

Ideally, I'd have had some seventh years entering the aurors next year, but I had a strange feeling that this administration had no plans to hire mudbloods. That meant that I need to suborn some halfbloods and then work to get them into positions where they'd be able to help the rest of us.

The Ministry was already riddled with Death Eaters and presumably with Dumbledore's people; why shouldn't I have my own pieces in place?

The most frustrating thing was that some of my plans were going to take years, and part of me was afraid that we wouldn't have that long. The Wizarding World was in a state of cold war at the moment, but it was like a zit that was pulsating and ready to explode, sending infected pus everywhere. All it would take was the slightest pressure in the right place, and everything would be terrible.

Most muggle revolutionary groups were utterly dependent on money; money was needed for ammunition, for food and shelter and training facilities. That wouldn't be as true for us, except for the Trace. A competent Wizard could supply himself with everything he needed, with the exception of food, and that we could steal from the muggle world and then duplicate it. But the Trace was going to be the one thing that kept us from being a viable fighting force.

The only solution, of course, was to get rid of it. I'd been trying to find out as much information about it as I could about the Ministry department that ran the Trace, and about the mechanism that it used to keep track of all the children.

Hopefully the spell had some sort of physical focus; if it did, I'd simply have to either steal it, or destroy it. That would involve a raid on the Ministry itself, which was part of the reason we were running all these scenarios.

The Ministry table games were not open to the public; the last thing I needed was for a curious Ravenclaw to ask the wrong questions.

“Running a student organization and a gaming league,” Tonks said, almost as though she was reading my mind. “You are staying busy these days.”

“The gaming thing isn't mine,” I said. “I play sometimes, but I don't have a lot of time for games these days.”

“Oh?” she asked casually. “What are you spending your time doing?”

“Plotting the overthrow of the Wizarding world?” I said.

She stared at me, and I grinned.

“I've got school and friends,” I said. “All the rumors about me being some kind of boggart queen are total exaggerations. I'm a totally normal kid.”

“Right...” she said. I could tell that she didn't believe me.
“Ask any of my friends,” I said. I gestured for Hermione to come over.

“Hermione, wouldn't you say that I'm a totally normal kid?”

“Well,” she said slowly, then glanced at me. “Uh... normal.... totally normal.”

“See?” I said. “And Hermione should know. She's totally normal too.”

Tonks stared at me like I'd grown a second head.

“I remember what it was like to be a second year, and I'm not sure you even know what normal is.”

“Normal is trying to protect the people you care about,” I said firmly. “It's standing up against people who would try to hurt you and fighting for what you believe in.”

“That's not normal at all!” Tonks said.

“And that's the problem,” I said. “If the adults would stand up for what's right, we could just play exploding snap and go about our day learning to turn turtles into teacups or whatever.”

“I'm just worried that you are going to get these kids into something they aren't ready for,” she said. “If kids fight, kids are going to die.”

“And what happens if they don't?” I asked. “Even more of them would die.”

She shook her head.

“Personally, I wish that aurors were teaching us defense,” I said “And that they were actually teaching us how to defend ourselves.”

She stared at me silently.

“But as long as the adults plan to leave us to our own devices, we're sitting ducks here,” I said. “The Death Eaters and the Ministry know exactly where we are, and the Ministry knows how to side step the school's defenses.”

I let that sit in her mind.

I doubted that I'd accomplish anything today, but the Ministry had made a mistake sending an auror who was so recently a graduate. She knew too many of these kids, which meant that she was likely to be sympathetic to us.

It was possible that Dumbledore had meant for this to happen when he'd had Moody send her to us. He'd always been sympathetic to our cause, in a patronizing way, and he probably saw this as a way to keep a spy in the school. If I could subvert her, I might be able to get a spy in both Dumbledore's camp and in the Ministry.

“I've got to get to class,” I said. “But I'd be perfectly happy to talk to you again.”

The first step in Radicalizing someone was to take them away from their normal environment. The longer she was at school, the more her loyalties would begin to switch back.

It was only a matter of time until I had her, and through her, I'd have a foothold in the Ministry.
“It makes sense really,” I said. “Remember what happened to the kids that tried to go home?”

Hermione was upset. Apparently she'd been looking forwards to going home with her parents for Christmas.

“They can't do this!” she said.

“They say it's for our protection, and for the first time, I think I kind of agree with them.”

“What?” she stared at me disbelievingly.

“The Death Eaters know where our families are,” I said. “And they don't seem to care enough about muggles to bother with them unless we are there. This keeps your parents safe too.”

She scowled.

“They're just trying to get us used to it in case the bill passes,” she said.

“That's probably true,” I said. “But this way we'll have more time to get ready.”

“You don't think there will be another attack?” she asked, suddenly concerned.

“A castle filled with mudbloods and free of almost all of the important kids?” I said. “They're going to attack and they'll blame it on the Death Eaters. The only thing I'm not sure of is how they're going to get rid of the staff and the aurors. They have to make it look like they weren't involved.”

“They'll use the dementors again, won't they,” Hermione said.

I nodded.

“Most of us can't cast a patronus charm to save our life,” Hermione said. “And those who can barely manage it probably won't be able to do it when they face real dementors.”

“I want you to get a list of all those who have the strongest patronuses,” I said. “Everyone else is to stay near one of them at all times over the holidays. It'll be inconvenient, but better than having your soul removed.”

“I'll get right on it,” she said.

I'd been working on a conventional light patronus for weeks, but I still wasn't able to create even a single wisp of silvery light.

Sometimes I wondered if it reflected some kind of fundamental flaw in me, that I was unable to call up a single happy memory without pairing it with something bad. In that respect, someone like Neville, innocent as he was was having a much easier time.

I'd been working on some plans to defeat them, although I couldn't be sure how they'd work until I tried them, and if I was wrong the results would be disastrous.

Still, I wouldn't have any choice but to try if the attack happened like I expected.
“We'll need to work out different sleeping arrangements over the holidays too,” I said. “I wouldn't put it past the Ministry to have the dementors attack when we are asleep. If we are in our own rooms, that would mean that some kids who can't create patronuses will be left to their own devices.”

“Maybe we should all sleep in our common rooms?” Hermione suggested.

“Possibly,” I said. “I still don't like the fact that we'll be separated by House. It splits our forces in a way that's unacceptable.”

“Well, I don't see what else we could do, unless we all sleep in the Room,” she said. “And I doubt that the Professors would agree to that.”

“We'll table it for the moment,” I said. “But let's keep looking for solutions. If we can get at least one of the professors to believe us, then they might agree to something a little more creative.”

The Room would be ideal; if could be locked from the inside, and I doubted that the dementors would be able to find us. However, it would raise alarms with the professors, and it would be likely the end of our using the room once it was discovered.

“Maybe the Great Hall,” I said. “Convince them that we're looking for a slumber party or something. That would keep us where we could all fight.”

If the attack happened, I'd have to figure out an appropriate counter-response. Simply allowing ourselves to be attacked until we all died off from attrition wasn't acceptable. I didn't say anything to Hermione, because I suspected she'd be distressed by what I planned to do.

She was a lot more ruthless than I would have thought when I'd first met her, but she still had some moral reservations about the things that we did.

“How have the experiments in forging the Dark Mark gone?” I asked.

“They're almost ready,” Hermione said. “It's been a little harder than we thought at first, requiring some tricky spell work, but I think that as long as nobody looks at the wands they'll have no idea that it's not the real spell.”

We had some seventh years working on it, and they'd done some excellent work. It was a sign of the trust the others had in me that no one asked why I needed it. I hadn't told them either.

Being able to commit atrocities and then blame it on an enemy was going to be very useful in the long run. I might not have to use it at all, but I'd rather have a weapon I didn't have to use than not have a weapon I needed.

“Have the others been making the purchases I asked for?”

Hermione nodded.

“We've had some success in buying Peruvian Darkness Powder through OWL order. Mr. Fletcher has been helpful in getting some of the other items, especially the ones too large to be transported by OWL.”

By splitting the orders up among more than a dozen buyers, I was hopefully keeping people from seeing the patterns in what was being purchased. The orders had been sprinkled among more conventional contraband being bought; muggle magazines, hair care products and the like.
Fortunately, the others had been willing to lend their money toward the endeavor. The money I had from selling Millie's parent's jewelry was a lot for a first year, but it wasn't anything when it came to the needs of an organization.

We needed a way to make money, and I wasn't quite sure how we were going to fund things. It wasn't like Brockton Bay, where you could always raid a Merchant Safe-house and steal a few thousand dollars in drug money, or raid and Empire 88 base for weapons and equipment.

Even if I knew where the British equivalent of the criminal gangs were, the Trace would reveal us before we got very far. Our number of Seventh year members was limited; they might be able to take the risk, but I hated the idea of them being shot for a few British pounds.

A better idea would be to have our enemies fund our organization. Raiding Death Eater houses and robbing them appealed to me, but we weren't to the point where we could even contemplate such a thing.

If it weren't for the Trace there would be all sorts of ways to make money. I'd heard from Lupin, and he'd managed to put my car repair scam to work, buying totaled cars and repairing them, then selling them to muggles for a large profit. He'd already made enough money to buy himself a house if he wanted, although he was apparently busy in France trying to drum up foreign support for Dumbledore.

“Take care of all of it,” I said. “We want to be ready for when it happens.”

“How will we know?” she asked. “When it will happen I mean?”

“They'll start pulling aurors away,” I said. “Most of the aurors here are ineffectual, but they'd never let children be attacked. My guess is that they'll send a lot of them home for the holidays under the guise of there being less children to protect. The ones who are left will be called away on one pretext or another; maybe a distraction on one end of the castle.”

It was what I would do, if I was determined to wipe out an entire generation of students without being blamed for it.

“They'll blame the Death Eaters for it if it happens,” I said. “And they'll use it as an excuse to say that it's too dangerous for the Muggleborn to go to Hogwarts. They'll try to send us away, either to an orphanage, or out of the country.”

“Maybe that would be for the best?” Hermione asked. “Leaving until this is all over?”

“There will be more muggleborn coming to Hogwarts next year,” I said. “And the year after that. Are we going to leave them to be slaughtered, either by the Ministry of by the Death Eaters?”

She shook her head.

“This won't be over until all of us are safe to live our lives,” I said. “And even if we leave, what guarantee do we have that it won't follow us? Do you think the Death Eaters will be content with just Britain? I wouldn't be. I'd be trying to expand a little at a time, just slowly enough not to alert the larger Wizarding World until it was too late.”

“They say that he's trying to become immortal,” Hermione said. “Which is why he chose his name.”

“If he lives long enough, he might be able to take over the entire world,” I said. “Which mean that no place will be safe.”
I was being a little disingenuous with her.

I doubted that Voldemort was competent enough to be a worldwide threat. Even Grindelwald hadn't been all that successful, and he'd been a lot more competent.

Still, there was always the possibility that he was smarter than I was giving credit for. He still had access to a seer of unknown ability, and he'd been modestly clever in trying to infiltrate the Ministry.

Hermione nodded, then said, “I'll get right on it.”

“I'm going to talk to Lockhart,” I said. “Hopefully he has some advice.”

She looked at me incredulously.

By now, it was clear to everyone except a few of the most infatuated girls that Lockhart wasn't nearly as competent as Travers had been. Some people wondered if he was even as competent as a sixth year.

“He's pants as a Wizard,” I said. “But he's great at public relations. We've got a public image problem, and hopefully he might be able to give me a few ideas about how to deal with it.”

She frowned, then nodded.

If she'd met Glenn Chambers, she'd have understood just how important public perception could be. Killing people and destroying things could only take you so far; the only way to truly win a war was to either get the support of the people, or to simply kill everyone and burn the earth.

I was hoping to avoid that second option, which meant that I needed all the advice I could get.

I left Hermione and made my way up to Lockhart's office.

“Professor Lockhart?” I called out.

“Miss Hebert,” he said. He looked a little nervous. He always had since that first day when I'd been overly enthusiastic in disposing of the pixies.

I stepped into his office and I sat down.

“I need some advice,” I said.

He relaxed a little and sat down himself.

“How can I help you, my dear?”

“You've heard about how the Ministry is painting the muggleborn as terrorists,” I said. “Making people think that we are all out to kill everyone.”

He looked strangely uncomfortable for a moment before composing himself. “It's a pity, yes?”

“I was wondering how we fight that? We've got the Quibbler on our side working full time, but it doesn't seem to be moving the needle much.”

He frowned.

“It's a troubling question. I could tell you how to improve your own, personal reputation, but
improving the reputation of an entire group of people... that would be a challenge, especially considering your limited resources.”

“Any help that you could offer would be appreciated,” I said.

“Well, you have access to a public paper,” he said. “Which is a good start. You don't want articles that are obviously pro-muggleborn; people will see through that and will discount it. You need to be more subtle than that.”

“Oh?”

“People believe authority figures,” he said. “Which is part of your problem. When the Ministry has people like the Minister saying that muggleborn are dangerous, it's hard to have someone of similar authority saying that she's wrong.”

“I'm not even sure the whole muggleborn resistance thing is real,” I said. “I think the Ministry is making it all up.”

“It doesn't matter,” he said. “All that matters is what people believe. If a false terrorist group scares people into pushing legislation through, does it matter that they aren't real?”

“So how do you fight that?” I asked.

“Get people's emotions involved,” he said. “People aren't impressed by numbers; they can't really care about more than a hundred or two hundred people. Tell them that a thousand African Wizards got killed by a Nundu, and they'll shrug their shoulders. Make them care about one child, and they'll get all up in arms.”

He was right.

It was why all those animal welfare ads on television showed pictures of dogs in cages, why people sent millions of dollars to charities that showed a single suffering child.

I needed a child who was photogenic, one who'd been harmed by the Ministry or the Death Eaters, a muggleborn poster child.

That couldn't be me; I already had too much baggage. I needed someone who had lost their family, someone preferably who was good looking with big eyes and a terrible sob story. I needed to make the Wizarding parents see their own child in that muggleborn kid, and I needed a story that would incite the people.

“The Ministry is trying to tell people that the muggleborn are different, that they are the other. You have to remind them of how similar they are,” he said. “Make people think of them as the people next door.”

I nodded.

“Ultimately, it's not your responsibility, though,” he said. “It's not as though you are the representative for your entire race.”

Were the muggleborn a race? I wasn't sure of that.

“I've heard an interesting theory,” he said. “That the muggleborn are all descended from Squibs who intermarried with the muggles. If that is true, then the muggleborn are actually just as related to everyone as the rest of us are.”
It would make sense. Whatever mutation had created the ability to do magic, it had probably arisen in a single person and then spread throughout the population.

“How would we prove something like that?” I asked.

“Trace people's ancestors,” he said. “if you can find even a handful of muggleborn who are related to squibs, you might be able to make people question if it is true. If they came to believe that the muggleborn were like everyone else...”

It wouldn't even have to be true.

All it would have to do would be strong enough to pass casual scrutiny. Wizards tended to be gullible, a product of depending on a state sponsored newspapers and not having competing media. They'd never learned critical thinking, in part because magic made so much of life easy.

I'd read that life as a hunter gatherer had been relatively easy, with people working an average of four hours a day to provide everything they needed in life. Human history had gone on like that for hundreds of thousands of years, and the pace of innovation had been incredibly slow.

Why innovate when you had everything you needed?

Life as a farmer was much harder, and human innovation had sped up considerably once people had to work long and horrible hours. Better communication had sped things up; the printing press had led to an explosion of creativity and innovation, and the Internet even more.

Wizards had stagnated in part because they had things too easy. The average Wizard didn't have to work much to keep food on the table. If he wanted, he could simply steal muggle food and expand it over and over until he got tired of it.

Without the Trace, the only reason a Wizard would need money was for things that were made by other Wizards. It boggled my mind that they even had an economy.

Muggles had had to work harder, and that meant that they'd had to work smarter. More importantly, numbers mattered.

There was a reason that rural high schools with few students didn't have the same caliber as large schools with three thousand students.

Truly exceptional people were rare. If one in ten thousand people was a genius, and you only had a population of ten thousand, you weren't going to be able to compete with the geniuses in a population of ten million.

The entire population of Wizarding Britain would have fit in a very small town. They simply didn't have the numbers to have the kind of exceptional people the muggle world had.

“You've been very helpful, Mr. Lockhart,” I said, rising to my feet.

“I'm always happy to help my.... most enthusiastic student,” he said.

His smile looked a little strained. He always looked a little uncomfortable around me; I wasn't sure why. However, he actually had been helpful and so I was willing to overlook it.

Now it was time to get to work.
“This is a little like a... what do you call it over there... a slumber party?” Hermione said.

I'd laid my bedroll near hers, Harry's and Neville's, and we were near the center of the Great Hall. We'd carefully arranged the children who were best at Patronuses near the entrance, with the younger and weaker children near the center.

I was in the middle because I couldn't cast a decent patronus to save my life, or anyone else's, but also because I was the last line of defense should the Dementors get through to attack the weak and helpless children in the middle.

“Every slumber party I've ever been too was a lot more fun than this,” I said.

There was a general aura of unease in the students. Everyone was on edge, and even the youngest children weren't laughing or playing.

“I'm just glad you were able to talk Professor McGonagall into letting us sleep like this,” Hermione said.

“She's not entirely against us,” I said. “And telling her that it would be easier to keep an eye on us this way probably helped.”

Headmaster Rowle was away for the week and McGonagall was in charge. Apparently Rowle had been called out of town for a Ministry meeting. That had been our first clue that the attack would happen soon.

“Maybe we should do something to calm everyone down,” Hermione said. “A game or something?”

Looking around I could see the fear on everyone's faces. Half the aurors had been pulled away from the castle for the holidays, and half those who were left were asleep in their rooms.

We did have one, Tonks who was sitting and watching us from a bed she'd made where the professors usually sat.

“We've got Caterwauling charms on all the entrances,” I said after a moment. “So it's probably safe.”

We could have gone with simple intruder charms, but they weren't nearly as loud, and there was a chance that some of us might not wake up. The Caterwauling charms would wake up the entire castle.

There was no telling how long it would take before the attack happened; if I'd run things, I'd have had it happen in the middle of the night, when people were less able to defend themselves. Letting the children be in a constant state of fear and anxiety until then would only exhaust them more quickly.

Furthermore, I had my bugs actively looking, and more importantly feeling for the Dementors. The cold they exuded would be obvious long before their physical presence was noted.

“Hey guys,” Hermione said. “Do you want to tell ghost stories?”
Everyone turned and stared at me, and I felt myself flushing.

“Uh... I won't be telling them,” I said.

There was an almost universal sigh of relief which I found vaguely insulting. I was capable of telling a ghost story that wouldn't give children nightmares for the rest of the year.

Of course, I had some that would.

“How would you like to hear a ghost story from a real ghost?” Hermione asked.

Myrtle was sitting at the edge of the wall, staring at us. We had to be the most entertaining thing that had happened to her in a while.

“What, me?” she asked.

Hermione nodded.

Most people hadn't had much to do with Myrtle, finding her a little too grating, but Hermione had gone with me a couple of times to talk with her. I'd done it because I'd promised I would, and because a ghost was an excellent scout, not being stopped by walls and all.

“And you're sure?” she asked.

“As long as it's not about how you died,” Hermione said firmly. “These are small children and that story might be too scary for them.”

Myrtle looked like she might protest, but then her chest swelled up with pride. Apparently having her death be too scary was a good thing.

She tended to get upset and started crying when she talked about her own death; the last thing we needed right now when everyone was on edge.

I glanced at Hermione, who looked all too pleased with herself. She was getting better at manipulating people since she'd been working as my second in command.

“Well,” Myrtle said. “There is a story that I don't hear anybody telling anymore. In my day they talked about five hidden rooms in Hogwarts, each protected by a different curse.”

She had everyone's interest with that one.

“Nobody knows where they came from. Some people say it was Salazar Slytherin; other people say they were build later by a Headmaster who'd gone a little mad. Some people say that they were built around something so dangerous that it could not be moved.”

I could hear some of the younger children oohing and ahhing.

I hadn't seen anything like that in my explorations of the castle, but then I hadn't seen the Room of Requirement either.

“Have you ever seen one of the rooms?” one of the younger first years asked.

Myrtle shook her head.

“Nobody has ever come back from one of those rooms alive... and no ghost has ever come back from them either. There have been children who went looking for them, but they were never seen
again.”

The younger children looked impressed, although the older ones looked like they'd heard it before. What other rumors hadn't I heard about? The castle was a thousand years old, and there were undoubtedly all sorts of things that no one knew about.

I stiffened as I felt an overwhelming wave of cold spreading throughout the northwest quadrant of the castle.

“They are coming,” I said, standing up. “Everyone knows what they are supposed to do, right?”

I heard whimpers from the first years; they hadn't joined our group and so they didn't have any of the training.

When overwhelming terror fills the human brain, the higher brain functions shut down, which is why people are often stupid when they are terrified. For most of human history the ability to run fast was more important than the ability to think well.

Training helped to combat that tendency. Those who were trained enough would fall back on their training when they could no longer think, hopefully doing the right thing.

Still, would a few weeks training be enough?

“Where are the Professors?” Tonks asked. There was a look of panic in her eyes as she looked around at the students around her, doubtlessly thinking that she'd have to protect all of us at the same time.

“Half were sent home for the holidays,” I said. “Some new cost saving measure of the Minister's. Some of them are asleep.”

“Send a message to Professor Snape,” I told one of the seventh years. “He'll alert the others.”

He wasn't actually asleep, but it would take time for him to come from the dungeons, especially if he waited to summon the others.

I'd had the portrait of Norvel Twonk moved from the fifth floor landing on the staircase to the Grand Hall. My excuse had been that he could watch over the boys and girls to make sure that they behaved themselves.

My true motives had been different. The man whose portrait he was based on had died saving a muggle child. He'd been granted the Order of Merlin posthumously. He'd died sometime in the fifties.

“Mr. Twonk, could you please alert the Deputy Headmistress and as many of the professors as you can?”

I'd hoped that he would be favorable to our cause; the look in his eye proved me right.

“I would be honored, Miss Hebert,” he said.

“Bring out the mirrors,” I said.

As it turned out, I wasn't the only one who'd had communications mirrors; most muggleborn didn't, of course, but we'd begged, borrowed and stolen every one we could find and had set them up in unobtrusive places, usually in the ceilings in the corners of the hallways.
We'd only managed to steal five sets, and now the images flared into place. I didn't have to remind everyone to keep quiet; we'd gone over this at least a dozen times. The dementors were blind, but they could hear just fine.

I could hear Tonks indrawn breath beside me as we saw at least a dozen dementors gliding silently through the hallways, hovering only a couple of feet above the floor. They moved with purpose, as though they knew exactly where we would be. Given that we were the greatest source of good feelings in the castle, doubtlessly they knew.

They were coming toward us from at least three directions; there had to be at least fifty of them. If they'd caught us sleeping, they could have finished all of us off and been hungry for more.

Once they'd all passed, I quietly shut the mirrors off.

“Front lines, to the doors,” I said. “We have five minutes until they are here. Prepare your patronuses appropriately. If they manage to push past them, fall back. We will leave no man behind.”

The problem was that of the thirty of us who could cast patronuses, only three were able to cast corporeal patronuses.

We closed and locked the doors, of course, magically. I wasn't sure how good the Dementors were against physical barriers, but I didn't want to chance it on the kinds of dodgy patronuses we could cast.

“Block the doors,” I said. “And set up the tables.”

They quickly moved the tables we'd shrunk earlier against the doors, and they set some of the others in the center of the room, tipped over to provide at least a little cover.

“Mr. Creevy,” I said. “You know what you have to do.”

He nodded, his face resolute. I wondered if he would be able to do what had to be done, but there wasn't time to change the plan now.

“BOOM!”

The door near where the professors' table usually stood shook as something hit it from the other side. Some of the younger children screamed in terror.

“BOOM!”

The main entrance doors shuttered. We could hear pounding as the monsters within tried to get in.

“Maybe the doors will hold?” Harry said.

The large window behind the professor's usual dining spot exploded, shards striking several children and I could hear screaming as row after row of the monsters floated over the lip of the window and into the room.

“Expecto Patronum!” Tonks yelled from beside me, and suddenly a silvery white jackrabbit appeared between us and the monsters.

“Retreat to the center,” I yelled, and I was gratified to see that they followed my lead.

I could hear the spell being cast over and over again, until a silver haze surrounded us, even as the
monsters continued to fill the room.

The patronuses of the three who could cast them, along with Tonk's Jackrabbit were circling us, stopping the dementors from getting any closer. There was a leopard, a boar and a white poodle.

I could see some of the white haze vanishing as the pressure on our minds grew with the presence of more and more dementors.

I shoved my emotions into my bugs as hard as I could, and my mind cleared.

It was time for my backup plan.

I'd been working on it for weeks, and then it had taken longer to teach the others. I'd hoped not to have to use it, because it was sure to raise questions I couldn't answer.

There were seventh and sixth years who couldn't raise a patronus; they could do this.

“It's time!” I shouted.

“Spunam ineloquence!” the first of them shouted.

A familiar yellowish white foam prayed from his wand; it hit one of the dementors, and it hardened suddenly. Seeing that it worked, other voices rose and foam was suddenly being sprayed in all direction.

It had taken me weeks to transmute ordinary water into containment foam. I'd worked with it for years, and I'd been intimately familiar with its taste, smell, and even some of the basics of its constructions, even though others were trade secrets.

Despite my familiarity, it hadn't been easy figuring out how to make it. It was a little humiliating that it had taken a team of sixth and seventh years half the time to come up with a spell to conjure it from nothingness, modifying a basic water conjuring spell.

I sometimes thought that our greatest contribution to the Wizarding world was going to be group spell research. Edison had done something similar; before him, researchers were essentially single guys in their basements. Afterwards, it was done almost like an assembly line. The expansion of human knowledge had grown exponentially.

The white mist around us that had been fading brightened suddenly.

Hope was apparently helpful in casting a patronus.

We were surrounded now by a wall of containment foam, with baleful faces staring out at us fulled with hatred.

More were behind them, but if I was right....

“EXPECTO PATRONUM!” I heard two voices call out.

A doe and a cat appeared, brighter than anything our people had been able to create, and the dementors were suddenly fleeing through the windows.

Snape and Professor McGonagall were at the entrance; they'd managed to open the doors and move the tables while we were busy fighting the dementors.

I looked over at Colin; he'd been busy snapping photos throughout the entire event, just as I'd asked
him too.

He hadn't cowered, even when the other children his age had. He'd known just how important what he was doing was.

Wars had been considered good sport in the old days; it wasn't until pictures and movies of the real thing had brought the horror into people's living rooms that attitudes had changed.

This was going to be in the Quibbler tomorrow if I had anything to do about it. Seeing the muggleborn as heroes might not be quite as good as seeing a pathetic, dying child, but it might begin to change people's minds.

A series of moving pictures, of dementors menacing cowering children? They say a picture is worth a thousand words. A moving picture had to be worth more than that.

“What's going on here?” McGonagall asked. She looked flustered.

“The Ministry tried to kill us again,” I said, standing up. From where they were standing I couldn't be seen; all they'd hear was my voice coming from behind a wall of containment foam.

Getting us out was harder than I'd thought. I had a lot of experience with containment foam, but my experience with the stuff they used to dissolve it was much less. I hadn't been able to create the counter, and we were completely surrounded.

We eventually had to settle for McGonagall transmuting a section of the wall into pigs even as Snape and Tonks drove the dementors within away. Even so, we had to file single file past dementors who were uncomfortably close.

We all ended up in the hospital section while aurors began to appear at the edge of the lawn and moving in to investigate.

As I drank hot chocolate along with the rest of them... I didn't need it, but chocolate was chocolate, I spoke in a low voice to my inner circle.

“They'll try to pin this on the Death Eaters,” I said. “If we wait, they'll sweep this under the rug and when summer comes, we'll all be dead. We have to move tonight.”

They stared at me, and they nodded grimly.

There had been a time where the sixth and seventh years would have been reluctant to follow my lead. That time was long past.

We'd been planning on dealing with the Trace all semester, and the best time to do it was tonight. No one would expect us to do anything while we were recovering from an attack, and they'd be busy dealing with the aftermath of what had happened here. With any luck, we could be there and back before anyone knew we had gone.

I'd known that we'd end up in the infirmary, and so the plan had been based around that.

The aurors were guarding the doors and they were heading for the windows outside.

“Brooms,” I said.

There were going to be six of us; me and six seventh years. All of them were older than seventeen and the Trace wouldn't apply to them. I was the only one who couldn't cast any spells once we got
outside of all Wizarding areas.

Our brooms had been magically shrunk in our pockets.

The sixth years were already transfiguring copies of us and putting them into bed. Hopefully the aurors wouldn't try to question me before I got back; Pomfrey had given me a sleeping draught, which I had spit out when she'd been distracted by someone else.

All of us leaped onto our brooms and disillusioned ourselves. One of the sixth years transfigured the window above us, and we were out. A moment later, the window was replaced.

As we flew into the night air, I couldn't help but grin.

I'd been passive the whole time I'd been here, responding to attack after attack, but never being proactive. Now, finally, I was ready to take the fight to the enemy, to do something that fundamentally changed the equation.

Without the Trace, we'd be able to hide in the muggle population. Unlike the purebloods, we knew the muggle world like the backs of our hands. They wouldn't find us until it was too late.

All we had to do was get through the security at the Ministry, destroy the source of the Trace, and get out while pinning the blame on the Death Eaters.

I'd never backed away from a challenge.
Ministry

Hogsmeade was only a mile from the outskirts of Hogwarts; it took us less than a minute to get there. Here I was at a disadvantage; unlike the older students, I hadn't actually been to Hogsmeade, although I'd looked at maps provided by the other students.

I had bugs on all of the others, so even though they were disillusioned I knew where they were.

We all landed, and I called out softly, “We're all here.”

“Right then,” I heard Thomas Cooper mutter. A moment later, the door in front of us clicked.

The older boys had learned to cast soundlessly, something I still hadn't managed. We all slipped inside the shop, and a moment later the fire in the fireplace at the back of the room flared up.

A softly muttered command, and the fire flared; once, twice, finally six times.

I stepped up, grabbed the powder and tossed it into the fire.

We were using the floo network because none of the boys knew the Ministry well enough to know how to apparate there, and because we weren't certain whether they had anti apparition charms in place.

“Ministry,” I said.

A moment later I stepped through.

I stepped into a one end of a long and beautiful hall, with a highly polished mahogany floor. There were golden symbols on the peacock blue ceiling that were constantly moving and changing. The walls behind me were paneled in dark wood, with gilded fireplaces.

This was the atrium, designed to welcome visitors to the Ministry of Magic. At this late hour, no one was coming through the fireplaces; it was after midnight.

There was a large banner with a portrait of Umbridge on one wall; it had probably been intended to make her look heroic; instead it made her look smug and self-satisfied.

A golden fountain filled the center of the hall, casting shimmering spots of light over the polished wood of the walls. The fountain had golden statues; a majestic looking wizard, a witch a little lower than him, and a centaur, goblin and house elf looking up at both of them adoringly.

Placing it here, right in the entrance was a sign of their belief of the order of the world; Wizards were on top and the other races were below them. Muggles weren't even in the picture. Their world view was so deeply ingrained that it never even occurred to them that it might be offensive.

We were on the eighth level below the surface.

The Trace was administered from the Improper Use of Magic Office, which was on the second level. That meant we had to move through six levels of the Ministry undetected, through whatever defenses that we hadn't heard about, destroy what we had to destroy and then return.

There was a guard at the security desk. He'd looked up at the sound of the fireplace flaring.

“Confundus,” I heard a soft voice say, and the guard looked suddenly confused.
We were all moving past the desk a moment later, ignoring the weighing of the wands. That was a security measure designed to check for polyjuiced imposers; most Wizards would use a different face, but they'd keep their own wand.

Presumably they had a list of Wizards and their wand characteristics; if they didn't match they'd look into it more closely. Why no one ever simply presented a second wand, I wasn't sure; there seemed to be a cultural blind spot about that.

The guard was carrying a probity probe, a device used to detect concealment spells and hidden magical devices. It was flashing now, but the guard was staring slack jawed, not paying attention to it at all.

There was a small food stand nearby, but it was closed at this hour.

We were headed for the elevators at the far end of the hall. They were located behind a pair of golden gates.

There were twenty elevators behind the gates. I saw the button being pushed several times in quick success.

“It doesn't make it go any faster,” I murdered. “Stay calm.”

Although I couldn't see any of them, the bugs could detect the stench of their fear. This was something that could get all of us put in Azkaban, or given the current political climate, Kissed.

I had gotten a good look at much of the Ministry when I'd been incarcerated here; three days to look over things and to get an idea of the way that people moved. I hadn't seen everything; there had been some areas outside of my range, and those were the ones that worried me the most.

Worse, I hadn't understood everything that I'd seen. There were magical devices that I'd had no idea what to make of; if they weren't used when I'd seen them, I didn't know what they were for.

As we stepped into the elevator, I grimaced. The elevators here didn't just go up and down; they went side to side. As a result, they had golden ropes hanging down from the ceiling; handholds that I was still too short to reach.

During the day, they had an elevator attendant, but by this time at night, he'd gone home.

“Are you ready?” Thomas Cooper asked quietly.

I'd warned them about this part; I quickly wedged myself into the corner of the elevator and pushed my back up against the wall; hopefully I'd be able to avoid falling down.

The doors closed, and the elevator jerked. Despite my determination, I felt myself thrown forward, and I felt a steadying hand on my arm.

A moment later, the door opened, with a woman's voice calling out, “Department of Magical games and sports.”

There was a messy looking hallway filled with posters of Quidditch teams tacked on the walls.

The next level was the Department of Magical transport, and we all froze as something white and fluttering entered the compartment. The Ministry sent interdepartmental messages like this; apparently using owls had been unsanitary.
The door opened again to the Department of International Cooperation. The memo left, and I could hear several sighs of relief, even though I'd never seen any indication that the memos had any sort of sentience.

We reached level four, the Department for the regulation and control of magical creatures. From what I'd heard, they kept a list of the names and addresses of all known werewolves in the country. Umbridge was using this to put werewolves in Azkaban, and there had been deaths already as they resisted being evicted from the nation.

Level three worried me; it was the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes. This was where the obliviators were based. Those were some of the most competent aurors in the entire Ministry; they'd been the ones who'd kept the secret over the past several hundred years.

It made sense that they were the best of the best; arguably, their department was the entire reason for the Ministry. Without the Statute of Secrecy, Wizards might barely need a government at all.

Finally we reached level two. Second only to the obliviators, the aurors here were the best. They were the ones who went after the Dark Wizards, the ones who kept the peace. They were the gloved fist of the Ministry. It was the largest of all the offices.

We stepped out into a corridor lined with heavy oak doors on both sides.

Moving quietly, we moved down the hall and around a corner. There, a heavy set of double doors led into a large open area divided into small cubicles.

I froze, and then quietly said “We have two aurors, in cubicles two and seventeen.”

Those weren't the actual names of the cubicles; as far as I knew they didn't have names. But in our simulations we'd named the cubicles for exactly this sort of reason. There wasn't another way to get through to the Improper use of Magic office except through here.

One of the aurors was faced away from us; he likely wouldn't be a problem. The other had a desk that faced the door, and he was looking right at it.

“If it had just been me, I probably could have slipped through the door when the man looked away; six of us would require the door to be open for longer, long enough that the auror would surely notice. Worse, with us invisible to each other, there was a chance that we'd run into each other in the attempt.

“I'll let one of you in when he looks away,” I murmured. “Get close and confundus him. When that's done, I'll let the rest in.”

This was a dangerous step. It depended on the auror not hearing a shoe scuff on the floor, and not sensing that something was wrong. I'd intentionally had all of them scrubbed clean of any colognes or scents of any kind; the last thing we needed was to be outed because a teenage boy thought he had to bathe in cologne.

I waited, and it seemed to take forever, but finally the auror looked down. I slipped the door open and I felt Thomas Cooper slip through. I watched with my bugs and listened until I saw the auror look up with a dazed look on his face.

“Did you say something?” his mate asked from the other desk. I opened the door, and a moment later I felt several of the others slipping through.
The auror leaped back, his wand coming out and his chair falling behind him. He stumbled and fell, and that was all it took.

Invisible hands set the chair back up and placed him back in the chair. Both aurors looked confused, and a moment later, I heard a pair of quiet obliviates.

A moment later, we were through, moving through other hallways. This part of the Ministry was a maze. It was enough of a maze that I'd struggled to remember the exact layout, which meant that our training wasn't as on point here as for the rest of the Ministry.

Worse, the office we were looking for had been outside of my range when I'd been imprisoned here.

“Let's go,” I murmured.

Grabbing several small pieces of string from my pack, I attached the string to the left wrists of each boy. I found them by the bugs I had on them, but as far as they knew I could see them despite their being invisible.

They were all tied together, wrist to wrist. If they needed to fight, their wand hands were free; half the boys were left handed, and they were attached by their right wrist. One of our greatest dangers was in losing track of each other as we ran through the corridors invisibly.

I heard a sound of screaming from a room in the distance.

Umbridge was in a room with a pair of aurors; a man was tied to a chair.

“I don't know anything about the Muggleborn Resistance!” the man in the chair insisted. There was blood on his face and he looked terrified.

“Clearly you do,” Umbridge said sweetly. “Otherwise you would call them terrorists, like every good, decent Wizard. Instead, you claim they are a resistance... as though there is something to resist. Why would people resist their rightful government?”

Before the man could speak, one of the aurors, a thuggish looking man pointed his wand and electricity shot out of his wand. The man screamed and his body jerked.

“It's a pity that the time is not yet right for the Unforgivables to be used,” Umbridge said. “A simple Imperio and this could all be over. Instead we are forced to resort to... cruder methods.”

“I don't know anything!” the man said. After a moment, he began sobbing. “What do you want me to say?”

“Just the truth, dear boy,” Umbridge said. “That you were part of the cell that killed my predecessor, and that they are the ones who have been targeting the poor, dear children in Hogwarts along with the werewolves.”

As far as she knew, most of the muggleborn had already been slaughtered; the man would think that he was admitting to an attack that had already happened. Undoubtedly she planned to have him Kissed shortly after his public confession so that he couldn't be questioned.

She leaned forward.
“All of this can go away, you know. Simply admit the truth, and we can find you a nice, comfortable cell somewhere, with decent food, a nice, warm bed. All you have to do is tell the truth in front of an audience.”

“I...Will my family be all right?”

On some level, he had to know that this was the end for him. The fact that he was even asking was a sign of his desperation.

“My dear boy, we aren't barbarians... your lovely children will be safe, provided that you keep your end of the bargain.”

The man was silent for a long moment, and then he nodded.

“You will sign this document,” she said.

One of the two brutes with her already had a sheet of paper with everything written out. The other waved his wand, and the ropes fell off of him.

He staggered, but they put a quill in his trembling hand, and he sobbed as he signed his name.

“Take him down to his cell,” Umbridge said. “And get him cleaned up. We want him looking his best for his speech to the papers tomorrow!”

The aurors grabbed the man, one under each arm, and they began dragging him down the hall.

I stopped.

“Aurors are coming,” I said in a low voice.

I pulled them all into a side room and gently closed the door. I waited until the aurors dragged the sobbing man past us.

I then pulled them toward the office in question.

A quick spell unlocked the door; I wasn't sure why anyone in the Wizarding world even bothered, really.

A moment later we were inside. Two more doors, and we reached what I thought had to be the source of the Trace.

I'd come across a historical record of the Ministry stealing an Analytical Engine; it had been created by Charles Babbage in the late 1830s as one of the world's first computers. The official, muggle record was that it had never been completed by funding issues, but the truth was that he had been confunded and obliviated, and the engine had been stolen.

The Hogwarts Express had been acquired in a similar way, stolen from the very muggles that the Wizards determined to be inferior.

The engine was really nothing more than a primitive calculator, but my guess was that they wouldn't have kept it here for that. They wouldn't have enchanted it if they didn't need it, and the timing.... it had been stolen shortly before the Trace had been implemented was suspicious.

“You know what to do,” I told the boys.

Blowing it up wasn't going to be enough; if enough parts were left, the technicians could simply
repair it and start all over. Blowing it up might interfere with the magic, but we couldn't be sure. The only way to be absolutely sure was to cut it up, shrink it, and then dispose of it in different places.

This was going to take a while; the Engine was larger than I would have thought.

There was a bowl next to the engine, and I looked through the papers; there were lists of the underage Wizards, the spells that had been cast near them, and their location. There weren't that many right now; presumably all the spells that had been cast during the day had been taken care of by the day shift, and these only represented those that had been cast tonight.

Once the Engine was disposed of, we'd create an explosion to make them think that it had been vaporized.

Quiet rage had been growing within me since I'd listened to Umbridge's little torture session. Getting rid of the Trace was all well and good, but not if Umbridge simply escalated even more. She was a problem that had to be dealt with, and I would likely never get a better chance.

It would put this operation at risk, but the potential rewards were enormous.

“I have other business,” I said after a moment. “I'll be back. If you finish before I do, I'll make my own way out.”

“What?” Thomas asked. He sounded anxious.

“We've been over the escape route a thousand times. If I get caught, it'll just be a single crazy girl who did this. If you get caught, it's every muggleborn who will be blamed.”

I could hear some distressed murmurs from the others, but finally they agreed.

A moment later I was out the door, and I was heading up a set of side stairs.

Umbridge was in her office talking to someone through a Floo connection.

Everything in her office was a horrifying shade of pink. There were portraits on her walls with moving pictures. All the portraits seemed to be those of cats, though. I'd have to make sure than none of them were able to talk.

“Everything is going according to plan. With any luck, our Hogwarts problem will have solved itself by tomorrow, and we'll be able to get on to more important matters.”

“I hope so,” the man in the fireplace said. “You should remember who helped place you in office. We do not look kindly on failure.”

“You should remember who I am,” Umbridge said sweetly. “One does not threaten the Minister, not if one wishes to continue breathing.”

The fireplace blazed and the fire returned to normal.

I stepped into the room, and I pointed my wand.

“Exelliarmus!” I said.

She whirled around and stared. I allowed the disillusionment to drop as I closed the door behind me.
“Miss Hebert,” she said. “Give me back my wand.”

“I think we have some things to talk about,” I said.
“You recognize me,” I said. “I’d have thought that all muggleborn looked the same to you.”

“They kept playing that same picture in the paper over and over,” Umbridge said. “As though hitting a majestic creature like an animal was something worthy of praise.”

The picture of me fighting the Dementors in the paper. It must have infuriated her, knowing that I had stopped her planned massacre.

We stared at each other.

“Why are you here, Miss Hebert?” Umbridge asked. “Do you really think you can make a difference? The tide of history is inexorable, and it is flowing against your people. The natural, rightful order is reestablishing itself, and those who do not fall in line shall be trampled.”

“You’ve been working for the Death Eaters,” I said. “I want to know everything you know about them... especially about where they live.”

“Miss Hebert!” she said, sounding shocked. “There’s no point in being rude! I would never work with the enemies of the state!”

I sighed.

“You know,” I said. “It’s too bad that the Unforgivables aren’t allowed. This would be much easier if someone had showed me how to use the Imperius. I’m going to have to use... cruder methods.”

I’d suspected that she’d used torture not out of fear of using an Unforgivable, but out of sheer enjoyment of breaking the man. There had been something in her eyes.

Her face twitched.

“You wouldn’t dare!” she said. “I’m the Minister for Magic!”

“I’m a barbarian,” I said. “A sociopath. You’ve heard what I did to boys who tried to bully me; what do you think I’ll do to someone who tried to have me and all my friends Kissed?”

She backed up a little.

“This is unconscionable!” she said. “What will it gain you? Even if I lied and gave you a list of false names, what would it get you?”

“A list of people to kill?” I asked. “That would be priceless. I don’t know if you’ve heard about my boggart.”

“There were rumors,” she muttered.

“My greatest fear was that I was going to have to murder all of you, destroy the entire Wizarding world. The problem we’re having is that I’m getting less and less afraid of that.”

She frowned, so I explained it to her.

“It’s actually starting to sound like a good idea,” I said. “And that’s going to be a problem for everyone if things don’t change.”
“I'm sure we can come to some arrangement,” she said hastily as I lifted my wand.

She was stalling. I could see it in her eyes.

I didn't see anything with my bugs, so...

“Did they tell you they'd be coming for me?” I asked. “The Death Eaters?”

They had a Seer; furthermore, they'd had almost a year and a half to get a grasp of my personality. They had to know that sending dementors to destroy me and my friends would warrant immediate retaliation, most likely on the very Ministry that had issued the order.

“If you surrender, I can grant you protection,” she said. “You are of more value alive than dead. Showing the world that you are no hero would be worth a little disagreement with my benefactors.”

So she thought that I'd become a rallying point for the muggles, a symbol that resistance was not futile. Having me in prison would demoralize the rest of them, make them easier to round up and deport, or worse.

“So you admit it,” I said flatly.

“You won't get away,” she said. “Whatever else happens, you will be found. It would be better if the Ministry administered justice, rather than the Dark Lord. I understand that some of his punishments can be... rather creative.”

She didn't know about the boys.

I could see it in her eyes. She believed that I'd broken into the Ministry on my own. It made sense that she'd think that; it had been my modus operandi in the past. I'd never really used allies in the past, and the seer had probably focused completely on me and ignored any images of the others.

Switching wands took me only a moment.

“What are you doing?” she asked, as I held her wand up and pointed it at the wall.

“Morsmordre Maxima,” I said.

The cats on the walls screamed as the wall bulged, twisting and changing into the shape of a familiar, green hued skull.

“What?” she asked.

“We need to get the Ministry back on track, chasing after the real enemy,” I said. “That's only going to happen if there is a crime big enough to shock the entire country.”

I could see it in her eyes.

“Now Miss Hebert,” she said. “There's no need to be hasty.”

She was reaching behind her; my insects could see something on her desk. She had another wand hidden under her papers, likely the wand of the man she'd just sent to the dungeons.

“Expecto Patronum,” I said.

There was a moment of confusion in her eyes, followed by a lot of screaming.
I watched dispassionately, despite feeling a little impressed at just how... effective the spell was. It didn't last long; just a minute or two, but her pain was indescribable. She didn't scream long; her voice box was eaten through after only a few moments, but she was alive throughout most of it.

Dismissing the patronus was harder this time, but I managed to do it.

All that was left of her were bleached bones and the remains of her clothes; apparently the Patronus had a preference for living flesh.

Immediately I was out the door.

I reached the boys, and I saw that they'd just finished disassembling the machine and had put it away.

“Get out. There are Death Eaters coming, and they only know about me. I'll try to draw them away. Get back to the school, and I'll meet you there.”

I heard them protesting, but I didn't bother to listen. We'd gone over several escape scenarios extensively, and they knew what to do in a situation like this.

I disillusioned myself and I sprinted down the hallway.

Voldemort had gone all out this time.

I could sense them now in the Atrium; there were more than twenty of them, and they were spreading out. They were wearing their full outfits, masks and everything, and as I watched, they killed the guard.

Being disillusioned wouldn't help if they used the human revealing spell. The spell didn't reveal identities, and it only revealed the general location, which gave me some wiggle room. Still, fighting twenty Death Eaters with no time to prepare was probably beyond even me, unless I was willing to reveal all my trump cards.

They were coming up the elevators.

I followed the boys through my bugs as they rushed down one set of stairs. I went down the other.

The sheer size of the Ministry was to our advantage. The fact that the seer had given them information was not.

On level three I paused. It looked like the boys might run into Death Eaters; I scowled, opened the door next to me, and pointed my wand.

“Bombarda Maxima!” I shouted.

The explosion in the room next to me was satisfying, and more importantly loud. I could sense the Death eaters who had been going up the stairs turn and head back in my direction.

Rain began to fall in the room almost as soon as the flames erupted from the furniture, despite there not being a visible sprinkler system.

I slipped back into the stairwell and slid down the steps as quickly as I could. There were alarms going off all over the building, which was only to the good. It would take the aurors some time to arrive, but once they did, things would start looking more in my favor.

A woman in her early thirties with prematurely graying hair was looking out of an office. She
looked confused.

If she wasn't careful, she was going to be murdered before she had a chance.

Putting my wand to my throat, I shouted, “THE DEATH EATERS ARE ATTACKING THE MINISTRY. EVACUATE!”

I tried to make my voice as deep as possible, hoping it didn't sound like the voice of a child. It was incredibly loud.

I was disillusioned, so she didn't see me, but I ran past her. Undoubtedly her ears were still ringing.

The Death Eaters were closing in on me more quickly. I had to find the route with the fewest Death Eaters between me and freedom.

It took me a moment, but... there.

I ran, and I cast the spell to silence myself. It might not help if they tried the human revealing spell, but they couldn't keep that up constantly.

Two Death Eaters emerged from a stairwell; I pointed my wand and said “Bombarda Maxima.”

The spell bounced off a shield being used by one of the Death Eaters. It exploded against the wall beside them, sending out splinters of wood.

I slid to the floor as beams of greenish light flew over my head. They couldn't see me, but they knew my general location. They probably hadn't disillusioned themselves for fear of friendly fire; it would have been difficult to avoid attacking each other if they didn't know where they were.

Darkness powder from my pack flew through the air; neither one of them was holding a Hand of Glory, although one of them had one on his belt. It would take precious time for him to reach it, by which time I could cut their feet out from under them.

The shield didn't reach the floor, so I used a cutting spell, putting as much of my will into it as I could. It sheered through muscle and bone, severing the man's foot. He screamed and fell, and the shield vanished.

The other man was fumbling with the hand of Glory. He looked up, but it was already too late.

“Bombarda Maxima,” I said.

He exploded, and as I ran past the other, screaming man, I pointed my wand at him and put him out of his misery.

Running down the stairs, I realized that the Atrium was still guarded by several Death Eaters.

The boys had reached it by now; the Death Eaters were firing at the spots where the sounds of apparition could be heard, but no bodies hit the floor. It looked like they'd gotten away.

Good.

I'd had a plan, just in case all of this went sideways. All I needed to do was reach an elevator...

A Death Eater was guarding the elevators. His head snapped around, and a flash of green light flew past my head.
They weren't trying to save me to be tortured by Voldemort; they were just trying to kill me. It was a lot more pragmatic than I would have expected from them.

The fact was that some of the others were distracted by fighting Ministry employees. Maybe this wasn't entirely to catch me. Having the Ministry attacked wouldn't have been in the interest of their puppet, Umbridge.

Maybe they were finally making their play for control of the Ministry.

I blinked as I realized that Voldemort was in the Ministry. He was headed down to the bottom level, which is where I needed to go. He was taller than I would have thought, his skin chalk white and in my old world I'd have thought he was a Case 53.

A group of five Death Eaters were fighting aurors in the next room, near the elevator. I dropped to the floor and crawled as spells flew over my head. They'd be too busy to use the human revealing spell, not while they were in the middle of combat.

I reached the elevator and I slipped inside. Pushing the buttons, I pointed my wand and spoke in a low tone.

“Bombarda Maxima,” I said.

It was enough that one of the Death Eaters heard me. He whirled around, but died as he was hit in the back by one of the auror's spells.

The man beside him exploded into a shower of guts and viscera, and that distracted the others enough for the aurors to take them down.

The door closed and I grimaced as the elevator almost shoved me to the floor. These things hand handholds for a reason; they didn't just go up and down; they moved from side to side and back and forwards, and they did so unexpectedly.

I was heading for the bottom floor, and the elevator was likely to open on the first floor before it continued on.

Moving as Far as I could around the edge of the door so that I'd have cover for most spell fire, I spoke the words of the shield spell, expanding it as wide as I could against the doorway.

It wouldn't protect me against the Killing curse, which is why I had cover, but it would keep someone from simply creating an explosion inside the elevator and easily killing me.

The door opened and I felt something massive explode against my shield. I heard screams as the blast rebounded on the people who'd cast it.

A moment later the doors closed again, and I heard soothing elevator music.

I was on the ninth floor.

This was the place where the Department of Mysteries resided. There were things here that I'd puzzled over for days; rooms filled with brains,

The doors opened into hallway with plain, black tiled walls. There were no doors to either side; only one at the end of the hall. It led to a circular room that moved; it had taken me hours before I'd figured out the trick to it.
I didn't have long before I was followed from one of the other elevators.

I sprinted down the hallway, reaching the Entrance Chamber just as the doors behind me opened. Spells flew over my head and I dodged to the side.

The entrance chamber was a circular room with a dark marble floor that looked almost like water. As I closed the door, the walls seemed to rotate. In truth, it was the chamber that was rotating with magic used to keep the people inside from realizing it.

Voldemort was in the prophecy room; presumably that was part of the reason he was here.

“Time,” I called out, and a moment later a door opened up.

I was in a long, rectangular room filled with beautiful, dancing lights. There were strange devices everywhere, including clocks of every description.

On one wall there were numerous devices that looked like hourglasses on necklaces. Hermione had tried to get the Ministry to loan her one; they hadn't, saying she was too young. When she'd shown me a picture in a book, I'd realized where I'd seen them before.

I began scooping as many of them as I could into my fanny pack.

Grabbing one, I began to twist it, just as the book had said.

Voldemort had taken up a globe, and it was speaking.

“The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches... born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies... and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not... and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives... the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies....”

I ducked as green light sprang up over my head. For once my shortness was an advantage instead of a disadvantage.

“Bombarda Maxima,” I said, but this time I didn't aim back at the people who were attacking me; instead I began to run, and I targeted the wall that held the time turners.

The explosion was quite satisfying.

The only thing almost as good as gaining a new assert for your side was denying one to the enemy.

I pulled my power in as much as possible, until it just covered the area over my skin.

Time changed around me. Even better, the Time Turner didn't just return you to the same place you'd left in the future; it brought you to the place you had been at the time when you arrived.

I was disillusioned and I had the sound dispelling spell on me; the worse thing that could happen would be for my former self to sense me when we fought to control the same bugs.

Everyone was in the Great Hall settling down for bed.

Remembering what had happened, I waited.

“I have to go to the loo,” a first year said.
“Take someone who can manage a patronus,” my past self said, irritated. I’d told everyone to go beforehand, but anxiety had given some people nervous bowels.

I waited until a fifth year escorted the first year out the door.

From there it was a matter of avoiding the Dementors; I slipped into the Infirmary, presuming that the Dementors had been told to avoid the adult staff members.

I could hear the sounds of battle from where I was, and I hid as all of the crying students filed into the infirmary.

I watched myself talking to the Seventh Years, and then I waited as they all escaped through the window.

Slipping into the bed was easy while everyone was busy reconstructing the window, and I disillusioned myself.

I think I’d fallen asleep when the seventh years returned.

The window above us disappeared suddenly, and the disillusioned boys dropped exhausted off their brooms. The others replaced the window before the aurors outside, who were looking outward noticed that it was gone.

As they reappeared, people burst into confused murmurs.

“Death Eaters showed up at the Ministry,” one of the boys said. “Taylor led them away from us.”

There were dismayed cried from everyone in the crowd.

I sat up in bed.

“What took you guys so long?”
“What happened last night was a crime and a travesty,” Rowle said. “You never should have been put in that situation.”

He looked like he'd aged a decade overnight. He'd returned overnight as soon as he'd heard about what had happened, although it had been far too late to do anything.

“Nevertheless, I am proud of all of you,” he said. “You protected yourselves and each other, and you went beyond what students of your age should ever be asked to do.”

The professors had all returned overnight, likely due to the multiple emergencies.

“This will not happen again,” he said. “As of this morning, the Dementors have all been returned to Azkaban. There will be an investigation... given the circumstances, it may take time, but I assure you that I will demand an accounting.”

The Ministry was in disarray.

Dumbledore had arrived at the head of an army of aurors, and he'd driven Voldemort away. The Daily Prophet was screaming about how he'd saved everyone, and there was growing pressure that he should become Minister now that two Ministers in a row had been assassinated.

I still wasn't sure he would do it.

He seemed afraid of power; afraid of himself. Perhaps he feared power would corrupt him, although I didn't really see what he was worried about. He already held half the high offices in the government; would Minister actually make him that much more powerful?

People listened to him, and if he really wanted something, he'd be able to get it, assuming he was willing to set aside his morals.

Hermione leaned next to me.

“Luna and her dad did a good job, didn't they?”

The Quibbler was spread out in front of her, and the entire from page was covered with pictures of us battling the dementors. They'd missed the attack on the Ministry, and I was afraid that story would overshadow ours, but the Quibbler's audience had grown to a point that it had to make a difference.

The Prophet hadn't even mentioned the attack, which didn't surprise me.

“What they wrote was pretty good too,” I said.

I didn't know Mr. Lovegood, and a lot of his articles seemed.... strange. He reminded me of an American conspiracy theorist writing an underground newspaper. I'd have preferred to have had this published in the Prophet, but that wasn't going to happen.

I'd hidden the Time Turners; some were in the Chamber of Secrets, and some were hidden deep within the air vents, carried by my bugs. The last thing I needed was for an auror to come and look through my bag and find any damning evidence.

I also wanted them in different places so that if one stash was found or broken, I'd still had a
reserve. It had been stupid for the Ministry to keep them all in one place, unless they were simply considered so dangerous that they hadn't wanted to separate them.

If that was true, they should have protected them better.

“The aurors are here to take your statements,” Rowle said. “Giving honest and true answers will be the first step in getting justice for what happened.”

Right.

Considering that the Ministry had been attacked, I was surprised that it was happening this quickly. It seemed likely that someone was suspicious, and they wanted to find a way to point blame at me, or at least at the muggleborn.

I'd worked with the boys on interrogation techniques, but I couldn't be sure that they wouldn't break. To that end, I'd be listening in on their interrogation sessions. If they did break, I'd enact the second part of my plan.

Now that the Trace was gone, I needed to get the entire group of muggleborns out of the country. I'd found a floo location near the ferry; we'd have to disillusion all of us, which wouldn't be easy and would take time. Getting everyone through the secret passage to Hogsmeade would be a nightmare, but I'd practiced the plan with them.

The only ones I was worried about was the first years who hadn't joined our group. They hadn't had the training and were the most likely to give us away if something went wrong.

The complicated thing would be surviving in France. Feeding this many children would be difficult by itself, without the extra challenge of hiding in a foreign country where most of us didn't even speak the language.

“Miss Hebert?” I heard a voice say.

I looked up, and I saw a young auror standing behind me. I'd sensed him coming, of course, but I didn't want to look like I knew too much.

“So I'm first,” I said.

“You lead the defense,” the man murmured. “So it would seem that you have the most to discuss.”

I followed him through the doors of the Great Hall. There were still traces of the containment foam on the floor; it hadn't dissolved as well as the genuine foam would. It was possible that my transfigured version wasn't perfect, and that there were some differences.

I was led into an empty classroom, where I saw Moody, Snape, two aurors I didn't know, and what looked like a Ministry employee.

They were sitting behind a long table that looked familiar; it was the one the Professors usually ate at.

A chair had been placed sitting directly across from them; clearly it was designed to put whoever was in the chair at a disadvantage. Was this an inquisition?

I sat down in the chair, and I pushed my emotions into my bugs. I'd need to be clear headed and focused.
“Miss Hebert,” the Ministry man said. He didn't bother to introduce himself. Maybe he assumed that I'd already know who he was, either through some outsized sense of his own importance, or because of my purported seer's ability. “We are here to discuss the events of last night.”

I nodded calmly.

“What do you want to know?”

“First, we need to have a timeline of events,” the man said. “When did you know that the attack would happen?”

“After the first attack, it was obvious,” I said. “The Ministry wanted us dead, and they were going to keep attacking until they were successful.”

“The Ministry did not want the muggleborn dead,” the man said sharply. “Those are unsubstantiated rumors.”

“Calling the people who were supposed to protect us away... that couldn't have just been the Minister,” I said. “That had to involve other people in the Ministry cooperating with her.”

“Coincidence!” the man snapped.

“It was obvious enough that I didn't need to be a seer to know when the attack would happen,” I said. “Anybody with half a brain could have seen it... which is why I have to wonder why the people supposedly trying to see us safe didn't... unless they wanted us all dead.”

The man's lips tightened.

He was thin, with a face that reminded me a little of a rodent's.

“It's clear that this line of questioning will get us nowhere,” he said. “How did you get a group of schoolchildren to defend themselves from the dementors?”

“Training,” I said. “People think that muggleborns can't do magic, but we're just as smart and magically gifted as the rest of you.”

Smarter sometimes, although I didn't say so.

“So you deliberately created an army. Were you intending to overthrow the Ministry?”

“I hardly think I'd need to,” I said mildly. “You lot seem to be doing an excellent job of it yourselves.”

His face turned red.

“The answer is no,” I said. “I wanted to protect my friends and classmates, and that was the best way I knew how to do it.”

“Arming them?” the man said.

As though every Wizard, down to the smallest First Year wasn't armed. The only question was whether they knew what they were doing.

“When government won't protect people, it's up to them to protect themselves,” I said. “And your government doesn't seem to be doing a very good job of it right now.”
“Do you know who I am, Miss Hebert?” the man asked, angrily.

I shrugged.

“Nobody I'm particularly interested in knowing,” I said.

“I am Roland Harrington, the Senior Undersecretary for the Minister of Magic,” the man said. “And you will speak to me with respect.”

“Miss Hebert,” Snape drawled. “You will give this man the respect he deserves.”

There was something about his expression that indicated that he didn't think any more of the man than I did, but that I had best at least give the appearance of respect.

“We did what we had to do,” I said.

“Where did you learn to make that.... substance,” the younger auror asked enthusiastically. He'd been looking like he wanted to speak the whole time.

“I call it containment foam,” I said. “I stumbled on it by accident, while trying to transfigure... something else. I got help from the senior students to refine the technique and make it better, so I guess you'd say it was a group effort.”

“And what are the qualities of the foam?” he asked.

“Living creatures can breathe in it,” I said. “Although you probably wouldn't want to.”

We'd tried the foam on rats and other pests, and eventually on Ron Weasley. His brothers had said he'd volunteered; I hadn't found out until afterwards that he hadn't. Apparently he was a little claustrophobic, and hadn't appreciated being trapped inside at all.

“This could be a breakthrough in aurors defending against multiple attackers,” the man said. “The Department of Mysteries will be very interested in...”

“We aren't here for that,” Mr. Harrington said sharply. “We are here to determine Miss Hebert's role in what happened last night.”

“I thought you knew,” I said. “I led the others. I can't cast a patronus myself... too young and all.”

Considering that there were a few others my age that could generate at least a silvery mist, it was a little humiliating to admit.

“So why would the others listen to you?” the man almost sneered. “A disturbed second year.”

“Because they didn't want to die,” I said simply. “And I knew how to keep that from happening.”

Moody leaned forward.

“Were you at the Ministry last night?”

“What?” I asked, pretending to be startled.

I could tell that Snape at least didn't believe me, but I couldn't be sure about the others.

“There was a young girl's voice that warned the members of the Ministry that the Death Eaters were attacking,” Moody said. “And none of the employees had brought their children with them.”
“Am I the only young girl in Wizarding Britain?” I asked. “Are you sure it was even a child at all? Some young woman have childish voices.”

“Answer the question!” Harrington demanded.

“Your own aurors had me locked in the infirmary until this morning, under guard. How could I have possibly been at the Ministry?”

“And you were here at the time of the attack on the Ministry?” Harrington demanded.

“Absolutely,” I said, looking them each in the eye. It even had the advantage of being true. As long as they didn’t ask me about the stolen time turners, I would be fine.

“Are you a member of the Muggleborn Liberation Front?” Mr. Harrington asked suddenly.

They were changing subjects quickly; almost like they were wanting me to lose my composure. Snape and Moody knew me better than that, but Harrington apparently expected to be able to browbeat me like he would any other twelve year old.

“I’m not even sure that’s a real organization,” I said. “After all, the Ministry covered up the attack on the train at the end of the last school year and said it was werewolf terrorists, when we all know it was Death Eaters.”

“We do not,” Harrington said. He sniffed. “I do not know what kind of training muggles give their children, but it is clearly inferior in manners.”

His manners didn’t seem particularly good to me either. The man was easy to antagonize; the more I kept him focused on his own outrage, the less likely he was to ask questions that I did not want to answer. As a government official, he was undoubtedly used to people bowing and scraping before him.

The fact that I was a child had to make it worse. Disrespect from a child was a button for some people; apparently he was one of them.

The problem was Moody and Snape, with the other aurors an unknown quantity. They were the ones more likely to see through my act; the question was whether they would attack me for it. The youngest auror probably wouldn’t be a problem; he seemed to want to talk to me desperately.

He was probably a spell research nerd, likely someone who wanted to be transferred to the Department of Mysteries. He was as young as Tonks, which meant he was probably inadequately trained, and he likely hadn’t gotten into his preferred department because the Ministry was hemorrhaging aurors.

“They might have done a better job if they weren’t dead,” I said.

“Miss Hebert,” Snape said warningly.

“I’m not a member of the Muggleborn Liberation Front,” I said firmly. “I have never been, and do not have any plans on joining.”

“Are you a dark lady?” Harrington asked.

I stared at him, and then I laughed.

“I’m twelve years old. If you want to know who the dark lady was, ask your old boss. She was
working with the Death Eaters to kill all the Muggleborns.”

“Unsubstantiated paranoia will not be tolerated,” Harrington said. “If... and I do mean if there was a conspiracy, it originated from lower in the organization. Madam Umbridge was a paragon.”

“So it could have originated from the office of the Undersecretary?” I asked.

Harrington’s face reddened and he stood up.

“You dare to accuse me?” he sputtered. “I am a member of your government.”

I could have mentioned that he wasn't a member of my government, but that might encourage him to threaten to have me deported.

“Umbridge was responsible,” I insisted.

An auror stepped into the room and stepped up to Moody, whispering in his ear. Moody's normal eye widened.

“Apparently Dumbledore has found documents linking Dolores Umbridge to the Death Eaters,” he said. He turned to Harrington. “Which brings up questions about your involvement.”

Only my emotion suppression kept the surprise off my face. I strongly doubted that such documents existed. It was more likely that Dumbledore had manufactured them as a way of swaying the Wizengamot in his direction.

It was a risky move; if the counterfeit was discovered, then his whole plan would fall apart, along with his credibility. If it worked, then it, along with the attack on the Ministry might push those who had been on the fence in his direction.

“That's what they've been trying to do,” I said. “Push responsibility off onto the werewolves, onto the muggleborn... anyone they can to hide their corrupt activities. Who else would want the muggleborn dead other than the Death Eaters... and who would have had to give the orders.”

“Miss Hebert,” Snape said. “It might be best if you were to stay outside.”

Harrington leapt to his feet, grabbing for his wand, but he fell back as I hit him in the face with a stunner.

“He was going for his wand,” I said unnecessarily. The others had seen it as well.

Although it happened to be true, only Moody had managed to get his wand up in time. The others stared at me.

I'd had bugs on him, and they'd felt his muscles tensing so I'd had ample warning.

Still, I imagined that it looked pretty impressive.

They all looked down to where his wand had fallen.

“Constant vigilance, right Mr. Moody?” I asked.

With that, I left the room. I regretted the fact that I'd pushed my emotions away, because I imagined that I'd have had a strong sense of satisfaction.

The interviews took the rest of the day, but Harrington wasn't involved in any of them. The boys
managed to get through the interviews with flying colors, most likely because Moody had left before they were interviewed, as had Snape. Their own heads of houses were the ones who oversaw their interviews.

Given Snape's predilection for mind-reading, I was glad that I was the only Slytherin involved in all of this.

Ultimately, it was decided that we would continue to stay in Hogwarts over the Holidays; as racist as Umbridge had been, she was right that going home would have led to us being picked off one by one.

I was worried about what would happen during the summer. A lot depended on who succeeded Umbridge in the government, and what policies the new Minister would enact. Would they be favorable to us, or would they be our enemies?

The last thing I needed was to have to assassinate yet another Minister; for one thing, I imagined that security would be better the next time, and for another, I doubted that the Ministry could survive one more assassination.

The government was on the brink of collapse at the moment even without that, and I'd seen what happened in my world when governments collapsed.

Warlords took over, and battles and skirmishes became the order of the day.

We wouldn't just be dealing with a single dark lord, we'd be dealing with a dozen. Without the government, the Wizarding world would be revealed to the muggles.

There'd been a time where I'd thought that the Wizards were silly to hide themselves away; my world had dealt with Capes just fine.

However, my world had had the Protectorate and Cauldron managing the reputation about capes, framing them as Superheros so that they were popular.

If the muggles of this world were as bad as the Wizards, there really would be witch hunts, and I wasn't certain that the Wizards would be smart enough to survive.

As I went to bed that night, I saw the bodies of everyone I'd ever known piled in the corner.

“Riddikulus,” I said, pointing my wand.

The boggart skittered away and I went to sleep. My dreams weren't good.
“Today we are going to talk about operational security,” I said.

When we'd first started, some of the older children had questioned how I knew things. By this point, they no longer bothered.

They didn't even ask what I meant; they already knew I'd follow up with an explanation.

“In muggle military organizations, operational security is a way of trying to see through the enemies eyes, to anticipate the things that they might do to try to steal that information from you, and then figuring out ways to stop them from doing that. It's difficult in the Muggle world... it's harder in this one. Why might that be?”

“Anybody can be imperio'd,” Colin Creevy said. “Even if they don't want to be.”

“Can anybody think of a way to combat that?” I asked.

Everyone looked around, and nobody said anything. Finally one girl raised her hand.

“The Fidelius charm?”

“That can work for some kinds of secrets,” I said.

Personally I would have loved to master that spell. I'd have had it cast on Gringotts and held the entire bank hostage until the Wizarding world gave into our demands. Unfortunately, it was considered such a difficult spell that even our seventh years couldn't manage it, although they might have been able to if they'd been better educated.

“I'm looking for something simpler, though,” I said.

Nobody raised their hands.

“You can't give away a secret if you don't know it,” I said. “Imagine that we were a group of strangers, and that at every meeting we came in wearing robes and masks, with only the leader knowing who we all were. Would controlling any one person make that much of a difference?”

“They could give away the meeting place,” a boy said. “And then they could pick us all up.”

“There are ways to deal with that,” I said. “Among which is to never actually meet. Split us up into groups of five; the members of each group only know the people in their group, except for the leader, who knows one person from another cell.”

“Couldn't you just go from one cell to the next?” Colin asked.

“You could, but each time you do, there's a chance something might go wrong... maybe the person fights back a little better than you thought, maybe they die... maybe your own cover is blown, alerting the other cells to your existence. Compare that to the aurors all showing up to this meeting right now.”

Everyone nodded slowly.

“It's too late for us here... we already all know each other, and even if we didn't, muggleborns in Hogwarts is a pretty limited group.”
“Didn't we sign a contract?” Harry asked.

He'd been forced to go home for the holidays, much to his dismay, but he was back now.

“IT helps,” I admitted, “But you could imperio someone into taking the consequences, and there wouldn't be a lot we could do.”

That seemed to reach them, and they all looked at each other uncomfortably.

“It's not the only risk, either. You all know what polyjuice potion can do. How would we defeat that?”

“Passwords?” a boy asked. I'd seen him reading spy novels in his room, so he probably was familiar with at least some of this.

“Also, eyes on,” I said. “If you suspect that someone is going to try to replace one of your members, it helps if everybody keeps their eyes on each other at all times until the operation is over.”

Polyjuice wasn't usually that fast, but I needed them to get used to thinking tactically.

“If you faced two versions of me, and you couldn't tell which was which, what would you do?”

“Riddikulous you both?” Colin asked.

“And if that didn't work?”

“Hit you both with a stunner,” Thomas Cooper said. “The one that knocks us out is you.”

Everybody laughed.

“He's right,” I said. “You are better off stunning both people and figuring out who is the impostor later rather than letting one of them betray you.”

After this was all over, I wondered if I might have a career in teaching. Maybe I could teach at Hogwarts, or train aurors or something similar.

It was optimistic of me to think ahead; I'd spent the last year and a half focusing on survival.

“It's time to go back,” Hermione said, pointing at her watch.

I nodded.

Finding a time where everyone was able to get together was a challenge; we were no longer the secret we once were, but the others were still bound by the contract they had signed. Also, the room of requirement was our trump card, the place where we would retreat to in an emergency.

To that end, we were holding this meeting in one of the classrooms. We reserved the Room for times when we had to do more hands on training.

Rowle had given his approval to our club and the other professors sometimes listened in. I allowed it only when the sessions were about more innocuous subjects.

I was reserving the Room for when I had to teach them to stab people under the armpits. I somehow thought McGonagall would frown at that.
As everyone began leaving the room, I waited; Snape had been waiting outside, listening in.

He stepped out of the shadows when the last of them had left, stepping into the room.

“The things you know,” he began.

“Tough neighborhood,” I said, shrugging. It was my standard reply to questions of that sort, yet he occasionally chose to ask. Maybe one day I would actually tell him... possibly after I got really good at the obliviate spell.

“I once asked you not to start a revolution,” he said.

I smirked. “Is it a revolution if you change the way people think?”

“It's the only kind of revolution that actually means anything,” he said. “Most simply replace one set of rulers with more of the same.”

He'd felt the sting of being a half-blood in Slytherin. I had a sense that he at least tacitly approved of some of the things I was doing, although he has suspicions that I had been doing terrible things, or that I was going to do them.

“I suppose I have your organization to thank for your classmates' improved performance. Some of them are... almost passable.”

“Unlike the purebloods?” I asked.

He didn't say anything. He just stared at me.

“Why are you here?” I asked.

“The new Minister would like to speak to you,” he said. “And as your Head of House, I am to escort you there.”

As it turned out, I had been wrong about Dumbledore forging the documents linking Umbridge to the Death Eaters. The papers in question had been released upon her death, apparently part of an insurance policy Umbridge had to keep herself from being assassinated.

She'd named the heads of a dozen prominent families as members, and with them under investigation and unable to vote in the elections, Dumbledore's party was able to elect their candidate, Amelia Bones.

According to the older muggleborn students, Bones' parents had been murdered by Voldemort during the first war, along with her brother, his wife and their children. As a result, the consensus was that she was very unlikely to communicate with them, at least voluntarily.

She was considered strict, but fair.

I was a little less enthusiastic. She was the head of Magical Law Enforcement, and she had been unable to clean up her own department. How competent she would be as Minister still remained to be seen. However, it seemed unlikely that she would be actively trying to kill us, so even if she was incompetent, she'd be better than her predecessor.

“This isn't a trap, is it?” I asked. “Like telling a criminal that they've won a prize just so you can trick them into turning themselves in?”

“Do you consider yourself a criminal?” he asked.
“I've done some things,” I said. “Necessary things, although some people might disagree.”

“I think you'll find Minister Bones to be... somewhat more agreeable than the last Minister.”

“A honey badger in a sack would be more agreeable than Umbridge,” I said. “Do I need to dress up or something?”

He shook his head.

“Just come along.”

I followed him to the Headmaster's office.

Apparently we were going to use the fireplace there to floo out. That could only be done with Rowle's permission, which eased my mind slightly about this being Snape forced to take me to the Death Eaters.

It didn't mean that it might not be a trap. There very well could be a circle of aurors waiting for me on the other side, ready to take me in because they'd listened to pensieve memories and realized that the voice they'd heard had an American accent.

I didn't relax until we were through and into the Ministry.

We were back in the atrium. The poster of Umbridge had been taken off the wall, and it wasn't empty as it had been the last time I'd been here.

People were coming and going through the fireplaces quickly enough that there was always someone entering.

There was a line waiting to go through security.

Instead of a sleepy security guard, they had five aurors working; these men looked grizzled and hardened, and they kept their hands close to their wands at all time. They watched each person coming through the line carefully, apparently looking for any signs of suspicious activities.

I stepped into line and I was soon followed by someone else. Snape stood beside me, waiting patiently. I kept a careful eye on the people around me, just in case. It would be just my luck to have an assassin attack me here when I was in public.

“I suppose I should have asked if you had any contraband on your person,” he said quietly.

“I'd have asked to use the restroom first,” I said. “I didn't even bring my second wand.”

Of course he didn't know about any of my other wands; the ones I'd taken from Death Eaters. I'd found that some of them worked better for me than others. Some of them seemed like they were actively resisting me.

I'd still kept them, hidden all over Hogwarts in places I was likely to be just in case I was somehow caught without my wand.

I hadn't kept Umbridge's wand. It would have been damning evidence, and likely would have led to me being in Azkaban or worse.

I'd dropped it at the scene near her body after wiping it off. I didn't think Wizards knew how to do fingerprinting, but I couldn't take the risk.
I felt a tap on my shoulder.

Looking behind me, I saw a young Wizard. He was staring at me. I tensed up, but felt Snape’s hand on my shoulder.

“Are you Miss Hebert?” he asked.

My mind saw an image of his shoving a knife into my stomach; I slipped my hand on my wand, and I stepped back.

“Yes.”

“The Hero of Hogwarts?” he asked. He grinned like a maniac.

“I don't call myself that,” I said cautiously.

“I wanted to thank you,” he said. “I've been dating a seventh year there, Gracie Hawkins... she says you saved her life.”

He was young; had he been at Hogwarts last year? I couldn't remember. In any case, seventeen was considered of age in the Wizarding World. Still, dating a school girl seemed a little sketchy to me.

“Gracie is a great girl,” I said. “I've learned a lot from her.”

“I'm surprised that she would consent to spend any time with you, Mr. Brooks,” Snape said. “As I recall, she was the only reason you managed to graduate at all last year, and she was a sixth year.”

Brooks flushed, and stared at the floor. Apparently Snape flustered him almost as much as he did some first years.

“All I wanted you to know was that you have people rooting for you,” he said. He leaned forward. “Not everybody in our world is a tosser.”

“Speak for yourself, Mr. Brooks,” Snape said. “And remember that despite her accomplishments, Miss Hebert is still a child.”

I allowed myself to grin at him, and he flushed.

He didn't seem as creeped out as most people. Maybe it was because there was the beginnings of something genuine in my smile.

We turned around and didn't speak again, although I did catch several people in line staring at me. My picture had been in the paper often enough that I was a sort of minor celebrity.

They seemed to take a long time running the dark item detector over me and Snape. I was reluctant to give up my wand; that would be an ideal time to capture me after all. I did, though, and it was weighed and returned to me.

I followed Snape to the elevators; there were lift attendants now; apparently working the elevators was too hard for some Wizards. It wasn't as though elevators hadn't been invented long before most of them were born.

“You seem familiar with this place,” Snape said.

“I was dragged through here when they threw me into a cell,” I said.
The elevator attendant gave me a strange look and I smirked at him.

“Hopefully an experience you aren't eager to repeat,” Snape said.

“I'd imagine I'd be a little harder to catch this time,” I said.

Maybe I should introduce some of those Death Eater wands into the ventilation system here; if I was ever caught again, I'd be able to summon a wand, and I'd be able to escape, unless Dumbledore used the fidelius spell again.

Being prepared was the best form of defense after all.

We made our way to the Minister's office.

I had a moment where I wondered if the cat portraits on the walls would give me away, but as the two guards outside the door let us in, I saw that everything had been cleared off the walls, leaving the room spartan and plain except for the desk and the fireplace.

There were guards in the corners of the room staring at me and Snape with suspicious eyes. They had the same look that the guards at the front had had, except they looked even more dangerous.

Apparently the Ministry was taking the assassination of two Ministers seriously.

Amelia Bones wasn't an attractive woman. She was square jawed with close cropped gray hair. She was wearing a monocle and sitting at her desk. There were stacks of papers covering her desk; Umbridge hadn't had a tenth of the paperwork.

“Miss Hebert,” she said, looking up.

I stood up straight.

This woman might actually be able to make the lives of the muggleborn better; my usual tactic of annoying and angering Ministry officials until they lost their composure wouldn't work here.

“Minister Bones,” I said respectfully, nodding my head.

She looked at Snape surprised; apparently she'd expected something else from me. Was I developing a reputation in the Ministry?

“You've done this country a service,” she said. “Prevented an atrocity and protected our greatest asset; the next generation.”

I stared at her, then frowned.

Was she trying to butter me up for something?

“What do you know about the Order of Merlin?” she asked.

Shrugging, I said, “Nothing much. I wasn't exactly brought up here, and it hasn't come up in Wizarding Studies.”

“It was originally created by Merlin to promote laws benefiting and protecting muggles. Over time, the awards that were granted changed to recognize outstanding Wizarding accomplishments.”

“Why are we talking about this?” I asked, suspiciously.
“I am planning to nominate you for the Order of Merlin, first class,” she said. “This will have the benefit of being well deserved, while being a slap in the face to certain members of our society who hold... antiquated views.”

“You expect the Death Eaters to attack the ceremony,” I said. “Thereby using me as bait.”

“Does that bother you?” she asked. “Given that the offer is genuine. It will enrage the partisans, but they already want you dead. You'll be the youngest recipient in history.”

Norvel Twonk, whose painting I'd used to warn the professors during the dementor attack had received the Oder of Merlin posthumously for dying while saving a muggle child. It was why I'd thought he would be loyal.

“The sooner we can eliminate the Death Eaters, the happier I'll be,” I said. “Although I'll want a look at the security precautions.”

“You'll have that,” she said. She hesitated. “I've heard that you have some... interesting ideas about how to tell whether people have been controlled or not.”

I'd told that to Snape in confidence. I glanced over at him and saw that he was studiously staring at the fire.

Most likely he'd told Dumbledore, who undoubtedly was the one pulling this woman's strings.

Minister Bones leaned forward.

“I'd be very interested in hearing your thoughts about that.”

She was in the middle of trying to clean up her department; getting rid of the compromised aurors was the single greatest thing that could be done to strengthen the Ministry right now.

Yet I hesitated.

Would it be easier to let the Ministry fall and then rebuild it from scratch?

Everything I'd heard about this woman suggested that she'd been known for unstinting fairness and honesty throughout her career. She hadn't adorned her office with superfluous decorations; instead she was here, presumably hard at work.

Was it possible to rebuild the Ministry without destroying it?

I'd give them a single chance.

“All right,” I said, sitting down. “You might want to write this down. I like to call these Master Stranger Protocols, and they aren't an easy solution. But if you want to weed out the bad apples, you have to start somewhere.”

She started writing.

“It goes like this,” I began.

Then I told them.
“The ceremony won't happen for a while,” I told Hermione.

We were in the library, where I was looking up dark curses using a pass from Lockhart. He'd proven remarkably easy to manipulate, and we'd developed a weird sort of working relationship. He was a fraud, but he was a useful one, and so I left him alone.

I'd told him that I had given information to various people, to be released if I was suddenly forgetful. He seemed to respect that, and for the most part he left me alone.

“They've still got to get their house in order,” I continued, “And the things I told them are going to take a while to implement.”

The version of the protocols I'd given them was of necessity an abbreviated one. I didn't have Alexandria's perfect memory. I wasn't one of the people who administered them, and we didn't have access to the kind of sophisticated technology that really helped with the thousand different ways that people could be mastered.

However, I'd been put under master/stranger isolation at least a dozen times while I'd been searching for the Slaughterhouse Nine, and at least some of the technology could be replicated with Wizard spells.

They'd already caught a couple of aurors who had been under the imperius. As a result, the process was going through a larger scale trial. It was being kept a secret, administered by the most trustworthy agents of the Department of Mysteries.

They were disguising it as a new experiment, and they were obliterating those tested afterwards, whether they were cleared or determined to be compromised, in order to keep someone from figuring out how to subvert the program.

The fact that it had been successful proved that even this, poor man's version of the protocols would work good enough.

They hadn't been arresting, or even doing anything to the compromised aurors for fear that movement would reveal their hand to the Death Eaters.

I had no idea what was going to happen to the aurors who'd been caught. Did the Ministry have some sort of deprogramming protocols, or were they simply released from service?

The only reason I knew about it at all was that Professor Snape was giving me occasional updates. Apparently he was considered my handler, much to his dismay.

Considering that I found him tolerable, I wasn't sure what the problem was.

“I'm just worried about the summer,” Hermione said. “What's going to happen then? Are they still going to send us to orphanages, or foster us with Wizarding families?”

“I talked to the Minister about that,” I said.

Getting access to the leader of the government wasn't an opportunity to be wasted. Usually that took a lot of political influence, or at least a lot of galleons. I'd done my best to push the muggleborn agenda.
“And?” she asked impatiently.

Considering that she had good parents that she loved, I could understand why she was so worried. Being forced to foster somewhere else might mean that she wouldn't be able to see them for the next five years.

“Well,” I said carefully. “It wasn't like there were a lot of choices. We could use the Umbridge plan, only with Wizarding families who actually like us, we could send everybody somewhere else over the summer, or we could do something else.”

She stared at me, waiting.

“You know how most pureblood homes have magical defenses?” I asked. “I got the Ministry to spring to have those put up in the homes of the muggleborn.”

“What?” she asked.

“It wouldn't be enough to stop a determined attack,” I said, “But we're putting floo connections in all the homes and hopefully there will be enough advance warning to get the families out.”

“What about people in flats or houses that don't have fireplaces?”

“They'll be encouraged to move,” I said. “Or have one put in.”

“Won't the Death Eaters just floo into the houses?” Hermione asked.

“They've got a way to make the floos only active when the people inside allow it,” I said. “We'll be able to visit each other by calling ahead by telephone.”

If the person on the other end of the line didn't have the connection, it simply wouldn't work at all. I wasn't sure what would happen if the connection was shut off while the person was in transit. I wasn't sure I wanted to know.

“It's not a permanent solution,” I said. “It's going to cost a lot, which means that the people who set this kind of thing up are going to be busy. They're already working on it, with your families house being first on the list.”

She stared at me.

I shrugged.

“The people around me are the ones who are most likely to be at risk,” I said.

“Won't they just attack the parents when they go to work?” Hermione asked.

“They seem to want to catch the muggleborn and don't care that much about the muggles,” I said. “It's a risk, though.”

“And won't we be in danger when we leave the house?”

“We won't be leaving the house,” I said. “I've suggested that the parents invest in video game systems, because it'll be too dangerous for most of us to go outside.”

Her face scrunched up.

“It was the best I could make of a bad situation,” I said. “We all have to make sacrifices until this
The war is over. The Longbottoms have volunteered their home for us to meet during the summer to continue our training.”

“They won't be able to keep this up forever,” I said. “And it's possible that they may not finish with everyone's houses in time, in which case some people are going to double up. At my suggestion they're starting with the people least able to protect themselves and working their way up. Sixth years go last.”

“Not seventh years?”

“They'll be adults,” I said. “They won't be living at home. And I have other plans for them.”

As adults, they'd be able to go places and do things that children couldn't possibly do. Several of the boys had already agreed to be my agents over the summer.

We needed money for our organization; what little money I'd saved up from robbing my host body's parents' home was rapidly vanishing. We needed a stable source of funds, and the scam that I'd had Lupin running in France would work just as well here.

I already had a seventh year whose brother was a used car dealer. He'd search for salvage cars, have his magical relative repair them, and sell them for a profit. The seventh year would keep half the money and send half of it on to us in the form of galleons.

At five galleons to the British pound, even a single salvage car would be enough to keep us going for a while. It wasn't like we had a lot of expenses; mostly we needed to purchase magical components and items and equipment.

“What about you?” Hermione asked. “Does Mr. Lupin even still have a house? I heard that his cottage was damaged when the Death Eaters came for him.”

“It was a rental,” I said. “He was kicked out. He's doing better now, of course.”

Dumbledore was paying him out of his own pocket to do whatever he was doing. He was also making money off the used car thing; enough that he was feeling rather flush the last time I'd spoken to him.

Of course, flush for him would have been pocket change for the Malfoys. Werewolves tended to get used to poverty.

Hermione was quiet.

“I'm not sure yet,” I admitted. “It's not even clear whether or not I'll be staying with him this summer. They tend to like to keep things like that a secret for obvious reasons.”

“He's going to be able to come back, isn't he?”

“Madam Bones has rescinded the werewolf laws,” I said. “Released all werewolves from prison unless they have other crimes they are accountable for.”

I had an uneasy feeling that wouldn't be enough. The Ministry had killed some of the werewolves, and some of those who had survived likely resented the government, for decades of institutional racism if for nothing else.

I felt a presence behind me.
Millicent stood, hesitant.

She'd spent much of the last year in a state of shock and depression after Tracey's death, becoming a shadow of her old self. I'd barely seen her even though we were roommates, with her not getting up until after I'd gone, and in bed before I got back to my rooms.

Depression wasn't anything to make light of; I'd seen it with my father and I'd felt traces of it myself on occasion, enough that I'd tried to talk to her, but nothing had worked. I'd gotten busy afterwards, and then time had slipped away from me.

“Taylor?” she asked. “Can we talk?”

I glanced at Hermione, who nodded and stood up.

“I've got some things to check on,” she said. She left quickly.

Millie sat down slowly beside me. She'd lost weight over the past four months; she hadn't been eating for a long time, and while she looked better, she still had bags under her eyes.

“How are you doing?” I asked.

I'd tried to talk to her several times before, but she'd never been interested. I would have pushed harder, but part of me had wondered if she'd blamed me for Tracey's death. She and Tracey had been friends for a long time, and they'd gotten even closer over the last school year.

“It's all real, isn't it?” she asked tonelessly.

I didn't have to ask what she meant. After Mom had died, there had been a time where nothing had felt real. I'd gotten over that pretty quickly, but I think it had taken Dad longer.

“Yeah,” I said. “I'm sorry it happened that way.”

“It shouldn't have happened at all,” she said. “Tracey never did anything to anybody. She didn't deserve that.”

“No,” I said. “She didn't.”

I could have continued but I didn't. I could tell that she wanted to talk.

“I blamed you, you know,” she said, not looking at me. “For getting her killed.”

“I know,” I said.

I hadn't been sure, but I'd suspected. It had been there in the way that she wouldn't look at me, in the way that she'd been avoiding me all semester.

“If you hadn't been there, Tracey wouldn't have been killed,” she said.

“Not there and then,” I said. “But two or three years down the line? She was a half-blood, and her family was pretty liberal. Do you think the Death Eaters wouldn't have come for her sooner or later?”

I was deflecting my own culpability, but I didn't see what else I could do. I pushed my guilt away into the swarm, and my mind cleared.

“It could have been me,” she said, looking up at me. “Or my family. If we hadn't...”
“Your family took precautions,” I said. “Tracey asked hers to do so, but they laughed it off. I've got a letter that she sent me over the summer; they couldn't reach me, so they held it till I got back here. I can show it to you.”

“My parents didn't want to believe it either,” she said, staring at the table. “But I kept telling them and telling them.”

“You made them listen,” I said.

Giving her a sense of control might help with her trauma. People tended to be more overwhelmed by things that they couldn't control, which was why people worried about flying a plane, but not about driving to the airport when accident statistics said that they should be worried about driving far more than flying.

“I've been thinking about it for a long time,” she said, “And I realized it wasn't your fault at all... it was theirs. They ruin everything.”

“We'll get them,” I said. “Me, the Ministry, someone. They'll pay for the things they've done.”

It wasn't a promise. It was a certainty.

I'd make them pay, even if it happened after I was dead.

She looked up, her expression suddenly determined.

“I want to make them pay,” she said.

“We aren't dealing with bullies anymore,” I said. “Or... at least not just that. You know what the Death Eaters are likely to do if they find out you're helping me. The muggleborn don't have a choice... Harry Potter doesn't have a choice. They're all on the list to be killed. You... you have a choice.”

“Tracey had a choice too,” Millicent said. “And she paid for that. I want to make them pay for that.”

I frowned.

Millicent had been out of this for months; most people barely even remembered that she was my roommate. Did I have the right to put her at risk when I didn't have to?

There had been people who had disapproved of the Wards program, convinced that they were creating child soldiers. They hadn't understood that the nature of our powers had meant that we were driven for conflict. We'd have been out fighting whether or not the government supported us.

Wizards didn't have that kind of drive. Most of them were just as lazy as most muggles or even more so.

Yet I'd seen the look of steely determination in her eyes before. If I didn't help her, she was likely to get herself in trouble.

“You're going to have a lot of catching up.” I said. “The others have half a year of training on you and it's more advanced than the stuff we were doing last year.”

“I'll work hard,” she said.

She had worked very hard last year; assuming she could keep her depression in check, she should
be able to this year too. She was likely to be rusty in her combat skills, and she'd need a bit of training to make up for the tactics and strategy skills I'd been developing with the others, but it was possible that she could catch up.

It would make her only the second Slytherin in our organization, but even Ron Weasley didn't mind her terribly, and he didn't like anybody that wore green.

He seemed to think that I wanted to mount the heads of my enemies on the wall or something.

Did wizards even have taxidermists? Muggle artists would likely have questions about something like that.

Even if I was inclined to something like that. Voldemort's head would make a horrifying ornament.

I had a momentary image of his head on my wall, and I shuddered.

“I'll see what I can do,” I said.

We had to start getting members from the other groups; I'd been reluctant before in part because I hadn't wanted to make them targets. The rest of us had already been targets, so all I'd been doing was giving them a better chance than they already had.

But now that an actual government that didn't want to kill us was forming, we couldn't afford to be seen as just a muggleborn organization. That would lead us to being marginalized.

Kids our age couldn't vote, and as muggleborns, neither could our parents. We didn't have anyone to advocate for us really, except for a few radical activists that people tended to dismiss out of hand.

We'd need the help of half-bloods and purebloods. They had parents who might be able to speak out for us, parents who had connections that might actually be able to get things done.

I had no illusions that Madam Bones would be able to fix everything. Wizarding society was by definition nepotistic. We'd have to leverage that if we wanted to forward our agenda.

As much as I like Madam Bones, it was likely that we weren't always going to see eye to eye. She was worried about the security of the Ministry and about maintaining its continued existence. Our concerns extended further than that.

If I could change the minds of this generation of Hogwarts students, and we could keep from being murdered in the meantime, then things would change eventually as the old guard started to die off. It was the usual way things changed; efforts by the young.

That was the reason that people like Thomas Jefferson, who'd been liberal for his day would have been considered a bigot now. The world was filled with incremental change, change that seemed to go faster and faster to those who were stuck in the old way of thinking.

Sometimes the world seemed almost unrecognizable to the very old, which was why some of them seemed to withdraw from a world they were no longer able to make sense of.

Some of the old guard would never accept the kind of changes that needed to happen. It was inevitable that there would be hard liners who tried to fight back.

If some of the old guard happened to have accidents in order to speed that change, well, sometimes eggs had to be cracked to make an omelet.
“Hey,” I asked Millicent. “Are you hungry? Let's go down to the kitchen and get something to eat.”

I'd figured out how to sweet talk some of the House Elves into making special orders for me; I got tired of a constant diet of heavy British food and occasionally wanted some fruit or pasta, a hamburger or pizza.

I'd been working with the muggleborn students to advocate for pizza and pasta night; Rowle didn't seem entirely against the idea, but it hadn't happened yet.

Still, an evening omelet sounded pretty good.

“Let's go crack a few eggs.”
“I don't actually see the future,” I insisted, ”So I may not be able to give you much warning.”

The team of aurors who were standing around me had all been certified as clear of the imperius, and I suspected that Minister Bones had been augmenting that with illegitimacy on the side; it was presumably secret, but I'd read between the lines from some of the things that I'd heard.

It had taken two months to purge the Ministry of the aurors who had been compromised, and not all of them had been the victims of the Imperius. Some of them had simply received bribes or been threatened with the deaths of family members.

That time had been relatively free of problems at Hogwarts; we'd continued our training, including Millicent, and we'd slowly added several other members; most of them were halfbloods, but there were a few purebloods as well.

By this time, I was probably teaching a quarter of the entire school population, which was probably raising some eyebrows.

However, those who attended my training sessions tended to be doing better at school and they caused fewer disciplinary problems; discipline was one of the first things we taught after all.

Even the Weasley twins were engaged in fewer pranks; we had focused their creativity into creating tools to help us be more effective; paying for their research. Their goal was to open a prank shop, and a lot of the things they made us could simply be scaled down to be less lethal and more humorous.

“We could have Tonks take your place,” Auror Kilcarne said. “It doesn't have to be you.”

“I'm got a better chance of surviving an assassination attempt than she does,” I said. “I'm faster, smaller, and harder to hit.”

Also, I cheated.

Besides, I'd never really been the kind of person who let other people fight her battles for her. I preferred to face them head on and kill them as they may.

“They'll know that it's a trap,” I said. “Which means that they're likely to try to cheat. We've tried everything we can to anticipate how they might cheat, but the nature of conflict is they they'll always think of something you don't.”

I'd had them go over everything I could think of, and it had visibly impressed them. They'd been shocked at some of the possibilities I’d thought of; contact poison on the medal, on the lectern, poison in the air, explosives under the podium, suicide bombers.

In one way, it was harder to police this than it would have been in a muggle setting. Muggles could be disarmed, checked for weapons, but every Wizard was armed, and disarming them would have roused so much of a protest that the ceremony would have been stopped.

“There will be two hundred in attendance,” Moody said. “We've done what we could to look into the backgrounds of all of them, but the new anti-imperius protocols are too slow to use on a bunch of civilians. Some of them will be foreign dignitaries and their entourages. Be alert.”
We were going to have plainclothes aurors in the middle of the crowd. Since the Death eaters knew who most of the aurors were, they were going to be polyjuiced using hair taken from random muggles; they'd be in the roles of foreign dignitaries.

Everything had been searched and scans were being done on the people entering the ceremony as we spoke.

Aurors were already outside; this was being held in the Atrium of the Ministry, both because it was large enough, and because it could be a controlled space. If we'd held it outside, we'd have had to worry about invisible broom riding attackers. In here we could control the narrative.

I sighed.

“Let's go,” I said. “The crowd is waiting.”

Minister Bones stepped outside, heading for the stage that had been set up where the fountain usually sat. How they'd moved it I wasn't sure.

“Friends, esteemed colleagues,” I heard her amplified voice say.

The din of the crowd decreased, fading into an expectant silence.

“Everyone here knows who I am,” she said. “But there are some of you who may not know much about our guest tonight. Taylor Hebert came from humble beginnings, born to muggles unsuspecting of the greater, magical world. Yet she has consistently proven that it is not breeding or background that creates greatness.”

I could hear the sounds of flash bulbs going off.

“Muggleborn have won this award in the past; the purebloods do not have a monopoly on braveness. Yet there has never been one who has deserved it so richly at such a young age. Miss Herbert didn't simply show bravery when she faced dementors, risking her soul to protect her classmates. She showed leadership in teaching her classmates to protect themselves.”

The crowd was silent now.

“There are adults who would not have done nearly as well,” Minister Bones said. “When they were faced with a horde of creatures with little more than a handful of spells and a lot of courage.”

The transcript of this would be published in all the papers. If Voldemort chose not to attack me, this would enrage his followers. It might spur them to be more reckless, which in turn would make them easier to catch.

I doubted that Bones would have been so effusive in her praise otherwise. She was laying it on thick for political purposes.

“Today it's my honor to award the highest honor given by Wizardkind, to a child who demonstrated exceptional courage in protecting her classmates, and through them, our entire nation. Will you please join me in welcoming Miss Taylor Hebert?”

The crowd applauded, and I took a deep breath. I'd had midges flying all around the room. They were common in Scotland, and I'd been breeding them for weeks in preparation for this. They were so small as to be almost unnoticeable unless they were at eye level, and I was purposefully keeping them well below that. I didn't detect any strange bulges on any of the Wizards in attendance, no bombs on anyone's chests, and nothing else unusual.
I had midges on everyone's wand arms, and some on other parts of their bodies. A lot of wizards tended to change their stances when they drew their wand, either due to duellist training or for some other reason.

I stepped out onto the stage and for the first time saw the crowd with my own eyes.

They were a mixed group; reporters from several countries, dignitaries, people from all over the globe. It worried me a little that there were representatives from the American Wizarding government; hopefully they wouldn't ask to many questions, or I might end up as the first Order of Merlin recipient who was also a wanted fugitive.

Madam Bones stood beside me, but she carefully stood a little to my left. We'd practiced this; the last thing we needed was for her to get in the way of my wand arm.

The podium had been enchanted to be unbreakable, meaning that it would be good cover for both of us in the event of an attack.

If Voldemort was smart, he'd ignore this event altogether, but the symbolism of it would cause dissension in his ranks. He'd have purebloods baying for my blood, and he'd have to address it, either by giving in or by making examples of some of them.

He'd make some sort of response, although I wasn't sure it would be the large scale attack the Ministry was hoping for. A lone assassin could be as effective as a team, as long as he was fast enough.

I kept a fixed smile on my face as I scanned the crowd with my bugs. Everyone was clapping; no one was going for their wands. So far so good.

The Minister would be disappointed if there wasn't an attack, but it would be nice to have something go right for a while.

There was a small, anomalous spark at one of the fireplaces, so small that no one else seemed to notice. It took me a moment, but I realized that there was a bug here that I could not control.

She was moving around the room; from her movements it looked as though she was trying to find a place to attack from.

Landing behind me and the Minister, her form shimmered, and she lunged forward.

I pointed behind me and said, “Stupefy.”

Rita Skeeter fell forward, her wand outstretched. The crowd gasped as aurors rushed forward to grab her.

“She's an animagus,” I said quietly to the Minister. “Can turn into a beetle.”

The Minister nodded and said something to one of her aides, who hurried off.

“There are forces in this land who would not wish to acknowledge that sometimes the muggleborn can be just as smart, just as brave, just as strong as the rest of us,” the Minister said. “This girl is proof that sometimes they can be even more so.”

I didn't have much time to react as I felt a dozen arms rising almost in unison. Skeeter must have been a diversion; they'd hoped that we'd assume that the attack was over with and drop our guard.
I lunged upward and grabbed the Minister, pulling her down as a half dozen bolts of green light hit the outside of our overly large podium. The podium shuddered and people screamed as it’s unbreakable nature was revealed and the explosion hit the people standing closest to the podium.

My ears were ringing, and everything went quiet, although I could still hear through my bugs.

People were screaming and scattering all around the room. Some of them were dropping to the floor. Those who had attacked us were moving forward, hoping to get around the podium.

I stepped through the trap door behind the podium, the Minister following me. As we closed the trap door, she locked it with a spell, and we crawled under the stage.

Stunners appeared from all around the crowd, seemingly from mid-air. The attackers were dropping quickly. The aurors were disillusioned, and they were going to stay that way until the battle was over.

The aurors were moving already, stunners flying through the air. They were all carrying transparent plastic riot shields purchased from muggle suppliers. They'd all been made unbreakable by magic, and they were turning out to be quite useful against Davao Kendra spells.

The aurors had to keep their magical shields up as well; all it would take would be for someone to explode the wall behind them, for example and the shield would be useless. They also had to watch that someone didn't shoot them in the places the shield did not cover, but they'd had a couple of months to practice.

Disillusionment helped with that; if they moved after shooting, it was possible that the attackers wouldn't know where they'd gone.

My human eyes only saw dim light under the stage, the sounds of explosions and screaming outside.

“Thank you, Miss Hebert,” the Minister said in a low voice.

I shook my head. The last thing we needed was for them to identify where we were by sound. While the stage had also been enchanted to be unbreakable, what had been done by magic could always be undone. It was unlikely they'd hear us in the chaos from outside, but it was already getting quieter.

I could hear sobbing from outside, but as the last of the attackers dropped to the floor, I relaxed.

It was silent for several minutes. The Minister stared at me as I stood with my eyes closed.

A series of knocks on the outside of the structure gave us the all clear.

The Minister looked at me, and I nodded confirmation. We headed back to the trap door, and aurors were helping both of us out of the trap door.

“They're all being taken for interrogation,” the lead auror said.

The Minister nodded grimly.

People were beginning to stand up; they looked traumatized.

“As you can see,” the Minister said, and to her credit, her voice sounded strong and confident. “Some people are determined to live in a past where they could use their power to intimidate
others. I have a message for all of them... we will not be intimidated.”

People were staring up at her; native reporters and foreign dignitaries as well.

“This is our nation, and Wizarding Britain does not cower before bullies. We stand strong, and we stand tall. I have a message for the world. To those who would try to cast their shadow on our fair soil, to those who would try to destroy the innocent, to destroy our children, I have this to say to you.”

She took a deep breath.

“We will fight! We will wage war by land, air and sea against a monstrous tyranny. We will fight our enemy on the fields, on the beaches, in the cities and in the towns. We will drive them before us, pushing them into extinction. They have attacked our children, attacking our only future. There will be no quarter!”

“For too long, they have had their way, fighting against a failing Ministry, helped by collaborators and those they have controlled by magic. I say NO MORE. We shall defend our homeland, whatever the cost may be. Our fathers fought Grindlewald, and we have fought dark lord after dark lord over the past thousand years. This is our fight, and we shall do what Britons have always done in times of great peril. We will take up our wands, and we will do what has to be done.”

She grabbed a box which had fallen to the floor when I'd pulled her down.

From it, she pulled a medal. It was iridescent, even though it didn't have to be.

“Taylor Hebert doesn't just represent the best of what a muggleborn should be. She represents a new age, a time when new ideas and innovations shall change everything any of us has ever known. I want you all to give a hand to Taylor Hebert, the youngest ever recipient of the Order of Merlin.”

As the medal went around my neck, the applause was tepid at best. It wasn't for a lack of enthusiasm for my accomplishment.

Everyone had a shell shocked look on their faces.

Madam Bones had just declared open war on Voldemort and his people. That was a bombshell even though the Ministry had been searching for them for a while.

It was putting things out into the open, in a place where the general Wizarding public would be forced to think about what had been said and react to it. The Ministry had kept so much hidden that for at least some of these people this was actually shocking.

“Does this mean I get my own chocolate card frog?” I asked loudly.

Chuckles erupted from the crowd, and the mood shifted.

Huh.

Ron Weasley had suggested that joke, although I wasn't sure he'd actually meant for it to be a joke. He collected chocolate frog cards and he might have been serious.

“Yes actually,” the Minister said.

Ron’s head was going to explode over the chocolate frog thing. Harry had one, although it hadn't
gone into circulation yet. Ron had a tendency to be jealous, but as long as Hermione and Neville didn't get one, I figured he'd likely be all right.

The Minister had approved of the joke, feeling that it would somehow reassure people that I was an actual child instead of some kind of homunculus in a little girl costume.

She stood next to me and we smiled for the camera. They flashed over and over again, but I kept my bugs eyes out just in case. A third assassin would be a lot more effective now that the second wave had failed.

There were no more attacks, however.

I remained alert throughout the ceremony, and not just from what was happening in the atrium. Planting people deeper in the Ministry would have been clever as well, despite the new security precautions.

I could hear Skeeter screaming in rage from a special room on the level below us. There were no cracks in the walls for an insect to go through, and ventilation was done by magic.

“You don't understand!” she screamed. “She doesn't exist! Taylor Hebert is an impostor! She's pretending to be someone that she's not and no one will listen to me!”

She'd been studying me, trying to track down my background. She'd been asking questions that I couldn't afford to have people ask.

I sighed.

“I think all this excitement has been a little much for me,” I said. “And I need to use the loo.”

The crowd was dispersing, and the Minister laughed, looking a little less confident than she had a moment before.

I slipped into the bathroom and a moment later I disillusioned myself.

This wasn't something I wanted to do, but I didn't see that I had any other choice. Skeeter had tried to kill me, and I was beginning to suspect that it wasn't because she had been controlled.

The good thing was that the cell she was in was soundproof. The bad thing was that she would be telling everyone what she knew the moment she was out.

I'd been to the Ministry several times while we were preparing for this event, and I had made certain preparations to help myself in the event of a regime change or in the event that I was arrested again.

I lifted my hand and a wand fell from a vend in the ceiling. It was one of my spare ones.

The last thing I needed was for this to be found on my wand.

It was time to squash certain rumors before they got out of control.
How had it all gone wrong?

She'd followed the trail as far as she could; looking through auror reports, talking to muggle authorities, looking through muggle paperwork and correlating everything with all the little tidbits that the girl had dropped over the past year as reported by some of the pureblood kids to their parents.

The girl was obviously from the east Coast of the United States, at least by her accent. Yet a friend of hers in the MACUSA couldn't find any records of a Taylor Hebert in muggle educational rolls.

The girl had claimed to be from a dangerous city; the most dangerous cities in the United States were Chicago, Los Angeles, Oakland, New Orleans, New York and Cleveland. They were big cities with big problems. There were rural areas that had problems as well, but nothing about the girl screamed rural.

It was a big country, though, and information was sometimes hard to come by, so it was possible that she had grown up tucked away in some slum with poor records.

However, Rita had been looking into the muggleborn deaths at the beginning of the year, hoping to come up with a story to counter the Ministry muggleborn propaganda. It wasn't because she liked the muggleborn; in her opinion they tended to be a little loud, crass and rude.

However, the opportunity to give the Ministry a black eye for constantly squashing her stories was irresistible. All she'd have to do was wait until her editor was indisposed; once the story was out there was nothing that she could do.

The missing Millie Scrivener had been the key.

No one in the Ministry had even tried that hard to find her; another dead muggleborn wasn't interesting when there were Death Eaters to hunt. The girl had been lost in the paperwork, even though aurors had been to her house to look for magical artifacts to preserve the Statute of Secrecy.

Rita had gone looking through the abandoned house, and what she'd seen had been quite illuminating.

There were pictures of the girl everywhere...pictures that precisely matched Taylor Hebert's current bodies.

Furthermore, the muggles had their primitive versions of Wizarding pictures; Rita had worked with videotapes in the past when working on crimes involving muggles. It had admittedly taken her an hour to figure out how to get the tape in the machine and to get the damned thing to actually work, but she'd eventually managed it, and it had gotten a lot easier after that.

The Millie Scrivener in the tapes was completely different that Taylor Hebert. She moved like an actual child, and her face and expressions were bright and happy. She looked a little naive, younger than her actual age even, and the family had looked happy.

There was none of the... strangeness inherent in Taylor Hebert; the girl's body language was normal, not like an insect ready to pounce. Her expressions were open instead of closed off and guarded.
The girl in the pictures could never have killed six Death Eaters in battle; in point of fact she hadn't. She and her family had been murdered by three Death Eaters. Considering the evidence of what had happened to the others, it hadn't been pretty either.

Rita had interviewed some of the children of people who had withdrawn their children from school. As far as she was concerned, they were the smart ones. The school had already been attacked several times, and was becoming more and more of a death trap by the day.

She... couldn't quite remember some of the times she'd gone to the houses of some of the more pureblood children. It was a little confusing.

Even more confusing was why she hadn't been to the ceremony where they were giving the monster child the Order of Merlin. Ordinarily she would have been there in the front row, screaming out questions.

Instead, something had held her back, had made her excuse herself. She'd found things getting a little blurry, and then she'd found herself being restrained by the aurors.

She hadn't done the things they accused her of; attacking the girl? Deep down she was afraid of the girl.

Clearly the girl wasn't a girl at all.

Taylor Hebert's name was in the book, so there had to have been a Taylor Hebert alive at some point. Undoubtedly she was in a shallow grave under a bush somewhere.

The Hogwarts staff had gone to where she was supposed to have lived, and they'd found a child there. They'd assumed that she was Taylor Hebert when in fact she was actually Millie Scrivener, or at least the girl's form.

Was the girl an adult witch polyjuiced into a little girl? It didn't seem likely; those potions only lasted so long and had to be periodically reapplied. No one ever said the girl was always drinking or eating anything.

A ghost, perhaps, possessing the girl and reanimating her body.

Rita had read about inferi, corpses animated by dark magic. They tended to have cloudy white eyes, though. They had no will or mind of their own either, which was a bigger impediment.

Zombies existed, although they tended to be no more intelligent than inferi, and their use tended to be limited to Africa and Haiti.

It was possible that she was a demon or revenant, though, using the girl's body as a vessel for whatever nefarious plans she had. Magicozoologists were finding new monsters all the time; perhaps she was some kind of monster who stole the skins of their victims and wore them like protective camouflage.

Rita could feel the revulsion rise within her every time she was around the girl. Her entire being screamed danger, and she could tell that killing was as easy or maybe even easier for the girl than for some of the Death eaters she was fighting.

The girl was better at it anyhow.
Somehow the girl had convinced everyone that Rita was some kind of terrorist. How she'd done it, Rita didn't know. It had undoubtedly been done with dark magic, likely with a lot of castings of unforgivables.

Rita had been at home, stewing over her repeated attempts to get anyone to listen, when she'd awoken in front of the crowd.

Now she was here, in a dark cell. She was in complete darkness, unable to see her hands in front of her face. Even as a beetle, when her vision was more blurry but much clearer at night she couldn't see anything.

There were no significant shifts in the movements of the air; it remained completely dead and still. As a beetle, she was able to find the slightest crack and slip through; it had been incredibly useful in her career as a reporter.

Here, though, there was not the slightest crack in the room. The air in the room was sweet and pure, if a little cold; presumably it was being replaced magically. There were other bugs in here, but they all seemed sluggish, likely from the cold and from not having anything to eat other than each other.

Rita had heard stories about places on the bottom levels of the Ministry; secret cells where Wizards went to never been seen again, experimented on by agents of the Department of Mysteries. Those stories had never seemed credible to her; it would be difficult to make a wizard completely disappear without someone noticing. It wasn't like Wizards were muggles, after all.

There were so many muggles that it wasn't surprising that they disappeared and no one noticed.

She'd heard that almost twenty times the Wizarding population disappeared in muggle Britain every year, and the muggles weren't all that interested in finding them. Wizards on the other hand, all knew each other. They had all gone to school together, had married into each others' families, and worked together. They had bonds, the kind that muggles apparently didn't have.

It was probably the lack of a soul that made the muggles so unconcerned.

Rita considered her options.

Her only chance was to escape and clear her name. She didn't have her wand, but she could still transform, which meant that her best chance was whenever they transported her for interrogation.

She froze as she felt a sudden presence in the room with her. There hadn't been any light or movement of air, but she had a sudden, unspeakable certainty that not only was she not alone, something terrible was in the room with her.

It was the same, gut wrenching sense of horror that she felt every time she was in the room with the girl, but now magnified. There was no way the girl could be in the room with her, but she was.

“Taylor?” she asked, her voice almost breaking.

“Why?” the voice that spoke sounded like the flapping of wings. It was breathy, and it didn't sound remotely human.

“Dear?” Rita asked cautiously.

“What do you know about Taylor Hebert?”
“Nothing!” Rita said.

“LIE!”

With that, the buzzing noises increased; not merely in the room with her, but in the walls. As a beetle, she had to be careful; there were many things that would love to eat her; everything from rats in the walls, to frogs, birds, spiders and centipedes.

She’d developed a horror of spiders and centipedes after a couple of dangerous encounters, and now she was hearing the sounds they made through the wall. They were scratching at the walls as though they were anxious to get in, to wrap her up in their webs, paralyze her and devour her from the inside out.

She found herself shaking much more than the cold warranted.

Was this actually Taylor Hebert, or was it another entity of her species? Could she get it's help, or would she risk alienating Taylor?

“I dug around a little,” she said. “Found out that she wasn't who she said she was. She's in the body of Millie Scrivener, the missing girl.”

“How do you know she is not the girl?” the voice asked. It had a detached tone, as though it was trying to decide what to do with her. Rita had an uneasy feeling that she wasn't going to like whatever decision came.

She'd asked herself that question; it made sense that Taylor Hebert had been the one killed and Millie Scrivener had simply stepped into her place. Most reporters would have stopped at that. She'd known that it wasn't true, however.

“It doesn't make sense,” Rita said, “There's nothing in her background that would give her the kinds of skills that she has. I've heard some of the aurors talking about the military maneuvers she's running the kids at the school through. She's creating her own army, right in the middle of the Ministry, and using Ministry funds to do it. Even You-Know-Who wasn't this blatant about it!”

“That's not an answer,” the voice said.

It sounded like it was moving behind her. Rita swung around and swept the air with her hands. In her mind she imagined the gleam of a knife in the darkness... or maybe a claw or a fang. But she had to do something.

“I've got evidence,” she said. Suddenly, a solution came to her. “It's hidden. If I die, it'll be found and all of the girl's secrets will be out in the open.”

This wasn't some other entity. This was Taylor herself, finally revealing her true form. What sort of monster was she in the dark?

Rita's mind went over a thousand possibilities, each worse than the last. Was the girl something so terrible that it would give boggarts nightmares?

The tiniest voice spoke near her ear, air moving like an insects wing. It sent chills up her spine.

“Where is the evidence?”

“I'll never tell,” Rita said defiantly, even though she flinched and her hand waved through where the voice had been. She was afraid to move for fear her hand would touch something horrendous,
but it was an involuntary reflex. “You'll have to get me out of here.”

“You won't be in this cell after today,” the voice said. There was certainty in the voice that sent a chill down her spine.

Did she mean to kill her?

“I've got people who will release it for me!” she said desperately. “If I'm not released.”

“You think they'll do anything for a Death Eater?” the voice said. It was moving around her, faster and faster. “Someone who would support the murder of children, the destruction of their very souls?”

“I didn't!” Rita said.

She hadn't.

She'd suspected what the Ministry was doing, but a lot of people had. She couldn't be blamed for trying to stop them; they'd have thrown her in Azkaban. She'd known that Umbridge was utterly vindictive.

The only reason she'd been more willing to push the current administration was that Bones was more likely to follow the letter of the law. It meant that she knew exactly how far she could push, and it meant that she could get away with a great deal. Someone like Umbridge was bad for business.

“You killed her,” she said, the sudden epiphany striking her like a bolt of lightning.

Umbridge had been eaten to the bones by something; no one had ever seen anything like it. No one had been seen anywhere near her office, and while it was officially being blamed on the Death eaters, there was some doubts among the aurors.

Who would have wanted Umbridge dead more than anyone?

She'd been doing Voldemort's bidding, so there had been no reason for him to kill her. The most likely killer would have been a werewolf, a member of the Muggleborn Underground, or Taylor Hebert.

“I can help you!” she said quickly. “Whatever news stories you want. You need someone to give your people what they need... a voice.”

“You kept your papers in the hidden compartment in the upper left handed drawer on your desk in your apartment,” the voice said. “Along with a letter from your editor saying he wouldn't publish that kind of trash.”

A sudden chill.

How had she known? Had she known all along?

Those papers had been her only leverage, the only reason that Hebert had to keep her alive at all.

“A new world is beginning,” the voice said. It's tone was unemotional, clinical even. “Some people aren't going to be a good fit. It's too bad. I actually thought your beetle form was quite beautiful.”
Rita was suddenly blinded by light in front of her. Instinctively she changed into her beetle form and started trying to fly toward the light.

The last thing she saw was a beam of light flying toward her; a moment later she knew no more.

A button fell onto the ground where she'd been flying. It wasn't particularly well done; McGonagall would have called it somewhat crude. The second year students had been taught the spell at the beginning of the year, after all.

An invisible hand picked her up.

“Thanks for making it easy, Rita.”

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“None of them are likely to be Death Eaters, ma'am,” Auror McGowan said. “Most of them were foreign reporters who had been visiting for the past couple of days. Doubtlessly the Death Eaters reached them during this period.”

“See what you can get from them,” Amelia snapped.

It was frustrating; Voldemort hadn't risked any resources in this attack, and he'd disrupted the ceremony, making Great Britain look like it couldn't protect its own. Doubtlessly by tomorrow newspapers all over the Wizarding World would be screaming about this attack.

It was going to cause political problems internationally. There was already mounting pressure internationally from forces concerned that Britain’s inability to clean its own mess was going to threaten the Statute of Secrecy.

It was about the only thing that would unify the quarreling countries in Africa, Asia, Europe and America. A country which could not maintain the secret would soon find itself no longer a country at all.

Worrying about Voldemort was bad enough without having to worry about an invasion from other countries. Amelia had an uncomfortable feeling that Dumbledore was leaning toward military intervention.

He'd been in the States for the past week, for reasons neither she nor anyone else knew. She'd heard rumors that he had agents in other countries as well, perhaps hoping to raise an army to destroy Voldemort when the Ministry fell.

It didn't show much confidence in her administration, which bothered Amelia more than she would like. She was doing a good job; contacting the Hebert girl had been an excellent decision, even if the ceremony today hadn't been the success they'd hoped it would be.

The Imperius Protocols had been revolutionary; if Amelia was still in the Ministry when the girl graduated, she planned to pressure her to join the aurors. She'd revolutionize that service as well.

There were aurors who worried that the girl was unnatural.

That was obvious. She wasn't any normal child; it was clear to anyone who spent more than five minutes with her.

Amelia didn't care.
She'd heard rumors that Merlin himself had been reincarnated at least once; if he was able to do it, why not someone else?

Even if the girl was some sort of spirit, as long as she was on the side of the Ministry, Amelia didn't plan on asking too many questions. The Ministry needed her help too much to look a gift horse in the mouth.

“I'm sorry,” the girl said, stepping out of the bathroom. “I hope I didn't keep you waiting very long.”

“Two minutes,” Amelia said. “Rather quick for a girl.”

“Well, I don't spend a lot of time primping and posing in front of the mirror,” Hebert said. She rubbed a button on the collar of her shirt, as though to reassure herself it was still there.

“Well,” Amelia said. “It's better to focus on the important things.”

Rita Skeeter went missing five minutes later, while Taylor Hebert was in the process of being transported back to Hogwarts.

All in all, the day was a wash. Voldemort didn't lose any forces, but they proved that the girl's new security suggestions worked. They still had further to go, but the government was coming together. It was only a matter of time before things finally began to swing their way.
Persuasion

Letting the button formerly known as Rita Skeeter be pulled up into the vents on a spider's web, a wiped my hands.

She'd keep for a long while that way; eventually, when I got good enough at obliviating people, she'd be found stumbling through the streets of Hogsmeade. She'd have no memory of the passage of time because for her, time itself would not have passed.

Turning a human into a button was difficult; there were several factors that made transfiguration more difficult. Concentration and wand power were important, and these was possibly the reason that someone like Dumbledore could accomplish so much more.

Viciousness was important; more vicious creatures tended to resist transformation through sheer willpower.

Body weight was the issue for me with living transfiguration. Something the size of a human would have been impossible at my current level of skill and power. Something the size of a beetle? Any second year could manage it.

Rita had gotten herself most of the way and I'd just had to push her over the edge.

It had taken two time turners hidden in the vents to accomplish, but I'd done what I'd set out to do. If I was forgiving, I'd have told the guards how important it was to search the room before putting the prisoner inside. If they had allies, it would have been easy to slip a wand into the room, or some other tool.

The fact that they hadn't discovered an entire disillusioned girl waiting in the cell, hadn't even bothered to cast a human revealing spell was disappointing. I'd brought bugs into the room, wearing them like a threadbare coat, and I'd pulled my aura as closely to my skin as possible so Rita wouldn't know I was there... and so I wouldn't detect myself.

They didn't even have the room guarded when it wasn't in use. Even better, it was soundproofed, presumably to muffle the screams of those being interrogated.

I should have known something was weird when I could hear Rita in a room that was supposedly proof against insects.

The hardest part had been cloaking myself from myself.

Fortunately I had known that I might have to... interrogate one of the prisoners and had made sure to leave part of each cell outside of the range of my power. I'd heard warnings about meeting yourself, and so I'd been working hard not to do that.... especially when one of the earliest time travel experiments had erased twenty five people from existence and led the witch who'd traveled back five hundred years to age that much when she'd returned.

I still wasn't sure how they even knew that some people had been unborn, but it made me cautious anyway.

There'd been other, even scarier effects that indicated that the very fabric of time itself had been frayed. Now most Wizards only used the Time Turners for trivial things.

The last thing I needed was to create a paradox and destroy the space time continuum. I'd already
saved the world once; I had no intention of destroying the universe.

“It didn't go the way you'd hoped?” Hermione asked, stepping into the bathroom.

“I got my medal,” I said wryly, holding it up to her. “Rowle wants me to get my picture taken to be put in the display case.”

“It's a tradition,” Hermione said. “Helps parents see how important Hogwarts is and all that.”

“Advertising to the alumni,” I said. “I guess...”

“So did they attack?” Hermione asked.

“They used a bunch of imperiused stooges,” I said. “Ruta Skeeter attacked me, and I think it's going to make the front page.”

“That's probably all they'll talk about,” Hermione said glumly. “People were supposed to be inspired by you; instead they'll see you as another victim.”

“The people who matter will be inspired,” I said. “And the people who see me as a victim... either they're just patronizing, which I can take, or they're my enemies, in which case them seeing me as weak is an advantage.”

There had been a time when I'd actually been weak, when seeming strong had been vitally important. The stronger I got, the less true it was. Eventually I would get strong enough that I could pull a Dumbledore and pretend to be a doddering old Headmaster with everyone humoring me because it meant I wasn't out in public causing trouble.

Sirius had been cagey about what he was doing in France, and he wouldn't talk at all about what Dumbledore was doing.

“It's just not right,” Hermione said. “Minister Bones should make them print the truth.”

“I like her, but I doubt that'll happen,” I said. “Either she's for freedom of the press, and they'll print what they want, or she's not, in which case they'll print whatever's best for the Ministry.”

The news articles about the event would give me a good grasp of the Bones policies on the media. If the articles talked about how incompetent the Ministry was for allowing the attack then Bones was a free press advocate.

If they praised the Ministry for saving me, then she wasn't.

“It's time to go,” I said.

The crowd was gathering outside.

The school ceremony was being held in the courtyard, in the heat of the afternoon sun. Rowle was to give a speech, have me give one, and I was to have my picture taken for the cabinet.

Fortunately, being the guest of honor meant that I got to skip Rowles speech. He was fair as an administrator, but he wasn't a public speaker, and he tended to drone on and on.

“Our guest of honor,” he said.

Stepping up onto the ledge, I held up my medal. It shone brightly in the sun.
“This isn't my award,” I said loudly. “This is our award.”

Everyone was silent. Hermione joined Neville, Harry and Millie on my left. Draco was watching silently from my right.

“Some of us fought directly, facing monsters that no one should ever have to face, much less schoolchildren. We risked our lives and souls for our classmates. Others were not faced with that choice; their choice showed a subtler bravery.”

People glanced at each other, confused.

“You stayed,” I said. I was silent for a long moment, letting it sink in. “This school has been attacked more than once, and the easy way would have been to run away. Many of you come from families of means; you could have gone to a different school. You could have chosen to be taught at home.”

I saw frowns on faces. Many of them had likely never thought about their reasons for that decision.

“Instead, you chose to stay. You all have friends here. Some are muggleborn. Some are pureblood. I think you knew that some of you are considered more valuable by the people attacking us than others. The attack I won this medal for never would have happened if the rest of you had been there.”

Rowle was frowning, but he didn't stop me from speaking.

“You have been our shield, and for that I thank you. There may come a time that any of us may have to take up wands; if we do, I hope that you will look to the people beside you and that you will see them as your brothers and sisters. In the coming days, all of us will need to be as brave as the lion, as smart as the eagle, as loyal as the badger, as cunning as the snake. When that day comes, I will stand beside you.”

I felt like I was making my announcement for my presidential bid. Politics had never been my forte when I was younger, and I despised it now. But some of these kids had been lagging, and they needed any encouragement they could find.

They cheered and I held up the medal.

The photographer chose to take the picture then. I had no idea how long he had been taking the picture. Wizarding photos tended to be set on a loop, almost like a short video lasting a few seconds, but without sound.

That evening, in my honor, we had our first pizza night. The house elves did their best, but they didn't quite make the kind of pizza I was used to. It was good, though.

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“I'm proud of you,” Remus said.

Behind him there was only blank stone wall. I'd hoped to get a glimpse of the architecture of the French Ministry of Magic in Paris, with some indicators of what sort of defenses it had. It wasn't that I ever intended to invade France, but knowledge you had but didn't need was much better than knowledge you needed but didn't have.

Instead, it was almost as though Lupin was being careful not to show me any of the background; was his mission that secret, or was he not in France at all? He seemed like the sort that wouldn't tell me if he was somewhere dangerous.
“It was a political move as much as anything,” I said, shrugging. “Bones is making a statement about her administration's views on the muggleborn, one even the densest pureblood can't mistake.”

“I want you to be careful,” he said. “That Rita Skeeter is in the wind, and with her power, she could be anywhere. Have they assigned more guards to you?”

I shook my head.

“I doubt that she was anything other than what the others were; a controlled patsy,” I said. “If she's smart, she'll have left the country.”

“No one can figure out how she got out,” Remus said. “There were antiapparition wards over the area and the guards showed no sign of being attacked. They've sworn under Veritaserum that they saw nothing.”

Time Turners apparently trumped anti-apparition charms. That was good to know... and something that I should have checked before I did what I did.

“Maybe they're occulemens,” I said.

“They were chosen specifically because they aren't,” Remus said. “If she was freed, Minister Bones wanted to find out how.”

They'd been sacrificial goats, left out for the Death Eaters. If they'd been mastered, she'd have had people in the Department of Mysteries deprogram them. There were incredibly painful ways of dealing with obliviation. If they were killed, that would have told her something too.

“Well, I'll be ready should she attempt to attack again.”

“Her editor was interviewed; he said she was raving about you being some kind of eldritch horror in a little girl's skin. She sounded mental according to him.”

“Well, I'm actually human,” I said. “And actually a girl. I'm not some kind of monster.”

“I know what being a monster is,” he said. “I've been through it every month. You are brave and scarily competent for your age, but you aren't a monster.”

I felt a moment of guilt for lying to him. He was one of the only adults here who had always been good to me; yet I couldn't tell him the truth because ultimately he was Dumbledore's man. I couldn't tell how Dumbledore would react if he knew what I really was, or what I'd really done.

“I'm glad to believe that someone believes I'm not some sort of two hundred foot squid monster,” I said.

When I'd had my passenger, that might have been debatable.

There was a noise from Remus's end of the mirror. It sounded like an explosion. Remus grimaced and looked out of frame.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

He looked anxious, but did a good job of keeping his voice steady.

“I'm fine,” he said, “But I've got to go. I look forward to seeing your picture on the mantle next time I'm there.”
“Be safe,” I said.

The mirror went dark.

Obviously Remus wasn't in France at all; it sounded like he was somewhere much more dangerous. That was likely to be here in Wizarding Britain. He'd likely been doing work for Dumbledore.

It hadn't made sense, his being a diplomat. While it was true that the French were much more accepting of non-humans, he didn't have the kind of personal charisma needed for a diplomat. He'd spent far too long being poor and downtrodden, when diplomats needed to project power and confidence. They were representatives of their nation, after all.

Slipping the mirror shard into my fanny pack, I stood up.

I made my way to Lockhart's office, waving to friendly students along the way. Even the other Slytherin were most neutral toward me, although some had made overtures in private. This was a far cry from my early days at the school.

“Professor,” I said.

His office was empty, but I could tell that he was crouched behind his desk. Was he hiding from me?

“Miss Hebert,” he said. “You'll have to excuse me. I seem to have lost my quill.

“It's fallen behind the desk,” I said. “On the left hand side.”

He grunted, and a moment later stood up with a brilliant smile.

“You are a very useful person to have around, Miss Hebert,” he said. “It's good to have another Order of Merlin recipient in this school....increases the prestige you know.”

Any other wizard would have simply summoned the quill: I suspected that he didn't know how.

I took a seat.

“Could you teach me obliviation magic?”

He froze, and the color drained from his face.

“What?”

He looked as though I'd just threatened to out him as a werewolf or something. Why was he so paranoid?

It was the one spell I knew he could perform well; I'd seen him using it to help one of the boys who'd been tormented by nightmares since the attack on the dementors. He'd made the memory hazy enough that the boy had slept well since then, and he'd erased the boy's memory of even visiting him.

Compassion wasn't something I'd have expected from him, but he'd demonstrated it, and I was grateful. The fact that he hadn't wanted any credit was even more impressive, considering that the man attempted to take credit for everything else.

I'd looked into his claims, and the things he'd claimed to have done had actually been done, even though some of them had occurred simultaneously. It could have been done with a time turner, but
I'd already searched through all his luggage, and he didn't have one.

“I'd like to learn to obliviate people,” I said. “It'd be very useful.”

He stared at me, and then shook his head.

“Are you threatening me, Miss Hebert?”

His hand didn't stray anywhere near his wand. He'd seen how fast I was, and how dangerous my thinker ability was in combat. I doubted that he was brave enough to attack me in any case.

“No,” I said. “You know the spell and I'd like to know it, that's all.”

He frowned, staring at me intently.

His mouth firmed.

“I won't,” he said. It would have been more impressive if his whole body hadn't been trembling a little. “It wouldn't be right.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“Most memory spells just obscure memories,” he said. “Put a layer between the conscious mind and the memory so that there is no access.”

I nodded.

“But a poorly done memory charm has been known to completely remove all memories, leaving the victim a child in everything but body. They have to relearn how to walk, talk, to go to the loo. It's a terrible fate.”

“Why not use that on criminals?” I asked.

“What?” he asked. There was an uncharacteristic look of revulsion on his face.

“Wouldn't that be better than Kissing them?” I asked. “Give them a second chance at life?”

He shook his head.

“They'd never have a chance...not with the victims howling for their blood.”

“So petrify them,” I said. “Release them in a hundred and fifty years. Hardly anyone will remember them, and they won't have any access to their support systems, wealth... they'd be entirely new people with a new lease on life.”

“They'd be dead,” he said. “Everything that made up what they were...their emotions, their memories, their... everything would be gone. Worse, what happens on the other side?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Imagine that you erased the memory of Bellatrix Lestrange, and somehow made her a good person. Presumably when she dies she'd regain both sets of memories, and how would she reconcile them?”

“That's better than completely obliterating her soul?”
I'd been somewhat agnostic in my previous life; I still wasn't sure about this whole soul business, although it was possible that all that had been left of me was a soul. It was possible that I was only a copy of the memories of my former self placed into my current body.

“The Ministry can be cruel sometimes,” Lockhart said. He stared at me for a long moment. “You aren't planning to do anything with all of this, are you?”

“Oh, no, no,” I said, smiling. It didn't reach my eyes. “I just find it very interesting. I hope that you'll be more open to teaching me when I'm... more skilled at persuasion.”

There was an alarmed look in his eyes.

“That won't be necessary,” he said. “I'm sure you are a quick learner.”

“You'd be surprised,” I said. I thought for a moment. “You do know that I've told a couple of people why I came here and I've written it down in a few places...just in case there should be some accidents during the training.”

“I wish I could forget this conversation,” he muttered.

“Well if you'd teach me, you could!” I said brightly.

He paled, and shook his head.

“I couldn't unleash something like that on the world,” he said. His lips tightened. “Also, I like being able to remember how to go to the loo, and in the hands of someone unskilled...”

“So how do you get skilled?” I asked. “It doesn't sound like the kind of thing somebody's going to volunteer for.”

“House elves and goblins mostly,” he said. “Although the goblins will kill you if they catch you doing it, and the house elves tend to be owned by the wealthy. The aurors learn it on convicted criminals; usually those sentenced to be Kissed anyway, or on those who will never be released. The results still aren't pretty.”

“Hmm,” I said. “I guess I'll have to practice on Death Eaters then. Thanks for all your help!”

Like hell I was going to use a blender on a house elf's brain. They were basically intelligent, humanoid dogs.

As I stood up, I said, “I'll learn that spell one way or another, but I promise I won't practice it on the kids or teachers here at school, unless I absolutely have to.”

For some reason, the look on his face as I left made me want to laugh.
“I had nothing to do with it, I swear,” I said.

“You can understand why we might find that hard to believe,” Moody said. “Considering that you've been at the center of every controversy in the past two years.”

“That's an exaggeration,” I said. “I had nothing to do with the werewolf laws or Umbridge's other atrocities. I've been here minding my business for the past month.”

School was almost out, and I still didn't know where I was going to end up for the summer. Given that the Trace hadn't been replaces, it really didn't matter. I was now capable of living in a culvert and actually making it livable, thanks to the Household spells Hermione's book had taught me.

“Six pureblood family estates are burning, and you say you didn't have anything to do with it?”

“I'm not some kind of anti-pureblood racist!” I said. “I've got people in my organization that are pureblood. More and more of them are joining all the time.”

“Some people say that the families were aligned with the Death Eaters.”

“And you didn't investigate that?” I asked. “It seems like that would have been your first priority.”

“The first priority was getting our own house in order,” Moody said. He frowned. “Your contributions to that are greatly appreciated.”

“I'm on the side of the Ministry,” I said. “This Ministry at least. I wouldn't do anything to jeopardize the gains that have been made by turning the swing voters against us.”

“Someone has,” Moody said grimly. “We'd hoped you might have some idea who.”

“My abilities mostly focus on threats to myself,” I said. “As far as my organization goes, none of the kids have heard anything about this, not that they've told me about anyway.”

For once I was telling the whole truth. It was a little frustrating to see that Moody didn't believe me. He apparently thought I was capable of penetrating whatever defenses these people had and destroying their entire mansions and everyone in them.

I might have been able to do it with my people, but the kind of dark charms that these kind of people used to defend their homes would have meant casualties. I was't ready for that yet, not unless it was something critically important to the survival of the others.

An assassination in Diagon Alley would have been easier to pull off, and I'd have been much more likely to catch them in public than to attack them in their hidey holes.

No one attacked a tinker in their lab if they had a choice; attacking a wizard in his home was just as bad an idea. I'd heard about some of the defenses that Wizards had placed on their homes, and Death Eaters tended to be richer than others, meaning they could afford more.

“It sounds like an inside job,” I said.

“What?”

“Who else would be able to get through their defenses?” I asked. “It sounds like at the very least
someone got hold of a family member who knew about the family defenses and forced them to reveal what they knew. Maybe a servant betrayed them.”

Moody stared at me.

“Well, the attacker could be some kind of crazed curse breaker,” I said. “But an average Death Eater is going to have really good defenses. It would be a lot easier to suborn someone.”

The other option was someone who was simply so good that they could slip through the defensive charms. However, Voldemort had no reason to kill his own people, and Dumbledore didn't seem like the kind of person who would destroy entire families.

“And you had nothing to do with it?” he asked.

“I don't even know which families were targeted,” I said.

He handed me a list, and I forced myself not to react.

Every name on the list was one of those that I'd given to Moody and Dumbledore. I looked up at him. He had to have known; was this some kind of an effort to frame me?

“I don't know anything about it,” I lied.

He sighed.

“I'd hoped you might.”

He wasn't acting as though he remembered my handing the names over. Had I handed the names to him directly, or had I assumed that Dumbledore would send the names to him? Had he been obliviated by someone, presumably either someone powerful, close to him, or both?

“I'm just speculating,” I said. “Which I'm sure you can do better than I, since presumably you've seen the crime scenes.”

For a moment, I considered suggesting that they try fingerprints, but that might come back to bite me later. Besides, if whoever was doing the attacking was only targeting Death eaters, did I really want to stop them?

If someone else killed Voldemort for me, then I could finally enjoy my retirement in peace.

“I've got to get back to class,” I said. “The question you have to ask yourselves is how hard you want to go after the people who are doing this, and if you really want to arrest them.”

“The Ministry is supposed to protect everyone, not only those who we agree with,” Moody growled. “And innocents were killed in these raids; servants, house elves... whoever attacked salted the earth behind them.”

“I'm not a blunt instrument,” I said primly. “Even if I have used blunt instruments in the past. It's my understanding that the Death Eaters are on the run currently, in part because of your efforts. I'd hope that you'd keep those up.”

“There is one other thing,” Moody said.

“Yes?” I asked.
“Sirius Black escaped from Azkaban several months ago. We lost track of him completely for a long time, but he was recently spotted in Hogsmeade.”

“Sirius Black?” I asked.

“He was a friend of Potter’s parents; he was their secret keeper, but he betrayed them to You-Know-Who, resulting in their deaths. He was captured after using an explosion to kill twelve muggles on a public street.”

“How did he do that?” I asked. “Were they close together, or was he using an area effect version of the Exploding charm?”

He stared at me.

“Most people would be worried for their friend. You want to take tips from the Death Eaters?”

“The better to kill them with, yes,” I said. “I'm surprised that there aren't more spells of mass destruction. Is it something that is difficult magically, or is it just a cultural aversion.”

“Wizards don't have the muggle love for blowing everything up,” Moody growled. “Real combat is man to man.”

“Cultural then,” I said.

I nodded to myself. It might be possible to make magical pipe bombs, set to explode when touched by certain people. I'd need to put it to the Weasleys in the form of a prank; once the basic mechanism was constructed, you could add things that were much worse later.

“As for worrying about Black,” I said. “He's just one Death Eater. I'll keep an eye out for him, and if he threatens Harry, he'll regret it. Harry has friends now, and this school has never been as well defended as it is right now. A third of the school can defend itself very well, and others are trying to catch up.”

We now had seventy five percent of the school in our organization; despite this, I didn't consider the first or second years as able to defend themselves. Third years and up would do fine, though.

Ironically, the whole thing was going to make Lockhart look like an exceptional Defense teacher.

“Don't get overconfident,” Moody growled.

“Constant Vigilance,” I said. “Right?”

He handed me a picture.

“He was younger in this one,” he said. “Add ten years to his face, and you'll have an idea of what he looks like.”

The man on the picture was wild haired and snarled. He looked savage and his eyes were a little crazed. I stared at it for a moment. He didn't look like the usual Death Eater; he looked like the kind of person who would eat babies.

I rose to my feet.

“If you need any help, please feel free to call me,” I said.

I left without saying anything else, or asking permission. I was an Oder of Merlin recipient, which
came with certain social privileges, some of which I was only learning about through Lockhart.

He was still adamant about not teaching me obliviation, to the point that he was actively trying to avoid me rather than hearing me ask again. Given that the school year was about to end, and he was unlikely to teach again next year, it was becoming a moot point.

“It’s the muggleborns,” I heard Moody mutter to the other auror in the room. “Umbridge got them riled up, and they're retaliating now that they have a chance.”

I frowned.

Part of me still suspected Dumbledore, or at least someone in the auror's office, maybe someone who was sick of having to jump through hoops to see justice done.

My impression of the Wizarding World was that it was filled with sheep. Life as a Wizard was so easy that almost everyone avoided even small dangers. It made them dependent on those who would promise safety at any cost.

It also meant that a citizen terrorist group wasn't likely to arise.

Still, I'd been wrong before. It was possible that a muggleborn had a relative in the military; or possibly that others had relatives who were IRA terrorists.

The surprising thing was that muggleborn hadn't caused that struggle to spill over into the Wizarding World. Kill a muggleborn's family and he was likely to retaliate.

Of course, it was possible that the conflict had spread, and the obliviators had covered it up.

Was part of the reason that they tried to pull the muggleborn away from the muggle world for reasons precisely like that?

How hard would it be for a Somalian Wizard to watch as warlords took over his country, as they abused his people, killed and mutilated his friends and neighbors. He'd protect his own family, but would it stop at that?

Were Wizarding governments all over the world having to suppress their own people to keep them from getting involved in things like that?

Why not work toward stability?

The Wizarding governments might want to not be involved, but once shelling started, wars affected everyone. It would be child's play for a government to send assassins after a recalcitrant muggle leader. Why didn't they?

Were some of the world's dictators secretly Dark Lords?

Maybe Wizarding governments didn't stop them because they couldn't. If that was true, then someone should at least try.

If it wasn't... I'd have thought that keeping the peace between the muggles would have been in the Wizards' best interest in the long run.

Wouldn't it make more sense for a few “accidents” and obliviations to destroy nuclear programs in some of the unstable nations?

I wasn't advocating for Wizards to control the muggles, simply to guide them. Nuclear weapons
had been destroyed in my world by Scion; the fact that this one still had them seemed insane to me.

Someone should do something.

As I stepped out into the hall, I found Hermione waiting.

“What did they want?” she asked.

“Six Death Eater houses have been blasted to oblivion,” I said. “Moody wanted to know if I did it.”

“Did you?” she asked.

I stared at her. “When would I have had the time? I’ve been busy.”

Money from the car sale scheme had started to trickle in; without the Trace some of our older members had managed to slip out and work with a squib at a car repair shop. So far we’d only earned three thousand pounds, which had converted to six hundred galleons.

It was a lot of money for a group of schoolchildren, but it’d never be enough to fund an education.

“Besides, if I’d been doing that, I'd have looted the mansions first, and we wouldn't be hemorrhaging money.”

She stared at me for a moment, then nodded.

For a moment I almost thought I saw her mutter something about unexplained money, as though she was adding it to a mental checklist.

Presumably she was trying to find a way to determine whether I'd actually committed a crime or not.

I wasn't going to make it that easy for her.

“On a more serious note, I need you to find out everything you can about Sirius Black,” I said. “He's been seen nearby, and they're worried he might come after Harry.”

“What?” Hermione said. She sounded alarmed. “He's a mass murderer!”

“So are most of the Death Eaters,” I said. “But they didn't get caught, which means that he might not be good at it. I'm going to look at my foe glass, and then I'm going to have Harry look at it. It might give us an idea of how close he is.”

I showed her the picture, and her face paled a little more.

“I don't want to worry Harry until we're sure what's going on,” I said. “But I don't plan to wait more than a few hours, maybe less.”

She nodded. “I'll try to find out whatever I can. Hopefully I'll have something by dinner.”

I went straight to my room, and checked the glass.

I had more enemies than I'd had before, but fewer of them that I recognized. Some of my previous enemies were dead, or in one case in the form of a button, which would explain why there was a button really close to the screen.

I'd seen her nearby before I'd gone to the ceremony, which was why I'd had the beetle to button
spell prepared.

The others were likely people offended by my Order of Merlin win, or family members of the people that I'd killed. The important thing was that none of them were close by.

I didn't see anybody who looked like the man in the picture, although I checked several times.

Maybe he wasn't after me at all.

Pulling out my wand, I shrank my foe glass. I stuck it in my pocket, and I headed down to the courtyard, where Harry was lying on the grass with Neville. It had become much more popular as a recreational area since the attacks on the school had begun. Hardly anyone ever went outside on the grounds anymore, which was understandable, but regrettable.

“Harry,” I said. “Come with me.”

He nodded.

I found an unused classroom, and I pulled him inside. Setting the foe glass up against the wall, I handed him the picture.

“Do you see this man in the mirror?” I asked.

He looked at the picture for a long time, then looked up at the mirror. He studied it for a long time, then shook his head.

Either Black had a way to cloak himself from the foe glass or he wasn't nearby.

Or it was possible that he wasn't my enemy or Harry's enemy at all. It was possible that he was only doing his master's bidding in Hogsmeade, and it had nothing to do with either of us.

“I see Voldemort,” he said.

I'd described Voldemort to him on more than one occasion, not that I suspected that bald, noseless albinos were common in the Wizarding World.

“There's a crazy looking woman, and a bunch of other people, but they're a lot farther away.”

“How far away?” I asked.

“Like half a Quidditch field?” he said. “Voldemort and the lady are close though.”

“How close?”

“Half a classroom,” he said.

I nodded, relieved.

Apparently very few people were enemies of Harry on his own merits. Likely the Death Eaters were only against him because their boss demanded it. I wasn't sure who the woman was. I'd have to get a description from him and see if it rang a bell with anyone.

On the edge of my awareness, I sensed new bugs entering my range. It took me a moment to realize that there was a dog standing at the edge of the school. It looked ragged and starving, and it was absolutely covered in fleas and ticks.
It stared at the school for a moment, and then retreated out of my range.

Did the anti-muggle charms apply to muggle animals as well? If they did, did that mean that there was something different about that animal?

Animaguses were potentially dangerous to me. I couldn't detect them in human form, and unless their animal form was an insect, I couldn't tell them from any other animal.

An experiment with a tick had showed that McGonagall blood tasted no different than that of any other cat.

Taste wasn't one of the senses I normally used, but I could if I had to.

“The Ministry thinks that this man betrayed your parents and was part of the reason they were killed,” I said. “They're afraid he's coming after you, but I'm not so sure.”

“Betrayed them?” he asked. He scowled.

“I'm not sure,” I said. “Hermione is looking into it now, hopefully by dinner we'll have some answers. In the meantime, be careful if you see this man.”

He stared at me for a moment, then said, “Are you really telling me not to go off with strangers?”

“...Yes?”

“My Aunt and Uncle kept trying to get me to leave with strangers ever since I was little,” he said. “I know better; I'm not a little kid.”

“I don't think any of us are, not anymore,” I said.

“Yeah,” He said. “Not even Colin.”

I thought for a moment. “Well, maybe Colin.”
"There's been no sign of him," I said. "Not for three days."

"Maybe he's not coming here?" Neville asked hopefully. "The last thing we need is another crazed Death Eater on the grounds."

"I still want the details of that spell," I said. "He's been in Azkaban for more than a decade; and we've never heard any of the other Death Eaters using it. It's possible that he hasn't taught it to them yet."

We were sitting in the Room of Requirement, me and a group of my ten closest allies. The Room was made up to look like the Pentagon from some movie that didn't exist in my world, something about a hacker almost causing a nuclear war.

There was a wall of huge screens on one wall, large enough that they'd have been tinkertech back at home. There were banks of computer monitors featuring the best consoles 1983 technology had to offer.

None of it worked, of course; apparently the boys thought it had the right atmosphere for these kinds of meetings.

Personally, I would have preferred a Protectorate conference room, but some of the boys were apparently geeks.

"It's important to deny the enemy assets," Hermione said primly. "Wars are matters of attrition."

"It's less true of Wizarding wars than muggle," I admitted. "We don't need oil, or machines or ammunition, or even that much in the way of food or water. For us, attrition is about manpower."

"Kill enough of them and eventually they'll have to give up," Harry said. He was staring at his hands.

He'd been uncharacteristically quiet since we'd talked about just who Sirius Black was, and what he meant to him in his personal history.

"I talked to Remus," I said. "And he tells me that Sirius is an Animagus. He appears to be a black dog. I noticed one watching the castle three days ago, but I haven't seen one since."

"He killed my parents," Harry said. He scowled and his hands tensed.

"None of us saw his face in the mirror," Hermione said. "Doesn't that mean there's more to the story than we're hearing about?"

"Maybe he's good enough to beat the mirror," Harry said.

"'Maybe there's a reason he's not our enemy," Hermione said. "Maybe he was imperiused into doing it, and he's sorry now."

"He admitted to it!" Harry said. "In front of witnesses."

"That just means that we have to find out what really happened," I said. "What else did you find out, Hermione?"
“There was never a trial,” Hermione said. “No proof that he ever did anything. The Ministry just locked him up because they found him on the scene.”

“Yeah,” Neville said. “If Taylor was found standing over a bunch of bodies, they’d probably blame her too.”

I heard a snigger from the back of the room.

“What?” I asked. “I don't get found standing over bodies very often.”

I saw Hermione scribbling something in her notebook. I'd had bugs try to read it, but she had everything written in some kind of code.

“Right,” Harry said. “Taylor would make sure that she never got found out.”

“I'm not nearly as murderous as everyone seems to think,” I said peevishly.

Everyone chuckled at that.

“Maybe he wasn't as smart as Taylor and got caught,” Neville said.

I doubted it, even given the nature of the Wizarding justice system. The look in the man's eyes had been crazed and evil looking even before he'd gotten to Azkaban. Even if he'd been innocent when he'd gone in, would there be anything of the man he'd been coming out.

“He was my parent's friend once,” Harry said grudgingly. “Maybe I should give him a chance.”

“Just because he isn't our enemy now doesn't mean he won't go through us to get to whatever he's here after.”

“If you see him, don't engage unless you outnumber him at least three to one, with at least two fifth years to back you up,” I said. “Get the information to the rest of us, and we'll come for you.”

“You won't know if he comes?” Hermione asked.

“My power's got a limited range,” I said. “Enough to cover the school, sure, but not the whole country.”

I had plans to change that. I was working on transmutation as hard as I could. It might take me years, but magic was as much a matter of intent as science. I was hoping to eventually recreate the relay bugs Panacea had made for me.

I'd be able to improve my range geometrically, even if I wouldn't be able to fully control that many bugs. It'd be a power multiplier and a game changer. Covering an entire city would be possible, and the thought of being able to stretch a thin line to another city while I was somewhere else was enticing.

“So?” Hermione asked.

“That means if I want to find black, I have to go to Hogsmeade,” I said. “If he's anywhere nearby I'll be able to find him, and with any luck we'll be able to interrogate him.”

I'd found a spell that turned a rock into a dog in an old book that the Room had somehow provided. Unlike the other things the room made, this one was real and could be taken out of the room. That had led me to finding the opposite spell, one that turned dogs into rocks.
With a shrinking spell, I'd be able to transport Black fairly easily, and I'd interrogate him on my own.

There were some things that the others shouldn't see, after all.

“You can't do that,” Hermione protested. “They've got a Seer, and they might be waiting for you.”

“I'll take a team,” I lied.

It wasn't that I was overconfident. It was that I had advantages that they didn't know about.

I didn't have to go into town the normal way; all I needed was to get halfway through the tunnel to the Wailing Willow, and my power would extend to the area above me. I could be there and back before anyone noticed, unless I found him.

If the Death Eaters were waiting for me, I'd have to have a plan to escape from them, but I wasn't sure that Voldemort had that kind of manpower anymore.

Getting me would be a coup for him, but while his Seer was undeniably powerful, he or she couldn't see everything. Even Dinah had been limited in the questions she could answer a day. It very well could be that they weren't looking.

“It's a bad idea,” Hermione argued. “A lot of risk for not much gain. We've only got a few more days before we're back at home, and Harry will be safe.”

“Everyone will be,” I said firmly. “And if they aren't, we'll make whoever hurt them pay for every ounce of blood that's spilled.”

“Which will hopefully be none,” Neville said firmly.

“Well, hopefully none of ours anyway,” I said. I stared at the blank screens. “How are you coming on the Veritaserum, Hermione?”

She shook her head.

“That's N.E.W.T. Level work; I'm not nearly ready for it. I've got a team of seventh years working on it; but it takes a full lunar cycle to produce.”

“Which is why we're making multiple doses all at once. How are we doing with the mass production of simple potions?”

We were starting with the easiest potions, reasoning that if we could start with those, then we could eventually work our way up to things that were harder.

“There are some steps that having multiple people doing the work is fine; others where it seems to be a problem.”

“You're keeping track of any useful mistakes, right?”

She nodded.

“So far we've discovered ways to make a very powerful acid, three kinds of new poisons, and a potion that explodes with contact with air.”
“I’m interested in the acids, and the exploding potion,” I said. “Have the recipes written up and put into the book.”

“I already did,” she said. “We're up to forty two recipes.”

Some of them were just alternative brewings that had effects that were only somewhat different than the norm, but those effects were useful in a dozen different ways. The fact that they would be unexpected was one of the best things.

“I'm a little concerned with the effects of the modified Bulgeye potion,” she continued. “It seems dangerous to include in the book.”

We had multiple copies stashed around the castle so that no one could deprive us of them. They were written in a code known only by me and Hermione.

The usual bulgeye potion caused the eyes to swell. Who in the hell had thought that would be a good idea to create, I didn't know. What we did know was that it wasn't at all hard to make the effect happen much more rapidly, and much more explosively.”

“We've tried everything we could to replace the rat's eyes,” Hermione said. “But apparently it counts as curse damage.”

“I'd ask if Ron sang the “three blind mice” song to them, but I doubt he knows it.”

“I'm not letting him anywhere near the potions experiments. He's not as dangerous as Neville, but he doesn't have the stomach for the things that we're doing.”

I thought she was being a little critical of Neville. He wasn't all that bad at potions, not since he’d managed to control his anxiety around Snape to at least some extent.

“We are able to put confusing concoctions into hard candies,” Hermione said. “Thanks to the twins.”

“Would have been a lot more useful when our last headmaster was here,” I muttered.

Hermione winced almost imperceptibly, even as several of the others chuckled. The others thought I was joking, but she knew me well enough to know that I'd have drugged the most powerful wizard in Great Britain if I thought it was necessary.

“Being able to deliver them as an aerosol would be helpful,” I said.

“The problem is the dosing,” Hermione said. “Most potions require a fairly high dose to take effect, and when you spray them most of it is lost in the air. Only a small amount gets into the lungs. Then there's the problem of an errant gust of wind.”

“They can be easily countered by a bubblehead charm, too,” Angus McConnell said. He was one of our most loyal seventh years, a Gryffindor, although I suspected he'd been a borderline Ravenclaw.

“It might work even better with a bubblehead charm,” I said. “Provided you can get the aerosol inside.”

“Because the spell would keep it inside, and they'd keep breathing it!” Hermione said. “But
“People tend to panic when they can’t breathe,” I said. “Especially when they think they should be able to. They breathe even faster than normal. We just need a delivery system.”

“What about birds?” Neville asked.

“What?”

“Well, everybody knows how birds... uh... like to target things anyway.”

“Poop, you mean?” Harry asked.

“Yeah,” Neville said, looking down. “So what if we had the potions in some kind of bubble that breaks when it impacts something.”

“They'd see them coming,” Hermione said.

“Make them invisible and silent,” Harry said. “First thing you'd know about it is when you feel something wet, and then you're gagging.”

“See if old military style gas masks can be used to avoid this tactic,” I said. “The last thing we want is for them to use it against us.”

“That'll cost,” Hermione warned. “We're already stretched thin with the cost of the potion's experiments.”

“I'll find us some more money,” I said. At her look, I held up my hand. “I won't even hold up Gringott's.”

“I thought you wanted to make friends with the goblins?”

“That's why I won't rob them,” I said. “And nobody is friends with the goblins. Allies, maybe.”

The fact that nobody made fun of the idea that I might be able to pull it off was reassuring. These kids seemed to think I could do anything, and I planned to live up to it as much as I could.

In my old life, I hadn't been able to focus on saving anyone in particular, because I'd had to focus on saving the entire multiverse. Nothing in my old life couldn't be sacrificed, because the consequences of losing had been inconceivable.

Now, though?

I could afford the luxury of actually caring about people. It was possible that I wouldn't be able to protect all of them, but I planned on making the enemy pay dearly for every drop of our blood they spilled.

“Let's keep up the research as long as we can. I'll try to get more money in the meantime. Anyone who has ideas about how we might make money, drop the ideas off with Hermione and we'll discuss them in the next meeting. Put the word out to the people in the outer ranks; for all we know a first year might have a better idea than starting a lemonade stand.”

I rose to my feet.

“We don't have much time left to get things done, so let's try to get everything accomplished while we can. With the Trace gone, I expect you all to keep up your studies over the summer, but be sure
to be mindful of the Statute of Secrecy; the last thing we need is to make enemies of this Administration.”

There was only so many times you could replace the Minister for Magic before people started getting suspicious. Plus, I actually liked Bones.

Everyone nodded, and as we left, I looked around at the War Room. I was going to have to be more careful about letting the nerds pick the setting; the office chairs from a nineteen eighties movies were presumably designed in the sixties, and they were uncomfortable.

The moment before I left the room, I disillusioned myself. Everyone who was capable of it did so as well, and those who couldn't were taken care of by their comrades.

The door wouldn't open until I gave the all clear, which I did, and we scattered as quickly as possible. Although we were now a publicly known organization, the Room of Requirement was still a secret. Should there be an attack on the castle, we'd retreat here if we could. We'd discovered that the room could store artifacts and retrieve them if we left them inside and changed the settings.

We now had a store of magical tricks and weapons preparing for the inevitable siege of the castle. They were stored here where Rowle, or whatever Headmaster came next wouldn't be able to confiscate them.

Instead of heading for the library, like Hermione and the others expected, I headed instead for the secret passageway leading out. According to the twins, it lead out to a supposedly haunted shack in Hogsmeade.

Even getting there would be a little dangerous; I'd have to leave the castle walls to reach the secret entrance at the base of the Whomping Willow. The tree could detect you even if you were disillusioned, and there was a knot at the base of the tree that I had to reach to deactivate it.

Slipping outside wasn't that hard.

All of the students were now keyed to the outside doors and gates; they could enter and leave at will; a necessary precaution so that if something did get into the castle people could get out. An alarm would be raised if someone who wasn't keyed in tried to pass; this was to keep a pureblood sympathetic to the Death Eaters from simply opening the door.

It was dark, and walking down the slope of the hill seemed surprisingly unfamiliar. I'd been trapped inside the castle for an entire school year, and it had been longer since I'd walked these grasses.

Part of me wondered how they kept the grass so short; presumably it was either through using magic, or maybe Hagrid had giant goats roaming the lawn every night. There wasn't any goat scat, though.

Slipping under the branches, I massaged the knot and an entrance opened before me.

I slipped inside, and found myself moving through a lightness, low tunnel. Even last year I wouldn't have had any trouble making my way through the tunnel, but now I had to stoop a little.

The earth was alive with things that I could sense; bugs and other things. There were enough that I didn't even need light. I was able to walk quietly through the tunnel without making a misstep.
I stiffened as I realized that someone was waiting for me in the shack. There was a figure simply sitting in the darkness.

Quickly I expanded my search outward. No one was visible anywhere nearby, but I was disillusioned myself. I couldn't hear the sounds of breathing, but there were spells for that as well.

From beneath my robes came my secret weapon; five thousand mosquitoes. They flew forward through the tunnel and up through openings in the roof of the shack.

Mosquitoes had the ability to detect human blood types from a hundred feet away, through a combination of smell, sight and heat detection.

The Death Eaters would likely disillusion themselves. They might make themselves silent, and they might even mask their scents, but I doubted that they'd think to mask their heat signature.

Nothing was nearby, not until I reached nearby buildings where people were supposed to be.

It was dark in the shack, but there were a few beams of light there, enough that I could barely see the figure huddled in the corner.

“Black?” I asked, my wand held out.

I wanted to stun him and ask questions after I'd tied him up, but his wand was carefully set just out of his easy reach, and the bugs on his body made it unfortunately clear that not only didn't he have any weapons, he wasn't wearing anything under his robes either.

I could smell him from all the way across the room, with my human nose.

“Terror,” I heard a voice say. It sounded raspy, like something that hadn't been used in a long time.

“Yes,” I said, tensing.

“I've come here for you,” Sirius Black said.
I stunned him.

Putting him in a full body bind, and checking him for traps before I took his wand and slipped it into my pocket, I waited until he woke up to begin my interrogation.

He'd have been a fool to announce his intention to attack me, but some of the purebloods had strange ideas about the meanings of honor.

Sitting in the darkness in a chair, I leaned forward, and stared at him for a long moment. The bugs showed that the moonlight barely showed my figure and the whites of my eyes. Ordinarily, I didn't cut an imposing figure, but with him lying over the floor, and me looking over him, I looked a little more intimidating.

Unfortunately, I couldn't do anything about my voice. Trying to make it sound deeper just made me sound stupid. I'd have to wait for puberty and growth spurts for my voice to change at all. I doubted that I'd ever get the kind of husky voice I wanted, not unless I took up smoking for a few decades, and in a world without Panacea, I wasn't that stupid.

“You've come here for me,” I said quietly. “To kill me?”

He shook his head frantically. Apparently he'd heard rumors about some of the things I'd done to people who'd tried to kill me.

“Then why?” I asked. “What can I possibly have that someone like you might want? I don't have any of the wealth, none of the breeding, not many of the connections...so what do you want?”

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

“You don't know?”

“I know what I need to know,” I said. “I don't know about you.... maybe you aren't that important.”

His shoulders sagged, as well as they could in the full body bind.

“I'd hoped...” he said. “That's why I stayed.”

He'd had months to get out of the country. If he wasn't planning to join Voldemort and the others, he'd be a liability to them. That would mean that he'd have the Death Eaters searching for him at the same time as the Ministry. Nowhere in the Wizarding world would be safe.

As a dog, he might be able to blend into the muggle world, but then he'd have to contend with dog catchers and bobbies.

“Why would you do something so stupid?” I asked. “You'd gotten away. If it was me, I'd have left the country months ago.”

“No you wouldn't,” he said, his voice hoarse. “I've read about you, about the things you've done. You could have left any time you wanted.”

“Not while the Trace was around,” I said.

It wasn't strictly true. I could have used my abilities to rob stores, to continue to live like a
homeless person until I was able to get across the bay to another country. I might even have been able to try to get asylum with the French.

“And it's gone, isn't it?” he said. “I may be a little mad, but I'm not stupid. A Minister for Magic attacks you and yours and she's dead the same night. She was working for the Death Eaters, and you've killed how many?”

“I was in Hogwarts the whole time,” I said. “I've got dozens of witnesses, including aurors. Everyone knows that I didn't do it.”

He grinned.

“And yet I don't hear you saying that you didn't.”

“Maybe it's just more useful to have you believe that I did,” I said.

“You've killed more Death Eaters than anybody,” he said. “And the more of them they throw at you, the more you kill. You hardly need to make things up to be intimidating.”

“The Death Eater thing...pure luck,” I said.

He laughed, and it was a bitter, horrible sound. :

“Nobody's that lucky.”

“Why are you here?” I asked tiredly. If he wanted to pursue conspiracy theories, there wasn't anything I could do to stop him. I hadn't learned the memory charm yet, after all.

“I want to work for you,” he said.

“I kill Death Eaters... isn't that what you said?” I asked. “And everybody says you are one. Why shouldn't I just turn you in to the Ministry?”

“I'm not,” he said. “I mean, it was my fault, but I didn't...I'd never...”

“What happened?” I asked.

“I thought I was being so clever,” he said. “They wanted me as the secret keeper. I thought no one would suspect Peter... so we switched.”

“Peter Pettigrew?” I asked. “The man you murdered?”

“I didn't!” he said, lunging against his bonds. “He did it! He cut off his own finger and left it after killing them all. If I'd killed him there would have been more left of him than just a finger.”

“How did he escape then?” I asked. “The aurors had an anti-apparition charm over the whole area by then.”

“He was an animagus, like me. We all were... to help a friend.”

“Remus?” I asked.

Remus had told me about the way the others had all become animaguses to help me. It hadn't mattered in the case of the others, who were dead, but he'd wanted me not to be surprised by a helpful black dog suddenly appearing.
He looked down and closed his eyes.

“James was a deer, Peter was a rat....it suited him. It should have warned us, but it didn't.”

“So James Potter was a deer, and he thought it was a good idea to go play with a werewolf?” I asked incredulously. “Was he really stupid or something?”

“He never bothered him,” Sirius said. “Besides, the books said that werewolves don't bother other animals.”

“How would be sure that was true that until he tried it?” I asked. “It doesn't seem like the kind of thing that you just guess at. It'd be like turning yourself into a pie to hide at a pie eating contest. Things could have gotten really messy.”

“Well, they didn't,” he said, and there was a hint of irritation in his voice. Apparently he tended to idolize Harry's father, and having someone speak ill of him was upsetting.

“So Peter cut off his own finger...blew up a bunch of muggles and escaped down the sewer.”

“I'd have thought you'd have gone after him than be here bothering me,” I said.

“That's what I've been spending the last few months doing,” he admitted. “Trying to find him. But nobody's heard anything about him. I haven't been able to find a single thing about him.”

I doubted that this man was exactly the world's greatest detective. He certainly was no Armsmaster, or even Batman. Still, finding a single rat in a population of ten thousand would be almost impossible.

If he was telling the truth, Pettigrew was likely long gone. If he was bright, he'd have slipped off to America or to Australia, places where at least he spoke the language, and where he could make a new life for himself.

Of course, given what I knew about pureblood psychology, he likely hadn't done that,.

“You think he's still a Death Eater,” I said, staring at him. “And that he's going to come after me.”

“Yes,” he said, staring at me. “You really are a seer.”

I didn't have to be to follow a chain of logic.

If he was obsessed with the memory of his friend, and he believed that he had to avenge those killings, then it was obvious that he was planning on seeking that revenge.

Using me to find the Death Eaters wasn't a particularly hard leap to make, even if it wasn't particularly bright of him.

“Do you have any proof of this?” I asked.

“I thought you'd just know,” he said. “Everybody says...”

I closed my eyes.

“Seers see the future,” I said. “Not the past. I don't even do that. I see the present.”

His face crumpled. “I don't have any proof.”
“Harry will want some,” I said. “Before he accepts you.”

“Harry?” he asked. He stared at me, and while the light was dim, I thought his face paled. He shook his head violently. “No. Harry can't know about me!”

“Why?” I asked.

“I got them killed... almost got him killed. They mutilated him because of me...because of my arrogance. The sight of me... he should have to see that.”

“I shouldn't have to see it,” I said sharply. “Or smell it. Harry's part of my crew; if you work for us, you'll end up working with him too.”

“He'll never believe me,” he said.

“I'm not sure I believe you,” I said. “But even if I did, how are you going to be any use to us?”

“I can teach you how to be animaguses,” he said desparately.

“McGonagall can teach us that,” I said.

I'd considered it, but if I learned it from McGonagall, I'd have to register, which would make it worse than useless. Also, there was the possibility that I'd end up with something useless, like a deer or a rabbit.

The ideal form for an animagus would be something really really small, like Rita Skeeter's bug form. I'd prefer not to be a beetle for obvious reasons, but something that small would be perfect.

With my luck I'd get something like a four hundred pound sow, or a horse.

What could you possibly do with a horse form? Trample somebody? You'd never use it?

“You'd have to register,” he said, reflecting my thoughts. “And I'm good at it.”

“Still,” I said. “It's a problem. I believe that you are not my enemy... and maybe even not Harry's. However, who knows what the Death Eaters did to your mind when they had you.”

“They never had me!” he insisted.

“Would you remember if they had?” I asked. “Rita Skeeter tried to kill me recently, in front of the entire Ministry. You think she was normally that stupid?”

He stared at me.

“Can you really be sure that somewhere in your travels there isn't a moment where you don't quite remember what happened?”

“What?” he asked.

“I'd imagine that you have a lot of those moments,” I said. “Maybe the Death Eaters actually caught you, and then they let you go. You'd never even know about it until you woke with your bloody knife at Harry's throat.”

“How can you trust anybody?” he asked, staring at me.

“I can't,” I said. “That's why I'm still alive, and half the muggleborn in my class aren't.”
That was an exaggeration, of course, but the effect was what mattered.

“So what do we do?” he asked.

“You can trust me,” I said. “And I'll figure out a way to be able to trust you. Or you can go bark up another tree.”

“What do you want me to do?” he asked.

“Turn into a dog,” I said.

His form shifted, and I pointed my wand at him. His form shimmered, and a moment later I picked up the rock that was left.

That was a decided disadvantage of being an animagus; the Wizards loved to transform animals into other things, and they had all sorts of spells that helped them do that. The only way to avoid it would be to turn into something rare enough that no one had bothered to come up with that kind of spell.

My mosquitoes detected a strange movement in the air that should not have been there. It was coming from several directions, and yet there was no sight, sound or smell to alert them. The mosquitoes moved closer, and they could feel the slight body heat radiating from several people.

It wasn't Black; I was almost sure of it. Most likely it was Voldemort's Seer.

Well, I hadn't come unprepared.

For a moment I hesitated; it was possible that these were aurors coming after Black. What I was about to do was decidedly lethal.

Reaching into my pocket, I pulled out an object that I'd shrunken to the limits of what I could shrink. Setting it carefully into one corner on the floor, I reversed the spell.

In front of me was an innocuous looking barrel. The barrel was packed with old fashioned gunpowder, but the slats on three of the sides had been made impervious with a spell. This meant that when it exploded, all of the force would be directed in one direction.

I set the cards on top of the barrel, and then I began to run, ducking into the tunnel. Behind me, the bugs began to play a game of exploding snap.

I hated the randomness of the game, but I had other ways of dealing with the intruders if it didn't work.

Apparently they were using the human revealing spell, because parts of the room suddenly exploded, letting more light into the room.

There were six of them, and they were cautious.

I'd thought they might be, which is why I'd been willing to risk it on a game of exploding snap. They'd suspect that I had some sort of trap, and so they'd each be waiting for the others to take the first move.

As I ran through the tunnel, I could hear what the bugs heard; an argument made in low tones among men who doubtlessly knew that they'd been determined to be expendable.

Slap. Slap.
The bugs had to slap the cards down with a certain amount of violence, which meant that I'd had to use nightmarishly large bugs. There had been some in the bowels of the castle that I hadn't even been able to identify, including some spiders the size of a grown man's fist.

In an effort to confuse the people watching, I'd set up a little green felt on the top of the barrel, and I'd dressed the spiders up in cute little gamblers outfits. I'd hoped that the incongruity of the scene would slow whoever saw it down for long enough.

They entered the room cautiously. I could hear spells being cast; presumably to detect magic and curses.

Slap, slap.

“Hey,” one of them called out. “There's two spiders here playing cards.”

“We don't have time for that,” another, irritated voice said. “She's gone down the tunnel. One of you go around the other side and head her off. Kill her when she comes out.”

Well, that was a problem.

Slap, slap.

A sudden thought occurred to me. I hadn't been anything near an explosives expert in the other world. Would a hundred pounds of gunpowder be enough? It was what, the equivalent of half that of TNT?

“Seal off the roof,” I heard one of them say. “There's people that say she might be an animagus. She might try to double back and get around us.”

As one of them began to magically repair the roof, I had a sudden, more horrible thought. I'd planned the blast around the fact that the roof had holes; explosions tended to follow the path of least resistance.

Slap, slap.

That route was now the tunnel I was in.

“Can somebody stop those stupid bugs,” I heard the commander snap.

SNAP!

I created the strongest shield I could possibly manage, and had it fill the entire width of the tunnel behind me.

“Hey, there's a string on fire,” I heard a voice say.

“Put it out!”

Everything turned white around me, and suddenly I couldn't hear. I gagged as I found myself suddenly buried in earth, and for a moment I blacked out.

I woke buried in the earth, and for a moment I didn't know where I was. The bugs and worms around me were already trying to dig me out, but I was gagging and struggling to breathe. I was drowning in the dirt and muck.
The dirt above me suddenly vanished, showing a gristle face.

He was saying something, but I couldn't hear what; my ears were still ringing horribly. It didn't matter what he was saying. He'd seen my bugs, and he couldn't be allowed to get back to his master with that kind of knowledge.

He gasped suddenly as a fly flew into his mouth. He choked and gagged, staring at me as I stared up at him.

More and more bugs flew into his mouth as I tried to dig myself out of the dirt.

“Expecto Patronum,” I said.

For a moment I thought the bugs were going to turn on me. Each time I used the spell it got harder to control. I'd thought the last time was specific to Umbridge, but apparently not.

It took me a moment to get the bugs under control, and then another to do what had to be done. He would have screamed, but his throat was already clogged with insects, and he was already dead, he just didn't know it.

A moment later he did. Dismissing the bugs was harder this time as well.

It took me almost two minutes to finish digging myself out, and I realized as I did that I'd probably broken something.

There was fire on the horizon, and in the distance I could hear the shouts and anxious screams of people. The explosion looked as though it was far more powerful than I'd expected; I'd need to talk to an expert before I did something like that again, and I'd want to be much farther away.

I disillusioned myself, and then I summoned the Death Eater's broom. I turned his bones into powder with a small blasting spell, and then I sent them flying into the wind. A moment later I was flying toward Hogwarts.

I suspected that I'd broken my leg, and there were a lot of other injuries. Some of them might even be internal.

If I'd known the memory charm, I could have had Madam Pomfrey heal me and then taken care of it. As it was, I'd have to rely on the incomplete healing from the others, and hope that I didn't have anything terribly serious.

I patted the Sirius Rock in my pocket.

Figuring out what to do with him would take some time, but I'd have time.

In the meantime, I was finding it harder and harder to stay conscious, so I focused on just making it to the school. Hopefully they wouldn't find me unconscious on the lawn on a stolen Death Eater's broom.

That would just be embarrassing.
Waking up, I saw Madam Pomfrey leaning over me, staring into my eyes intently. I'd lost consciousness at some point, presumably when I was still in the air, which had likely caused even more damage than I'd already suffered.

I couldn't tell from her expression how much trouble I was in. Was I under arrest for the bomb?

“What's going on?” I asked, with as innocent an expression as I could manage. Even with Wizardly healing my entire body ached, but I ignored that. I didn't push it into my bugs because I needed to show those small indications of pain, both as proof that I was normal, and possibly to gain small amounts of sympathy from the adults.

“As if you didn't know,” Pomfrey said. “Found out on the lawn with body parts left all over Hogsmeade...second time since you came here, if I recall.”

“I'm sure it's just a coincidence,” I said. “You could say the same thing about everyone in my year.”

She gave me a look that said that she didn't believe a word I was saying.

“I've seen aurors who have taken less damage,” she said. “A blasting spell wouldn't do the kind of damage you had to internal organs, not without simply killing you. The damage you suffered was similar in kind, if not extend as that suffered by those unfortunates who were in the Shack.”

“There's a simple explanation,’ I said.

“But not a truthful one, I think,” she said. She stared at me with a gimlet eye. “I suspect there's a lot of things you aren't telling people, Miss Hebert. Everyone has a skeleton in their closet, or two. I think you have a mansion full.”

If she'd known about my old life, she'd know that I had enough dead in my past to fill entire cities.

I shrugged.

“I know what I've done,” I said. “There are things that I regret, but I never did any of them without a good reason.”

“Children often don't see the horror of what they've done until they are older.”

Miss Militia had seemed to think that; in part because she'd been an actual child soldier. I'd never been that; I'd been a teenaged soldier, which was entirely different. I'd had a childhood, as short as it had been, a time to be happy, and to feel loved. I'd had people I'd trusted, and if that trust had later been betrayed, well, at least it had been there once.

“Some people never get to be a child at all,” I said. “Through no fault of their own.”

She didn't have a response to that, and I nodded.

“How much damage do I still have,” I said. “And what do I need to do to stay relatively healthy.”

“If it were up to me,” she said. “I'd have you in bed for at least three days. Wizardly healing is amazing, but it is not miraculous. You have put your body through something that would result in lifelong pain and disability if you were a muggle. I had to completely regrow your spine, which is
tricky because of all the nerves their. If I'd made a mistake, your breathing or heart could have stopped, and that would have been the end of you.”

My shield spell was reasonably strong, and it hadn't done that much to protect me. Did that mean that I had to work on making it stronger, or were shield spells just innately weak against enough physical force?

“However,” she continued. “The aurors wish to speak to you. This time, they seem as though they have real questions.”

Under the Bones administration, I doubted that I'd be able to dance around their interrogation like I had in the past. These would probably be better men, and better interrogators than I'd met in the past.

There were aurors waiting outside the Hospital wing, waiting at all the doors. My wand had been taken from me, and my fanny pack.

I had wands available in the vent system, both here and at the Ministry. I wouldn't be helpless. However, Moody's eye had the ability to see through things, and I could hear his distinctive footstep coming toward us.

I'd leave myself vulnerable only as long as I had to.

“You'd had a concussion,” Pomfrey said. “I can give you an extra day at least.”

I shook my head.

“I'd just as soon get this over with and get back to work,” I said. “You don't have my wand, do you?”

“They took it for examination,” she said. “Your second wand as well.”

I shrugged. There was nothing I could do about it now. Even if I'd brought a third wand I'd have been caught out.

Maybe I should take Black up on his offer of teaching me to turn into an animal. Hopefully I wouldn't turn into something stupid like a large sea turtle. Most Wizards didn't bother with it because it wasn't really something that was useful in their lives.

It was good for spying and stealth, and otherwise didn't give any real advantages. Turning into a bear might terrify a muggle, but it only made you a bigger target for a killing curse. It'd be different if you were able to choose your form.... or to have more than one. It sounded like it was a grueling process too.

I'd had another student ask McGonagall about the basics, and they sounded time consuming.

The doors opened, and Moody strode into the room.

“Hebert!” he snapped. “I hope you have some answers for what happened last night!”

“The Death Eaters tried to kill me again,” I said. “And I escaped...mostly.”

“And what about the barrel of hell fire that scattered Death Eater parts all over Hogsmeade?” he asked. “It's got your handiwork all over it.”

“I was hurt as much by thing almost as much as everybody else,” I said. “Whoever set it, I don't
think they knew just how strong it was going to be.”

“What were you doing out there anyway?” he asked.

“Should I have an advocate with me?” I asked. “I've had these kinds of kangaroo courts in the past with the last administration.”

“Clear the room,” Moody said.

Everyone obediently did so, including Pomfrey. I tensed; if he was a Death Eater plant I'd be in trouble. There were things I could do; throw the bedpan at his head, roll under the bed; none of them were likely to do much to a duelist as strong as Moody.

Insects began to flow through the vents; with any luck I'd be able to keep him talking until I could kill him, if I had to.

“Why were you out there?” he repeated.

“I was going to meet with Sirius Black,” I said.

“He's a murderer,” Moody said. “And a Death Eater. Why would the likes of you meet with the likes of him, except to kill each other?”

“He claims not,” I said. “Said he was set up by Peter Pettigrew... Pettigrew was the secret keeper, not him.”


“He's not my enemy,” I said. “I checked.”

“That foe glass of yours?” Moody asked. “You think I didn't know? I've already been through your rooms. Problem with a glass like that is that somebody like you has so many enemies they make a crowd. He could have been somewhere in the back of the crowd and you'd never have seen him.”

“He wasn't much of an enemy then,” I said. “Nowhere near the front. That makes me wonder if maybe he wasn't a Death eater at all, because I see a lot of them in my mirror.”

“Where is he now?” Moody asked.

“I have no idea,” I said, truthfully as it turned out. I had no idea what they'd done with my stuff, including the Rock that had once been him.

“He's a tricky one,” Moody said. “Was clever during the last war. Too clever if you ask me... much like certain other people.”

“I'm good at not dying,” I said. “Whether that makes me clever or not is up for discussion.”

Moody leaned forward.

“You think other Wizards haven't thought of using muggle explosives before?” he asked. “Some of us saw the muggle world wars... we saw what mustard gas and bombs do to people. Not all of us hid in the countryside when the bombs started to fall during the blitz. Some of us fought back.”
“So why didn't you take care of Hitler, then?” I asked.

“We were busy with Grindlewald, and Hitler had his own Wizards,” Moody said. “We tell Wizards that the reason that we don't help muggles with magic is because they'd expect us to solve all their problems for them, but that's not it at all.”

“Why, then?”

“Because the things Wizards and muggles could come up with working together could destroy the world.”

I frowned.

“I'm not sure I see how,” I said.

“Try that trick of yours on a bigger one... like the ones the muggles dropped on Japan,” he said. “Use a spell to replicate whatever hell-stuff those things use for power. The Department of Mysteries has a division devoted to thinking about just what might be done, and about how to stop it before it becomes a problem.”

“It'll happen eventually,” I said. “I'm sure every Wizarding government isn't as stable as the one here.”

We stared at each other for a moment and then we both chuckled.

“If you start doing things like this, eventually the Death Eaters will be forced to reciprocate by doing similar things. That is a line that none of us want crossed because it means that the death toll will go far higher.”

They didn't want me to start an arms race. That meant that I'd have to be more careful about my methods being discovered. I'd been sloppy leaving the impenetrable barrel; I should have found a way to have it destroy itself, or at least positioned it so that it flew up like a rocket and maybe into the lake.

“I could have you picked up for this,” Moody said. “But we've already held you up as a hero of the realm. The official word will be that Sirius Black blew the shack up in a disagreement with the Death Eaters.”

“And if Black is innocent?” I asked.

“Then he had a heroic disagreement with the Death Eaters,” Moody said. “We'll cover up your injuries; you were discovered by house elves and brought here last night, and no student has been allowed in the infirmary.”

I nodded.

“You've got the weight of the entire muggleborn movement on your shoulders,” Moody said. “And the Ministry is invested in making you look good. But there's a limit past which I won't be able to look the other way. This isn't Umbridge's administration.”

The fact that they were letting me off made me think a little less of Bones, whatever the political considerations. Still, I wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth.

“Well, I'll do my best to not get caught doing anything you'd have to arrest me for,” I said.
“Do you think this is funny girl?” he asked, taking a step toward me.

“I mean what I say,” I said. “And I honestly don’t like having to do things that are morally gray.”

“Gray,” he said. He chuckled. “I think you left black behind the first day you stepped into this school.”

“Protecting myself and other people isn’t black,” I said. “I’ve seen black. Black is why I’m here... you think any of this would have happened if they hadn’t done what they did?”

“Dark magics wound the soul,” Moody said. “And so does murder. The sad thing is that the more you do it, the easier it becomes. Maybe it’s because you have less of a soul left each time you do it.”

“You’ve killed people, Mr. Moody,” I said.

“I’ve regretted every time I’ve had to do it,” he said. “Somehow I suspect that you don’t.”

“Imagine that you could have killed Hitler,” I said. “Maybe not as a baby, but later, before he became dangerous. Or Grindelwald, or Voldemort, or any of them... wouldn’t you take that chance?”

“What would give me the right?” Moody asked.

“The people I’ve been fighting are already dangerous. They’ve already killed children, murdered families. These people aren’t Grindelwald as a baby... they are Grindelwald, just dumber.”

“He’s going to come after you himself one of these days,” Moody said. “And when he does, all your tricks won’t save you.”

“I plan to face him eventually,” I said. “As good a Wizard as he may be, he’ll die just like anyone else.”

“Don’t be so sure,” Moody said. “There are rumors that he’s found a way to make himself immortal. There’s nothing definite yet, but Death Eaters we’ve interrogated seem to believe it.”

“There’s ways to deal with immortals too,” I said. “Things worse than death.”

I’d seen some of them. Gray Boy’s victims alone would create a lifetime’s worth of nightmares. There were other things I could think of as well that would make an immortal impotent while keeping the rest of the world safe.

Moody stared at me for a long moment.

“You really believe that,” he said.

“I know it,” I said.

“There are a lot of things about you that don’t add up,” Moody said. “The things you know...”

“I’m a seer,” I said. “And I read a lot.”

“You have practical knowledge,” he said. “Not the kind of things that a child would know from reading a manual.”

“Maybe I was trained from infancy to be a child soldier and secret agent by muggles,” I said. “Or
maybe I have the memories of a past life as a soldier. It could be that I'm not actually a child at all, but a boggart made flesh. I've heard all the rumors, Mr. Moody, and I'm not interested in creating more.”

“You could tell the truth,” he said.

“In this world?” I asked. “I need every advantage that I can just to stay alive. Contrary to what some of the kids here seem to think, I'm hanging by the skin of my teeth. One mistake, with a flash of green and its all over for me.”

“You've seen the killing curse,” he said.

“I've fought Death Eaters,” I said. “And I'm not sure they even know any other spells. I've never cast it myself, of course.”

“Not that you'd tell me if you had.”

“You have my wands,” I said.

“Death Eater wands go missing every time you kill a few,” he said. “And I didn't find any in your room. You have to have a stash of them some place.”

“I don't use that spell,” I said. “Not that I don't have the motivation, but I have no interest in going to Azkaban just yet.”

“Just yet?”

“I'd have to seriously reconsider my alliance with a Ministry that sent me there,” I said. “And right now I'm busy fighting the Death Eaters.”

“And if you should finish fighting the Death Eaters?”

“It depends on how things are run,” I said. “I sincerely hope that the Ministry works towards the causes of justice and fairness for everybody. If that happens, I suspect that I'll retire. I might become an auror or auror trainer.”

“And if the Ministry doesn't meet up to your high standards?”

“Depends on how bad it is. If it's just a little bad, then I'll work to replace the problematic politicians with better ones. I think my friend Hermione Granger would make an excellent Minister for Magic when the time is right.”

“And if the transgressions are worse than that?”

“I don't think we'll have any problems with Madam Bones,” I said. “I'm pleased with her performance. Should another Umbridge come into power, I'd have to seriously reconsider my position.”

“So you're telling me that you'll rebel against the government.”

“I didn't say that,” I said. “I'm just saying that I'm happy with the current government and would be unhappy having to fight a war on two fronts.”

Moody shook his head.

“A year ago I'd have had a child speaking like you sent to St. Mungos. I'm still not entirely sure I
shouldn't, but I don't want to have them to deal with a Death Eater attack that will doubtlessly end up with a wing being destroyed and innocent people being hurt.”

I shrugged.

“I have a right to defend myself.”

“But you don’t have a right to kill or involve innocent people,” Moody said. “That's beyond the bounds.”

“There are no innocents in this war,” I said. “Except possibly children too young to go to Hogwarts. Do you think the Death Eaters will let anyone remain neutral? Everyone able to lift a wand is involved whether they like it or not. All pretending to be neutral means is that you are stepping aside to allow the Death Eaters to do whatever atrocities they can manage.”

“Or letting an insane young girl continue to escalate?” Moody asked quietly. “You haven't killed any innocents yet, but if that changes, I won't be able to justify not putting you away. My gut screams at me that you should be in a locked cell somewhere that you can't infect people with your ideas.”

“Ideas are the most dangerous thing,” I said. “But the people screaming the loudest against change are usually the ones most deeply in the wrong.”

“You asked why we didn't stop Hitler,” Moody said. “There were seers who predicted his rise, but we didn't think it was any of our business. When I look at you, I see a charismatic fool with radical ideas who believes that only she is in the right. You've got seventh years following you in the second year. Even You-Know-Who didn't rise so quickly. You talk casually about overthrowing the government at the age of twelve. At the age of twenty one do you think it won't be more alluring? If I live that long, people may be asking me why I didn't stop you know.”

“Because I'm like a lightning rod,” I said. “All the horrors that are happening to me would be directed at the Ministry or at the voters if I was gone. I'm useful for right now, which is why your bosses want me around.”

“If you were a real twelve year old you wouldn't know that,” he said. He turned and headed for the door. Without turning back toward me, he said, “No more explosives, or it won't matter how useful you are.”
Planning

“The bombs were a bad idea,” I said. “We didn't have enough information on how strong the blast would be and that almost got me killed.”

If it had been my time we'd have been able to find everything we needed on the internet. Having it as a directional blast would have made it harder, but we'd have figured it out eventually.

The libraries in muggle England in the early nineties hadn't had a lot of that kind of information; worse, I'd been forced to send muggleborns who hadn't had to deal with card catalogs in years and they hadn't been able to stay for a long period for fear of being attacked in public.

If we'd had time to keep looking the information probably existed in mining charts or something, but we'd been forced to guesstimate which was apparently a very bad idea with explosives.

I stared across the desk at them. This time, someone had decided to make the Room of Requirement look like the oval office. I felt a little strange sitting in the big chair, especially as the desk and the chair dwarfed me, but it was better than some of the other things they'd come up with. I let them do it because it got them better at visualizing details.

That could be important in a lot of areas. Visualization was paramount in transfiguration. It was also important in curse breaking, in looking for clues, and in seeing what a room should like and seeing the subtle differences that indicate a trap.

Also it was a chance for them to engage in their childish whimsy, and I had stolen enough of their childhoods already.

It gave me an idea of what they liked to watch when they weren't busy being an underground child guerrilla movement. So far we'd had a GI Joe Base, Skeletor's castle, the Ghostbusters firehouse, the teenage mutant ninja turtle sewers, and the Thundercats lair. They'd put us in several James Bond Villain lairs, and in the TARDIS. They'd competed with each other as to who could be both the most creative and the closest to the original material.

We'd all been a little disturbed when Edmund had sent us to Ponyville, though.

It did seem strange that they'd put me in the Nixon white house. It seemed like half the places they created for us were villain lairs.

I had to assume it was because the villains got all the coolest gear.

“I'm not blaming anyone,” I added. “I was the one who came up with the idea, and you were the ones who helped me.”

“Does that mean that we should stop researching the spell to reverse a shrinking spell when someone touches an object?” George asked. “Because that one still seems useful.”

“No,” I said. “And we might still use explosives at some point. If we do, though, we'll want to go big with it, and we'll want to be nowhere close. It'd be better if nobody that's uninvolved was close either.”

Moody might come after me, but if the Death Eater threat was ended, I'd consider it an even trade. However, if we weren't able to decapitate them, then I'd be throwing away all my capital with the government for nothing.
“So, why were you out there?” Hermione asked. “You've told all of us not to go out on our own.”

“I went to meet with Black,” I said. “He was waiting for me in the shack.”

It was technically true, even if it gave them the impression that I had been waiting for him.

“And?”

“I'm not sure he did it,” I said. “But I don't know that he didn't.”

We'd told Harry everything, of course. He was sitting in the corner, staring at his hands. If Black was guilty, then Harry would want vengeance. If he were innocent, then he'd want him freed. For the moment he was in a strange sort of limbo where he didn't know what to believe.

“The problem is that we need to take a look at his memories,” I said. “We have to make sure that he doesn't get loose, and we need to do it all without getting caught.”

“Can we get a pensieve?” I asked, looking up.

Nothing happened, and I sighed.

The Room was able to create certain types of magical items, but they were all minor things of the sort that students at Hogwarts would have available to them. Something like a pensieve had been a long shot. It was rare and expensive.

Some of the boys theorized that the Room had a secret storage place for certain items, and the other things that were in the room were just an illusion. They suspected that the castle itself somehow stored lost items within this space.

“That means that we're going to have to rob the Headmaster,” I said.


“When I said rob him, I really meant that we were going to borrow his pensieve and take it back to him before he missed it.”

She didn't look as relieved as I would hope.

“And how are you going to get Mr. Black to put his memories inside?” Hermione asked skeptically. “Are you going to smuggle him inside the castle?”

“I already did,” I said. I pulled the rock out of my pocket and held it up.

She stared at it, slightly horrified.

“You turned Mr. Black into a rock?”

“He can't hurt anyone this way,” I said. “And if he's innocent, then nobody can find and hurt him before we can prove he is innocent. Also, he's not aging, so he'll get to live more of his life in a Death Eater free world, which is a bonus for anybody.”

“Then you should turn us all into rocks,” Hermione said dryly. “And wake us up in a hundred years.”

“Moody told me Voldemort may have found a way to become immortal,” I said.
Everyone gasped and stared at me, and it wasn't because I'd said his name. Harry paled as he looked up at me.

“You don't seem worried.”

“Well,” I said, “Immortal doesn't matter much if I turn you into a rock and drop you into the bottom of the deepest ocean, or sneak you onto a muggle satellite launching into space.”

Hermione frowned.

“I've got at least a dozen ways to deal with an immortal,” I said. “And our assignment this week, after the pensieve is dealt with, is to come up with as many ideas as possible for that.”

“Can we even use a pensieve?” Hermione asked.

“I've had it done to me,” I said.

“I can do it,” Edmund said. He stared at his hands. The teasing had been merciless over the pony thing, until I'd put a stop to it. Edmund seemed a little slow compared to the other sixth years, at least emotionally. He was good with magic.

I'd gotten permission for him to go with Hagrid to go help with the Unicorn herds. I hadn't gone myself because I'd have been attacked, but I suspected that Edmund wasn't important enough for the Death eaters to go after, not when Hagrid was there.

Voldemort had lost enough resources that I doubted that anyone short of Hermione or Harry, Neville or other members of my inner circle would merit a response. I kept the others in out of caution, of course, but mental health was sometimes almost as important as physical health.

Edmund understood the risks, and he'd been visibly happier after dealing with the unicorns. If Voldemort killed him, it would enrage my base, and it would only make them more loyal to me. I didn't want that, of course. I liked Edmund well enough.

Still, Voldemort had a habit of pulling small victories from every defeat, and I was going to have to do that if I wanted to keep up.

“Do we even need to do this?” Hermione asked. “Why not just let Black go? If he really hates Death Eaters, he'll fight them on his own anyway, and we won't be saddled with someone the Ministry considers a criminal. If he's a Death Eater, then he can't do us any more harm if he's not close to us.”

“If he's innocent, then he's my Godfather,” Harry said quietly. “That means that he's the only real family I have left.”

“You've got your aunt and uncle,” Hermine said.

Harry scowled and looked down at his hands. “He'd be my only real family.”

Right.

Harry was quiet about his family circumstances. He'd told a little to Ron, but he seemed embarrassed about it. I'd heard enough to understand that he wasn't happy at home. He was likely hoping that Black would end up like Remus for me.

Hopefully this wouldn't blow up in our faces.
Hermione stared at Harry, then nodded.

“So how would we do it then?” she asked. “It can’t be that easy to break into the Headmaster's office.”

“It is,” I said. “But it’s hard to break in undetected. There's a lot of paintings in that office, and while a lot of them sleep at night, there's always at least one of two insomniacs.”

“You've been planing to break into the headmaster's office already?” Hermione asked.

“I have a conversation I have to have with a hat,” I said. “And possibly a reckoning. I like to keep my promises, after all.”

“You're seeking vengeance on the Sorting Hat?” Hermione asked incredulously.

“Every problem I've had since I came here is its fault,” I said. “I'd have been perfectly happy as a Hufflepuff or a Ravenclaw. The Death Eaters wouldn't have targeted me... I'd have been a normal student.”

“How many of us would have been dead?” Hermione asked.

“I'd have been with you when the dementors attacked either way,” I said.

“But we wouldn't have been ready,” Hermione said. “You made us what we are today, and the only reason anybody listened to you is because they saw you fighting.”

I frowned.

She had a point.

Yet part of me wanted to argue. There was no way that the Hat could have known any of the good things that came from my being sent to Slytherin, but it could have easily predicted the bad things. The only way it could have known was if it was at least a little precognitive.

Was that how it picked houses? Not based on who the eleven year old was, but on who they would become?

In that case I needed to talk to it even more.

“All right,” I said, rubbing my hands. “We're going to break into the office. Rowle is a creature of habit. He changes the password to his gargoyle every night before going to bed. The portraits are usually asleep by eleven. He's got a sneakoscope in there which will light up and wake the paintings.”

“What's the range?” Hermione asked, writing it down. She was already making a sketch of what she remembered of the layout of the office.

“I'm not sure,” I said. “I'm pretty sure that it only covers his office; if it went further than that, it'd go off all the time.”

False positives on alarm systems were bad; too many of them, and human nature was to dismiss them, which would cause people to dismiss them.

“If it reaches the hallway, we're in trouble,” Hermione said. “We'd need line of sight to disable it.”

“Why not steal it during the day?” Neville asked suddenly.
“What do you mean?” I asked.

“He disables the sneakoscope every time you go in there, right?” Neville asked.

I nodded. I didn't consider myself an untrustworthy person in general, but the Headmaster couldn't trust him any more than I could trust him.

“The pensieve is in a cabinet,” I said. “It'd be tough to get to without opening it; everybody would notice.”

“Use a distraction?” he asked. “Myrtle could lead Peeves in there, have him knock over things, open the door.”

“Myrtle likes to gossip,” I said. “Or else she'd be here with the rest of us.”

“Plausible deniability,” Hermione said. “Use intermediaries. Make her think it's a prank for the Twins.”

“Would she go for that?” Harry asked. “I don't think she likes them all that much.”

“The more people we involve, the more likely the whole thing gets found out,” I said. “And the timing would have to be perfect on something like that. There's a lot of eyes in that room, and someone would likely see the pensieve vanish.”

“So what do we do?” Hermione asked.

“Peruvian darkness powder,” I said. “That'll keep the lights from waking the portraits up. Silencing charms tend to have to be cast on specific objects or people. How are we coming with the area effect version?”

Hermione shook her head. “It's a fifth year charm to start with; it's not as easy to modify as some of the easier charms. We've got a team on it, but if it was easy someone would have come up with it before.”

It'd be a game changer.

If I could blanket an area with a silence spell, then wizards would be limited to those spells they could cast soundlessly. While every fifth year and above was supposed to be able to cast wordlessly, spells cast that way tended to be weaker than spoken spells. It would weaken my enemies.

“I'll find out the range on the sneakoscope,” I said. “I'll show up to his office unexpectedly and listen for how soon it goes off.”

“If we can get to the door, we can silence it,” I said. “Otherwise I'll have to figure out a way to break it while visiting the office. Most likely we'll have to look at a pocket sneakoscope; as far as I've been able to tell, the big ones tend to work pretty similarly to the smaller ones.”

Hermione nodded.

“The twins will know how to break one,” she said. “They've done it before.”

“Well then,” I said. “It sounds like we have a plan.
“I wasn't expecting you, Miss Hebert,” Rowle said.

We'd developed an understanding; as long as I didn't cause trouble, he'd ignore most of my activities. I'd never seen him actually use the chains in his office. Whether that was because my people were keeping the school buttoned down or because it had all been a bluff from the beginning I couldn't be sure.

“We need to talk,” I said. “I need to know what is going to happen to me over the summer. Will I be going back with Remus, or will there be other arrangements?”

He looked at me for a moment, and then shook his head.

“I'm not sure,” he said. “The Ministry is keeping the details of your security arrangements secret from anyone who doesn't need to know.”

“So the same as last year,” I said. I shook my head. “If they really wanted to make sure things were safe they'd teach me occlumency.”

“The only way to do that would be to let someone into your mind,” Rowle said. “You don't seem like the sort of person who would be comfortable with that.”

It was true, of course. I had secrets that no one could ever know, not until all my enemies were dead. Letting someone into my mind was out of the question, and so I was reduced to what I could learn from books about grounding myself and trying to keep a mental barrier. Until I could get someone to test that barrier I could never know how well I was doing, and that meant I couldn't correct any of my mistakes.

“Is repeated obliviation damaging?” I asked.

Rowle looked uncomfortable. “Yes. I don't think you could agree to get anyone to agree to...”

“Well, I have to get back to class,” I said. I stood up. “If you hear anything about my summer accommodation, please let me know.”

He nodded.

As I stepped into the stairwell, I suppressed a grin. The Sneakoscope didn't extend into the hallway, which meant that getting the pensieve was a go.

Tonight we'd break into the headmaster's office, and I'd get the pensieve and the hat. We'd return it before morning, with any luck. It'd mean having to dodge the aurors wandering the halls, but with luck I'd be able to get the hat as well and ask some of the questions that had been plaguing me this whole time.

The hat had seen others like me in the past. What did it know about my resurrection?

Was it precognitive, and if it was, what did it know?

I was using the Sirius situation as an excuse to get the others to go along with my stealing the hat, mostly because I didn't want to explain to them why I needed it. However, if the man turned out to be innocent, it could be useful to have an adult that no one knew about on our side.

None of our people had graduated yet, and he'd be able to go places we couldn't, especially if we
were able to prove him innocent. Also, it was likely his resources had been frozen when he was imprisoned, but from what I recalled his family was supposed to be fairly wealthy. He might be the solution to our money worries.

If he was a Death Eater, it might be possible to interrogate him.

No matter what happened, a great deal rested on tonight.

I couldn't wait.
Difficulties

“Keep the cloak on it,” I muttered angrily.

It had seemed like an easy plan, in and out; move through the darkness, muffle the sneakoscope, in and out. It should have taken all of five minutes once we reached the Headmaster's office.

It had already been three times that, and the alarm was blaring all over the castle.

Running through the hallways, I felt short of breath, and I resolved to start running more in the Room. Combat drills four times a week were good for reflexes but not for endurance. The hardest thing had been finding the time to do it, between all my other responsibilities and plans.

Clearly I needed to make the time.

Apparently Rowle had spelled the sneakoscope and the pensieve against magic. It had been a nasty surprise when we'd tried to silence the sneakoscope. We hadn't even been able to levitate the pensieve, and so we'd spent the first part of this chase with three teenage boys lugging it around. They'd been invisible, but the pensieve hadn't, and it had been spilling water, or whatever liquid was inside all over the halls.

Portraits had been shrieking out the alarm and leading the aurors right to us. Luckily we'd managed to send a message to Harry through a patronus, and we'd gotten his cloak and a hastily dumped out trunk. We could levitate the trunk just fine.

Still, the aurors and Rowle had gotten entirely too close, and the whole thing felt eerily like a Pac Man game. We couldn't stop and hide because human revealing spells would have made hiding redundant. We couldn't get ahead of them because there were more of them and we couldn't scatter; without me the others would have gotten caught quickly. Rowle was on the move, and only the fact that I knew where he and all the professors were at every moment kept us free and mobile.

“In here,” I muttered.

A passage opened up, and we all slipped inside, barely in time to avoid aurors running past us. This was one of the older passages, and there weren't any portraits nearby, so we were reasonably sure that we hadn't been found. If the Wizards were smart enough to use hunting hounds we'd be sunk; none of us had thought to disguise our smell before we'd set out.

We were all disillusioned, so the portraits wouldn't be able to tell who had perpetrated the theft, but the fact the Headmaster knew if was gone was going to cause all kinds of problems.

“The mission is scrubbed for tonight,” I said. “The first thing that the headmaster will think to do if he is smart is to send all the prefects to do a head count. We've got two of them in our pocket, but they'll be looking for me and Edmund, so we need to get moving. I'll hide this and we'll take it up tomorrow night.”

They nodded.

“Follow the passageways up,” I said to Edmund and a senior girl. Neither of them had a girlfriend or boyfriend, and I had my suspicions as to why. “If they catch you, you'll have to pretend that you are...uh...stepping out with each other.”

Sarah glanced at Edmund. “He's a year younger than I am.”
“We all make sacrifices,” I said. “I'd do it myself, but I'm not going the direction you are and I'd like to not get Edmund arrested.”

She frowned then nodded.

“Right... you're my boyfriend if we get caught.” She clapped one arm around Edmund's shoulders, and he looked shell shocked. He was a heavyset boy, and I suspected he'd never thought he might have a girlfriend, for whatever reasons.

Sarah was on the Gryffindor Quidditch team as a beater, and she was as sturdy as that made her sound. She tended to be outgoing and boisterous, for all that she'd never been known to date anyone.

Edmund was a Hufflepuff, with everything that implied. He was loyal but quiet, hard working and introverted. I'd always assumed he was just shy before his turn to make the Room, and even now I wasn't sure he wasn't.

It wasn't any of my business who anyone dated anyway, unless it was a security concern. None of my people were dating any Slytherins for example, not because they thought those who we still left in the school were dangerous, but because those families might be threatened and them blackmailed.

It had been an awkward discussion with the group. Fortunately, most of them weren't inclined to date purebloods anyway.

As they left, I slipped out of the secret passageway and made my way down the hall. Instead of heading toward the dungeons, I made my way toward the Ravenclaw common rooms. I'd made sure all of our people there had alibis; at the moment they were engaged in a very late night study session with their prefect, cramming for finals.

Hopefully they'd assume that it was a couple of Ravenclaws wanting to cheat with each other's memories. Unfortunately, I was in the building, and the aurors didn't share the general public's opinion of me just because I'd won the Order of Merlin.

I deliberately knocked over a suit of armor, and a moment later the portraits started shrieking. Aurors who had been nearly about to reach Edmund and Susan veered off, heading in my direction.

Knocking a couple more suits of armor over, I veered, racing down a hallway. It got me to a secret passage, and I slipped inside, moving far enough that I thought I wouldn't be detected. I followed the dark tunnel around the curve of a wall, and I soon found myself out into the courtyard.

Old buildings like this were full of secret passages, presumably for fear that muggle armies might invade and those who couldn't escape by appPartition would need a way out.

I'd left the pensieve in the first secret passageway, covered with the cloak and hidden. It looked like my misdirection worked. The aurors were all converging on the Ravenclaw common room. With any luck we'd get through this and tomorrow night we'd interrogate Black. Then we'd return the pensieve; the sneakoscope wouldn't work if we weren't in the room, and now that we knew about it's protections, all we'd have to do is levitate the pensieve back into place and then vanish the box.

That's assuming we could banish the box without banishing its contents. I'd have to check with an
upperclassman.

“Black mamba,” I muttered.

Last year, the passwords had often been slurs toward the muggleborn. I found it pleasant that this year they'd mostly just gone with types of snakes.

The fact that someone had suggested “Hebert” was something I wasn't sure how I felt about. Was it a compliment, or a curse?

“Miss Hebert,” I heard Snape's voice from behind me even as the passage slid open.

I froze.

Of course Snape had taken the obvious step of simply waiting by the entranceway to the Slytherin dorms. He'd probably assumed that I was involved, no matter that my transfigured corpse was lying in my bed, doubtlessly freaking Millicent out.

At a glance there was no one behind me; he was disillusioned but now that I was paying closer attention I could hear the swish of his robes.

Sloppy.

I could deny it, but he'd heard my voice and there wasn't really a place to escape to. Undoubtedly he had the human revealing spell going as well.

“I knew you were there,” I said.

“Taking an early morning constitutional, Miss Hebert?”

“An evening stroll,” I said. “Then I heard all the commotion and decided I'd best get back. Wouldn't want to lose Slytherin any house points, right?”

He knew I didn't care about Slytherin house points any more than he cared about Gilderoy Lockhart's patented hair gel. As it turned out, it really did work, and I personally thought he should have focused completely on that. The Potters had made their fortunes from something similar.

“I'm sure,” he said dryly. “I've been asked to escort you to my office.”

“Fine,” I said. “I'm not admitting to anything.”

“Other than being out after curfew at three A.M.?” he said. “I'm sure that there is a reasonable explanation for this from someone who is not yet old enough to be interested in the opposite sex.”

“Maybe I wanted to go out and see the unicorns,” I said.

Truthfully I had been wanting to see them for a while, but involving them in a heated battle with Death eaters was just asking for them to get killed.

“I'm sure even they are asleep at this hour,” Snape said.

We were already making our way to his office. I heard a click and the door opened. A moment later I slipped inside.

I stopped as I saw that Dumbledore was sitting on a chair in front of a roaring fire. He looked years younger, as though he no longer had the weight of the world on his shoulders. He'd cut his beard
into a stylish, short cut, and he'd cut his hair short. Looking at him, I no longer saw Gandalf; instead I saw someone who looked younger and much more deadly.

“Please make yourself visible,” Snape said, becoming visible himself.

I did so.

“I see that you have the Sorting Hat on your head,” Dumbeldore said mildly.

I'd forgotten, actually. I should have dropped it in the passageway when I'd dropped the pensieve, but I'd been worried about the other two being caught.

“A youthful prank,” I said. “Also, I've been wanting to talk to the hat.”

The bad thing was that the thing hadn't even woken up once I'd grabbed it. It had just snored loudly and had almost gotten us caught a few times.

“I fear the hat is no longer who it once was,” Dumbledore said. “It likes to sleep for most of the summer, doubtlessly dreaming of past sortings. This lets it be fresh for the Sorting Ceremony.”

I grimaced. I'd noticed it sleeping a lot, but I'd assumed that was just because it had nothing better to do. When it had refused to talk to me, I’d assumed it was pretending so it wouldn't get eaten by moths.

Dumbledore gestured, and I handed the hat over to him.

“I had an interesting discussion with the hat before I left, though,” he said. “He wouldn't name names, of course, but he told me that it was not unknown for certain Wizards to be reborn into bodies not their own, getting a second chance at life.”

I froze and my hand slipped toward my wand.

“I'd prefer to keep this conversation congenial, unless you think that you can outdraw me,” Dumbledore said. There was no hint of amusement in his eyes, and his body language told me that he was willing to fight.

He had his wand resting in his lap, and it was already in his hand. There was no way I'd be able to outdraw him.

I forced my hand away from my wand.

“Just who are you Miss Hebert?” Dumbledore asked.

My mind raced. Should I lie, or should I finally come clean?

He'd know if I lied. I was in a room with two mind readers who were determined to see if I was telling the truth. Furthermore, he had the clout to have me arrested by the Ministry and held until I talked. While I was being held, my people would be vulnerable.

“The hat let me attend,” I said. “Which I'm sure it told you wasn't always the case.”

Dumbledore nodded slightly.

“You've known this for an entire school year, and you've left me alone,” I said. “Why ask questions that you do not need the answer to.”
“Because I do not know I can trust you,” Dumbledore said. “I believe that I can trust you with the children here; you seem to have some measure of affection for them, and you have never been as... enthusiastic in your punishments with them. However, I need to know that I can trust you with more than that... with the fate of the Wizarding World.”

If he thought that would impress me, he was wrong. After saving the multiverse, a single world didn't seem like that much. He wasn't even talking about the world; rather he was talking about this one small portion of it.

“You want to hire me,” I said. “Or at least have me join your organization. The Muggle Liberation?”

Dumbledore stared at me for a moment, then nodded.

“I thought your seer abilities were limited to dangers surrounding yourself.”

“I've had my suspicions,” I said. “I wasn't sure they even existed at first, but there have been rumors of attacks on the Death Eaters that hadn't been perpetrated by the aurors.”

“I'm sure that knowledge was highly classified.”

I shrugged. I'd been in the Ministry often enough to get a good look at a lot of things that were classified. Even though I approved of the Bones administration didn't mean I wasn't looking over their shoulders.

“I know what I need to know,” I said.

“And my involvement?”

“An organization like that doesn't form naturally; it requires a leader. The fact that it's been able to stay secret for all of this time means that its being led by people with experience. The most likely candidates are those who fought in the last war, or possibly the war before that.”

“But me?”

“Their activities only really picked up once you stopped being Headmaster. Also, I had a discussion with Remus where I heard explosions in the background. I knew he was working for you...”

“But not a muggleborn.”

“T’ve had my people look into the main fighters in the last war. There weren't any who were likely candidates.”

“You seem to know a great deal about this sort of thing.”

“I'm willing to work for you,” I said. “As long as our aims align. However, I'd prefer not to talk about my past.”

“I can offer money and resources that will keep your followers alive,” Dumbledore said. “Assuming our interests align. I can't know that unless I know you.”

I hesitated. I'd kept this secret for more than a year and a half. Was I really willing to give it all away?

Well, I could always obliviate them.
Snape winced.

“My name really is Taylor Hebert,” I said after a long pause. “But this is not my original body. This is the body of a girl named Millie Scrivener.”

“The missing girl,” Dumbledore murmured. “And how did you come here?”

“I don’t know. The last thing I remember, I died. The only thing I can think of is that when Millie was tortured to death, her accidental magic called out for something, anyone able to stop the people who were hurting her.”

“And you were that someone,” Snape said.

I shrugged.

“Just who are you, Miss Hebert?”

“I was a muggle,” I said. “But not one from this world. I was eighteen when I died. As far as I know there were no wizards on my world, but there could have been. On my world, certain special people were granted... abilities. They dressed up in costumes and fought each other. They also fought monsters that destroyed entire cities. Some of them called themselves heroes, and others villains.”

“And which were you?” Dumbledore asked.

“Both at one time or another,” I said. “But I saved everyone eventually... all the worlds that ever were, and all the worlds that will ever be from a threat that would have destroyed us all. That was what killed me in the end...not the monster, but what I had to do to myself to beat it.”

“What are your plans, then?”

“Kill Voldemort and the Death Eaters, excepting Professor Snape and possibly Lucius Malfoy,” I said. “And then retire.”

“Why Lucius?”

“I think he can be bent,” I said. “I doubt his loyalty to the Dark Lord.”

Both men were silent.

“So you were a seer on that world.”

“I was more than that,” I said. “I still am, but I'm not telling anyone what I can do, because that's likely to kill me in the end.”

“You don't intend to take over the Ministry?”

“Not as long as I see a Ministry that is just and fair,” I said. “I'm happy with Madam Bones. That might change in the future, but I'd prefer to simply back political candidates and work within the system.”

Unspoken was the fact that I would make different decisions assuming that the government didn't fit my criteria of what was right.

Both men were silent for a long moment.
“I believe that we can work together,” Dumbledore said. “But you will need occlumency training. Severus can provide that over the summer. Once you have that skill, we can speak about other things.”

“So that's it?” I asked.

“I will return the Sorting Hat to its proper place,” Dumbledore said. “And I would prefer that my pensieve be returned.”

“It should be back in its proper place tomorrow or the next day,” I said. “I'll do better the next time.”

“Every plan meets difficulties,” Dumbledore said mildly. “The question is how one meets them.”

“Teach me occlumency,” I said. “And legilimency...I'll need that to teach it to my people.”

Snape stared at me.

“I'm not sure the country could survive your learning legilimency.”

“I already know half of everything,” I said. “I'm just covering the rest of my bases.”

For some reason, neither man discussed me while they were still in the castle.
“She believes every word,” Severus said. “I didn't detect a single bit of lying, not even her usual prevarication.”

They'd waited until they'd gotten to London to speak. Albus wasn't sure what the girl's range was, but he had a suspicion it was growing, and they hadn't wanted her listening in.

“I concur,” Albus frowned and shook his head. “Do you think she's insane?”

“I've had my suspicions since she was planning to knife me the first time we met,” Severus said dryly. “But the Sorting Hat suggested that this sort of thing isn't impossible. The Quill wrote her name, and not Millie Scrivener's; otherwise we'd be having a different conversation right now.”

They'd known that she was actually Scrivener for months; Severus had suggested using a muggle private detective to track the girl down, bypassing the Death Eaters in the Ministry and the aurors. Albus had been surprised at the idea, likely because he didn't have a foot in both worlds like Severus had once had.

“I'm more inclined to believe that her accidental magic made her simply believe that she was this... character from another world.”

“More things in heaven and Earth,” Severus said.

They'd had this argument before. The girl knew things that Millie Scrivener could not have possibly known; ergo she wasn't Millie Scrivener. It wasn't simply a matter of a seer seeing things or reading books; the girl had known how to use a knife since the first time he'd known her.

“We'll find out soon enough,” Albus said. “She's agreed to allow you to teach her, and you'll get enough glimpses to her past to make a determination.”

“If she believes that I am trying to plunder all of her secrets, she may lose all trust in us,” Severus said. “And I believe that there are not many adults that she trusts at all.”

Albus nodded, but it was apparent that he wasn't listening.

Taylor Hebert, while an intriguing mystery wasn't particularly important in the scheme of things. She was violent, but not overly so. She tended to attack only when attacked. If she was going to be a Dark Lady, that was still years away.

As far as Albus was concerned, that meant that she wasn't a problem for the moment.

Severus had different opinions.

The death of Minister Umbridge shortly after the attack on the Muggleborn seemed suspicious. It had caused all sorts of problems for the Dark Lord, and no one in Albus's ragtag Muggleborn resistance had admitted to removing her.

Severus had an uneasy feeling that the girl had seen a problem and eliminated it, using magic so dark that even the Dark Lord had been unable to identify it.

She had an unyielding belief that she was always right. She distrusted anyone in authority, and she
was gathering followers at an alarming rate. Worse, her followers tended to be much more competent than their same age peers, and would likely each be worth several of the usual incompetents who graduated from Hogwarts.

They had tactics. He'd spied on their training sessions often enough to know that what they were doing was dangerous.

Wizards attacked one on one. That was the cultural rule. Aurors didn't always follow that rule, but even they didn't tend to gang up by more than three to one.

Taylor's army attacked while disillusioned, multiple opponents attacking one wizard, moving, and then repeating for the next. Most Wizards didn't bother with disillusionment because of the human revealing spell; it was good for an ambush, but once Wizards knew they were being attacked, it became much less useful.

He'd heard that they were researching a counter to the human revealing spell. He'd have scoffed, except that he'd created several spells when he'd been a schoolboy, and they were working in teams, which seemed to make them much more effective.

Most Wizards researched their own spells, hoping to be able to sell them and make a profit, or use a spell that no one else had and use it to their own advantage. Wizards simply didn't do research as teams.

It was such a muggle concept that it hadn't occurred to anyone.

Severus had read about Edison and the scientific method. Much of magic wouldn't work as a muggle would expect; it was as much a matter of willpower and visualization as rote words and wand waving. However, they were accomplishing things at a faster pace than he would have expected, learning spells that would make them more dangerous.

Even their failures were sometimes weaponized.

Severus saw this every day, watching from the shadows, and yet somehow Albus never seemed to pay attention to what he was telling him, and he never seemed to understand why it was important.

He was too wrapped up in his own shadow war with the Death Eaters. There had been battles that had never made the newspapers, fought through proxies. The Muggleborn Liberation Front outnumbered the order by four to one, but Albus had never trusted any of them enough to bring them into the inner circle.

Albus was simply too old to understand the changes that Severus saw coming. He didn't understand that the real danger Taylor represented wasn't that she was another in a long line of dark lords; it was that she was changing how things were done. Those changes would last long after she was dead.

Even the Dark Lord tended to be dismissive of her; something that Severus found incredible considering the losses that he'd suffered. The Dark Lord was certain that the girl had a backer, most likely Albus who was the real mastermind behind the defenses the girl had put up.

Both men were fighting the last war, while the girl was looking past the current war to the next one.

“She Dark Lord is going to expect more information from me,” Severus said. “he's becoming
frustrated by the losses he has had.”

“Do you have any news as to the identity of his Seer?”

“There are only three known Seers missing,” Severus said. “It could be any of them. If the Dark Lord is taking counsel from Miss Hebert's methods, it might be all of them.”

He doubted it, though. The Seer had been in play long before the girl had been gathering her cotiere.

“His Seer has made all of this harder than it has to be,” Albus said. “Which is why it is important to bring the girl into the fold.”

The Death Eaters and the Albus's group had been engaged in a little dance; the seer tended to keep the ambushes from being as effective as they should be, which was likely the reason that the Dark Lord didn't punish the seer worse for his or her failures considering the girl.

“His seer does seem to fail consistently around her,” Severus said. “But do you believe that it will be enough?”

“She's whittled his numbers down to the point where if it wasn't for his seer, his destruction would be certain.”

The fact that Albus was fighting in every fight meant that any fight that didn't include the Dark Lord was almost a certain victory.

“I'll do my best to bring her into the fold,” Severus said. “And her people?”

“Bring in the graduates,” Albus said. “But not those who are younger. We do not use children in this war, not unless we absolutely must.”

Potter, he meant.

“You don't consider the girl a child?”

“Not by her own words,” Albus said. “I don't think I considered her a child even before I knew.”

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The world vanished around him, and a moment later he found himself in a dark room. A single lamp was hanging from the ceiling, beaming light into his eyes and making it difficult to see into the darkness.

He could barely make out figures in the darkness; almost all of them had wands pointed at him.

Stiffening, he realized that he didn't have his wand.

Why had he thought this was going to be a good idea again? His escape from Azkaban had been eclipsed by that of the others, and he could have easily escaped the country in the confusion. Finding Peter was a lost cause; undoubtedly the rat was at his master's side, protected from anyone who would ever do him harm.

Coming to serve a girl who'd inspired boggarts had been foolish.

“Sirius Black,” the girl said, stepping out into the light.
All of the others had hoods on, but she didn't bother. Presumably it was to protect their identities, although he wasn't sure why. Everyone knew the girl had the muggleborns in her pocket. Finding out the non-muggleborns wouldn't be that hard.

“Yes,” he said. His throat felt strangely dry.

It didn't feel like he was facing a twelve year old girl at all; it felt like he was facing the court, ready to be sent to Azkaban once again.

“You have been accused of crimes against the family Potter,” she said. “Convicted on your own word. Now you tell us that you did not.”

“I didn't,” he said.

“Prove it,” she said.

A second light appeared, highlighting a pensieve. It looked almost exactly like the one Dumbledore had once had, except that the stand it was on was different.

“Do you know how to use that?” he asked.

She nodded.

“Show us you are innocent,” she said, “And we will give you what you wish; a chance to fight back against those who did you wrong.”

A heavyset boy stepped out of the shadows.

“Take a deep breath,” he murmured, “And think about those memories you want to show us. Don't think about lying; I've had the training to see through that, and these memories may be shown to Dumbledore later.”

He nodded.

The boy put his hand on Sirius's shoulder, and as he leaned in, Sirius could see a dozen wands lifted in his direction. The message was clear; a single false move and he'd regret it.

He closed his eyes and sifted through his memories.

Time seemed to stop, but finally he opened his eyes.

“Is that it?” Taylor Hebert asked.

He nodded.

Before he could say anything, she raised her wand and the world disappeared around him.

It seemed like only an instant when light exploded all around him. There were children moving quickly, and he looked around him, confused.

“The rat is here,” the girl said.

“What?” he asked.
“How did you miss it all these years?” she asked a pair of redheaded twins.

“We’ve had pets before who had different names than what we gave them,” one of the boys said. “We had a cat we called Crinkles, but when we brought her here, the map said her name was Polly Proudfoot. We just thought Scabbers thought he was named Peter.”

“Right,” Taylor said. She sighed.

“All right,” she said after a moment, a strange, unfocused look in her eye. “It looks like we’ve got him.”

“What’s going on?” Sirius asked.

“Your rat has been living with our family for more than ten years,” one of the boys said. He grimaced. “Staring at us in our room with his beady little eyes. The things he’s seen…”

“You need to stay here,” Taylor said. “There are aurors in the castle, and the last thing we need is for there to be an accident on the day you’re going to be free.”

“Free?”

“We’ve got the rat,” Taylor repeated, as though he was slow. “I showed the memory to everyone who needed to see it, and the boys recognized your rat as their family pet.”

“We gave Ron that rat,” one of the boys muttered.

“Worst gift ever,” the other boy said. “We’ll have to make it up to him.”

“New pet,” the first boy decided. “Tell him it’s actually a lady in hiding; it’ll make him paranoid to even go to the loo, much less…”

“Leave him alone,” Taylor said tiredly. “He’s going to be traumatized enough about this without you adding to it.”

“We’ll figure something else out,” the second boy said cheerfully. “After we figure out how to get back at the pervert.”

“We need him for Sirius here,” Taylor said. “Nothing until after he is free.”

She didn’t entirely sound against the idea of getting revenge, Sirius noted.

A girl stepped up.

“My aunt is on the way with Mr. Dumbledore,” the girl said. “She doesn’t sound very happy at being summoned.”

“Minister for magic means she’s the servant of the people, right?” Taylor asked. She turned to Sirius. “I’m going to need you to be quiet.”

Her wand snapped up, and the world vanished again.

A moment later, he was standing in the stairwell leading to the headmaster’s office. He stumbled, and a girl who decidedly wasn’t Taylor Hebert grabbed him. She had bushy hair, and she seemed Taylor’s age.

“Please be quiet,” she whispered in his ear. “Taylor’s working to get you free.”
Sirius frowned, but he stayed as quiet as he could and he listened. It wasn't until he heard Peter's voice that he growled and lunged forward.

The girl grabbed him firmly by the arm and said, “Don't make me stun you, Mr. Black. It's not time yet to go in.”

There was a strange sort of steel in her expression.

Sirius forced the rage that filled his breast to quiet down. He'd have his time with Peter; now that he knew he was near, he'd never give up looking for him.

It seemed like an eternity before they were summoned.

He stepped into a room with Dumbledore, Snape and several aurors. There was a distinguished looking older woman in the room as well. Sirius found himself suddenly self conscious about his lack of bathing; he should have made more of an effort.

They were all standing around a pensieve, and they were looking at him soberly.

“There will be a trial,” the older woman said. “But it will be a fair one. I expect the penalty for being an unregistered animagus has already been paid. That can't be said for Mr. Pettigrew here.”

Peter was crouched over, locked in a cage. He was pale, staring up at everyone. His hands moved convulsively.

“I was hiding from him!” he shouted. “He was insane! He'd have killed me if I hadn't run.”

“Even after he was locked away in Azkaban?” the lady asked. “Hiding in a family with young children... you should be ashamed of yourself.”

Sirius lunged forward, only to find himself suddenly hobbled and falling to the floor.

“I'm sorry,” the bush haired girl said. “But I told you we need him.”

“Any information he has will likely be ten years out of date,” Taylor said thoughtfully. “Unless you think that he was in the family to spy on a Ministry official.”

“While Arthur Weasley has a valuable position,” the woman said. “It's not one that would be of interest to the Death Eaters.”

“Then he was after the children?” Taylor asked dispassionately. She stared at Peter with a look as though he was a bug ready to be squashed.

“I've been watching,” Peter said desperately. “I know your secret, what you can do. A rat sees things that people don't. If you don't free me, then I'll...”

Taylor Hebert stunned him.

“He's likely to say anything if he thinks it'll get him out,” she said. “And he's apparently pretty tricky.”

“We'll make sure that he stands trial,” the older woman said grimly. “Thank you for bringing this to my attention.”

She nodded, and the aurors descended on Sirius. They grabbed him, but they were much more gentle about than any of the guards who'd attacked him in the past.
A female auror who looked like she was barely out of school leaned close to him.

“Don’t fight,’ she said. “We're going to get you a bath and a shave. It's important to look like an honest man when you're up to be freed, right?”

They escorted him out of Hogwarts, and apparated him to the Ministry. They were halfway to the cells when two aurors came rushing up.

“Pettigrew was murdered,” one of them said.

“What?” the girl beside him seemed shocked.

“The Ministry is on alert; hopefully this isn't the start of something bigger. The only way the Death Eaters would have known is if we had another leak.”

The world seemed to shrink around Sirius. He’d spent so much time obsessing over Peter. The thought of killing him had been the only thing that had kept him going sometimes, and even his idea to serve Taylor Hebert had been with the idea that since Voldemort seemed to be after her it would eventually lead him to Peter.

Now... Peter was dead? Hopefully they had a body and he wasn't just faking his death again.

If it was true, then what was Sirius's purpose in life now?

His friends were dead; the war he'd devoted his life to was over. There was a new war, but did he really want to continue making the mistakes he had in the last one?

The Death Eaters had likely killed him. Sirius'd heard how corrupt the Ministry was, and the Death eaters wouldn't have wanted Peter to testify, even if the information was long out of date. He presumably was able to name some important names, and that was all the court ever really cared about.

“Are Jenkins and Dawkins all right?” the girl asked.

“That's the weird thing,” the second auror said. “They were just stunned, not hurt. Pettigrew was murdered hard though.”

“Death Eaters usually take out the aurors too,’ the girl said. She was frowning. “We'd better make sure Black here gets to his cell safely. I'm going to ask the higher ups if we should double his guard.”

“They'll likely want the trial to be hurried up; this is a black eye for us; we're supposed to be doing better.”

“Moody will have us running drills,” the girl said gloomily.

They led him to a much better cell than he was accustomed to; they got him new clothes, a shower and a shave.

Eight hours after that he was a free man.
“It's a little anticlimactic,” Hermione said. “I think the quality of the entertainment has dropped considerably over the last year.”

“Well, they can't be boring and try the same thing every year,” Ron said, getting into the spirit of things.

“They didn't even try to bomb the train,” I said in mock disappointment. “Hopefully they'll have something more exciting next year.”

We were in the train station after an uneventful trip back from Hogwarts. The train had left early, and our classmates were being apparated out by their parents from this side of the station. Trusted aurors were apparating the muggleborn to their homes, with phone calls confirming receipt of the children moments after they had left.

I'd expressed my concerns about a poly juiced Death eater being substituted, so we were doing it this way. I'd have asked about setting up a Thief's Lament, but that was apparently incredibly expensive, and the goblins weren't willing to let the Ministry apparate people in and out of their bank willy nilly.

Also, it would have made it difficult for me to get inside the Ministry if I absolutely needed to.

“There's still time,” I said. “If they really wanted to, and weren't worried about turning everyone against them, they could simply do something horrible, like cursing all the seats to rot our asses off.”

“That's why you let Ron sit down first?” Hermione asked, surprised.

“Hey!” Ron said.

“Maybe you'll learn to let ladies sit first,” I said calmly.

“Maybe I will if I see one,” he said irritably. “Instead of a nundu in a skirt.”

The banter was light hearted on the surface, but I could see that everyone was actually nervous. We'd spent the last eight hours waiting for an attack, and there was still a chance that the Death eaters were waiting for the pure blood kids to get off the train. That was why the Ministry had decided to have the kids leave in batches that were equal in number.

I was being left for last because it was thought that I'd be able to spot things; also, if the death eaters were to attack, it'd likely be on my behalf and would likely happen when the train was empty.

“Everyone is almost gone,” I said. “They'll be coming for Hermione first, then Harry, then Ron.”

Moments later Tonks showed up for Hermione. She changed her hair color and grinned at us. Her ability was rare enough that it would have been difficult for the Death Eaters to replicate on short notice.

Moody was there for Harry.

“Code word is Pigtail,” he said. Unlike Tonks, he needed to have a code word to prove his identity.
That left me alone in the cabin with Ron.

He didn't look at me, instead looking straight forward. He was silent for a long moment before he finally spoke.

“Thanks,” he said.

“For what?”

Now I was the one not looking at him. I was scanning the area for any signs of Death eater incursions. The area outside had cleared of parents and children rapidly, as though everyone was afraid of an incipient attack.

“Scabbers,” he said. “That was... all kinds of wrong. I still have nightmares about it.”

I shrugged. “It was an accident. One of your brothers noticed the rat when we were doing... something else.”

We'd kept our involvement with Black as quiet as we could. The news about him being a free man would make the press soon enough, and the people who made the news were going to frame it in a way to make the Ministry look the best.

“Still,” he said. Looking at his hands, he said, “I heard you told the twins not to make fun of me.”

“He was in their bed too,” I said. “Which is gross considering that rats like to pee everywhere.”

I'd wondered if that was why the twins had given Pettigrew to their brother in the first place. He'd have been a white elephant of a pet.

“Scabbers wasn't that bad,” Ron said. He winced. “I still have trouble thinking of him as a grown man.”

“Well, you don't have to worry about him now,” I said.

He winced.

“Did you?”

I didn't have to ask what he meant. I'd been questioned about it for two days by Moody, along with all of my closest lieutenants. He'd wondered if I'd ordered it done, like I was some kind of miniature mob boss.

“I was with the Minister for Magic when it happened,” I said. “Apparently someone exploded his eyeballs, then when he turned into a rat to run, they turned him into a teacup and then smashed him. I've seen the pictures of what was left when they turned him back.”

He stared at me.

“Who'd do something like that?”

“Someone who didn't want him speaking about what he knew,” I said. “The eyeballs were a message, I think.”

“A message to who?” Ron looked a little green at the gills.

“The muggles have a saying about snitches that I doubt you'd understand.”
“They play Quidditch?” he asked.

“No,” I said firmly. The last thing I needed was for Ron to be badgering his father about muggle Quidditch. Getting some of the muggleborn to learn to play Rugby might help with learning to use physical violence when needed.

Not that I’d been doing a bad job of teaching them that so far.

Tonks appeared at the door.

“Are you ready, Ron?”

Her nose turned into the snout of a pig, and Ron shuddered.

“Be careful this summer,” he said, as he rose to his feet. “Harry says you’ve been the one keeping him alive, and even if you are mental, I appreciate that.”

A moment later he was gone.

Moody appeared in the doorway.

I’d have been just as happy with Snape, but no one wanted to risk the idea that Snape might be forced to either take me to his master and give up his position, or declare for our side and be lost as a double agent.

“Code word is Golden Morning,” he said.

We’d been asked to come up with our own code words, things that wouldn't mean anything to anyone else. It wouldn't make a difference if Moody was mind controlled, but the entire auror corps had been through master stranger protocols in the two weeks previously.

They’d all been obliviated as to when or if they’d been tested, with groups of them taken at random times for other things to confuse everyone. It didn’t stop anyone from controlling them on the last day, but it was the best we could do.

They’d had eyes on each other throughout the day, until the apparition began, and they were taking care to go in pairs.

I nodded.

Our trunks had already been taken care of before we’d left.

All that was left was to let him take my arm. I offered him my left arm, even as I had my wand gripped tightly in my pocket.

“You won't need that, girlie,” he said, glancing down at my hand.

“I might,” I said. “It depends on whether you've gone and hidden the real Moody somewhere while you are here to take me to your master.”

He scowled and shook his head.

“Or maybe the Ministry has decided that I’m a political liability, and they’ve sent you to put me in an unmarked grave somewhere in France.”

“That what you did to Skeeter?” he asked.
“I didn't kill her,” I said automatically. “Although it's possible that I've annoyed you to the point that you wouldn't mind arranging a little accident in transport.”

He stared at me for a moment, then nodded approvingly.

“If all the kids were as vigilant as you, we'd...”

“Be run by twelve year olds?” I asked. “Give it time.”

With luck, Hermione would be ready by the time I was ready to explore the world. I'd never even gotten to see America, outside of Protectorate bases and combat zones, much less the rest of the world. There were places here that had been destroyed in my homeworld, some of them before I was even born.

“Let's go,” he said. “Before the Death Eaters realize we're the only ones on the train.”

He held out his hand and I took it. A moment later, it felt like we were being pulled through a tube.

We were standing on a muggle street; it seemed utterly unremarkable. I didn't detect anyone lying in wait for us.

Moody handed me a paper. I did not take it, instead staring up at him. While he wasn't wearing gloves, the possibility that he might be somehow protected from whatever curse was on the paper didn't slip my mind.

“Read it and remember,” he said. He opened the paper, which had an address in Dumbledore's handwriting.

He tapped his walking stick, and the moment he did, I staggered a little as I felt an entire old building's collection of insects suddenly come within my range. This had to be the fidelius charm; I was less impressed by the way the buildings seemed to be moving and more concerned with how it seemed to bypass my magic.

“You brought Harry here?” I asked. “I thought you were taking him to his family's place.”

“He's gotta stay there a few weeks, but Dumbledore's starting him on occlumency training with you. It's a fool's effort.”

“Oh? Because he's too young?”

“Because you'll teach him better than Snape will,” Moody said. “Snape's got a grudge against the boy. It's not as bad as it might have been; if you hadn't been worrying him bald for the last two years he'd have had a lot more time to focus on the boy.”

“He's not going bald!” I protested.

“Figure of speech,” he said. “And how would you know? You're short even compared to your classmates.”

“Makes me a smaller target,” I said. “And I'm a seer. I don't need to actually see the tops of people's heads.”

My bugs did, but he didn't need to know that. Besides, my dad in my original life had been balding. I knew balding. Snape hadn't reached that point, despite the damage potion fumes likely did to his hair.
The buildings had finished moving apart.

“Not impressed, eh?”

“You had me in one of these in the Ministry,” I said. “I've see it before.”

He looked at me sharply. “I didn’t think you noticed.”

“Oh, I noticed,” I said.

He nodded, looked around once and headed for the steps. He didn't look behind for me to follow, presumably trusting in my own survival instincts to keep me from walking out into the muggle city alone.

He gestured with his wand to open the door. I watched his wand movements carefully. Presumably I'd have the opportunity to see it done several more times before I tried it again myself. After all, if I was to need to sleep out into the muggle wilderness, I’d need to be able to get back in.

I didn't have a time turner with me; Moody's eye made that too dangerous. I wouldn't want to be carrying one around Dumbledore either; the man seemed too alert now to think I could avoid thinking about it.

“This place is unplottable,” Moody said. “The Black family put every protection they could think of on this place, and then Dumbledore added some more.”

“This is Sirius Black's place?” I asked.

He nodded.

“He was happy to lend his place,” he said.

“After the Ministry and Dumbledore basically threw him into Azkaban? If I was him, I'd have told you all to suck on lemons.”

“You'd have been at the bottom of our bed in the middle of the night,” Moody said. “Staring at us until you murdered us.”

“That's just a boggart,” I said, shrugging.

“You'd let us think that,” Moody said. “Fortunately, Black was more than willing to help us, especially since Harry's his godson.”

Ah.

So they'd used Harry as leverage for Black. It was probably why he was coming here first instead of later in the summer. Presumably Sirius had been bright enough to demand time right away instead of giving away the Fidelius and getting nothing for it.

The long hallway we were walking through was lit by gas lamps. The patient was absolutely filthy with bugs; there were enough here that I could have created an immediate swarm in any room in the house. I felt immediately comfortable.

“Mudblood!”

A filthy cover slid off a painting. I looked at a picture of an irate old woman; her face was irate and she stared at me as though I was the worst thing that had ever entered the house.
“Charming picture,” I said as the woman screamed epithets at me.

“I've heard of you, unnatural thing!” she said. “Little bitch, think you're better than real people!”

How much had the painting heard, here where Dumbledore's people were making plans. Was it in communication with other, racist pictures in other places?

Wizards had a bad tendency to ignore paintings and house elves, which was a cultural blind spot I fully intended to take advantage of one day.

Was it possible to transfigure a painting into another painting? It I could make one painting look like another, then I could use a loyal painting as a spy.

“It's stuck to the wall; nothing works to get it off,” he said. “Hates the muggleborn. Everybody hates having her here, but the old biddy just won't shut up.”

“Trying to replace real people with your filth! Mudbloods should never have been taught magic. They should have been left to wallow in the muggle filth they came from!”

I stared up at her.

“In my day, they'd have dealt with you on the first day you came to Hogwarts.”

“Quiet you old hag!” Moody shouted, whacking his cane against the frame of the picture.

The old woman shrieked.

“Blood traitor!” she said. “Every one of you should be burned alive for what you are doing here. The girl should be first.”

“Why don't you go ahead?” I asked quietly. “I'd like to talk to her for a bit.”

“I doubt you'll be able to reason with her,” he said. He stared at me for a moment, then smirked. “But have at it.”

He walked forward, and the moment I thought he was out of earshot, I turned to the woman and looked up at her.

I reached up to touch the canvas.

“What are you doing?” she shrieked. “Don't get your filthy mudblood hands on my nice clean canvas.”

“I haven't killed a painting before,” I said. I purposefully channeled Luna's voice as I spoke. It tended to be disconcerting when she said something unexpected, and I needed to get a true reaction from her. “Would you scream if I set your canvas on fire?”

“W...what?”

“I could try paint thinner. I might be able to melt half of you while leaving the other half to scream,” I said. “It'd be an interesting experiment.”

“You wouldn't.”

“I'm a filthy mudblood,” I said. “The muggles have been experimenting with ways to murder each other creatively for a long time. Why would you expect me to have any pity for a pureblood. You
aren't even that, though... you're less than a mudblood, because you aren't even human.”

She spluttered.

“Frankly, even a house elf is better than you. They're alive, after all, and they can do magic, and you... you can't do anything, can you. You can sit and scream, and maybe that's all I need you to do.”

She was shaking, and her face was red.

“I am from a line of blood as pure as...”

“You aren't even related to them, not really. You're just paint and canvas, and you know where the things that paint is made from...the ground. So who's the mudblood?”

She screamed at me, her face red. She was almost incoherent.

“BE QUIET!” I said. “Or I'll just stick another piece of wall over your painting with a sticking charm, leaving you alone in the dark forever. How long do you think it would take for you to go mad?”

“They'll never allow it!” she said, her face turning pale.

“None of them like you much,” I said. “They wouldn't care if I burned you for kindling. The easiest thing would be to cut out the wall you are in, put it on the fire and then replace the wall.”

She didn't have anything to say to that.

“I want you to know who I am,” I said. “Because I'm not going to spend the next three months listening to you insult me and my friends.”

“You're bluffing,” she said.

I pulled out my knife and I stabbed her in the area where her chest would have been. I stabbed the canvas several other times as well.

She shrieked as though she was dying. Interestingly enough, she did bleed red paint.

Pulling herself away into the corner of the frame, she stared at me as though I was mad. She was pale and shaking.

“I don't have to bluff,” I said. “If I destroyed you, there's no court in the land that would convict me. You aren't a person, and that means that I can do anything I want to you, and nobody will say a damn thing. It's ironic, considering that's what your people have been wanting for my kind.”

I waited for her to slip out of frame. She didn't, though.

“If I cut out your eyes, would you be blind?” I asked.

That was too much for her, and she crouched in the corner of the frame. I nodded in satisfaction; if she'd had another painting to run to, that was something we all needed to know, because she sounded like the kind of painting who would turn on us in a minute.

“If you keep making a nuisance of yourself, we'll have to have another talk. I might have to get angry. I suspect you wouldn't like me if I get angry. Or worse, I might get creative.”
With that, I headed for the kitchen, when I saw several faces staring out into the hall.

I whistled jauntily as I went.
“She was a security risk,” I said. “I had to be sure.”

They were all staring at me, as though stabbing a painting was some kind of insane thing to do instead of a reasonable security precaution.

I was sitting at a table with Remus, Sirius, Snape, Dumbledore and Harry. The only one who didn't seem horrified was Harry. He just nodded at me knowingly. Molly Weasley was in a different part of the house, using magic to clean and get things ready for us. Moody was leaning up against the wall.

He understood the need to take decisive action; the only surprise was that the others didn't. Snape was the only one of them who didn't look surprised.

“She hasn't said anything in two hours,” Sirius said. He sounded bewildered. “She's never given up an opportunity to say something horrible to me.”

“Why did you keep her around?”

“We tried everything to get her off the wall, but the canvas and frame are permanently stuck on there.”

“So destroy it,” I said. “It's just a picture.”

They all looked shocked, all of them except Harry. Even Snape looked a little disturbed.

“She's family,” Sirius said. “Not the kind you want to talk to ever, or admit you're related to, but you just don't kill your family. It's just not done.”

“She's not your relative,” I said. “She's not real.”

It wasn't that I didn't believe that artificial intelligences could be real people. Dragon had been a real person. It was just that I'd seen how limited the portraits were, even more limited than the ghosts.

The ghosts could at least learn, even if they would always emotionally be stuck in the moment where they died. They could even grow a little. Paintings just didn't have that ability.

“She's got my mother's memories,” Sirius insisted. “As horrible and hateful as they are. When that painting is destroyed, the last thing that made her....well, her will be destroyed. You don't do that to family. Maybe if she was Bellatrix...”

I noticed that he didn't say anything about loving his mother. If she'd been like that throughout his life, she'd probably been critical toward him as well. That would have gone a long way to squashing any feelings of maternal affection.

Yet there was always part of us who sought that maternal approval. Did he still somehow hope to get that affection from the painting that he'd never gotten from his mother?

He didn't seem to like the painting any more than the rest of us, but was it all an act? I couldn't be sure.

“It does not do you credit to victimize a poor painting,” Dumbledore said. He glanced at the
hallway. “Although I must admit that you were provoked.”

“We needed to know if she had another painting she could go to,” I said. “Imagine that she'd had another painting she could visit in the Malfoy house.”

“She wouldn't...” Sirius protested, then shook his head. “She had another painting, but it was destroyed in a fire a long time ago. The paintings here aren't all connected, not like the ones at Hogwarts.”

“You think she wouldn't inform on the Muggleborn Liberation Front?” I asked. “When she rabidly hates muggles and muggleborns and worships everything pureblood?”

They looked at each other as though the thought hadn't occurred to them.

“Did you have to terrify her?” Sirius asked.

“I had to make her think she was going to die. If she could have escaped she would have. I'd still recommend putting a cover over her, something that you can magically stick on and off. Preferably something that muffles sound and light so that if she is captured she can't give anything away.”

“If this place is captured, then no place in Britain is safe,” Dumbledore said. “And all will be lost.”

I shook my head.

“No headquarters is worth sacrificing everything for. Places don't matter. If we had to, we could hide out in France, in Spain. We're Wizards and space shouldn't be a barrier. As long as we have the people, we can come back, stronger than we've ever been.”

“This isn't the Muggleborn Liberation Front,” Dumbledore said. “Our organization is older than that. We've been together since the last war.”

“Purebloods, mostly, right?” I asked.

“Why would you say that?” he asked, his voice carefully neutral.

“Molly Weasley is here,” I said. “Which means that she is a member; she wouldn't be here otherwise. That means her husband is also likely a member, and some of her older children.”

He nodded, but didn't say anything.

“Lupin and Snape are half bloods,” I said, working it out for myself. “Moody is pureblood.”

“And how do you know that, Missy?” Moody asked.

“You don't think I'd research the people I was to be working with?” I asked. “I'm not a fool. Skeletons in closets lead to betrayal at the worst of times.”

“You've got a mountain of bones in your closet, I'd wager,” Moody said.

“You have no idea,” I said. Apparently neither Dumbledore nor Snape had told him what I'd revealed to them. It pleased me that they understood enough about operational security to be cautious, even with him.”

“Still, I haven't heard about any muggleborn in this group of yours, and you even went out of your way to make a separate organization for them. That sounds a little sketchy to me.”
"No insult is intended," Dumbledore said. "I simply created this organization from those people I knew and trusted best. Those people did not include many muggleborn. That is not to say that it did not include any."

He didn't begin spouting off names, which meant that he either didn't have many to say, or that he was taking operational security fairly seriously."

“They call it the Order of the Phoenix,” Sirius said. He still seemed bewildered. He'd seemed that way every time I'd seen him since I'd saved him from the attack on the Shack. It occurred to me that life as a free man was likely difficult after years of having your sanity drained away by monsters.

I frowned.

“So the organization was destroyed and you rebuilt yourself?” I asked.

“No,” Dumbledore said.

“You've all got fire powers.”

“We are wizards,” Snape said. He smirked. “I'm sure we could set some fires if needed.”

“It's named after Dumbledore's phoenix,” Harry said impatiently. Apparently he was so happy to be somewhere else other than at home that he was buying whatever Kool-Aid Dumbledore was selling.

I had no problems allying myself with Dumbledore, but I knew he had his own agenda, and that he'd likely throw me under the bus if it was convenient for him. Hopefully Harry wasn't a lot more naive.

“So if he'd had a parrot, you'd have been the Order of the Parrot? Guess you're glad he didn't have a pet chicken then.”

For some reason Snape seemed the only one amused by that.

“Professor Dumbledore wasn't going to tell me anything for another couple of years, but he says you've already stolen my childhood, and so I might as well get started.”

Dumbledore winced.

Apparently Harry hadn't been supposed to tell me that part, but he still had some residual loyalty to me. Dumbledore might not even have phrased it that way, but that was the way harry had heard it.

In a way he was right.

After all, Harry now spent more time training than he did playing gobstones or exploding snap. Even Ron participated somewhat more than half the time, although he often skived off to do something he thought was more fun.

Still, if Sirius hadn't insisted on Harry being here as a precondition for using the house, Harry likely would not be here. He'd be rotting away at home with his relatives.

I'd heard bits and pieces about them, usually when he was talking to Ron and thought no one could hear. I'd heard enough not to have a high opinion of them.

Some of the incidences would have required intervention by Child Protective Services in the
United States. I wasn't sure what the laws were like in England or Scotland.

Unlike Harry, I had likely been slated to be here as soon as the opportunity opened up. Remus was too busy to keep a good eye on me, and no other place in Wizarding Britain would be as well protected.

Leaving me on my own would have been considered a nonstarter in any case; I was suspected of any number of murders, some of which I hadn't even committed. Both Dumbledore and Snape were wary of leaving me on my own for fear that I'd choose to meddle in politics.

I'd had a weird and awkward discussion with Snape after Umbridge died about not messing in politics.

What he didn't seem to understand was that everything we did affected politics, even and especially the decision to do nothing.

“I'd argue that your childhood was stolen the last time you saw your parents,” I said tartly after a long moment. “And from what I've heard, what was arranged for you wasn't exactly what you would have chosen for yourself.”

“No one gets to choose their family,” Dumbledore said gently. “Nor their circumstances.”

“I believe that if you are unhappy with your circumstances that you should try to change them,” I said.

I'd wasted more than a year of life as a normal person trying to live with my circumstances, and all it had gotten me was misery.

“We should establish some ground rules,” Remus said. He sighed and ran his hands through his hair. “Most of them are like they were last summer, but Harry wasn't there, so I'll go over them again.”

“No stabbing people,” I said. “That's rule one.”

I glanced back at the hall.

“She's not a person though,’ I said. “She's... less than a shadow.”

“I hated her,” Sirius said. “But she was still my mother. Family is important in the Wizarding world. You don't go around stabbing people's mothers.”

My bugs detected the displacement of air behind me. I didn't have time to think; I just acted. Lunging to the side, I tried to spin around, but I was slow; too slow. My wand was in my hand, but the small creature behind me was pointing at me, his face contorted in rage.

“Mudblood!” he screamed.

A blast exploded the table where we'd all been sitting. I rolled, and dodged again, my wand out to stun my attacker.

Dumbledore was faster, though. He had the advantage of not having to turn, but I couldn't be sure that I'd have beaten him even so. Snape had his wand out as well.

Snape, Moody and Dumbledore all hit the creature with spells almost simultaneously.

The house elf went flying through the air to crash into a wall. He fell stunned.
“The other reason we don’t bother my mother’s picture,” Sirius said after a moment, pulling himself up from the floor where he’d fallen, “Is that our house elf is unusually fond of her.”

“This is going to be a problem,” I said. “I can’t feel safe going to sleep with this thing after me.”

“It’s not his fault,” Sirius said after a moment. From the look on his face, he expected me to start stabbing. “He’s been left in the house for ten years with only mother’s portrait for company. It would drive anyone batty.”

House elves were loyal, sometimes incredibly so. They were self-effacing. I tried to put myself in his shoes; if I’d come home and found that someone had attacked someone I cared about, I knew how I’d have reacted.

I rose to my feet, and I pointed my wand at the elf.

“Don’t,” Sirius said. “It...wouldn’t be right.”

“I just agreed not to stab anyone,” I said. “I’ll try not to kill anyone either.”

The others were watching me closely.

“Obliviate,” I said, pointing my wand at the elf’s head. He’d be out for a while from being hit by three stunners.

The others stared at me, horrified.

“Professor Lockhart was kind enough to teach me before he left,” I said absently. “He said he’s going on a worldwide book tour and may not be back for a decade or more.”

It had taken the entirety of the school year to convince him to teach me, and it was a very difficult spell. Still, at least this house elf probably didn’t have any good memories from the last ten years he’d miss.

I waved my wand, and I levitated the house elf behind me.

Back in the hall, I stood in front of the painting. The old biddy was hiding behind a chair, staring at me hatefully.

“I understand that this creature is yours,” I said. “Your right hand in the world, your eyes. There is a saying in the muggle Bible about plucking out eyes that offend you.”

She stared at me without speaking.

“I’ve removed his memory,” I said. “When he wakes up, you will tell him that the damage to your painting was done by rats.”

There were plenty of rats in this house; from what I knew of house elf psychology, it should have been humiliating for a house to be in this state. Maybe something like that would help keep him busy.

I knew what it was like to feel depressed, and how important it was to stay busy.

“If you don’t, then I will simply obliviate all memory of you from him, and then I’ll paint you over. He will never even know you existed, and you’ll be alone in the dark. If I find out that you’ve tried to turn him against me, I will obliviate him. Do you understand?”
Eventually she nodded.

I returned to the kitchen.

I was bluffing of course; the truth was that I was nowhere good enough to remove all memory of a person lasting for years, not without simply wiping the whole person's memory. As long as she didn't know that, though, the bluff might work.

The others were staring at me as I returned.

“See?” I said. “I didn't even threaten to kill him.”

I went to the drawer and got a washcloth. I wet it, and returned to the house elf, who was waking up.

I put his head on my lap, and I began washing it.

He blinked, then stared up at me.

“I hope you are all right,” I said. “A rat ran by on a shelf and a tin of something hit you in the head.”

Reinforcing the rat story was important. Hopefully he'd go after the rats who'd hurt his mistress and not me.

When he'd hit the wall, objects had fallen off the shelf to land on the floor. That helped sell the story.

His eyes narrowed and he slapped my hand away. He staggered to his feet.

“Nasty brat. Kreacher has heard about the girl.”

“What, that I'm a mudblood?” I said mildly. “It's true. But I believe that anyone can rise above their station; mudbloods, ghosts, even house elves.”

He looked revolted.

“Dirty things should know their place.”

“Places change,” I said. “I'd like us to be friends.”

He stared at me, and then his face twisted up. He spit on the floor in front of me.

A moment later he left.

I listened in as the painting told him that it was rats that had damaged her painting. It wasn't a very good performance, but it seemed that it was good enough.

“He's going to be a problem,” I said. “He can apparate out of here and back, right?”

Dumbledore nodded.

“Then we need his loyalty,” I said. “And it's not going to be easy to get.”

“I could just tell him not to say anything about what goes on in this house, and tell him he is not to
harm anyone in this house.”

“And then he kills one of us the moment we step outside,” I said. “House elves are loyal, but loyalty is earned. If he's chained to do what you say by some kind of spell, he'll figure out how to get around it to help his master's former friends.”

“He's just a house elf,” Sirius said.

“He just attacked me in a room with how many of the fastest wands in Great Britain, and he still managed to get two shots off?” I asked. “And listen to him talk! He doesn't sound like all the other house elves.”

“The Blacks expected a higher quality of servant,” Sirius said. His face twisted. “He just parrots what my mother used to say.”

“He's smart, and smart is bad,” I said. “We have only three choices. We need to turn him, kill him, or obliviate him.”

“We aren't killing my mother's house elf,” Sirius said. “I'll have a talk with him.”

“Don't undo my work with the memory charm,” I said.

“About that,” Dumbledore said. “That's a rather potent charm to place in the hands of someone who has not yet gone through puberty.”

“It's better than my old way of removing memories,” I said. I picked up my knife from the floor and slipped it into my bag. “And it's a little less permanent.”

Only Sirius seemed confused by that statement.

“He's probably very lonely,” I said. “From what I've seen, house elves are very gregarious creatures. Turning him might not be as hard as you think.”

“You're much more forgiving of him than Ms. Black.”

“He can change,” I said. “She's just paint and memories.”

“You might be surprised at just how potent some memories can be,” Dumbledore said. “Children are sometimes quite opinionated, but as we grow older and wiser, we learn that sometimes there is more to the world than what we can see.”

“Well,” I said. “Let's get through the rest of the rules, and then I'd like to start obliviation practice.”

“Right,” Sirius said. “There are dark objects and books in the house.”

“I'm going to read them,” I said immediately. “You can't protect against the dark arts unless you know something about the dark arts.”

“Some of us are... less than comfortable with the idea of you getting your hands on books like those.”

“Then don't put me in a house full of those books. I have to learn as much as I can as quickly as I can.”

“Where you are sometimes lacking is not in knowing what to do,” Dumbledore said. “But in knowing what not to do.”
It seemed that we were at an impasse.
“Explaining the curses on the books will simply encourage her,” Severus said quietly. “And letting her see the contents of some of those books is in no one's best interest.”

“The only alternative is to simply remove all of the books,” Dumbledore said. “Which will only feed the resentment that she has towards us.”

“She doesn't seem to resent me,” Severus said. He smirked.

“Be on your guard,” Dumbledore said. “I suspect that one of the reasons she wanted the memory charm so badly was to remove anything damning that you discover before you have a chance to inform me.”

Scowling, Severus said, “I can't imagine what prompted that fool to teach her.”

“Blackmail, most likely,” Dumbledore said. “Or fear. He did say he was taking an extended sabbatical to places as far away from here as possible.”

“Of her or the Dark Lord?”

“Yes,” Dumbledore said, without elucidating further.

“I'll find out what I can,” Severus said. “And see whether she is a delusional genius, or something much more dangerous.”

He stood up and took his leave.

The Order Headquarters wasn't the only place they met; for one thing, they'd never be able to keep secrets from the girl. For another thing, they needed places where less trusted assets could meet with them.

After all, someone who knew the secret could always be controlled into taking someone else with them.

Apparating to an alley near Black's house, Severus walked there quickly. It was daytime, and so he moved quickly. Most of the muggles were working, but there were a few who were on the dole, and the last thing he needed was for the obliviators to be summoned.

He was inside the house a moment later.

The changes in only two days were impressive. Gone were the cobwebs, the heavy coating of dust. Everything had been meticulously cleaned with the best effort that magic could give.

There was a smell of food cooking in the kitchen.

Molly Weasley was a failure as a mother in some ways; her children were all willful and disobedient. Yet there was something about the way in which she treated them that made a strange pressure in his chest.

Their family was nothing like his own had been. His parents had been cold toward him even as they'd fought each other with desperate intensity. There was something strangely warm about the Weasley household that made him wonder if his life might have been different if he'd been raised in such surroundings.
“I don't need any more to eat,” he heard Potter saying irritably from the other room.

“You're a tiny thing,” Molly was saying. “Maybe a few more bites.”

“The food's great, Mrs. Weasley,” he heard Potter say.

He waited for the old familiar anger and bitterness to rise up. This was James Potter's brat, the child of a man who was everything Severus was not. Potter had been a bully, yet in the end he'd gotten the girl.

He'd been prepared to see Harry Potter as being his father's son. He looked enough like him.

At first it had seemed clear and simple. The boy was brash, and every bit the Gryffindor his father had been.

However, his association with Taylor had made him quieter, more reflective. Training had given the boy discipline, and he'd lost his tendency to spout off whatever nonsense that came into his head.

He'd never care for the boy, but much of the venom that had fueled him was gone. In it's place was a sort of feeling of hollowness. This was all that was left of Lily; all that ever would be. He'd sacrificed a great deal to keep the boy alive.

He closed his eyes and forced himself to focus. The last thing he needed was for Taylor Hebert to go rummaging through his memories. With his luck, she'd go right for the current location of the Dark Lord, and he'd return to find a lot of murdered Death Eaters.

The Dark Lord himself wouldn't die, of course. He was immortal. The fact that the others did would lead to a lot of pain for Severus; it might even lead to his death.

He stepped into the room. The kitchen was changed dramatically from two days before. It was almost sparkling.

“I am here to see Miss Hebert,” he said.

Molly was ruffling Harry's head with one hand. She looked up.

“She's in the drawing room,” Molly said.

Snape turned and headed for the drawing room.

The girl had cornered Kreacher and was speaking to him in a low voice.

“She thought it was rats, but it might have been doxies. I know a really good way of getting rid of those.”

“Stupid mudblood is good at killing,” Kreacher said grudgingly.

“I showed you how to kill the rats, didn't I?” the girl said.

The house elf chuckled evilly, and Severus had an uneasy feeling that the rats in the house hadn't died an easy death.

“Running around without eyes,” Kreacher said. He grinned, and the expression on his face wasn't pretty. “Stupid rats got what they deserved. Hurting the mistress like that.”
Severus felt a chill down his spine. He knew of one rat that had been murdered recently with exploding eyeballs, one that had threatened to reveal a young girl's secrets.

The girl obviously knew that he'd heard, but she turned around and smiled at him as though nothing had been said at all.

“Hello Professor Snape,” she said. “Is it time for lessons?”

Did he dare say anything about what he had heard? If he did, then he'd worry that he'd wake up one night with her standing over his bed, and then he'd be missing some of his memories.

If he didn't he'd be tacitly condoning her behaviors.

“We've all done things we aren't proud of,” the girl said quietly. Apparently some of his dilemma had shown in his expression. “But for the moment we are all moving toward the same goal.”

She turned and said, “You're doing a great job, Kreacher. I think your mistress would have been proud.”

“Stupid mudblood! Who cares about your opinion?” Kreacher's face twisted up and he turned away from the girl.

Yet as she turned away, his posture straightened. His shoulders lost a little of the droop they'd had in every encounter Severus had ever had with the thing.

The girl was blatant and obvious in her attempts at ingratiating herself to the thing; it should have been completely ineffective, but it seemed that she was getting through to him.

Yet equally as obvious, being nice wasn't a skill that she was used to using. Intimidation and fear were well worn paths for her. Diplomacy and being nice much less so.

It made Severus feel a little better to see her being so clumsy and obvious. He'd wondered at times whether the seeming affection she had for him was an affectation, an attempt to manipulate him much like the dark lord had once.

Unless she was being clumsy and obvious with the house elf in an effort to convince him and Dumbledore that she wasn't manipulating them. That was a chilling thought.

Severus shook the thought off. She wouldn't be letting him into her mind unless she was sure that he wouldn't be repulsed by what she would see.

“It's time,” he said.

When he was sure that the house elf was gone, and that there were no other spies, using the best spells that he knew, he turned to the girl and said, “I assume you've done the reading.”

“Everything I could find,” she said.

“You will wish to sit for this,” he said. He'd thought she might protest; after all she was the girl who'd laughed while experiencing the cruciatus. Instead, she primly took a seat.

“If you were Potter I'd be more worried,” he said. “His mind is undisciplined, and his emotions are close to the surface. Part of the reason this is rarely taught to children is because they have difficulty controlling their emotions.”
"I had an easier time of it in my last body," Taylor admitted. "I think there's something about a childish brain that makes emotional regulation harder. Maybe it has something to do with the glands. I'm not looking forward to puberty again."

"Speak to Professor McGonegall or one of your female prefects if you have questions. There are potions to control bodily functions that are not covered in general classes."

At her raised eyebrow, he continued.

"Wizards tend to be conservative, and what the muggles call sexual education isn't on the agenda."

"Are there magical STDs?" she asked. "Hagrid's a half-giant, so wizards are apparently doing things with other races... it seems like you could get some funky diseases that way, much less from sharing a bath with someone with a weird magical foot fungus."

"None are yet incurable," he said. "And this is off the subject. Despite your... handicaps, your emotions tend to be muted."

"I've got ways to control that," she said. "I'm trying to use it less; I think it's not healthy."

"In occlumency, being able to clear one's mind is an asset. Once you become more advanced, you will be able to clear everything but those things that you want an opponent to see."

"Creating a false narrative," she said. She nodded.

"I will attempt to break into your mind," Severus said. "Which will require me to point my wand at you."

He knew better than to try that unannounced.

"It will be painful," he said.

"So you could use it as a means of torture?" she asked.

"The process itself is not painful," Severus said. "It is the resisting that causes the pain. The dark lord has been known to extract every ounce of pain from his victims before ending their lives in agony."

"That's a waste, unless you're trying to send a message," she said. She looked thoughtful. "Is terror the only reason he's able to keep his people's loyalty?"

"No," Severus said. "Although your presence has made the lowest level members much more cautious about courting the disfavor of their superiors."

"What? The Terror? Right. So why is that?"

"It's become... fashionable to recommend members who do not perform as well for the next mission against you. The Dark Lord tolerates it because as long as the rank and file fight among themselves, they will not turn on him."

"I always wondered why someone didn't just shoot him in the back, then the lot of you pretend he was still alive. You could easily use it as an excuse to loot the houses of your enemies, then fade into the woodwork."

"If the Dark Lord were known to be permanently dead, the organization would likely split into factions."
She nodded sagely. “I've seen that before. Have you ever thought of leading a Death Eater reform party? Once I've killed your boss, I mean.”

“What?”

“You could create a kinder, gentler organization of Death Eaters who do nothing but sit in their rocking chairs and mutter racist things while the younger generation goes out and changes things.”

“And you’d leave that be?”

“As long as it wasn't someone who has directly harmed me. Maybe even some of them, depending on what they did. It depends on whether I believed they were faking it or not. I'd hate to be eating out in Hogsmeade a year from now and have to put blood on the walls.”

If Severus was right, it wouldn't be the first time. How she'd killed an entire group of Death Eaters and then creatively decorated the town, he didn't know. He wasn't sure he wanted to know.

“I'm sure that you'd be quick to believe anyone,” he said.

“It's a great reason to teach me legilimency,” she said. “Otherwise, I might have to be proactive.”

Was she threatening to murder all of his old acquaintances if he didn't teach her?

“It'd be aggressive self defense,” she said.

“I doubt the Ministry would think so,” Severus said dryly. “And while I don't doubt that you'd be successful in escaping Azkaban, they might think it wise to have you Kissed simply because of the danger you represent.”

“I'm considering ways to deal with the Dementors,” she said.

She didn't continue, though, so hopefully the message was taken.

“Are you ready?”

She nodded.

He lifted his wand and pointed it at her.

Her mind had always been difficult to penetrate. Every mind was different, of course, but almost all shared many things in common. Her mind was more alien than even the mind of a house elf.

It was like looking through a kaleidoscope, jumbled bits and pieces of images, with only small bits making sense. If she were able to control and refine it, it would make for an effective occlumency shield.

As it was, it took him longer than he would have liked to slip through the ever shifting maze that was her defenses.

A moment later, he was in. It wasn't a recent memory, but he didn't have enough control to do more than snatch at anything he could reach.

“And the neck bone's connected to the...back bone. The back bone's connected to the...leg bone.”

A child with blonde hair was leaning over a body on a table. She'd opened the body up and was doing something with a scalpel. It took Severus a moment to realize that the body on the table was
alive. The open chest cavity showed lungs still working and the heart was still pumping.

Was this Taylor in her old body, performing some kind of torture on an innocent?

Through a set of heavy refrigerator doors, Severus could see what had been a black teenager, splayed out much like the bodies in Hogsmeade had been. His face was contorted in agony, and somehow, impossibly he was still alive.

“Wake up Taylor,” the girl with the scalpel said sweetly. “I don't want you to miss all of this.”

The girl's eyes blinked open but she didn't speak. She was wearing a strange sort of a mask with goggles, enough that Severus couldn't quite make out her face.

This was Taylor?

Before he could see anymore, he felt himself being ripped away, swept into the maelstrom of her mind.

Suddenly he found himself gagging, with a memory of a stench so profound that he felt it in the back of his own throat. He could barely breathe.

They were in the darkness, trapped inside a claustrophobic metal box. Had someone put her in a coffin? There were insects crawling all over her as she struggled.

Outside he could hear female voices, taunting.

“Nobody's coming Taylor,” a girl said in a low voice on the other side of the door. “You'll die in there and nobody will even care. They can all hear you scream, but even the teachers won't protect you. Stay in there with the rest of the filth.”

He could hear the sounds of several girls laughing as they walked away.

The girl screamed and sobbed and beat on the doors, but true to the other girl's words no one came.

It reminded him of his own experiences with James Potter. He'd seen all sorts of bullying at Hogwarts, yet he'd never worked to stop it despite his own experiences with how painful it could be.

Why hadn't he ever done anything?

He'd lashed out at students, but not at the ones who tortured their classmates every year.

He tried to pull himself from the memory, but he found himself trapped, gagging and choking from the smell of vomit and rotten bodily wastes. It was hard to take a breath, and he saw the moment the girl started to panic.

This girl was younger than the girl on the table. That girl had been afraid but resigned, even given the pain she was in. This girl didn't have the raw power that the other girl...

Severus suddenly felt an outside memory intrude on his mind, one that he could not remember even a moment later.

That should not happen inside a memory. He felt a sudden moment of anxiety; was she obliterating him even now, in the middle of his rummaging through her mind?

He tried to pull away, but he found himself lost in the maelstrom, spun back and forth until he
landed in water.

He was in some kind of an underground vault. It was huge filled with a large number of muggles, all of whom stunk of fear. They were in water, and some of them were trying to make their way up a set of stairs.

The girl looked much more menacing in her full costume than he would have thought. She was wearing a black and gray bodysuit with armored panels. He couldn't make out what any of it was made of, but he could tell it was well made.

People were sobbing; some were holding pets above the water as they made their way out of the vault.

The girl's head snapped up in an expression that he'd learned to recognize.

The back wall of the vault exploded, and something stepped into the breach. The girl was pushed to the side as people panicked. They screamed and fled, crawling over each other in an effort to get away from whatever this was.

Taylor had had a name for these. What was it?

Severus stared up at the unblinking eyes above him, and despite himself he felt afraid.

Right.

This was an Endbringer.
Severus found himself being thrust out of the girl's mind. It was a little disorienting; there were memories in the girl's mind that simply weren't intelligible, almost as though she was seeing the world from a million different perspectives all at once.

It made his head hurt to even think about it, and so he'd been focusing on the memories that he could interpret.

“What was that?” he asked finally.

“Leviathan,” she said.

“And the little girl?”

“Bonesaw,” she said. She looked away. “There were things about my world that were pretty fucked up.”

He didn't bother to correct her language. From what he could see that was an accurate assessment. Even the Dark Lord rarely bothered with any forms of torture other than the Cruciatus.

Bellatrix would have been impressed by Bonesaw.

“She was how you died?” he asked.

“It wasn't even my worst injury,” she said. She shook her head. “Being shot in the head was my reward for saving the worlds.”

Severus grimaced.

“This isn't something that can be accomplished with one event. We have to continue to do this until you can successfully keep me out every time.”

Hopefully it would be sooner than later, for both of their sakes.

She nodded grimly, then gestured for him to continue. He sighed and lifted his wand again.

Immediately he was in her mind. This time the maze created by her mental static was more intricate. Whatever else the girl was, she was a quick learner. It took him longer to get inside.

They were in the middle of a devastated cityscape.

Leviathan was there, surrounded by muggles in colorful costumes. No one had a wand, but at least twenty of them were shooting at the monster. The beams didn't seem to make much of an impact on the creature, but whenever a beam missed and struck the surrounding area, the impact was huge.

Twelve men and women in costumes were fighting the thing hand to hand. Worse, they were losing.

The thing was incredibly fast; so much so that it was terrifying. It cut a man in half with its tail as Severus watched.

The men and woman were wearing armbands; as each of them died a litany of the dead was called out.
Severus heard the sounds from behind him. He turned and saw Taylor wearing her costume. She was staring up at the monster, which was less than a hundred feet away from her.

Water flooded everything up to people's knees, which slowed them even further.

Some of the capes were almost as fast as the monster, including one flying woman.

Taylor was talking to another cape.

“She needs her face cauterized,” she was saying. The woman she'd rolled over was clearly dying; her face had been ripped off.

She other man was shaking his head, but eventually agreed. The smell of burning flesh was particularly pungent.

She left the woman with the other man, and she followed the monster, which was now being fought by an even larger group of other men and woman.

A pureblood would never have understood what CPR was, but Severus did. She was struggling with an obese man when she looked up with a look of horror on her face.

Hesitating only a moment, she looked down at the man she was too weak to drag. She dropped him, but her expression was one of regret.

She darted close to one of the men and a glowing shield surrounded him, protecting several other people.

Severus turned around and he stared.

A wave of water taller than most of the buildings slammed into them.

Leviathan... the city killer.

He tried to pull out of the memory, and he did, but the names of the dead followed him, being called out with a certain inevitability.

When the world righted itself, he found himself in a muggle high school. He'd never been in one himself, but they weren't that different from primary schools, and the children were similar in age to fifth through seventh years in Hogwarts.

Taylor was faced by several people in costumes. Some were children themselves. From their body language it was clear that they were at odds.

“Students!” the girl called out. “I've described you as a jury. Now it's time to vote. Stand if you side with me.”

A third of the three hundred children in the auditorium stood. They surrounded the girl, forming a human shield.

The consternation of the others was obvious.

The next few minutes showed the girl slipping away from the others, primarily because they didn't want to hurt her followers. It was adroitly done; the girl changing into a hoodie while the others shielded her from her enemies.
Had she always used children in her fights against others?

After the escape, Taylor seemed at a loss as to what to say to the teenagers. There was none of the easy camaraderie that existed with her current group of minions.

“You saved my dad,” one girl said.

“Fought the Slaughterhouse Nine,” another said.

“Those bastards at the ABB.”

“Leviathan showed up at the shelter, and I heard you…”

There were so many stories that it was hard to take them all in. Severus felt himself being yanked almost viciously away from this memory.

He was back in the real world.

The Taylor he saw in her memory had a body that didn't look anything like this one, but the more he watched her, the more he could see similarities between the two of them. Her body language had always been strange; both girls shared the same, odd, mantis like way of moving and holding themselves.

“It wasn't even my school,” she said. She looked down. “It was a shot in the dark; I didn't expect it to work so well.”

She was more embarrassed about the last memory than the one before.

Even the previous memory only bothered her because she'd been forced to abandon a man. The fight itself had been normal for her.

“The fight?” he asked. “How many were killed?”

“Capes?” she asked. “Over forty. If you're asking about regular people, who knows? He destroyed half the city and it was a good day.”

“And on a bad day?”

“Millions dead,” she said. “He's sunk entire islands. He was the weakest of the three, and we later found out they were all sandbagging.”

“Sandbagging?”

“Pretending to be hurt when they weren't, not being as deadly as they could. If they'd shown their real power, no one would have even bothered to fight. The real horror was that they gave people false senses of hope just so they could slap us down.”

The monster had killed more people in a few minutes than the Dark Lord's people had in their worst year during the last war. That only included the people directly fighting. Undoubtedly the flood had to have killed thousands if not tens of thousands.

It was like fighting a Nundu, if the Nundu were fully intelligent and capable of destroying entire cities. Severus doubted that an army of wizards would have done any better; some of the costumed men and women had been supernaturally swift.

He'd seen the look in the thing's eyes; there was a malevolence there that even Bellatrix would
have been hard pressed to match.

“Do you wish to continue?” Severus asked.

Part of him wanted her to say no. The things he'd seen would need time to process. They had a
great deal to say about the person she had been and about the person she was now.

“No,” she said. “I can take it.”

He forced himself not to sigh as he pointed his wand again.

The images flashed through his mind this time; she was actively trying to reject him.

Falling from the side of a large metallic structure in the middle of a bay, an explosion of golden
light and half of her body dropping away. She was wearing something like a backpack, something
that was spraying out air and slowing her fall.

He was pulled away from that memory.

She was kneeling beside some sort of memorial; it was a list of the names of the dead. There were
so many.

A girl was crudely scratching the names of dogs into the memorial; her dogs, dogs who'd fought
and died.

Arms and legs were tangled together, ebony skin and pale.

Severus pulled himself from that memory as quickly as he could, hoping that she didn't choose to
obliterate him for this alone.

It was like a storm, riding from one memory to the next.

A naked woman with skin striped like a tiger's, tearing through metal, flesh and bone.

A black six legged monster the size of a van, covered in spines and scales and thick armored
plating. His flesh healed and changed as he was attacked, becoming more powerful.

The flying woman from before. The most powerful woman in the world, in a conference room with
Taylor, who was in handcuffs.

A body bag being pulled into a morgue; officially looking men laughing cruelly. It was a memory
that was strangely scattered and distorted.

Taylor was kneeling, and somewhere in the distance a man was screaming. She had her eyes
closed, and Severus couldn't see anything but her.

“Not a promise, or an oath, a malediction or a curse,” she said. “Inevitable. Wasn't that what she
said? I warned them.”

There was a sound of insects everywhere, and Severus was pulled from that memory even faster
than the one before.

He tumbled, unable to control his pathway through her memories. They were coming faster and
faster....

Learning how to fight from a black teenager.
Riding on the back of gigantic, monstrous dog monsters while laughing with other costumed teens who were riding similar monsters. Her posture with them was relaxed, much more relaxed than it had been with any of her minions in Severus's world.

This was a Taylor who was happy, or at least as happy as she could be in the kind of world she lived in.

A much younger Taylor, at least as young as the Taylor in his world. She was talking on the telephone, chattering happily.

A sound from the phone, the screech of tires, the sounds of metal against metal, followed by a horrible silence and a growing realization.

The sounds of sobbing.

A black dress, drizzling rain.

Mom would have hated this; the sobbing in the background, the shine of the box as it was lowered into the damp ground.

Her father a shadow of his former self, as much a remnant as a Wizarding ghost. It was as if he'd been Kissed but had somehow been able to still talk and move.

It hurt as he was yanked from this memory, and for a moment he found himself trapped in the dark. He tried to withdraw, but there was resistance.

Suddenly he was inside a strange craft. It was unlike any kind of craft he'd ever seen, all cool metallic lines. It was like something he'd seen on the telly when he was a child.

There were screens everywhere, and on the screens a winged woman. Cameras were focused on different parts of her body; she was waif thin but wore no clothes. She had multiple wings, three of which were wrapped around her, nominally protecting her modesty.

Her hair was white with tints of silver; it wreathed her head in gossamer strands that floated as though she was in the water and not in the air.

Her face was like a doll's, with a stare that saw nothing and everything at the same time. She was beautiful as an angel would be beautiful; inhuman and horrifying. No man alive would even consider himself worthy of someone who looked like this, even without knowing what she was.

Hopekiller.

She reminded him of a verse from the Christian Bible, one his muggle grandparents had made him read.

The Seraphim had six wings; with two they covered their faces, with two they flew, and two covered their feet. Apparently feet in the Bible were often a euphemism, at least according to a conversation he'd overheard from a religious Ravenclaw.

A flash of images, of entire cities locked away, of people turned into curses waiting to trigger.

She could see the future, and she slipped into a man's mind. All it took was the urge to say a few words into the wrong ears, to inspire the wrong person, to set off a series of events that ruined lives and destroyed hearts.
Entire cities were walled away because of this creature, innocent people trapped because of the possibility that she might turn them into someone who would kill their friends or family, or maybe just say the wrong words to someone else who might.

This was the world that Taylor Hebert came from. A world of hopelessness, a world where the best outcome was waiting for death.

The girl beside Taylor was speaking.

“We're here because we're asking you for help. For vengeance, for your strength. We want you and the rest of the Endbringers on board to stop Scion.”

What?

They were trying to ally themselves with that thing? Taylor knew what this thing was, what it did to people. She knew it could never be trusted. A brilliant human might be able to see a dozen steps ahead; she could see ten thousand.

Why would Taylor ever ally herself with something that was responsible for tens of thousands facing fates worse than death?

What had she said?

That she's saved not only her world, but every world?

The Simurgh didn't act like it heard them. It simply floated in the air, as though it didn't actually need its wings at all.

Taylor was arguing with the other girl, their faces turned away from the screen for a moment.

It was confusing that he was seeing this at all if she wasn't looking, but the monster finally moved its head.

It was a subtle shift in expression, but for a moment Severus thought that the monster was looking at him.

That was impossible, of course. This was only a memory, a shadow of the past.

Still, it was unnerving even if she was just staring in his direction. Snape checked; there was no one or nothing behind him that she could be staring at.

To reassure himself, he pushed himself with his mind, trying to get another view of what was going on. It wasn't as easy as it would have been with a pensive, but he found himself on the other side of the two girls.

The monster was staring at him still.

An uneasy fear settled in his stomach. This was a creature who could see the future; was it possible that she'd realized that he'd be here now, and that she'd foreseen exactly where he'd be?

She screamed and he felt a stabbing pain in his head.

A moment later he was back in the real world, staggering backward and falling to one knee. He could feel the blood draining from his face.

“She saw you?” Taylor asked. For once she was just as pale as he was.
Apparently she'd seen more in his mind than he'd thought.

“It's impossible,” he said. “Preposterous.”

“She turned people into time bombs,” Taylor said. “Made them dangerous, and sometimes not because they did something terrible.”

“Are you suggesting that she could have affected me?” Snape asked. It should have been ridiculous, but there had been something about the sound of her scream that had deeply unsettled him.

“Powers are bullshit,” she said soberly. “And the Endbringers had powers that were more bullshit than most. Scion hobbled everyone else's powers, but theirs weren't hobbled at all.”

“I never saw your powers from before,” Severus said.

A look of guilt flashed across the girl's face. Was it possible that he had seen those memories, but that she'd removed them?

A quick glance showed her hands nowhere near her wand. That was suspicious in itself. Normally she'd never allow someone to point a wand at her without a wand in her own hand.

Was knowing about the Simurgh making him paranoid.

“It was the worst thing about her,” Taylor said quietly. “You couldn't ever trust that your thoughts were your own. They kept me away from her, you know, until the end. They didn't think I was stable enough, and the damage that I could have done would have been unthinkable.”

“How did they fight her?” he asked. If she was anything like the other one, with the added power of driving men mad, it would have been almost impossible.

“In short bursts,” Taylor said. “And it was a death sentence to fight too long; no one could risk a Cape becoming one of her proxies.”

They killed their own then.

Severus felt nauseous. The thought that the thing might have violated his mind was more than unsettling. It was horrifying in ways that he was only beginning to comprehend.

Would he spend the rest of his days wondering if this was the moment that he'd finally lose control and follow her will?

If she could see him from a memory, what was to keep her from simply coming to this world? What was to keep any of the others?

Taylor had apparently killed whatever creature had created these things, but no creature lived in isolation. Where there was one, there would be others.

“You lived in the future, didn't you?” he asked, his memory of chrome and steel still vivid in his mind.

She nodded.

“When?” he asked.

“2013,” she said. “At least toward the end.”
“And how bad was it?”

“Worlds were destroyed,” she said. “Billions, tens of billions dead.”

“Here?” he asked.

She shrugged helplessly. “There were a lot of worlds; I didn't really keep track.”

So it was possible that this world only had twenty years left before... something happened.

“Maybe this isn't the past,” Taylor said. “Maybe time just runs a little slower here.”

He stared at her.

She shrugged.

“If it happens, there won't be anything we can do about it. I try not to think about it too much.”

When he could finally speak, he said, “I think that's it for the lessons for today.”

He rose to his feet, and he left without saying a word.
Serius

I'd learned a lot during my first lesson with Snape.

For one thing, it was possible to be so wrapped up in legilimency that you lost awareness of the outside world. That meant that you were vulnerable to anyone with a wand.

I'd have to be careful about that. It wasn't hard to use a wand and then stick it back in a pocket.

Next, I'd been able to keep him away from noticing my insects mostly. The times that I hadn't were regrettable, but ultimately not something he was going to remember.

Third, sometimes there would be bleed through. There had been a point where Snape had started to experience my memory instead of simply see it. I'd experienced some of his mind at that time as well. I hadn't really been able to see anything; just a sense that he'd seen aspects of my being bullied in his own life when he'd been younger.

I didn't need to see the specifics; the feelings were more than enough.

It seemed that many things in the Wizarding World were things that cut both ways.

Becoming an animagus was terribly dangerous for obvious reasons. Yet learning it might be the edge I needed if I were ever caught by the Death Eaters and they didn't do the intelligent thing and simply end me.

It was one of the few defenses that didn't need a wand at all, which meant that it was good for those times that a person was disarmed.

Most wizards didn't bother; it was primarily useful for reconnaissance and stealth, and it was always possible to get something entirely useless, like a deer or a beaver or a turtle.

I'd read that the form of the patronus was often indicative of the animal you would become. If that was true, I might as well give up the endeavor entirely.

Yet knowing how to become one didn't mean I needed to use it. It was better to have more cards up my sleeve and not need them, than to have none when I was losing.

Better still, I had a wizard who knew how to do it right here.

“Mr. Black,” I said carefully. “I want to thank you for allowing us to stay in your house.”

“Are you planning to turn me into a rock again?” he asked. He was sitting at the table and stating at his drink. Apparently things weren't going as well with Harry as he'd hoped.

“If it'll save your life or someone else's, absolutely,” I said. “Do I need to turn you into a rock again?”

“Could you?” he asked.

The signs of depression were obvious to me; I'd lived with it in my own house for years. I'd experienced it myself.

“He's not James,” I said.
From the glimpses I'd seen in Snape's mind when he thought I wasn't looking, that was probably a good thing.

Sirius had been pushing too hard; trying to create a relationship from scratch a little too quickly. Harry was fascinated by stories about his parents, but he wasn't the child he'd once been.

He'd seen the threat the death Eaters posed, and he'd applied himself commendably.

“I'd have thought he'd be a little more fun loving,” Sirius said. He slowly tilted the drink in his hand. “But instead he's focused and determined. He's a lot more like Lily than his father.”

“I've been training him for more than a year,” I said. “Trying to keep him alive.”

He stared at me uncomprehendingly, and I sighed. Apparently he didn't know my reputation as well as everyone else did.

“He's never, ever going to be able to relax until the Death Eaters and their master are dead and gone.”

“I just expected to see more... something,” he said, waving his hand with a look of frustration on his face. “It's like he just doesn't like to have fun.”

“He likes it,” I said. “He's just a little more serious than you.”

He stared at me for a moment, then grinned ruefully.

“It takes time to become a family,” I continued. “You can't force it.”

He stared back down at his cup, his face settling back into a frown.

“Would you like something that might help bring you closer to him?”

His expression sharpened, and he stared at me.

“Harry needs every little advantage that he can get,” I said. “And he's not the only one. How hard was it for you to become an animagus?”

He laughed, a short, almost barking sound.

“If it was easy, everybody would do it,” he said. “It saved my life, but most people aren't going to end up in prison.”

“I've been in prison before,” I said. If he checked, he'd assume I meant in this lifetime when I'd been under arrest by the Ministry. “It's possible that I might be again.”

“You want to learn?” he asked.

I shrugged noncommittally.

“How long would it take?” I asked.

“You've got to harvest a mandrake root,” he said. “And keep it's leaf in your mouth for an entire month. If it slips out, you have to start over.”

“Even when you sleep?” I asked.
“You wouldn’t believe how easy it is to accidentally eat a mandrake root while you are eating a nice roast beef,” he said. “And if you fail, you start all over.”

I nodded.

“Then you have to use the leaf to make a potion,” he said. “Hope that the moon shines, because it's the last step in making the potion, and if it's overcast or something... well, it's back to sucking on mandrake leaves for another month.”

“What else is in the potion?” I asked.

“Dew that hasn't been exposed to sunlight or human feet for a full seven days. The chrysalis of a Death's Head moth.

I'd have to breed for quick reproduction.

“Can you just capture the dew on the first day and then stick it in a cupboard?” I asked.

He frowned. “I'm not sure.”

I pulled out a notebook, making a note.

“What have you got there?” he asked.

“What do you know about the experimental method?” I asked.

His expression of incomprehension told me exactly how much he knew.

“I'll need to find something else that uses this ingredient,” I said. “Because this whole mandrake business seems a little arduous to risk on an untested method. If it works, it makes things a little easier. How did you solve it?”

“Houseplant,” Sirius said. “We put it under glass in James' basement. It killed the plant, but it worked.”

I made another note.

“Once you've got the potion, you've got to wait for an electrical storm,” Sirius said. “So you can take the potion. Until then you have to recite an incantation every sunrise and sunset.”

“OK,” I said. “So we'll have people watching the weather reports on television, and we'll just go to where the storms are.”

He stared at me.

“The muggles keep track of the weather and tell everyone when it's likely to happen,” I said. “They've got cameras in the sky that watch for storms and report on it.”

He stared at me.

“Cameras in the sky?”

“In space,” I said. “They send pictures back and people can tell which way storms are going.”

I wasn't clear on when the news had started showing the weather, but I was certain they did by the nineties; I'd seen a weather report in France last summer with Hermione.
Sirius was a pureblood; I doubted that he'd ever even looked at a television, much less watched the weather.

“Next thing you'll be telling me is that muggles have been to the moon, or that they've found a way to cut bread before you buy it.”

Now it was my turn to stare at him. I'd met purebloods who would have been amazed by these very facts, but...

“I know what a weather report is,” he said. He grinned. “My best friend's girl was a muggleborn.”

Right.

It was probably a bad idea to generalize just because someone was a pureblood. Not all of them were ignorant xenophobes.

“How are you going to get the forecasts from every part of the country?” he asked.

“I've got muggleborn friends everywhere,” I said. “And they've got halfblood friends. If I let them know that I need to know when a storm is going to hit, they'll tell me.”

“So you want me to teach you and Harry?”

I shook my head.

“How many do you think you could teach at once?”

“What...” he asked. “You want me to teach the entire muggleborn class how to be animagi?”

“Eventually,” I said. “I think I want to start with my most trusted twelve.”

“Including you and Harry,” he asked.

I nodded.

“We'd have to keep this secret,” I said. “Likely not do it here, either. The Longbottoms household has strong defenses.”

I'd intended to train with the rest of my team over the summer. It was a bit of a risk; I'd investigated the defenses of all of my friends' houses.

In the interest of expediency and saving money, the muggleborn had all gotten standard suites of defenses. It wouldn't be enough to ward off a determined attack, but it would be enough to warn them and allow them to escape via the floo network.

The Longbottoms had invested in upgrading their defenses since my pensieve treatment had returned their family to them. According to Neville, there had been some attempts to breech there security. After each attempt, they'd beefed things up even more, to the point that their home was almost as well protected as money could buy.

If I could get Sirius to sign off of going with me to Neville's house, I'd get out from under Snape's watchful eye and I'd be able to get things done. Neville said he had a garden of magical plants; hopefully he'd have some interesting species of magical bugs to match.

“An entire class of animagi,” he said. He stared off into the distance. “Wouldn't that make it... not special anymore?”
“Most of us consider not dying special,” I said. “And it's not like you're teaching a class at Hogwarts. You'll be teaching kids who know that having an ace in the hole might make the difference between life and death.”

“You don't get to pick your form,” he warned. “Some of them might end up as panda bears, or a sloth or a snail of something.”

“Even a snail would be useful,” I said. “And you can't just quit because something might not be useful. Snails can climb walls and might be small enough to go through mouse holes.”

“And get eaten by mice,” he said.

“Maybe,” I said. “But if you are in a situation where you are desperate enough to go in a mouse hole, you are pretty much already dead anyway.”

He frowned, then nodded.

“You can't tell Snape or Dumbledore,” I said. “Or any other member of the Order. Some of them might register us.”

He grimaced when I said Snape's name. Apparently their relationship was somewhat strained. I hadn't really seen much

“They haven't registered me,” he said. He had a thoughtful look. “Still, it would be a huge prank on the Ministry... a dozen unregistered animagi.”

“Eventually two hundred,” I said.

“You'll never get that many Death's head moths,” he said.

I shrugged.

“All things are possible.”

Depending on what forms people gained, I might even be able to use it as an infiltration tactic. A dozen beetle animagi might change the tide of a battle very quickly, especially if they were all disillusioned before I entered combat.

“You have big plans,” he said. “Asking someone for a favor when you keep turning them into a rock.”

“The worst you can do is say no,” I said. “In which case I'll just badger you for the rest of the summer.”

“Honest little thing, aren't you?”

“It helps to have a reputation for honesty,” I said. “That way if I tell you I'm going to gut you with a knife, you believe me.”

He stared at me for a moment, his head cocked to the side as though he was trying to decide if I was serious.

A moment later, he shook his head, and then said, “I might as well. Dumbledore and the others don't trust me enough to let me take part in whatever they're involved in. They think that my being in Azkaban for so long has made me a little crazy. Can you believe that?”
I'd heard him muttering to himself too often to completely dismiss the idea. However, if I could learn a useful skill from a crazy person, I was more than willing to try.

He laughed, and the sound of his laughter was a little strained. Years of having dementors eating away at his soul couldn't have been good got him.

“I suspect they think I'm crazier than you,” I said. “so you're in good company.”

He'd probably been sustaining himself solely on hatred for years; now his life was different and he didn't have a purpose. He'd have likely thrown himself at the Death Eaters with a vengeance, but Dumbledore and Snape didn't trust him.

He'd have been happy to be a godfather to Harry, but Harry was too alien now. I'd infected him with responsibility, and it would take time for them to get acquainted.

He needed a purpose now.

“Have you thought about what this will mean for the muggleborn?” I asked. “It'll save some of their lives. It might give them a chance to fight back. Death eaters might die.”

His head snapped up and he stared at me.

“Every time a muggleborn kills a Death Eater because of something you taught them, it'll be like you did it yourself. Besides, wouldn't Lily have wanted you to protect Harry's friends?”

“You're trying to manipulate me,” he said. His grip tightened on his cup. “But it's not like I've got anything better to do.”

“It'll force Harry to spend time with you,” I said. “And who knows what will happen? You'll be able to shape the minds of an entire generation of Hogwarts students... won't that be the greatest prank in history?”

“Might teach them a trick or two,” he said.

He was twelve years out of practice; I doubted he was even up to our standards. It was possible that he knew things we didn't, though, and I wasn't going to turn away anyone.

Besides, getting more adults on our side would only be useful.

“I won't start with twelve, though,” he said. “It's too many. There's parts of the whole thing that are dangerous.”

“How many, then?”

“Six,” he said. “Four would be better.”

“Six it is, then.”

Me, Harry, Hermione, Neville since he'd be hosting. I doubted that Ron would want to go through the arduous process involved; his eating habits alone would have him swallowing his leaf, and he tended to become nasty when he was irritable.

I'd have to go with one of the graduated seniors and a sixth year.

“It won't be easy,” he warned me. “There will be times when you want to spit that leaf out and give up. Most people do.”
“My people aren't most people,” I said. “And I'll make sure that if they spit the leaf out, they'll lose some teeth with it. They can regrow teeth, right?”

“Maybe this'll be entertaining, at least,” he said.

“The most dangerous part will be when we drink the potion,” I said. “The Death eaters have a precog... a seer, and they may come for us.”

He perked up at that.

“So we could set a trap if we wanted.”

“We wouldn't have a lot of time,” I said. “Considering that we'd have to be watching the weather reports.”

“We've got the summer,” he said.

“That's true,” I said. “And it's not like Dumbledore or Remus are planning to include us, so we might as well make our own fun.”

In the distance I heard the sound of Kreacher cackling along with the sound of squealing.

“What did you do to my house elf?” he asked.

“Gave him a purpose,” I said. “Turned him into the Death of Rats. I've got bigger plans for everyone else.”

“What are those?” he asked cautiously.

“The Dark Lord... what do you think his name means?”

“French, isn't it?” he frowned. “Flight from Death?”

“Something like that,” I said. “And I want the people who work for me to become death. I want the muggleborn to become exactly the thing he claimed that they were... the ones who will replace him and his kind.”

“That's ambitious,” he said. He carefully set his cup down. “Especially for a second year.”

“Almost third,” I said. “And frankly, the current dark lord was an underachiever. I've already accomplished more in my first couple of years of school than he did in six.”

My organization was certainly bigger than his had been.

“All right,” he said. “What do we need to do?”

“I'll need to contact my friends,” I said. “And then we'll need to get some ingredients together. I'm going to need an exact list, including the stuff you left out. No point in getting everyone exited if we can't get components for everyone.”

He nodded.

“And then we'll see what kind of inner animal we all have.”
“You've done our family a service, Miss Hebert,” Neville's grandmother said. “But I'm still not certain why this has to be done here.”

“The place I'm staying is too small,” I said. “Not for the scale of what we'll be doing. Plus, the entire point of the thing requires secrecy. The more people who know about it, the greater the chance that someone will break.”

“And you've chosen to tell me?” she asked. “Someone you barely know?”

“You have a reputation for integrity,” I said. “More importantly, Neville is a good friend, and he has a high opinion of you. I've learned to trust his judgment.”

“That's high praise,' she said. “Don't think that I'm unaware of your contribution to his development. He's hardly the same boy that he was when I sent him to Hogwarts two years ago.”

“You can't turn a pig into a plow horse,” I said. “He always had the ability to become someone better; it simply too time to bring it out.”

Our training sessions had changed Neville in more than one way. The baby fat that had covered him had almost vanished, and he no longer spoke with a stutter.

Snape still intimidated him, but he'd learned to hide his feelings behind a wall of impassivity. The fact that the others helped him improve his potions skills had kept Snape from bothering him too greatly.

“There are dangers to what you're contemplating,” she said.

“We'll have the help of someone who's been through it.” I said.

She sniffed.

Apparently her opinion of Sirius wasn't as high as her opinion of me.

“You'll do it here,” she said. “Under supervision, at least for those parts that are dangerous.”

I nodded.

She hesitated.

“My son will never be what he once was, Miss Hebert,” she said. “But you returned a part of him to me. I will be eternally grateful.”

I nodded.

“I didn't do anything anyone else wouldn't have done,” I said. “Had they thought of it.”

“You don't think like anyone else, though, do you?”

“It's why it's good to have outsiders introduce new ways of thinking,” I said. “I might see things in a way you don't, but it doesn't mean I can't learn from you.”
She meant that I didn't think like the other muggleborn. That was because the system was designed to encourage conformity of thought. Bring the children in at an impressionable age, dazzle them with magic, and then keep them away from their muggle lives. Cults sometimes did worse jobs of indoctrination.

“You have my permission.”

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“Using a sticking charm seems like cheating,” Sirius grumbled.

“I thought you were all about cheating,” I said. “And there isn't anything we could find that says it will cause any problems in the spell.”

Hermione looked smug.

The sticking charm had been her idea, and the research hers as well. We'd sent Sirius out to get books for us, and we'd scoured everything he'd allow us to see in the Black Library.

We'd all just finished applying the small leaf to the insides of our cheeks and my cheek was already turning numb.

“The next three days aren't going to be easy,” Sirius told us for the third time.

“The leaf is poisonous,” Hermione said. “I know.”

Sirius smiled, and it wasn't a pleasant smile. “You have no idea.”

There was something strange about his face. It took me a moment to realize that it looked as though there was something moving under his skin.

Was this really Sirius or had he been replaced by someone who had been polyjuiced?

I opened my mouth to speak, but the world seemed to tilt on its axis. I felt myself slipping to the floor, and my heart was beating in my chest.

The others weren't in any better shape.

Hermione had fallen as well, although Neville and Harry seemed to be doing a little better, probably because they were larger and had more body weight.

“I did mention that it was hallucinogenic, didn't I?” Sirius said. As he leaned toward me, it looked like his head was expanding like a balloon.

Worse, my sight with my insects was distorted as well. I saw him in a thousand different eyes like a kaleidoscope.

The world expanded and contracted around me, and I struggled to stay conscious. Sirius had warned us that this would be unpleasant; I had brushed his concerns aside.

Maybe I shouldn't.

I could see insects crawling out of the walls. I wasn't controlling them, and I couldn't sense them at all with my insect senses.

I saw them crawl over all of my friends, and I could hear the sounds of chewing as they quickly defleshed them.
All I could do was stare as I realized that I was alone.

Why was my face hanging over a toilet bowl?

Oh.

My midsection heaved again as my body tried to rid itself of the poison that was still flowing through my veins.

“Drink this,” Sirius said. “It'll help to undo some of the damage to your organs without ruining the leaf.”

I took what he offered me, a vial, and I drank it without even checking to see if it was poison or not.

It was cool, and it made me feel better the moment that I drank it.

“Aren't you glad I insisted on just four of you?” he asked.

I nodded weakly. My stomach heaved again, and I hoped that I was managing to keep at least some of the potion down.

“How long has it been?” I asked.

“Fifteen minutes,” he said. He grinned. “Just three more days and you'll be in the clear.”

I wearily lifted one finger in his direction as he left the room, heading for the bathroom next door, where I could hear Hermione retching.

He'd done this on his own without supervision? All for Remus?

How in the hell had they managed to keep this secret when they were at Hogwarts?

According to Sirius, it had taken them the better part of three years to work out how to do it on their own. It was possible that they'd used the Shrieking Shack.

Had they taken shortcuts when they'd come up with the procedure, or were there things they didn't know, things that would have made all this easier?

Somehow I couldn't see McGonagall doing all of this.

I must have blacked out, because I woke with my head on the lid of the toilet. I looked blearily up at Sirius.

“This is probably worse for you since you are so small,” he said. “We were fifth years by the time we managed this. What do you weigh?”

“Seventy five pounds?” I muttered.

“We were twice your weight then,” he said. He wasn't grinning as much anymore. “If you want to stop this, we can...”

I shook my head.

“As long as it's not permanent damage, I don't care.”
He stared at me for a moment, then nodded.

“Let's get you up and into the bedroom. I've set up sleeping bags on the floors; I don't want any of you falling out of the bed. I can yell you from experience that's not fun.”

“And if we need to...” I gestured toward the toilet.

“Chamber pot if you need to hurl,” he said. “The house elves will take care of it. If you need to use the restroom, as one of the adults and we'll help you there.”

He helped me to my feet. My feet felt numb, and they dragged behind me, and a moment later he picked me up and carried me to the room they'd set up.

They'd cleared out all the furniture except for the bedrolls and two chairs, presumably for the adults who would be watching over us.

Sirius lay me down on top of a sleeping bag, and I rolled over to my side.

A woman in her early thirties had Neville's head in her lap. She was stroking his hair gently and she was singing a gentle song.

Her face was still thin, but the worn look I'd seen in some of Neville's earlier pictures of her was gone. There was a quiet serenity in her face as she stared down at her son.

Neville seemed to be having a better time of it than I was. Maybe it was because he actually had his mother.

Seeing her stroke his hair made my chest ache... or possibly it was the poison.

Still, I could see Harry staring at the both of them, at Neville lying with his mother's hand on his head, and I could see a look of raw longing in his face.

If he was like the other orphans that I had known, he'd probably dreamed that his parents would one day show up alive, there to rescue him from the hell that his life had become.

“Harry,” I said, and to my distress, my words came out slurred.

“Yeah?” he asked. He didn't look at me, instead choosing to continue staring at Neville like a man dying of thirst.

“Do you want me to have a talk with your aunt and uncle?”

His head snapped around and he was looking at me now. He grimaced, apparently moving his head had made him dizzy.

“What?”

“I could talk to them,” I said. “Make them be nice to you.”

“I know how you talk to people,” he said. He stared up at the ceiling for a moment as though he was thinking about it, and then he shook his head.

“It wouldn't work,” he said. “The wards wouldn't let you in. It protects them as much as me.”

“They aren't always at home,” I said mildly. I heard a ringing in my ears... was that normal?
“You’d ambush them at work, or at the grocers or something?” he asked. He sounded a little horrified. “You aren’t supposed to use magic on the muggles.”

“You don’t think I could be... convincing without magic?” I asked.

“They’re my relatives,” he said, grimacing. “They’re terrible people, but they aren't Death Eaters.”

Did he think I’d mutilate them or something? That would just raise questions that none of us wanted answered. There was a lot of territory between a firm talking to and limb removal.

Of course, his family did sound particularly stupid.

“Just say the word,” I said.

Hermione suddenly retched into her bowl, and hearing it made me nauseous as well. A moment later I was grabbing for my bowl.

After what seemed an eternity, I heard Harry say dryly, “Ron’s going to be sad he missed this.”

The irony in his voice was almost palpable. Yet Ron likely wasn't going to believe Harry about how hard this was, not until he went through it himself.

How's everyone feeling?” Sirius asked cheerfully. “Ready to give up yet?”

Neville threw up, and then shook his head. He looked even more miserable than the rest of us felt. The fact that he was going through this at all impressed me.

Hermione and I were both on the Death Eater hit lists, both because of being muggleborn and because I'd murdered a lot of their relatives and friends. Harry was in the same boat; I'd heard the prophecy and knew that Voldemort was going to have to murder him sooner or later.

Neville wasn't on anyone's chopping block. Staying friends with me didn't protect him like it did the others in my organization. If anything, it made his life more dangerous.

He could have easily hosted this and simply abstained from doing it. I wouldn't have thought less of him for giving up early.

“Well,” Sirius said, “If you're sure.... the fun part is about to start.”

“What?” I asked.

That was when the entire world began to morph and change around me.

“Muggle mandrake is bad enough,” Sirius said. “But Wizarding mandrake...whooo.”

The next three days were considerably harder than Sirius had let on. The month after that passed quickly.

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“It's cloudy,” Sirius complained.

I'd gotten to know him better over the past month. Apparently, he'd considered underselling the strength of the mandrake's poison to be a form of a prank.

The reason Snape hated him was obvious; I couldn't see Snape ever taking a prank in good spirits, much less actual bullying.
Sirius didn't think he'd bullied Snape, of course. He seemed to think of his school days with a sort of rose colored lens. I could read between the lines, though, from the stories he told Harry, and more importantly the ones he didn't.

“Does the ritual require a clear sky, or just moonlight?” I asked. We'd had this argument a dozen times.

“Moonlight,” he muttered.

“The most dangerous thing is the possibility that we might have Death Eaters popping in when we go up.”

“You could fall off your broom,” he said.

“Sticking charms,” I reminded him.

The one advantage we had was that we were going to be in the air. I'd been gathering insects for days in preparation; they wouldn't be waiting for us.

If they apparated in on brooms, the odds were that they would have a moment of disorientation. I'd soaked some insects in a poison that was harmless to insects, but deadly to mammals. It was one of our more successful potion mishaps.

I liked to think of it as an ironic reversal of pesticide. It was dangerous enough that a few flies in the mouth would be enough to take care of an average sized human. The only unfortunate thing was that it had to be ingested.

Bezoars wouldn't work on it either. There was a cure, but I kept the formula hidden and the antidote in my fanny pack.

“Are you ready?” I asked the others.

They nodded.

This would have been safer if we'd simply been able to stand on the roof and mix the potions there, but I wasn't willing to wait another month.

According to Sirius, the potion was only the first step. Learning to master your new form would take time, and the summer was short enough that I felt a strange sort of urgency.

“Bubble head charms?” I asked.

They all nodded.

Sirius was going with us; in part it was to protect us, and partially because he was hoping that the Death Eaters showed up. He'd been practicing with a ferocity that I normally only saw in my muggleborn trainees.

We'd helped him train, of course. It had helped to keep our skills sharp, and he'd turned out to know a few tricks I hadn't heard of. In turn, we'd impressed him with our organization and efficiency.

“Up,” I said.

The bubblehead charms were because I wasn't sure how far we'd have to go to get above the clouds. Even better, if the Death Eaters apparated to our position, the lack of oxygen might slow
them down.

I wasn't sure how far up my insects would still be viable. Hopefully, if they weren't, then the Death Eaters would suffocate.

We soared into the air. We were all disillusioned, of course. The last thing we needed was to make the obliviators work overtime. That might strain whatever goodwill I had with the Ministry.

Being disillusioned would help in the event of an attack. Presumably the Death Eaters would have to use the human revealing spell, and that would cost them time.

Although I couldn't see him, I knew that Sirius was grinning. He'd shrunk a bludger; solid iron, the thing weighed a hundred and fifty pounds at full size.

It was enchanted to ignore us and to attack anyone else on a broom.

Wizards had small bits of accidental magic when it came to falls, but at thousands of feet, nothing was going to make a difference.

If they kept their heads, they'd be able to apparate away, but I was going to do everything I could to disrupt their concentration.

No plan was foolproof, but Sirius loved the idea when Harry had suggested it. The thought of Death Eaters raining down had tickled his fancy, although he'd insisted that we move two blocks to the right of his house.

We reached the top of the clouds, and the moon was shining brightly.

The clouds here were low lying, otherwise we'd have have had to put the whole thing off all together. Despite this, we were still almost a mile in the air.

At temperatures of seventy degrees, most of my insects could only reach a height of thirty six hundred feet. At ninety degrees, that would reach six thousand.

There'd been cases of flies being found at nineteen thousand feet, but that wasn't the norm.

In any case, we were at the safe limit of my insects flying ability, but I was able to scan the area and see that it was clear.

“Drop the disillusionment,” Sirius said. “The potion has to be visible to the moon.”

Whatever that meant.

I complied and so did the others. It made me feel like a sitting duck.

I pulled a vial out of my fanny pack, and I put my wand to my own cheek to unstick the leaf. I then spat the leaf into the vial. I plucked one of my own hairs and dropped it in, and pulled out another vial painted black.

It had the dew in it. Adding that to the chrysalis of the Death's Head moth, I held the potion up to the light and pointed my wand at it.

We'd practiced this indoors, going through the steps over and over. There had been a lot of mistakes; they hadn't been terrible as we were using false ingredients.
This time, everything went smoothly.

I spoke the words of the ritual while waving my wand, and a moment it changed.

When I was sure the others had all succeeded, we disillusioned ourselves again, and returned to Neville's home.

It seemed impossible; we'd had a flawless run without a single Death Eater in sight.

We didn't learn about the attack on Diagon Alley until the next day.
“It's a sign of desperation,” I said.

We were back in Sirius's home, with the potion vials neatly labeled and hidden. Remus had contacted us, asking that we return from our “vacation” at Neville's for our own safety.

This was the first time I'd seen Dumbledore or Remus in more than a month. I wouldn't have seen Remus the night before in any case as it had been a full moon.

Tonight was as well, so he was going to have to leave soon.

“What do you mean?” Remus asked.

“If they were fighting from a position of power, they'd have attacked a hard target... Gringotts, the Ministry, a place that was well protected. It would show the inability of the government to protect itself.”

“But they didn't do that,” Hermione said. She was still staring at the paper, where there were pictures of innumerable Diagon alley shops on fire.

Every shop that had been attacked had been owned by a muggleborn or a half-blood. Pureblood shops had been left alone entirely.

“They attacked a soft target,” I said. “And they used a bunch of imperiused patsies to do it. Between the Ministry and Dumbledore, they've been under a lot of pressure to stay relevant. People have started to feel safe again because most of the fighting is out of the papers, and the only thing that gets reported is their losses.”

Remus frowned.

“I wouldn't have thought that the opinion of the common Wizard would matter much to them.”

“It's everything,” I said. “Their power has always been based on smoke and mirrors. Every wizard is armed, and they outnumber the Death Eaters a hundred to one. Even Dumbledore would have to run if there were enough Wizards trying to kill him.”

Dumbledore stared at me with one eyebrow raised.

“You have to sleep sometimes,” I said. “And all it would take would be for some sedative in your soup, and somebody could kill you easily.”

Dumbledore carefully put down his soup spoon and stared at the bowl.

I usually had my insects smell my food before I ate it. In this world I couldn't trust anything.

“There are curses that can kill you just from picking something up,” I said. “Even the best wizard in the world can be blindsided by something like that, and once all his allies have been killed, he'd have to run away and hide.”

“He's immortal,” Remus said.

“Really?” I asked. “From what I hear, being killed just leads to his getting a new body later. Just give him the Grindlewald treatment, or worse.”
“You make it sound so easy,” Dumbledore said dryly.

“Muggle governments can rule people because they have bigger guns and bombs and they are have gangs of people they can dogpile you with. That's not true in the Wizarding world. Any wizard who's willing to work hard enough can become dangerous.”

“And how would you deal with them?” Remus asked.

Because Hermione, Harry, Neville and Sirius were here, they had to be circumspect about how they questioned me.

“If they were a muggle terrorist group, you'd target the money, and you'd target communications,” I said. “Wizards don't have the same needs. They don't need weapons or ammunition; they can steal food and shelter from the muggles.”

Remus looked up sharply at that.

“I'd have thought they'd avoid muggle areas. Most purebloods don't know a lot about them.”

I glanced at Sirius.

“You can't assume that every pureblood is ignorant of the muggle world. Tom was raised in a muggle orphanage, after all.”

They all frowned at that.

“I doubt he really believes in all that pureblood claptrap anyway,” I said. “He's a halfblood. Most likely he believes that he's the only person who really matters. If he could have risen to power by gaining the allegiance of the muggleborn, we'd be having a very different conversation right now.”

I'd been gathering information about Voldemort from as many sources as I could over the past year. Myrtle had been his classmate, and so had Hagrid.

I had to take both of their reports with a grain of salt, because each was clearly biased in different ways. However, I'd read as many books as I could about the last war in an effort to get an idea of his tactics and strategy.

“He's a sociopath,” I said. “He bears all the classic symptoms. I had one of my associates track down his old orphanage. Sixty year old records were difficult to find, but they found them in a back room. Did you know they were worried about him even as a child?”

By associate, I meant Mundungus Fletcher. I hadn't been willing to risk one of my muggleborn seniors on something like that, even if I thought that Voldemort cared about his childhood home that much.

“He hurt animals,” I said. “He was a loner and he bullied other children with magic.”

I'd had to read between the lines to discover that one.

“And from that what would you guess about his behavior?”

“If he was a muggle he'd end up as a serial killer,” I said, “Or maybe the chief executive officer of a large company. A politician maybe. If he was a serial killer, he might collect trophies.”

Dumbledore looked thoughtful.
“He had a box,” he said. “Of stolen articles taken from the other children.”

“Does anyone know how he became immortal?” I asked.

Remus and Dumbledore glanced at each other, in a way that I thought was suspicious.

“I have suspicions, but as of yet no proof,” Dumbledore said.

“Well, a lot of things like that have loopholes. I've read about old muggle legends about wizards removing their hearts and hiding them somewhere so they could not be killed. Is that possible?”

“Are you seeking to become immortal yourself, Miss Hebert?” Dumbledore asked cautiously.

I shook my head.

“If we knew he'd hidden his heart, then we could start looking for it,’ I said. “If he'd become a vampire, then we could poison our blood, or use sunlight. If he'd drunk unicorn blood... well, we'd figure something out.”

“I hardly think that even Tom Riddle would be so foolish as to drink the blood of a unicorn. It would only provide a half life at best, and that would never be enough for him.”

“What about the philosopher's stone?” Hermione asked. “I've heard that has let Nicholas Flamel live for hundreds of years.”

She'd done some of my research about possible sources of immortality. There weren't many, unfortunately.

“The stone extends life,” Dumbledore said. “But it does not prevent death. Nicholas is no more proof from being killed by any means other than sickness or old age than any other wizard.”

“You'd have thought he'd have at least tried to get the formula for the stone out of him,” I said.

“Why not simply take the stone?” Remus asked.

“What happens if your stone is destroyed?” I asked. “If you can't make another one you are dead. If you have the formula, though, you can make a spare.”

“Like having a spare wand?” Remus asked dryly.

I flushed. “It's not a silly idea. It may end up saving my life one day.”

“You could hand them out to the people you cared about, so they could live just as long as you,” Harry said brightly. “And then you'd never lose anyone.”

“I doubt he cares about any one of his followers enough to share a secret like that,” Dumbledore said. “It was always important to him to be special, and there is nothing more special than being the only immortal.”

“It sounds lonely,” Neville said. He stared at the table.

“Friends and followers are interchangeable to him,” Dumbledore said. “As far as he is concerned, one is as good as another as long as they are useful.”

“He should be more careful,” I said. “Wars are about attrition.”
The adults clearly knew what I was talking about. So did Hermione. Neville and Harry seemed clueless.

“In the muggle world, the side with the most weapons and men in the end tends to win,” I said. “Unless you can break their will to fight. That happens with democracies when they feel that the cost of warfare exceeds whatever goals they have.”

Neville looked confused. “But Wizards aren't like that, right?”

“We don't have to worry about ammunition,” I said. “So attrition in this case is all about who has the most men and how skilled they are. The Death Eaters were always at a disadvantage in terms of numbers compared to the Ministry. Their opening gambit, with the mind control was a really good way of stopping that.”

“But the Strange Master thing you taught them helped stop that,” Neville said.

“Master Stranger,” I said absently. “It takes a long time to implement, so it's not much good in the field. The protocols are really more about being aware of your comrades in arms and about how they normally act.”

“He wasted a lot of manpower trying to kill you,” Hermione murmured.

I nodded.

“Once he saw that I was as difficult to kill as I turned out to be, he should have either stopped sending people after me, or he should have come after me himself. I wasn't actively thwarting his plans, at least at first, so I was a problem that could have been left until later.”

“He'd invested a lot into killing you,” Remus said. “Failure must have seemed humiliating.”

“He could have used those men when Dumbledore started pressuring him,” I said. “If he didn't have his seer, I doubt he'd even still be something that we'd be talking about.”

“You have great confidence in my skills,” Dumbledore murmured.

I shook my head.

“You don't have to be as strong as he is. All you need to be is strong enough to distract him long enough for someone else to shoot him in the back.”

Remus and Dumbledore both looked horrified by that. None of the kids at the table looked remotely disturbed by it.

“You should be careful about that yourself,” I said. “Because if it occurred to me, it will have occurred to him. He'll probably kill whoever does it, and then tell his followers it was because they stole his chance to defeat you and prove himself the strongest Wizard.”

“Is that what you'd do?” Dumbledore asked.

I shook my head.

“I'd reward whichever follower did it; in the end it doesn't matter who is the strongest. It's who's still standing, no matter how that happens. Ego had no place in survival.”
“Tom always had a massive amount of ego,” Dumbledore said.

“It shows that he's afraid,” I said. “Afraid of death, of not being good enough. He can't let anyone come too close for fear that they will betray him.”

“Lonely,” Neville said.

“It almost sounds as though you pity him,” Remus said.

“Would you pity a rabid dog?” I asked. “Maybe... but it wouldn't change what had to be done.”

“It sounds as though the Seer is his biggest asset,” Hermione said. “Is there anything we can do about that?”

“We haven't been able to get any information,” Remus said, despite a sharp look from Dumbledore. The kids didn't know that Snape was a double agent, and they weren't going to know, at least until they all learned occlumency, and maybe not even then.

Hermione turned to me, and I shook my head.

There hadn't even been rumors in Hogwarts about the Seer; while it was possible that was because the Death Eater kids had left, I suspected that they wouldn't have known in any case.

“It's his strongest asset,” I said. “He's going to keep it from anyone who absolutely doesn't need to know. Mind control means that no secret is safe. If I were him, I'd probably have the seer or seers locked away somewhere that no one could find them.”

“You'd have to keep them fed,” Remus said.

“You could do it yourself, or use a house elf sworn to silence,” I said. “Is it possible to just apparate food to a place without going yourself? If it is, he might just do that.”

“Seers don't need their wands to use their skills,” Remus mused. “But they generally don't remember the content of their visions, either.”

“So use more than one,” I said. “And use the Imperius to force them to record each other's prophecies.”

“Are you talking about a seer sweatshop?” Hermione asked incredulously. “Seers are highly unreliable at best. Even arithromancy, which is much more scientific is only somewhat reliable.”

“Well, he's figured out a way to get better results,” I said. “I know he's not feeding them luck potion at least.”

“Oh?” Dumbledore asked.

“Because the smarter thing would have been to feed luck potion to his best man before they came after me. It's really hard to make.”

“I'm assuming you tried?” he asked.

“Me?” I asked. “No. I'm not nearly good enough to do something like that.”

My team was, though.

We'd managed to make one vial in an entire year of trying; the components were hard to acquire
and it required six months to brew. We'd failed with five other batches.

I hadn't used any so far for a number of reasons; first, I only had one vial. Secondly, it was supposedly addictive if used too often and poisonous if too much was taken at one time.

The effects of the dose sounded a little like what Contessa's path to victory was supposedly like. You gave over control to the potion, and things went your way.

I hadn't been able to research the limitations of what that meant. It couldn't be as powerful as Contessa's power, or it would be banned by every magical government. My fear was that something like that would be used against me.

Would drinking a vial be enough to give Voldemort an edge over Dumbledore?

Would Voldemort be willing to give over even that much control over his life to an unthinking potion? It was supposed to give you a perfect day, which meant that it probably took its cues from your own conscious and subconscious desires.

I was keeping mine as an absolute last ditch survival aid.

One vial would give twelve hours of luck. It wouldn't allow for impossible outcomes; only make outcomes that were possible and favorable more likely.

There were presumably other limits as well. It made me uneasy about depending on it in anything other than the more dire circumstances.

Also, the ingredients had practically bankrupted us, and I couldn't see trying to mass produce it. If I'd been able to, I would.

Voldemort had been forced to vacate from several bases over the past few months. That likely would have disrupted any potions brewing. I'd had some of my recently adult muggleborn going through the shops in Diagon Alley to see if anything useful was for sale; once we found it, we'd scrounge up the money to buy it.

I'd considered robbing the homes of known Death Eater sympathizers, but the risk of alienating the Ministry was too great. Besides, the last thing I needed was to have some kid working for me killed in a crime.

“I sent some people to shops in Diagon Alley to do some exploratory shopping,” I said. “Mostly in the muggleborn shops because I figured we might be able to get a better price. You don't think that might be related to this?”

Dumbledore frowned.

“If he suspected that you had some plan brewing, and that this might make it more difficult, it might have influenced the timing. I doubt it would be the only reason for the attack. That would require him to take you much more seriously than he seems to have done so far.”

“Right. He'd have come after me himself if he really cared,” I said. I nodded, relieved. It really wasn't all about me.

“I've made a list of people I've seen in my foe glass,” I said. “Focusing on the people that I don't recognize. If I could get access to a pensieve...”

“I'll arrange it,” Dumbledore said hurriedly. “I'd prefer for you not to break into the castle over the
summer. The ensuing Death Eater attack might be rather expensive to repair.”

“I was just thinking that if one of the Seers is my enemy, you might recognize their face.”

They nodded.

“There aren't that many Seers in Britain, and several have gone missing.”

“They may not actually be my enemies,” I said. “Since their success rate with me is lower than it is with your people. I just thought I might get lucky and find a clue.”

“I assume that you have found your time at the Longbottom's to be productive?” Dumbledore said. Clearly he was trying to change the subject.

All he had to do was peek inside the minds of one of the others and he'd know exactly what we were doing. If he was Snape, I'd have expected him to do exactly that.

However, he wanted my goodwill, even if it was only because I was a lightning rod to draw the attention of the Death eaters away from other targets.

“We've had a perfect summer,” I said. “Mr. Black has taught us a lot.”

“I'd have thought you'd have chafed at staying in one area for so long,” he said.

More like he'd preferred to keep me out of London for fear I'd slip off to the Ministry or do something else dangerous.

“We were thinking of going back there for a while,” I said. “Once it's safe, I mean. Neville has an amazing garden. He apparently gained his skill with plants from his mother.”

“How is she?” Dumbledore asked. “I only visited Alice once, but she was in the beginning of her recovery.”

“Much better, sir!” Neville said. His face lit up, just as I'd hoped it would. He was enthusiastic on the subject of his mother, and he could talk about her for hours at a time.

It was exactly the distraction I needed, and at the same time, it was a subject Neville was proud to talk about.

Hermione and Harry glanced at me once, and then we had a perfectly cozy evening.
“There's supposed to be a storm in Ottery, St. Catchpole,” Hermione said.

I nodded.

“That wasn't one of the locations we thought was most likely, at least from what everybody told us,” I said. “Do we have anyone who lives near there?”

We were in Neville's house, which meant that Hermione had been able to Floo directly to us. If we'd still been in Grimmaud Place, she'd have had to risk arriving by Knight Bus, which would have put her in more danger than I was comfortable with.

“Ron,” Hermione said. Her voice was filled with dread.

It wasn't just that Ron was likely not going to understand why he hadn't been included. Ron's father was a member of the Ministry, almost honor bound to inform on us. His mother was a busybody, likely to tell Dumbledore, or at the least her husband.

“We'll figure it out,” I said.

Worst come to worst, I could always obliviate everyone.

Hermione didn't seem convinced, but finally she nodded. “I'll contact him through the floo and see if we can get invited over.”

“I'm not sure we've done enough to prepare,” Hermione said anxiously. “What we did last time was all well and good, but the Death Eaters might be regretting missing their chance.”

Harry smirked. “I bet they don't.”

Harry's family had balked at having the floo network installed in their fireplace until Sirius had gone over to speak with them. According to Harry he'd told them I might come to visit if the Floo wasn't put in.

Harry had apparently been enthusiastic over the past two summers in describing my deeds to his cousin; Dudley was apparently quite afraid of me.

His aunt and uncle hadn't been kind to him for that, but Harry had shown them some Wizarding papers he'd hidden. They'd destroyed them, of course, but then Sirius confirmed everything Harry had told them and then some.

I suspect that he might have exaggerated my deeds; when he'd told them that I'd be at their house to visit, they'd turned white as a ghost and they'd been more than happy to send Harry on his way, especially once they learned that the Trace had been destroyed and Harry was theoretically free to do anything he wanted to them.

They'd been much more polite to him since then, especially after Harry had demonstrated his magic with no signs of recrimination from the government.

Now he slept at home, and stayed part of the morning, not getting up until his uncle had left. His aunt and uncle went to bed early, and he arrived after they normally went to bed.

He seemed enormously pleased by the situation.
“We'll floo over to Ron's house,” I said. “And we'll wait until there is actually a storm. We'll pop
up onto his roof, drink the potion and see what happens.”

“I'm not sure you could get up on Ron's roof,” Hermione said.

“You been to his house?” I asked, surprised. I didn't know any of us had been to each other's house,
with the obvious exception of Neville.

“He showed me his home once, in the Room, when I told him I'd never seen a real Wizarding
house.”

I nodded. “So a steep roof.”

“You'll be helpless once the transformations begin,” Sirius said. “And there will be muscle
convulsions. The last place you want to be is on a roof. Also... the pain will be incredible.”

He'd been a little more forthcoming about side effects since I'd had a talk with him after the last
debacle.

“How will we keep his parents occupied?”

“Stunner and obliterate?” I asked. At their looks, I said, “Or you could just ask the Twins to help.”

“Right,” Hermione said. “I guess I'd better make that call.”

I don't know what she said to convince his parents, but we were at his home two ours later.

It seemed... lived in. It reminded me a little of my own home in Brockton Bay, before Mom died.

Everything was just a little shabby, but was well cared for. The whole place smelled of cinnamon
and peppermint; apparently Ms. Weasley had been cooking for us.

She'd been a little cautious around me, but she doted on Harry.

It had the little bits of weirdness one would expect from a Wizarding house. The clock on the
opposite wall had one hand and no numbers at all. It had little notes inscribed instead; apparently
they normally fed the chickens at nine in the morning and had tea at four.

There were books stacked on the mantle; unlike my mothers books on literature, these were books
about magical housekeeping and cooking. If I had time, I'd look through them; sometimes useful
spells turned up in the oddest of places.

A table that seated eight was in the kitchen; it was of really nice quality. The chairs were
mismatched.

There were windows out to their front yard; apparently we were likely to be finalizing our ritual
somewhere outside while still being inside the family wards.

Miss Weasley hugged Harry tightly. “I thought you weren't going to visit at all this summer,” she
said.

“You see me all the time at Sirius's,” he said, obviously embarrassed. He pulled away a little, but
he obviously wasn't trying too hard.
“Ron's been upset,” she said. “And so have the twins. Ginny too.”

“It's dangerous,” he said. “He could have come to Neville's, I guess, but Sirius is still recovering and too many people around still bothers him.”

Harry was getting better at lying. I was impressed.

“So why now?” Miss Weasley asked.

“I wanted to come,” Harry said.

That had the virtue of actually being true. He'd been happy when he'd found out where the storm was going to be. He'd felt guilty at excluding Ron, even if he'd been willing to follow my lead.

If we went through it first, we could make it easier for people like Ron if we found workarounds for some of the negative effects of the poison.

“I'm happy to be here too,” I said, and I was surprised to find that it was true.

Neville's aunt was someone I approved of, but she was not a very warm person. His mother was, but there was still a little something otherworldly about her.

Miss Weasley was the kind of person who made you feel good.

“BOYS!” she shouted. “HARRY'S HERE!”

There was a thunderous sound of feet on stairs, and we were soon joined by the twins and Ron, followed by Ginny Weasley, a girl I'd barely noticed at school, other than spying on her a few times to make sure she wasn't a plant by Voldemort.

There were shouts and laughter, and we soon moved to the living room, a cosy room with a sofa and armchairs. There was a clock on the wall with nine hands, each inscribed with the name of a family member.

It had different conditions listed; home, work, school, garden, in transit, lost, Quidditch, prison and mortal peril.

“Mrs. Weasley,” I asked, staring at the clock. “Where did you get this?”

“That?” she asked. “I don’t know. My husband brought it home for Christmas one year; it helps because I tend to worry.”

This was more useful than a foe glass if it was accurate. You had to stand in front of a foe glass, but this could be seen anywhere in the room.

I wondered if it was expensive; the Weasleys didn't look like they had a lot of money, so maybe it would be within our budget.

I could even assign bugs to look at it regularly.

“We all had to give a little blood,” she said, but it helps me greatly.

“You wondered if you were all in mortal peril when you brought us here,” I said. She'd glanced at the clock a couple of times. “Don't worry; if we put you in any danger, we'll leave.”
“The ones chasing you might not let you,” she said in a low voice.

Harry was surrounded by the younger Weasleys, telling exaggerated stories about his time at Neville's.

He didn't seem to notice Ron's look of anger.

“I'd be interested in getting one,” I said. “Not for myself, of course; I don't need anyone tracking me. I'd like to keep the people I care about safe, though.”

“It's good that you have people to care about,” she said. “People who don't end up becoming dark lords.”

“You mean me?” I asked. I shook my head. “I don't want to run things.”

“It seems that you already run your school,” Mrs. Weasley said calmly.

“Oh, that's just what I've been forced to do, to keep everyone safe,” I said. “I'll be happy to give it all up when everyone is safe.”

“And when will that be?” she asked.

“When the Death Eaters are all dead or in jail, and their master is taken care of permanently.” I said. I frowned, “And maybe once some better rules are passed in the Ministry. The current system tends to breed dark lords. It might be good to give the whole system a good overhaul.”

She looked disturbed for some reason.

“Hermione's going to be Minister for Magic someday,” I said. “And she'll take care of it.”

“And she works for you?”

“Right!” I said brightly.

Mrs. Weasley frowned, and then carefully reached out and hugged me for some reason. It felt nice, but I didn't understand the context.

For some reason, I soon found myself pulled into helping to make dinner along with Hermione. Apparently it was part of the deal she'd made with Mrs. Weasley.

Harry was out with the boys, even though he was twice the cook that I was; apparently he'd been cooking since the age of six.

“You cooked?” Mrs. Weasley asked. “What about your mother? Did she work?”

“My mother died,” I said. “When I was... well, shortly before I came to Hogwarts.”

Saying that she'd died when I was twelve would indicate that she'd been alive when I'd come to school.

“You poor dear,” she said. “I'd heard you were an orphan. What happened?”

She wasn't asking questions for Dumbledore; I'd already told him all of this. This was simply a woman being curious despite my natural suspicions.

“My parents were murdered by Death Eaters,” I said. “And I was tortured by them to the point that
I have brain damage.”

I couldn't tell them what had really happened; my theoretical life story was already known.

“She cooked,” I said, noticing that both of them had gotten quiet. “She was a literature professor, but she always made time for me.”

“Taylor grew up in a bad neighborhood,” Hermione added. She glanced at me. “From what I've heard it was a really bad neighborhood.”

“Made Knockturn Alley look like a picnic,” I said sanguinely.

“You don't have to chop those by hand,” Mrs. Weasley said. “There's a spell that will do it just as well.”

I was chopping rapidly.

“It doesn't bother me,” I said. “It's good for me to have a knife in my hand, and the skills you use in cooking make potions class easier.”

It really was magical cooking class in a way, even though I'd never tell Snape that. The thought that he was teaching magical home ec would really bother him.

Dinner was cozy and pleasant; we ate outside watching the approaching storm.

Fortunately, the Weasley parents and Ginny were soon yawning, likely helped by the sleeping potion I saw the twins slipping into their food.

Was this something they'd done a lot? It seemed weird that they'd have the potion on hand. Were there long term effects to that, like there were to excessive obliviation?

Hmm... if I obliviated Voldemort enough, could I give him a magical form of Alzheimer's?

I added it to my mental list.

“So what's this all about?” Fred asked.

“It'd better be good for us to dose the whole family,” George said.

They'd done it without Harry even telling them? I looked at Harry with a new look of respect. I hadn't expected him to engender that kind of loyalty in them.

“We're becoming animagi,” I said. “And tonight is the last step. We'll be helpless when we make the first change.”

Ron was staring at us with a look of betrayal.

“Trust me, mate,” Harry said. “It's a lot less fun than you'd think.”

“If it's any consolation,” Sirius said brightly, “It's going to be incredibly painful.”

Ron stared at him, obviously wondering if he was joking.
“It won't hurt once they get it right,” he said. “But until then...”

“If he says it's going to hurt, believe him,” Harry said. “If he says it won't... he's probably lying.”

Ron still didn't look convinced.

“Sirius was only willing to take four of us,” I said. “Me, Hermione and Harry because we've got Death Eaters wanting to murder us, and Neville because his house is the best defended, and his parents aren't likely to inform on us.”

“Hey!” Ron said. “Are you saying my parents would...?”

“It would be your father's duty,” I said. “And if they found out he'd helped us if I was convicted of a crime, it'd make him guilty too.”

Ron glanced at Neville, clearly wondering why his parents didn't receive the same consideration.

“I saved his parents,” I said. “At least to a degree. Mrs. Longbottom has the resources to defend herself.”

“So it's because we're poor?” he asked angrily.

George put his hand on Ron's shoulder.

“We've got Ginny to protect, and if Mum and Dad die, there's a lot of us who are going to be in trouble. There's just Neville over there.”

Neville looked uncomfortable, both by my implication that he was only part of the group because he had a house, and that his parents were somehow worth less than the Weasleys.

I could see, though that he understood that we were trying to make Ron feel better. We'd talked about it earlier in the summer.

Ron didn't look completely convinced, but he at least stopped complaining, which was good enough for the moment. I'd known that he'd be unhappy; jealousy seemed to be his worst character flaw other than a certain amount of laziness.

Hopefully, his Weasley loyalty would smooth things over eventually. Otherwise, I'd have to depend on those members of my group who were better at that kind of thing than I was.

Intimidation was great for enemies, but it didn't engender loyalty. That took an entirely different set of skills and actions.

“The storm is coming,” Sirius said. He pointed.

The wind was already picking up around us.

We'd debated how to keep the potions; they were to be in a dark, undisturbed place until shortly before the storm. We'd settled on keeping them in my fanny pack with cushioning charms, and I'd spent most of the month without it, which had left me feeling almost naked.

Now I reached inside and handed the potions to Hermione, Harry and Neville. I took mine in hand. They were all prominently labeled; Sirius wasn't sure what would happen if we drank the wrong potion, but he had a feeling that it wouldn't go well for anyone.

We all pointed our wands at our own hearts.
“This is going to be dangerous,” Sirius said to the others. He'd explained it to us at length. “They could get stuck halfway in one form, and half in another; it could even become permanent.”

Ron stared at us, seemingly uncertain.

“Amato Animo Animato Animagus,” we chanted in unison. We'd cast this spell on ourselves every morning and every night for the past month.

According to what I'd read, some Wizards in the past had to go through the ritual for years while waiting for lightning to literally strike.

Lightning struck in the distance, even though the sound of thunder had yet to reach us.

“Now,” Sirius said.

I upended my vial, and the taste was as terrible as you might expect. It slithered down my throat, and everywhere it went a strange warmth filled me.

My skin started to itch; at first just a little, but more and more over a period of just a few seconds.

I managed to keep from scratching by force of will alone, but the others were already ripping at their clothes.

Despite myself, I found myself scratching at my neck; more leisurely than the others, but still inexorable.

Now my skin was starting to burn, and I could hear the cries from the others. They were falling to the ground and trying to claw their way out of their clothes.

I fell to the ground, and I could see the horrified, stricken look on Ron's face before the twins forcibly turned him around and away from us.

Sirius watched; he'd warned us about this as well. Once we got better at this, we'd be able to transform with our clothes. Right now, it was impossible.

Eventually we'd be able to choose, which I saw numerous uses for.

Sirius had to watch, because it was possible that one of us would go into respiratory distress when some organs changed faster than others. He had to be there to keep us alive long enough for the change to finish progressing.

It was always possible that your form would be a fish, or a shark, or something incompatible with dry land. It was unlikely since none of us other than me had been raised near the shore, and I didn't identify with sea life much due to Leviathan.

Other things could go wrong as well. A boy's lungs trying to support a horse body, a heart that wasn't large enough for the volume of blood that had to be transported.

Assuming that you survived the transition and had someone to help you, none of those things were impossible to overcome; doing it without someone there as a midwife was crazy, according to Sirius.

Considering that he didn't seem to be the kind of person who would think about everything in advance, I took that warning seriously.
Hermione started screaming first, followed by Neville and then Harry. My own throat had already closed off; I tried to scream, but I could not.

The world warped and altered around me, and everything changed and became utterly alien.
I could see through my feet.

It took me a moment to realize that it wasn't actually sight; instead I was sensing the vibrations in the earth beneath my feet, and my brain was somehow translating that into something I could understand.

There were twenty five earthworms digging through the soil beneath my feet. I could hear the sounds of their digging through the vibrations transmitted through my legs. It sounded strange, but I knew what they were.

I'd known that the insects I'd controlled had senses that I just didn't have, but those senses had always been filtered through my human brain. I simply hadn't had the frame of reference to understand what my bugs were sensing in anything more than a general sense.

I'd done fine with sight and hearing, but my power had filtered the senses that I lacked or that I had to a very limited degree into something that I could understand.

In the darkness, the next thing I noticed was an unbelievable richness of smell. An entire universe of odors was suddenly open to me, and part of me wondered how I'd never noticed it before.

Even odors that would have once disgusted me now smelled enticing.

I could smell the aftershave that Sirius wore. Before, it had been a barely noticeable afterthought. Now, it was overwhelming, even though Sirius had to be at least twenty feet away.

Beneath that, I could smell the soap he used; not just the soap itself but at least twelve elements that made up that soap.

Every flower, every plant, every body not just in the Weasley home or yard, but well outside that suddenly each had their own unique and overwhelming smell. Even without my powers, I could tell how many insects were around.

I was in the darkness, presumably because I'd changed without my clothes and I was trapped inside them.

I could hear the panicked heartbeats of at least two of my companions. I could hear the sounds of shouting; apparently something had gone wrong with at least one of the others.

Their voices sounded distorted; incredibly deep and slow. It was almost as though every panicked word was drawn out, taking five times as long as it should.

That should have bothered me; I somehow couldn't remember why. All of them were Other; somehow not related to me or my hive.

This wasn't like when I'd offloaded my emotions into my bugs. Then I'd at least understood what emotions were, and I'd had a memory of what they'd been like.

Now the world seemed crystal clear to me. I could remember what emotions were supposed to be, but I couldn't remember what they'd felt like, other than anger.

Anger I understood, and I suspected that I could still experience it.
I moved remorselessly toward the light. I could see bits and pieces of light through the cloth, usually when there were flashes of lightning.

I reached out with my power; it was still there, and if anything, it was stronger than I'd experienced in a long time. It was as though this form had a natural affinity for control.

My mind worked faster in this form, which meant that I could take better advantage of the faster reaction times of the insects under my control.

A moment later, I was free.

I felt the wind on my wings, and I began to flap them experimentally.

The Others were all huddled around someone else and no one was looking at me.

They were monstrously huge. At the moment, even the smallest of them looked nine hundred feet tall. Either they'd all grown enormously, or I'd become very small.

It didn't matter; I had wings.

If they attempted to take my territory, I'm make them pay. I had my sting, but even better, I had my swarm, and even in this mindset, I knew how to use it.

I watched them for a moment; it didn't look as though any of them had designs on my former skin coverings.

Still, better safe than sorry. I began to move my wings, tentatively at first, but soon I was lifting away from the earth.

It took a moment, but I suddenly realized that I was capable of another feeling: joy.

Lifting into the wind, I found myself hovering over the ground. I'd always wanted to fly; Atlas and my jetpack had been imperfect substitutes, but this was what I was meant to be. This was a form that was meant to fly.

I wanted to shout with glee, but I could not speak.

I rose into the air, staring down at the figures below. One of the humans was struggling, I could see it was growing fur, but there was something wrong about its movements.

I could smell its distress, hear the sound of its beating heart. It was a sound that changed in pitch and tempo, almost moment by moment as the heart itself changed shape.

They were panicked, but that was no concern of mine. The breeze had ten thousand intriguing scents, some of which I was anxious to investigate. The problems of the Others were no concern of someone like me.

A familiar scent came with an updraft; I'd smelled it at school when looking for a post. Then, the only reason I'd been able to smell it was because dozens of creatures were cramped in a small area along with their own filth.

This smell was much more detailed and much more alarming. Something within me screamed danger, and I instinctively rose higher into the air.

One of the Others was completing her change; I could see a baleful yellow eye staring up at me from a face that morphed around it.
Feathers and a beak exploded in my direction; I barely managed to bank to the right in time to avoid being snapped down a gullet.

With my enhanced speed it should have seemed slow, but it did not. Her flying speed was almost twice mine, and my only advantage was that she was marginally less maneuverable due to her weight.

She was seventy times my size, with a wingspan that was twice that. She was a monster.

Yellowish eyes stared at me balefully as she banked around again. Her night vision was excellent, but her senses weren't as good as mine.

I began to gather my forces even as she dove for me again. Night insects threw themselves in her path, and she snapped at them, gobbling them up as quickly as she could.

Her eyes were on me, though.

I dove; the Others were supposedly my allies, and if I could get inside one of their false coverings, the enemy would be forced to withdraw.

She was gaining on me; her size and speed made her fast compared to me.

Bugs began to swarm her, even as I dove toward the smallest of the humans still standing.

He shrieked and began flailing his hands around. This made me want to sting, but I did not. Instead I dove into the neck of his robe.

I felt the impact as the bird struck him. If she'd struck where I was, I'd have been crushed. As it was, I'd already crawled around beneath his limbs, headed for his back.

I could feel his organs through my feet as they vibrated and gurgled, lungs filling with wind and bellowing in an incredibly deep way.

A moment later, the predator's smell was gone, replaced by the stench of a human and everything that came with that. The bird was gone, replaced by a girl.

The Other I was using as a shield slapped at himself, although his movements seemed incredibly slow and clumsy.

Allies should not attack allies. As a matter of principal I stung him, once, twice, then three times. As he bellowed and jumped around, I slipped down to the bottom of his coverings, and then I was in the air again.

I approached my own former coverings, and I dove inside, comforted by my own former scent.

A moment later the world contorted itself; it became smaller somehow. I suddenly felt as though I'd gone blind, and not because of the fact that I was wrapped in dark robes.

I was human again, and somehow, it felt as though I was less.

Was it like this for all animagi? If it was, why didn't they simply run off into the forest and live life in the moment?

I struggled to find the holes for the neck and the arms, and it took me several moments. I felt slow and clumsy, as though I was moving through molasses. The sweet clarity I had felt as whatever I was was gone, replaced by human concerns.
By the time I was able to see again, Hermione had run inside the house. I could hear her trying to get dressed inside through my bugs. Sirius was no longer wearing robes; apparently he'd thrown his over her before she'd run inside.

Neville had apparently turned into a small rodent; it took me a moment to realize what it was. He'd become a hedgehog.

That was a disappointment, even if it seemed somehow appropriate. Hedgehogs were resistant to snake venom, and they tended to be shy and nervous.

I'd have to get a closer look at Hermione's owl. If she could pass as a post-owl, that opened up some possibilities, assuming that she could get over her instinct to eat me.

The others were still huddled over Harry, who I couldn't see.

I could hear Sirius murmuring in a low voice as I stood up, awkwardly trying to slip into the clothes under my robes.

As I approached, I could see golden fur and a tuft of a tail. Whatever Harry had turned into was big; really big.

I could hear the sound of heavy breathing as I approached. The creature that had once been Harry was already staggering to his feet.

His mane was magnificent.

He stared at me for a moment, and I carefully let my wand slip into my hand. As a full grown African lion, if he lost control to his animal instincts the way Hermione and I had, we'd all be in big trouble.

Instead, despite the trouble he'd had in transforming, Harry seemed to have better control over his mental state. He stared at us, then lazily opened his mouth showing a vast number of sharp, white teeth.

"I thought you usually transformed into an animal native to the place you live," I said.

"Usually," Sirius said. He looked up at me. "That's why I said four of you were too many to teach at once. It was irresponsible of me."

I nodded soberly. The thought that we might actually eat each other hadn't even occurred to me.

Harry's form was the least useful of any of ours, even if it was the most impressive. Being larger than human, he just made a bigger target. His best bet was going to be to transform from close range, before his target had a chance to react.

My form was good for stealth; Hermione's was common enough in the Wizarding world that she could likely slip into any owlery and then into wherever she wanted.

A hedgehog could slip into any English garden and it would likely be ignored by everyone except the house elves. A lion, however would be incredibly obvious to everyone.

Maybe if I could put armor on him. That would likely deflect the killing curse. Armor with shield spells attached might be helpful. I could literally turn him into a tank.

"He's a Gryffindor all right," George said. He actually sounded proud.
I'd never taken the Houses too seriously, and I suspected that the people who followed me didn't take them as seriously as previous years.

The twins had been raised in that system, though.

"Surprised you didn't turn into a snake," Fred said to me. "Given that you are the Slytherin-est Slytherin who ever slithered in."

"You stung me!" Ron shouted. He was scratching at his back.

"You tried to hit me," I said calmly. "I was being nice by not stinging you in the eyeball. I was tempted."

"I've never seen a wasp like that," Sirius said. "Whatever it is, it isn't native to here."

"What did it look like?" I asked.

"Black abdomen and head," Sirius said. "The rest was mostly red. It was kind of hard to see in the dark."

"I read about a wasp like that," I said. "It's from Asia. I don't think they've named it yet."

I frowned.

Most animagi took the form of an animal they were familiar with. Why did I have an affinity for this one?

"It's got a kind of venom that affects other insects. It stops their ability to control their own body. I think I could just lead a bug wherever I wanted with it, so I could eat it somewhere else."

It was a useless ability for someone with my power, of course, but it was impressive for a tiny insect that was less than half an inch long.

"You mean you basically Kiss the bugs?" Ron asked. He was still glaring at me.

"I'd have said turn them into zombies," I said, but he ignored me.

"That's how people that have been Kissed end up. You can lead them anywhere you want."

"I guess we could call it a Dementor Wasp," I said, joking. "At least until the muggles finally get around to naming it."

Ron looked suddenly panicked. "I'm not going to get paralyzed, am I?"

"Yeah," George said. "It just takes longer for the poison to take effect since you're so much bigger. Taylor here is going to make a snack out of your brain in a little while, and then she's going to still be hungry."

Sirius smiled briefly, then said, "At her size, I doubt she'll be dangerous to you. We should probably use some of the treatments in the house just to be sure; I'd hate for you to have an allergic reaction."

"I think your head is starting to swell, little brother," Fred said.

George had pulled his wand out; Ron wasn't facing him. Had Ron's childhood always been like
“I’ll go in first,” I said. “Make sure Hermione is decent.”

I still didn't have most of my underclothes on; I grabbed for what was left on the ground, including my shoes, and I made my way across the lawn.

My bug senses enabled me to pick a path across the lawn free of any twigs or stones that might hurt my feet.

Hermione had finished dressing.

She was sitting on the couch, staring at her hands. When she looked up at me, there was a little bit of fear in her eyes.

Ah.

She'd tried to kill me, and I usually took exception to that. Best to reassure her that everything was normal.

“Good, you're dressed,” I said. “They'll be looking for a medical kit for Ron. I might have stung him a few times. Mind of a wasp, you know how it is.”

What did a Wizarding medical kit even look like? It probably had a bezoar and maybe some potions. Did they even bother with bandages?

“I'm sorry I almost ate you,” Hermione said. She looked away from me, and her face was still flushed, probably because she'd been naked in front of the boys.

Ron had probably looked too. I immediately felt a little less bad about stinging him.

“We'll have to work on those instincts,” I said. “Can't be eating each other. The rest of us would barely be an appetizer for Harry.”

She giggled a little at that.

“I'm going to get you a little message carrier for your leg,” I said. I wondered if she would be willing to wear a little mail carrier hat as an owl. She probably wouldn't, because the others didn't wear them, but it would look cute.

“I'm not going to deliver the mail,” she said, looking up at me.

“Might be the easiest way to get into some places where they stay on the lookout for anything else,” I said. “I could ride in your feathers as long as you don't try to eat me.”

She was silent for a moment.

“I can't believe that I ate bugs,” she said. “And it didn't bother me.”

I shrugged.

“When you're using a different brain, there are bound to be some personality changes,” I said. “Even if it were still a human brain, there's all sorts of genetic personality traits that would be different that would change you. In an animal brain? It's amazing that we can think at all.”

“It's strange,” she said. “When I was coming after you, it was almost like bugs were throwing
themselves in my mouth, trying to distract me.”

I froze.

“That is weird,” I said carefully. “Maybe you just flew through a swarm and it seemed like that?”

She shook her head.

“They were moving like they had a purpose,” she said. “Almost like they were protecting you.”

“Maybe it was accidental magic,” I said. “Even at our age that kind of thing still happens.”

She was staring at me, as though she was trying to see if I was lying. Ironically, I technically wasn't.

Before I could say anything else, the door opened, and Ron staggered inside. His head was swollen to twice the size it had been before and he was yelling at his brothers, who were laughing at him.

Through the chaos that followed in trying to find the medical kit, I felt Hermione's eyes on me, watching me assessingly.

This is the Dementor Wasp, discovered in 2007 and named in 2014. For obvious reasons, they'd likely have ended up with another name in Taylor and Harry's respective worlds.

“No attacks this year either,” Hermione said.

“Don't relax until we get into the castle,” I said. “An attack at the last minute when we are letting our guard down would be smart.”

“So you and Harry can see the thestrels,” Ron said. I wasn't sure why he was still talking about that. Surely he'd noticed that we could last year?

Actually, I couldn't even remember whether he'd been in the carriage last year. He'd likely been distracted.

“I saw Taylor murd...er, kill a Death Eater on top of a train,” Harry said. “And I've heard her killing them a lot of times.”

“I heard her killing them too, and I still can't see them,” Ron said. He sounded irritated.

He'd been upset ever since the whole animagus thing, although seeing the difficulty that Harry had in completing the transformation had scared him a little.

He certainly hadn't rushed forward to learn how to do it once Harry had filled him with stories of what it actually involved. Hopefully he'd never need it.

After that debacle, Sirius and I had agreed to never teach more than two animagi at a time, or at least two per teacher, and preferably in different rooms.

I still planned to teach others how to teach; it would be harder during the school year because we wouldn't be able to travel to find a lightning storm, and they were rare in this part of Scotland.

It would probably be better to wait until next summer; no point in having someone put mandrake leaf in their mouth for a year just to prove their loyalty to me.

“Do you want to actually see death?” Hermione asked. She sounded irritated, likely because we were cramped tightly into the carriage.

Only Neville and Luna were actually visible; the rest of us were disillusioned. It likely wouldn't stop the Death Eaters for long, but even a few moments for them to cast the human revealing spell would be enough for me to kill a few of them.

“I go to school with her, don't I?” Ron asked irritably. “You'd think that would be more than enough.”

“You shouldn't joke about that kind of thing,” Millicent said primly. She'd been quiet throughout the ride. She'd lost a lot of weight over the summer, presumably because she'd continued the exercise regimen I had assigned to her. I would have included her in our group, but her family preferred to keep her with them.

They'd been in hiding in Spain.

Truthfully, I was surprised that they even bothered to let her go to school here; it would have been a lot safer just to move.

“Taylor has saved more people than she's killed,” Millicent said. She hesitated. “Unless she's killed
some more people this summer I haven't heard about.”

“You're keeping track?” Hermione asked, surprised.

“I've got a scrapbook with all the newspaper clippings,” Millicent said enthusiastically. “About both the ones she's killed and the ones she's saved.”

Millicent still hadn't forgotten Tracey; she took a vicious pleasure in hearing about the deaths of more Death Eaters, especially since they'd uprooted her family during the summers. I didn't tell her about anyone I'd killed where it wasn't public knowledge, of course.

She hadn't had occlumency training yet, after all.

“I'd be interested in looking at your figures,” Hermione said. “I've been working to figure out what kind of numbers the Death eaters have, and a casualty list might be helpful.”

Even the Ministry didn't have a firm idea of the numbers. Working only from public data, Hermione was going to have a hard time.

“We might be able to cross reference the dead Death Eaters with others in their family who are likely candidates,” Hermione said brightly.

“Don't forget that Sirius is a Black,” I said. “Despite his mother and his other relatives. If I killed everyone who was related to a Death Eater, I'd pretty much kill the entire pureblood and half blood world.”

“The Weasleys don't have any Death Eaters,” Ron said indignantly.

“Aren't you related to Draco Malfoy?” Hermione asked.

“Take that back!” Ron protested.

“Your mother showed me your family tree,” Hermione said. “Your paternal grandmother was Cedrella Black. That makes you Sirius's second cousin. Draco is his first cousin.”

“Why are you looking at my family tree anyway?”

“There's a theory that muggleborn don't actually exist,” Hermione said. “I'm trying to prove or disprove it.”

Everyone was silent for a moment, and then Hermione said, “Stop poking me.”

“You feel like you exist,” Ron said. “Don't be so hard on yourself.”

“I clearly exist, or I wouldn't be arguing with you,” her voice said. “But some people think that muggleborn aren't really muggleborn.”

“What do you mean?” he asked suspiciously.

“Some people think that the ability to use magic only appeared once in humans,” Hermione said. “And that muggleborn are just the descendants of squibs.”

“What, so you could be related to any of us?”

“All of you, if you go back far enough,” Hermione said. “I don't know whether it's true or not. I've got my family lineage traced back to a Hector Dagworth Granger, and there's records of a squib by
“What?”

“But how can we be sure they are the same person?” she asked. “I plan to write a paper on it when I get out of school.”

“You mean a paper that you won’t get credit for?” Ron asked. He sounded as though she was insane.

“If I can prove that we're all related...” she said.

“It won't make a difference,” Ron said. “I hate Malfoy, even if we're related. Maybe more now that I know.”

“It might make a difference,” Hermione said.

I'd set up a sound muffling spell around the carriage. Hopefully multiple voices from two children wouldn't alert anyone that something was strange.

We all became silent again.

“I think it's lovely,” Luna said dreamily. “Will you let me brush your mane?”

Her hand was stroking where Harry's shoulder should have been.

No one had told her about our animagus transformations; she shouldn't have known.

“I... don't know what you're talking about,” Harry said quickly.

I'd pressed on them the importance of secrecy. Our animagus forms were only useful if they were secret. Once they were known, they would be useless.

“It's all around you,” she said. “Like a halo. I didn't know I was in a menagerie.”

“I did,” Ron muttered. “Everybody's mental.”

Was he actually trying to help? I was actually pleased by the attempt.

“Brave Gryffindor,” Luna said. She stared up at the sky. “It's like most of you belong on a flag. Brilliant Ravenclaw, a wise old bird. Some of you don't quite fit, though.”

“Oh?” I asked neutrally.

“Digger in the garden, without the mean streak,” she said. “Not a Hufflepuff; braver than that, but just as loyal.”

Neville had been really loyal, even at times when it would have been easier not to.

“But you aren’t a snake,” she said. “It's surprising really/”

“I'm an American,” I said, as though that explained anything.

“It's probably the worms,” she said. Her voice sounded different, and her eyes were glazed. “Twenty years to the end of the world.”

“What?” I asked. The silence around us was deafening.
“Did I say something?” Luna asked. She looked confused.

“What did you mean the end of the world?” I asked.

“I don't remember saying anything about that,” she said. “I just remember talking about Harry's hair.”

I felt a chill down my spine.

My real fears had nothing to do with Voldemort and everything to do with Scion. He'd destroyed a lot of worlds before we'd finally stopped him. Being trapped on one, even twenty years from now wasn't something I was looking forward to.

I needed to keep working with the others on occlumency; eventually I was going to have to transform the entire society if we were to face an attack.

Hermione had seemed to get the message about not talking about her suspicions, at least, and once I'd managed to get the rudiments of legillimency from Snape, I'd begun teaching her occlumency.

I'd had two months to get them up to snuff, and I'd worked as hard as I could. In the meantime, I'd done everything I could to keep Hermione from all known leglimens, especially Snape.

I'd included Ron as well, always teaching him at Neville's. He hadn't yet been to Sirius's house; none of them had except Harry. I didn't feel comfortable simply inviting guests over to someone else's house.

Teaching Ron had given me insights into his character. I'd had glimpses into his memories, of his petty jealousies, of his doubts about me, some of which, surprisingly weren't unreasonable.

I'd also seen genuine loyalty toward Harry.

It made me slightly more charitable toward him, and it made me have a talk with his brothers; they were causing genuine psychological damage to him, and continuing to do so would only make things worse.

It wasn't enough for me to bring him into my inner circle. Harry and Hermione had been hardened by battle. Ron was just a regular kid who'd made a bad choice in friends. I wasn't sure that his loyalty would survive being faced with a Death Eater.

It was impossible for anyone to know until they were faced with genuine danger. Training helped, but some people were constitutionally unable to adapt.

I'd taught Neville and the Twins occlumency as well. I planned to teach as many of the people in my muggle group as possible, and I planned to have the better ones working as my co-teachers. Hermione was already starting work on legillimency, and she'd teach the others.

Being included in something had helped a little with Ron's jealousy, but flashes of it still occurred here and there. We were all trying to help with it, but his flashes of irritability were starting to make me irritable.

We were all silent after Luna's declaration, the only sound the creaking of the wheels and the sounds of the thestrel hooves.

I'd tried looking into Luna's mind on the train trip, while everyone else was distracting her. It seemed that her mind was chaotic enough that I couldn't make heads or tails of it; it was almost as
though she had her own version of a natural occlumency shield.

It was comforting; even if she knew things she shouldn't, I wouldn't have to worry about her revealing anything accidentally.

We were tense until we finally stepped inside the school.

Being seated for the feast, I noted that the defense teacher's position was vacant. Lockhart was doing well currently; apparently he was on tour in Asia. I suspected that he intended to be out of the country until the whole Voldemort situation was resolved.

Draco sat down next to me.

That was unusual of him; usually he was a lot more careful to keep at least one student between us. He too had been doing well; he'd taken my advice and had become a lot quieter over the past couple of years. He was riding on his own accomplishments in Slytherin.

“There's not going to be any Quidditch this year,” he said.

“Oh?” I asked.

“Have you ever heard of the Tri-Wizard tournament?” he asked.

“I'm muggleborn,” I said. “So no.”

“They shut it down two hundred years ago after several people died,” he said. “But they're bringing it back!”

“What?” I asked flatly.

“It's a competition between Durmstrang and Beauxbatons and Hogwarts,” he said. “Dangerous, but with big rewards.”

“Really. Why would they be bringing it back now?”

“There's been concern by the international community about the Dark Lord,” Draco said in a low voice. “Even though some people say he's been on the run for a while.”

“So they're trying to reassure the rest of Europe that everything is under control by having a death sport?” I asked incredulously.

“I'm sure they'll try to make it safer,” he said, impatiently.

“I can't believe that Minister Bones would do something like this,” I said. “Not when things are going well.”

“It wasn't her,” he said. “It was a couple of lower officials. She wasn't even involved.”

“What kind of things are involved in this?” I asked suspiciously.

“One task per school,” he said. “They used to have kids fighting monsters, although my father says that's unlikely to be the goal now. I hope they don't make it too easy?”

“Planning on trying out?” I asked.

He shook his head.
“You think I'm going to be in the running?” I asked.

He grinned.

“Might be fun for Slytherin to represent the school, wouldn't you say?”

I shook my head.

“I don't plan to do anything like that,” I said.

“Grand prize is a thousand galleons,” he said. “That's nothing to me, but you…”

I frowned.

It was a nice amount, but if I participated there was every chance that the Death Eaters would try to sabotage the event to have me killed. It would be best to simply stay out of the whole thing.

“Hey,” I said. “It's the new students.”

“You know, Professor Snape has given orders for the prefects to give a speech about you this year.”

“What?”

“Most of them have likely heard about you, but there are always some that think they can make comments because they come from a good family.”

He sounded so superior to all of that.

“And what are they going to say?”

“The truth,” he said. “That your boggart is that you are going to murder us all and that bothering you will do the rest of us a favor.”

“What?”

“Professor Snape says that it's good to cull the dunderheads early, lest they breed stupidity into the next generation.”

“Isn't it a little late for that?” I asked.

Draco shrugged. “I wouldn't know. Does that mean I'm stupid?”

I stared at him.

Making fun of himself? That showed a level of self confidence that I wouldn't have expected from him.

“The Sorting is starting,” he said. “Want to bet on which house the kids are going to get sorted to?”

They'd already sent one kid to Ravenclaw. I shrugged. I didn't have anything better to do, and I wasn't allowed to sit by any of my real friends, other than Millie, who was talking animatedly with a second year and sitting on my other side.

The Sorting Hat was reciting some kind of poem; it did this every year. It was awake now; I'd have to get to it soon before it fell back asleep again.
“Sure,” I said. “That one looks kind of shifty...Slytherin?”

“Slytherin!” the hat shouted.

“One for me,” I said.


“HUFFLEPUFF!” the hat said.

“I’m not sure,” I said about the next one. “Could be a Ravenclaw, but he doesn't look very confident.”

“Hufflepuff then,” he said.

It was a little disturbing that we were right two thirds of the time. Sometimes it was because Draco knew the families the kids were in and the houses they were likely to go to, but just as often there were things in their body language that cued us in.

Sometimes we were entirely wrong.

“You've been pretty talkative today,” I said when the sorting was finished. “Is there a reason for that?”

“The Dark Lord is on the retreat, and your people are on the rise? Isn't that enough?”

“You still think I'm going to be a contestant,” I said. “So you want to be a trainer?”

He shook his head. “Campaign manager, maybe. You've been in the papers a lot recently; this will make you even more famous.”

“You don't think being seen in the papers next to me would be a bad idea?”

He shook his head.

I pulled out my wand and cast a quick muffling spell under the table. He noticed immediately.

“Is it because someone told you to get close to me?”

“I can't confirm that,” he said calmly. “Or deny it. I can say that I haven't been asked to do anything but keep tabs on you.”

“And you don't think I'll explode your eyeballs for that,” I said.

He turned a little pale. “That was you?”

I shrugged. “I can neither confirm nor deny that. I'm not even sure which incident that you're talking about.”

“There were more than one?” he asked, looking horrified. He shook his head, and his face became more composed. “I figured that if you know what I'm doing, and I'm up front about it, then you probably won't do anything horrible to me.”

He had been watching me.

Everyone around us reacted to an announcement by Headmaster Rowle. I dropped the muffling
spell.

Everyone was staring at the door, which had been flung open dramatically as a man stepped inside.

He stumped his way down the aisle, until he was standing directly over me.

“Hello Moody,” I said. I sighed. “I suppose you're teaching Defense this year.”

My voice rang out in the silence.

Everyone was staring at him as though they'd never seen him before. Surely they had; he'd been to the school several times investigating me.

The new kids were horrified, but that made sense. His eye probably took time to get used to.

“That's Professor Moody to you,” he said. He then finished stumping his way to the head table.

“As always, Miss Hebert seems to know things one step ahead of the rest of us,” Rowle said wryly.

“Welcome your new Professor.”

No one clapped, so I sighed and forced myself to do so. The clapping afterward was sporadic.

After that, Rowle proceeded to explain the rules of the tournament.
“The Triwizard tournament began seven hundred years ago,” Rowle said. “Supposedly it was to foster communications between young wizards of different nations. Each school would choose a champion, and they'd compete, with the schools switching out hosting duties.”

He stared at us bluntly.

“They discontinued it because the death toll was too high, and two hundred years of Headmasters chose not to continue the tradition for just that reason. Were it up to me, I'd have preferred to have continued that tradition, but I was overruled by the Board.”

I glanced at Draco.

Had his father been the one to push the vote, in favor of his master?

He looked at me, and then gave me the slightest shrug.

“That being said, we will do everything we can to protect the champions,” Rowle said. “It has been agreed that only adults will be allowed to compete.”

There were groans in the crowd, along with a few cheers. Everyone seemed to be looking at me for some reason.

“That disqualifies Miss Hebert,” he said. “Which opens the door for sixth and seventh years to put their names into the contest.”

Everyone chuckled uneasily.

The first years were all staring at me with wide eyes, no matter what house they'd been sorted into.

“However, due to our very active club participation this year, I suspect that our chances are quite good,” Rowle said. That was high praise of my group, considering that he'd only seen a couple of our training sessions.

I could see pleased grins on the faces of people in my group, even Ron Weasley. Despite his lackadaisical attendance to sessions, he'd still gotten good enough to beat students who didn't attend at all.

“The prize is a thousand galleons,” Rowle said. “And I'm supposed to talk about the glory that will be won. Beauxbatons and Hogwarts are neck in neck in the records. I won't, though. I'll let you make your own determination about that.”

“Durmstrang has never won,” Draco said quietly. “Part of the reason that my father didn't send me there. Their education is substandard in everything except Quidditch.”

“Let me be clear,” Rowle said. “People have died in this contest; sometimes not just the contestants. If it were up to me, we wouldn't be doing this at all.”

It was the school board pushing it, or someone in the Ministry, then. I frowned.

“Does that mean there will be strangers at the school?” I asked Draco.

“The kids from the others schools,” he said. “Reporters, parents, Ministry members... a whole lot.”
A lot of opportunities to slip in assassins, some of whom likely wouldn't be in their right minds. Worse, because we wouldn't know them, and because there would be so many, Master Stranger protocols would be difficult or impossible.

Draco seemed to understand my line of thought.

“It'd be bad for your reputation to be seen murdering someone's grandmother on the front page,” he said.

“Maybe I just won't go,” I said.

“And then if something happens that you couldn't stop?” he said. “Maybe to one of your friends?”

Scowling, I shook my head.

Being sniped at unsuspectingly from a crowd would be difficult to deal with. Worse, it would allow people on at least the outside grounds of the castle and would leave all kinds of opportunities for them to leave cursed items out.

“I won't forbid this,” Rowle continued, but I'd ask that only those of you who are best at magic apply.”

He was looking at my people.

They'd been the ones who'd been working the hardest over more than the past year. They'd had training in strategy, and not just in group tactics. They'd been trained in dealing with battles where they'd be the only ones fighting because they'd all be targets.

The seventh years from last year were already working as trainers for Dumbledore's muggle group, although they still reported regularly to me.

All of them looked at me.

Should I tell them to avoid the tournament? That would be the smart thing to do, but some of them could likely use a thousand galleons, and I'd intervene if there was a real problem.

I shrugged.

“Are you really a muggleborn?” a first year asked from across the table.

“Hasn't had the orientation yet,” Draco said. He sighed, and he turned to the boy. “That's just what she wants us to think. Her mother was a boggart and her father was a nundu. Dumbledore had to put spells on her to keep her from murdering us all, but every time someone bothers her, those spells get just a little weaker.”

“R...right,” the boy said. “Sorry.”

“That's a joke,” Draco said. “But it's not far from being true. I'm going to have a discussion with all of you first years before you go to bed.”

“You're giving the talk?” I asked.

“The school feels that I'm in the fortunate position of knowing you without being your enemy or your friend,” he said. He shrugged modestly. “Who was I to refuse?”
It would have the further position of cementing the first years’ opinion of him as an authority, not just about me, but about other things. Was Draco playing the long game?

Ultimately, I couldn't even resent him. He'd warned me, and all he was really doing was trying to help his family survive. If I won, he'd take credit for helping me. If Voldemort did, he wouldn't mention it.

“Right,” I said. “Try not to make too many boggarts.”

“I should have at least some fun with all of this,” he said. “I'm doing a public service for everyone...the administration for not having to do the death paperwork, the first years who aren't that stupid, saving them from the trauma of what happened to their classmates... even the house elves for not having to clean the blood off the floor.”

“Fine,” I said.

Classes began the next day as though nothing had changed. I'd wanted to talk to Dumbledore about Luna.

Was she a Seer, or just a natural legilimens? I couldn't tell. I still wasn't particularly good at looking inside of people's minds unless they allowed me, at least not without being incredibly obvious about it.

I could use brute force to shove my mind into theirs, but that was obvious. The kind of subtle, non-noticeable mind reading performed by Dumbledore and Snape was still very difficult for me.

Snape kept his mental shields up all the time around me; as far as I could tell he never dropped them.

I was surprised to see that our Herbology assignment was to bottle bubotuber pus. I noticed that Draco kept watching me.

Was he worried that I was going to slip some into my pocket? If I had had this assignment during first year, he'd have been right to worry.

Now, though, I had three Ravenclaws doing it for me. While I had no need to use it for an attack, it was valuable for potion ingredients, and it was something that we wouldn't have to pay for.

Any extra could be made a gift for Pansy if she decided to be irritating again this year.

Professor Sprout seemed less suspicious of me this year; some of the muggleborn I'd saved from Dementors had been Hufflepuffs, and she seemed to have a long memory.

I'd been looking forward to the next class.

“I'm not sure how Hagrid is going to teach,” Hermione said.

We were walking together, along with Millie and four Ravenclaws who were in my group.

Rowle had continued the policy of separating the Gryffindors and Slytherins, which meant that most of our classes were with Ravenclaws.

“Oh?” I asked noncommittally.
Hagrid didn't seem like the brightest adult to me either, but he seemed to be well intentioned. Likely the class would have a lot of hands on work and not much in the way of written assignments.

Not that I minded the written assignments now that I had mastered using the quill. A foot was apparently a single page, and they didn't expect us to do that many of them.

Mostly I was looking forward to any new creatures he'd show us, and any insight I could get on creating my own.

My holy grail was being able to create my own relay bugs. I'd been limited before by what Panacea was willing to make for me, but with enough of them, I'd be able to reach anywhere in the country.

There would have to be redundancies of course; the last thing I needed was for an errant mail owl to snap up the one link between me in Scotland and London at the wrong time.

The relay bugs would end up wandering off and possibly breeding, unless I stopped it.

Of course, a country full of relay bugs might not be the worst thing in the world as long as they weren't otherwise superior to regular ones.

Leaving them with a little extra might mean that I always had an ace in the hole. It would have been much more useful if I'd still had my full multitasking ability, although it was possible that even my passenger might not have been able to handle the information from every bug in an entire country.

“Why's Hagrid teaching anyway?” Millicent asked. “Wasn't Professor Kettleburn supposed to be teaching?”

“At least Hagrid is likely going to survive the subject better than Kettleburn did,” I said. “He only had one arm and half a leg left.”

“I've heard he was on probation sixty two times,” Hermione said. “As a teacher! Hagrid has got to be safer than that.”

“Is this class going to be that dangerous?” Millicent asked nervously.

“Just remember your training,” I said. “And be careful. Animals can be unpredictable, no matter how well trained, and I doubt that Hagrid is going to have trained some of them at all.”

I had to keep myself from freezing suddenly as we came into range of something I'd never experienced before.

They were shelled creatures, six inches long and they were blasting sparks periodically out of their nether orifices. I could tell that they were newborns, and I suspected that they would grow much larger. I didn't know what they were, but I knew I wanted some of them.

Fire breathing arthropods. I had to keep myself from squeeing.

I picked up the pace.

“Taylor?” Hermione asked.

“I'm kind of excited to see what Hagrid has waiting for us,” I said. “This isn't just the kind of class you sit in a classroom for. We might get to see monsters!”
The others seemed less enthusiastic, but wasn't this part of the reason we actually went to magic school?

Rounding to the other side of Hagrid's hut, we saw Hagrid standing beside several large boxes.

“Gather round, everyone,” Hagrid said.

I was already staring into the boxes, careful not to let my control of the things become obvious.

“What are these?” Malfoy asked. His voice held an element of disgust.

Considering that they looked like insects and had a pungent smell, I could understand his reticence.

“Blast ended skrewts,” Hagrid said proudly. “Newly hatched. I figgure we can make a project of raising them.”

“Why?” Draco asked cautiously. “What are they for?”

“They've got poison stingers,” I said examining one. “And the females suck blood. They shoot fire out their backsides.”

I looked up at everyone else and I grinned.

“These things are amazing!”

Draco stared at me.

I had one of them in my hand, and I carefully set it back into the box.

“Five points fer Slytherin,” Hagrid said.

“Can you train them?” Draco asked. “Maybe use them like attack dogs?”

He frowned at the things, considering. He'd learned a little about my way of thinking, and he was wondering just what I would do with a few hundred of these.

“How big will they get?” Hermione asked.

“Those are all good questions,” Hagrid said. “Maybe we'll find out together.”

“Let's try to feed them,” Hagrid said.

“Maybe we should use gloves,” I said. “Since they've got poison stingers and all. After all, even if they aren't very poisonous now, they might end up being a lot worse, and we don't want to get careless.”

Hagrid frowned.

“Ye might be right,” he said. “Better safe than sorry.”

He sent a couple of Ravenclaws to pick up gloves, and in the meantime we tried throwing small bits of meat to them.

“I don't think they actually have mouths,” Millicent said. “I wonder how they eat?”

“The mouth is on their underside,” I said. “I had a good look at it. It's almost invisible, but it opens
Hagrid looked at me, trying to hide his look of surprise. In truth I'd discovered it because I could feel their mouths with their own sensations.

“They likely eat insects,” I said. I could feel their hunger directed toward each other. “They'll probably start eating each other if you don't separate them.”

“Why do you think they eat insects?” Hagrid asked.

“With your permission, I'll show you,” I said. “If I can kill one of them.”

Hagrid looked doubtful.

I plucked one of the screwts out of the box with my wand, and I stabbed it into the ground. It's shell hadn't hardened yet, and so it was easy.

I proceeded to use my knife to open the thing up, showing the class the interior.

“It's weird that they have internal mandibles,” I said. “Most insects are specialized to either chew, drink blood, or vomit acid and then lap up what's left. It's unusual to have one using multiple mouth types. Is this a natural creature?”

Hagrid looked uncomfortable.

“The Ministry approved their creation,” he said.

I shared a glance with Draco. He nodded. Part of the Tournament, then.

“That explains it,” I said.

I tossed the remains of the skrewt into the closest box, and the creatures disinterest was suddenly gone. They were scrambling over each other and fighting to get to the remains.

“Yeah,” I said. “I'd get more boxes.”

I probably shouldn't have told him that; I likely could have siphoned off some of the Skrewts and installed them inside the castle walls. Unfortunately, I couldn't be sure that I wouldn't be taken away from the castle for some reason, and I'd hate to learn that some of them had eaten a House elf or a First Year.

Everyone else was looking pale.

“I've got a feeling that these are going to get a lot bigger,” I said. “Maybe get lids on the boxes once they figure out how to fly.”

Now everyone was looking alarmed. The thoughts of these things flying around the halls of Hogwarts unchecked wasn't anyone's idea of a good time.

“They don't have wings,” Hermione protested.

“They can shoot fire out their butts,” I said. “Which means they'll be able to jump really high at the very least.”

I had a sudden fantasy of sending three hundred of these things after Voldemort's headquarters, undoubtedly some pureblood mansion. They could easily set fire to something, and because it
wasn't a spell, it might even get through some of the standard defenses.

Or maybe not. However, waking up in bed with a dozen lobster sized scorpions might be enough to make almost anyone rethink their life choices.

“Five more points to Slytherin,” Hagrid said. He looked stunned.

I was cheating, of course. I did know a lot about insect biology, both from first hand experience and because I'd intentionally studied in my minuscule free time as Weaver in an attempt to get better at what I did.

I fully intended to steal some of these, but I wanted to see what they turned out to be before I let them loose in the castle. Contrary to my confident speech, I really didn't know much about them.

I suspected that Hagrid didn't either, and if they were new, maybe no one did.

Nobody argued the ten points I'd gotten for Slytherin, but that was because I'd cheated to demonstrate knowledge no one else could know.

I'd have felt bad if I cared about the point's system at all.

In truth, I doubted that most of the people in my group cared about the points much either. Other than the opportunity to put your flag up at the end of the year, they didn't really mean much. It wasn't as though you won a pizza party, or your own blast ended skrewt.

“Say,” I said to Hagrid once everyone but Millie and Hermione had left. “Just how do you breed new creatures anyway?”

“It's gen'rally illegal,” Hagrid said.

“Do you use transfiguration?” I asked.

He shook his head. “These will breed true... mebbe.... if they can breed. Might be sterile.”

“They've got reproductive organs,” I said. “But that doesn't mean anything if they're mules.”

“You aren't planning on doin any.... creative animal breedin, are you?” Hagrid asked uneasily.

“Well, I think it'd be cool if these things were smarter,” I said. “And if they could actually fly.”

“That's the sort of thing that gets ye in Azkaban,” Hagrid said. “I knew a feller who bred a fire breathin chicken once. Turned out to be a bad idea.”

“Oh?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said. “Chickens are pretty stupid, and fire breathin chickens like to set fire to just everything.”

“How do you breed something to breathe fire?” I asked, interested.

He stared at me for a moment, and then said, “I think mebbe you'd better get on to yer next class.”

I shrugged.

I'd find out about magical breeding one way or another, and if I thought the effort was worth the time, I'd do something with it.
“You wouldn't really make a fire breathing chicken, would you?” Hermione asked.

“Not a chicken, no,” I said.

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