

Forty-One Times Dead

Title: Forty-One Times Dead

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Summary: Harry has an annoying habit of dying before his time. After one death too many, the Soul Reaper assigned to the case decides to take matters in hand and train the Boy-Who-Lived up to scratch. Good thing he's already dead - 'cause this just might kill him!

Author's Note: I've come across a great many stories written in response to a challenge posted by Reptilia. The criteria are as such:

1. Harry is killed at 17 during a fight with Voldemort. He's sent to his Death's office (explained later) and finds out that this isn't the first time that this has happened.
2. Harry's Death (who can have a human name) is mad at his arrival. Apparently, people dying before their time is a black mark on the various Deaths' records, and Harry is getting perilously close to getting this particular one fired.
3. When Harry asks what was supposed to have happened, Death goes off on a rant saying how he was supposed to have killed Voldemort, found his soul mate ("Some Granger girl...") and lived to be a centennial age. But since Harry keeps getting into life-threatening situations for one reason or another, he keeps dying before that happens. Harry is surprised about the soul mate part.
4. Death gives Harry a paper to sign that allows him to retain his memories (the previous times, he wasn't given this option for some reason). Harry is deposited to a previous time of the writer's choosing.
5. Eventually, Harry gets it right. He kills Voldemort, gets the girl, and lives to a ripe old age of whatever. And Death doesn't get fired.
6. Harry had to have died at least three times before this one.

Well, having written a few fics about Harry and Death Incarnate (*Something Grim* and *Masters of Death*), I thought this sounded like something right up my alley. Of course, considering the push I'm making to get some of my older stories back up and running (namely *Backwards Compatible* and maybe *Culture Shock*) I can't really go too in depth into this idea, but I was inspired enough to hammer out this little one-shot.

That being said, I believe I have found the perfect "Death" to have assigned as Harry's guardian angel (so to speak). Suffice to say, I'm sure Harry would not agree. Nor would any other sane person. But I figured that if you need a physical representation of death that isn't a walking skeleton, then why not use the craziest one to be found?

/oOo\

Forty-One Times Dead

/oOo/

Harry had no idea where he was or how he had gotten there. That worried him. Well, it worried him *a little*. After everything that had happened to him over the last three years, since Voldemort's return, it took a great deal to truly bother him. Of course, since the last thing he remembered was letting the aforementioned Dark Lord hit him with a Killing Curse...

Yes, he was *a little* worried.

On the other hand, however, wherever he was bore absolutely no resemblance to any kind of afterlife he ever heard of or come to expect, which gave him some hope that he had not passed over. In fact, as he examined his surroundings, Harry had to wonder if he had perhaps managed some sort of accidental apparition. All the way from Britain to Japan. Or maybe it was China; he knew next to nothing about either country or culture and literally wouldn't be able to tell them apart without Hermione's help.

Thinking of Hermione almost made him wince. He just *knew* she was not going to be happy with him for this and was going to take the first opportunity, and any that followed, to let him know it. He could hardly blame her, as he was sure his abrupt demise would have left her more than a little upset.

A low, menacing grumble, like two boulders grinding together, drew his attention back to what *was* worrying him.

Yes, worrying him.

A lot.

It was a man, but that barely gave just description to the figure sitting behind the desk opposite him. Harry struggled not to swallow nervously as he once again took in the sight of his, obviously displeased, host.

"You're starting to get on my nerves, gaki," the man rumbled ominously.

"Um, sorry?" Harry haplessly apologised.

It was difficult to judge the menacing figure's height, as he was seated, but Harry could guess that he was easily the tallest person he had ever met that didn't have some giant blood in him. Add to that the fact that the man's broad shoulders easily stretched half that height across and he certainly cut a very intimidating figure. That he was dressed in mostly black robes of some sort of Asian design (Harry thought it was called a komodo) only added to the effect, despite the raggedly sleeveless white trenchcoat-like cloth draped over his shoulders.

"Do you have any idea how much the Central Committee are going to complain when they hear about this?" the man growled as he levelled an unhappy glare in Harry's direction. What made the glare all the more impressive was the fact that it was so effective despite being made with only one eye. The man's other eye, the right one, was concealed behind an eye patch.

This time Harry did swallow nervously. He could almost feel the man's murderous intent filling the air and bearing down on him from all sides. Were Harry only a little less experienced at being on the receiving end of furious scowls (he *had* endured six years of Severus Snape), he would doubtless have experienced difficulty breathing.

"I, uh, I'm sorry," he stammered.

The man pinned him with a look. Harry tried to match his gaze, but failed. Afraid to be caught staring at the few impressive scars cutting across the man's face (he may not have been as mauled as Mad-Eye Moody, but he had clearly been on the wrong end of a blade at some point), the young wizard directed his eyes up to the man's hair.

He doubted that the slick black spikes, extending about a foot outward from the man's head, were a natural occurrence. Still, having known Nymphadora Tonks for a couple of years now, he couldn't be entirely sure. Harry's attention was quickly captured by the tiny silver bells that tipped each spike of hair. Now that he had noticed them, he became aware of the faint tinkle that they made with every movement of the man's head.

"Forty-one times, gaki," the man said, the annoyance plain in his deep bass voice. "You've been here in my office forty-one times. That's forty times more often than anyone else." He paused thoughtfully and then added, "Well, for anyone that's not already dead."

"Dead?" repeated Harry somewhat blankly. He wondered if that was a threat.

"Yes, gaki," said the man. "Dead."

Harry had no idea what a "gaki" was, but could guess that it was not a compliment. Ordinarily this would annoy him, but he got the impression that such a reaction would not sit well with his displeased host. As he was currently without a wand, Harry had no doubt that the big man could snap him in half like a twig if he grew sufficiently aggravated.

"Tell me," the man glared down at the very thick file on the desk in front of him, "tell me, gaki, why are you always getting yourself killed before your time and sent to my office? Do you get some perverse pleasure in letting your life slip away and thereby give me even more paperwork to do? Or are you just suicidal? Well? Which is it? Tell me!"

Suddenly, being lost in Japan and being called a gaki were the least of Harry's worries.

"WHAT?!?!?"

"Oh, yeah, that's right," the man muttered unhappily. "You don't remember."

"Remember? Remember what?!" repeated Harry frantically. Everyone had their limits and he had just reached him. "Was I obliterated? Do you know who did it? Did *you* do it? What the bloody soddin' hell is going on here?!"

The man reacted to Harry's confused tirade by reaching across the desk with one arm and engulfing the boy's throat in his massive hand. Ignoring the choked reaction, he inexorably drew Harry towards him, until they were nearly nose-to-nose. "Don't yell at me, gaki," he commanded, "or I'll make sure your death's permanent this time. Got it?"

"Gahk!"

Having his throat crushed somewhat dampened Harry's ability to respond coherently, but the man seemed to accept his choked hack as a sign of agreement. Releasing his hold on the Boy-Who-Lived's throat, the man rocked back and resumed his one-eyed glare at the coughing boy.

"I hate explaining stuff, so listen good, 'cause I won't be saying this twice," he rumbled.

Rubbing his bruised throat nervously, Harry was quick to nod his understanding.

"My name is Zarak Kenpachi," said the spike-haired man, finally introducing himself. "I am the captain of the Eleventh Division of what you would call Soul Reapers."

"Soul Reapers?" repeated Harry in confusion. He winced as Kenpachi's visible eye speared him with a look.

"The actual word is shinigami," he explained impatiently. "It doesn't translate that well into English, but basically it's our job to see that the souls of the newly dead get to the right place. Oh, yeah, we also get to fight and kill a whole bunch of stuff as well. That's the *fun* part of the job."

Harry swallowed painfully and forced his voice not to tremble as he asked, "You mean I'm really dead, don't you?"

Kenpachi glared at him. "Yeah, you are. For the forty-first time."

As Harry tried to absorb this new knowledge, not the least of which was the fact that he was actually *dead*, the large shinigami began to leaf through the file on the desk. "Now, I can understand the first time," he said, pausing a couple of pages in, "You were only a snout nosed brat at the time. If it's anyone's fault it's that Voldemort freak's for killing you when you were still in diapers."

"You mean... the night my parents were killed..."

"You died as well, gaki."

"Oh."

Harry was not sure how he felt about that, but he was beginning to wonder just how long he had been dying. For that matter, there was the question as to how someone (namely Harry) could die more than once. Especially without the help of a horcrux or seven. Or forty, as the case seemed to be.

Kenpachi, however, seemed to care less about the effects such a revelation was having on the wizard. He was more interested in the file. "The second and third times, aged three and five, I suppose weren't really your fault either," he mused, scratching his chin thoughtfully. "Those idiot relatives of yours sure as hell weren't looking after you properly."

"You - you mean the Dursleys... they actually *killed* me?!" asked Harry incredulously.

"Twice," confirmed Kenpachi. He read over the relevant parts of the file. "First by starvation. Second by... frying pan to the skull? Heh."

"Great, Aunt Petunia bashed my brains in with a skillet," mumbled Harry, dropping his head into his hands.

"Then, a couple of years later, you managed to kill yourself for the first time," continued Kenpachi, ignoring the boy's distressed expression. "Seems you were running away from your fat-ass cousin and ended up doing some sort of flash-step teleportation technique to get away. You missed the roof's edge by about a meter, dropped three stories and ended up splattering your brains on the ground. That was also the first time that freak Kurotsuchi had to turn back time before fixing things so that you actually landed on the roof."

"I remember that," mused Harry, thinking back. That incident was one of the most obvious examples of accidental magic he had displayed during his childhood. But he was pretty sure he had never missed the roof and fallen to his death. Wondering about this, he asked, "Why don't I remember dying?"

Kenpachi looked at him as if he were an idiot. "Because we had those wimps in the Fourth Division erase your memories after they finished unsplattering your body."

"Why?"

"Because, gaki, it's against the rules for you to remember this place," explained Kenpachi. He waved a hand, to indicate everything around them. "All this is one of those things, 'man is not meant to know'. Well, not a living one, anyhow. It's fine if you're dead - but you weren't supposed to be. Still aren't."

"Oh."

Kenpachi returned his attention to the file and resumed paging through it. "After that you lasted a few years before setting a cobra loose in the zoo. I can kinda commiserate - Yachiru does dumb shit like that all the time. We fixed it by letting you set some other big snake loose. Of course, we hardly expected you to be back only a couple of minutes later. Dammit, gaki, how dumb must you be to piss off a python like that?"

Harry did not bother to respond, preferring to simply bury his face in his hands once again.

"Then you finally got to go to school. Magic school, not the normal one," Kenpachi continued. "We were all sure that was the end of it. With you being away from your relatives, we pretty much figured you were done with the life-threatening situations."

Harry almost laughed at the idea. One look at the shinigami's dour face, however, convinced him to remain quiet. Kenpachi levelled a stony and utterly flat look towards him. "You didn't even last one damn day before you fell out of a mining cart in that goblin bank you were visiting."

This time Harry did laugh, though it held no humour. "Why do I get the feeling things only got worse after I arrived at Hogwarts?"

"I'm gonna smack you if you don't stop laughing," muttered Kenpachi. Harry was instantly silent. The big man nodded, either in satisfaction or in answer to the boy's question. "A month into term you managed to fly into one of the castle walls and crush your skull. Kurotsuchi was in a good mood that day, so he fixed things that you actually caught that bauble thing you were chasing after. Of course, he wasn't in a good mood when you got yourself eaten by a giant three-headed dog that same night. Then again; sifting through dog shit to recover your chewed up body will ruin anyone's mood."

As the idea that Fluffy might have actually managed to kill and eat him was not so hard to believe, Harry said nothing. But, if truth be told, most of his

attention was concentrated on the fact that he had apparently killed himself while trying to rescue Neville's rememberall from Draco Malfoy. Somehow, he imagined that such an accident would not have earned him a place on the Gryffindor Quidditch team.

"Now, without wasting any more time recounting the rest of your time at school - and your many, many, *many* deaths - let's get down to business, shall we?" asked Kenpachi, tossing Harry's file aside. He then proceeded to unsheathe a somewhat ragged, but still extremely sharp and dangerous-looking sword.

Harry scrambled backwards in alarm, tipping his chair over and falling to the floor. "Uh, um, can I ask a few questions first?" he pleaded, desperately hoping to buy some more time. While he had come to accept that he was no longer among the living, he had no desire to discover what would happen were he to die in the afterlife.

"No."

"Then at least tell me what you're going to do?!"

"Train ya."

"Train me?" repeated Harry, utterly stunned.

With a sigh, as if acknowledging that he could not get away from explaining matters, Kenpachi lay his sword down across his desk. He reached for the discarded file and resumed browsing its many pages.

"You've died forty-one times, gaki," he reiterated, "which means we've had to send you back forty-one times."

"Ah, yes, sorry about that," apologised Harry as he reclaimed his seat.

Kenpachi grunted and pinned him with a look of pure foreboding. "The only reason we've even bothered is 'cause you have a '*destiny*' that needs doing," the large man explained, though the accent he placed on the word indicated his scepticism as to the validity of such an excuse. "Until that's done, you keep getting sent back."

As the prophesy immediately sprang to mind, Harry nodded in understanding. He may not have liked the burden it placed on him, but at the moment he was unimaginably grateful for it. Having the proverbial *Get-Out-of-Azkaban-Free* card was a blessing, considering the situation. Hearing, in all the gruesome detail, about even only a few of your forty-one deaths tended to do that to a chap.

"Let's see," muttered Kenpachi. "You're supposed to kill that Voldemort idiot, get hitched to your soul mate - some Granger girl, kill some idiots, raise a family, kill some more idiots, spoil the grandkids, kill a bunch of morons and finally... die in your sleep at the ripe old age of a hundred and twenty something."

There was a long and awkward silence as the two men stared at each other.

"Kinda boring, I know," summed up Kenpachi, "but that's life. Well, yours."

Despite the succinctness of it all; despite confirmation that he had a chance of surviving and winning the war; despite hearing about the fact that he would apparently kill a great many people; despite being told of his future family, children and grandchildren; despite knowing to almost the year exactly when he would die for the last time; despite all that... there was only one detail that Harry focused on.

"Soul mate?! Hermione?!"

"Meh," Kenpachi shrugged. "I don't really care for all that romantic twaddle, but that's what it says in the file."

"But... Hermione?"

Kenpachi half-sighed, half-growled. "Why do you keep making me repeat myself, gaki?"

Noticing that one of the big man's hands was twitching towards his jagged-edged ninja sword, Harry forced himself past his shock. "Sorry," he apologised. "It's just a bit of a shock, you know? Like learning I've already died before."

"Forty-one times," Kenpachi reminded him.

"Right. So... Hermione?"

"Dammit, gaki, what's the damn problem?" the man asked with visible frustration. He held up the phonebook-sized file and waved it in Harry's face. "She may not be a looker, but she isn't ugly either. She's smart, loyal and has stuck by you the whole damn time. Plus, she has a mean right hook - what's not to like? Besides; it's in the *file*."

"Right," agreed Harry, more out of fear for the large man's mounting aggravation than anything else. Still, he had to concede that they were all valid points, even if he had never really considered them before. What worried him, however, was that he could even see the sense in Kenpachi's words; which suggested that he was being influenced by the man's obviously aggressive tendencies if he came to think of such things as even vaguely normal. He also wondered what else might be in that file.

"So, does it say anywhere in that file *how* I manage to kill Voldemort?" he asked, hoping to distract the shinigami with mention of potential violence, pain and death.

No details," replied Kenpachi, as if it was obvious.

"All right, so, uh, when are you going to send me back?"

"After your training."

Remembering the sight of Kenpachi bearing down on him with a sword, Harry had to ask, "Have you, uh, 'trained' me before?"

Kenpachi shook his head, causing the bells on the tips of his spiked hair to tinkle merrily. "Nah," he denied and then explained. "Not really allowed for some stupid reason. But this time I got permission from old man Yamamoto; seeing as this is the last time we're sending you back."

"The last time? Why?" asked Harry in surprise.

Kenpachi glared at him. The man seemed to have this reaction even more than Snape. "You've died forty-one times, gaki," he reiterated once more. "You die again and it'll be *forty-two*."

Not particularly impressed by this display of rather basic math, nor really understanding the significance, Harry asked, "Why is that a problem?"

"Forty-two times is the kicker, you idiot," explained Kenpachi. "If you die forty-two times, we're not allowed to send you back any more!"

"So... I'll be dead for good?"

"Yeah."

"Oh."

There was a minute of uncomfortable silence. Or at least it was uncomfortable from Harry's side of things. Kenpachi just seemed bored.

"So... why forty-two times?"

"Because, gaki, that's just the way life, death, the universe and everything works," Kenpachi answered. He then tossed the file aside and reclaimed his sword. Harry's attempt to protest died as the shinigami captain rose up from behind his desk; finally revealing his true size. He was massive.

While not much of a believer of Divination, prophesy aside, Harry suddenly experienced a moment of perfect prescience.

"Oh shit."

"Now, gaki... defend yourself!" roared Kenpachi, using a single hand to hurl his desk out from between them as he simultaneously swung an overhead blow down towards the horrified Boy-Who-Lived.

-oOo-

Zaraki Kenpachi entered the Fourth Division's main infirmary with a tattered and incredibly bloody body draped over his shoulder.

Hardly anyone noticed and those that did barely batted an eye at the sight. The Eleventh Division's captain was well known for his brutality, so it was not at all strange to see that he had viciously assaulted yet another poor soul for whatever reason. Truthfully, the only thing remarkable about this occurrence was the fact that Kenpachi was bothering to drop his victim off for medical attention, rather than simply leaving him where he had fallen.

"Heya, Ken-chan!"

The big man paused, his burden dangling limply over his shoulder. His one visible eye tracked to where various Fourth Division members were scrambling over each other in the desperate hope of avoiding the approaching form of Kenpachi's vice-captain; Kusajishi Yachiru.

The black kimono-clad little girl, who appeared no older than five, cut a swathe through everything between her and the waiting shinigami captain. This included other shinigami, who she either trampled beneath her sandaled feet or simply tossed out of her way. Considering that she had announced her arrival quite loudly, not to mention that her short crop of hair was a brilliant bubblegum pink, one had to wonder why so few people were able to avoid being mowed down.

"Hey Yachiru," greeted Kenpachi as his companion bounced up to perch in her customary place upon his broad shoulder. As luck would have it, she chose the shoulder that Harry was draped over. The unconscious boy let out a pained moan as she landed on him.

"Who's this, Ken-chan?" asked Yachiru, noticing the body for the first time.

"Just some stupid gaki," rumbled Kenpachi as he resumed walking.

Yachiru regarded the twitching form of Harry Potter from where she was sitting; almost directly on top of him. The tiny vice-captain was far older than she appeared, but still had a very child-like mentality. It would be several more centuries before she "grew up". Thus she reacted as most children would when confronted by a battered, bruised and bleeding body slung over her father figure's shoulder.

She poked it.

This elicited another groan from Harry which seemed to vastly amuse the pink-haired girl. She poked him again and again as the two shinigami progressed further into the infirmary.

"Hey!" she suddenly exclaimed, "His hair looks like a rat's nest! He's got rat hair!"

Kenpachi smiled slightly at Yachiru's exuberance, even as he scanned his surroundings. Before long he found what he was looking for. He shoved open the door to the room and stepped inside, ducking slightly so as to avoid banging his spikes of hair against the doorframe. Seeing his intent, Yachiru swung from one shoulder to the other before the man unloaded his burden onto the room's empty and only hospital bed.

"What's wrong with Rat-Hair, Ken-chan?" asked Yachiru, as if only now realizing Harry's condition.

"He's a weakling," explained Kenpachi. "I'm training him up some."

"Really?" Yachiru asked, staring at the unconscious boy with wide eyes.

"Yeah. Got permission from old man Yamamoto."

Yachiru considered this for several seconds. She then asked the question that would have caused many of the weaker-willed shinigami (or at least those that knew her beyond her already fearsome reputation) to break into tears.

"Can I help?"

Kenpachi's reply would have caused a general loss of bladder control.

"Sure."

His charge dropped off, Kenpachi departed, carrying Yachiru on his shoulder as always. He would be back, though, in the morning. While he hated paperwork and had little use for bureaucracy, he did acknowledge that as captain of the Eleventh Division, he had a job to do. And Harry Potter's repeated dying was causing him to come perilously close to failing that job.

Kenpachi really did not care if Potter fulfilled his destiny or not, but he would not accept that he, the Demon of the Zarak District, could fail at anything. He loathed the idea of failing. Admitting defeat was simply not something he was capable of. Even if it was something as stupid and pointless as guiding some gaijin brat towards his proper destiny.

This was why he would see to it that the gaki would be tough enough do what he was supposed to.

-oOo-

"Wake up, gaki!"

"AAAAAAH!"

Harry Potter woke up faster than he ever had in his life. Since he was dead, and had apparently just been thrown out of his third-floor hospital window, that did nothing to help him. He crashed into the paved street with a resounding crunch that probably would have killed him - were he not visiting the afterlife as he was.

While he had gone from blissful sleep to hyperawareness with remarkable swiftness, his less than desirable landing left him with enough cobwebs in his head to redecorate the Shrieking Shack. He barely had the chance to shake some of them away when he noticed that he had suddenly been eclipsed by a shadow. He looked up.

His personal Soul Reaper, Zarak Kenpachi, was falling through the air and would apparently be landing on Harry's head if he didn't move quickly.

He was not nearly quick enough.

"Urkle."

Harry returned to unconsciousness almost as fast as he had awoken.

Kenpachi regarded the young wizard whose half-buried head he was now standing on. Said head had been driven into and then *through* the two-inch-thick paving stones that made up the street outside the Fourth Division's infirmary. Harry had not been able to weather the impact as well as the large man had hoped he would.

Clearly, training was already cancelled for the day.

"Weakling," he concluded.

-oOo-

"Wake up, gaki!"

"AAAAAAH!"

Harry survived his flight through the air far better than he had before and, while his landing still left much to be desired, this time he cognizant of the fact that Kenpachi had followed him through the window. He hit the street rolling and just barely escaped having the shinigami's feet driven into his head. As it was he was still peppered with debris when the large man's landing shattered the paving stone he crashed down on.

He did not entirely manage to avoid the wild swing that cut a deep gash in his right shoulder.

"Hmm. Better, I suppose," grunted Kenpachi as he swung his sword for a second and third strike.

This time Harry managed to dodge the blows, mostly by virtue of having already turned on his heel and started running. He had no clue where he was in the afterlife, nor any idea as to where he was going, but so long as it was far away from Kenpachi, he did not care.

Unsurprisingly, the shinigami captain took off in pursuit of his fleeing "student".

"Damn it, gaki, stop trying to run away and start fighting back!" bellowed Kenpachi, swinging with such wild abandon that he cut through a tree that was thicker than Harry was tall.

"How am I supposed to do that?" yelled Harry, not pausing in his desperate sprint away from the madman chasing after him.

"With your zanpakuto, you idiot!"

"What the bloody hell is a zaptakto?!"

"Your sword, fool!"

"I don't *have* a sword!!"

Kenpachi paused, stopping his relentless pursuit and attack for the first time since throwing Harry out the window. He blinked in confusion, as if not understanding what he had been told. Harry failed to notice, as he continued to run away as quickly as his legs could carry him. He would have tried to apparate, if things were a little calmer and he had the chance to concentrate properly, but at the moment he was too overcome by sheer terror to even contemplate it. Still, he was almost tempted to risk it, splinching be damned, if it would get him way from his "trainer".

"Huh," muttered Kenpachi. "Knew I forgot something."

He glanced up to the tiny, pink-haired figure that was watching from the nearest rooftop.

"Oi, Yachiru!"

"Yeah, Ken-chan?"

"Get back to the barracks and find a training sword for the gaki!"

"Sure thing, Ken-chan!" the little girl replied, waving happily as she turned to depart. "Have fun!"

Kenpachi hardly noticed as his vice-captain, who was essentially his adopted daughter, disappeared with an almost sonic boom - the force of her take-off shattering the roof tiles where she had been standing. Instead the large man turned to regard the rapidly shrinking form of his wayward charge. If nothing else, Harry Potter had a decent pair of legs on him. He grinned like a hungry shark and hefted his blade.

"Oh, I will."

With a resulting detonation that matched the departed Yachiru's, Kenpachi took off in chase of his "student".

"Hey, gaki! Quit slacking off and start dodging again!"

"NOOOOO!!!!"

-oOo-

"Are you all right, Potter-san?"

"Please, just kill me," groaned Harry, being absolutely literal.

Unohana Retsu, captain and chief healer of the Fourth Division of shinigami, did not blink at the Boy-Who-Lived's pained request. She was used to such things, especially when one of Kenpachi's training partners was involved. Besides which, if the young wizard was lucid enough and physically able to make such a request, then clearly he had not been the recipient of one of Kenpachi's more *rigorous* spars.

"I'm afraid you're already dead, Potter-san," she reminded him as she set to work patching him up. He *did* have further training scheduled for the next day, after all.

"Then I just want to rest in peace," Harry moaned as the elegant woman poked and prodded his injuries.

"If you're not careful, you'll be resting in pieces," commented Retsu, opening a jar of healing salve to dress the wounds in.

"Would I be more dead than I already am?" asked Harry plaintively.

"Until Zarakai-taicho decides to send you back to the living world, I'm afraid not."

"Uh, kill me, please."

-oOo-

“Wake up, gaki!”

“AAAAAAHHH!”

Harry was becoming used to waking up in mid-air. In truth, the falling sensation was not that bad. After a while he found that it was actually quite refreshing, to the point where he doubted any better way of waking up existed. The ground jarring crunch of his landings, however, was still very unpleasant and not something he would ever get used to.

Recovering from his landing, which he noticed was happening a lot quicker than before, Harry scrambled to his feet in preparation to start running. He turned, took his first step, and slammed into what seemed like a brick wall, but was actually the broad and extremely well muscled chest of Zarak Kenpachi.

“You’re getting better at that, gaki,” the large shinigami noted absently.

Harry tried not to burst into tears at being cut off from his attempted escape so quickly. His knees began to shake violently when he noticed that Kenpachi was today holding *two* swords instead of just the one. This unsteadiness in the legs was why he fell over when the man thrust the new sword, still in its sheath, into the wizard’s hands.

“Here you are; your new zanpakuto. A Soul Cutting blade; the weapon of a shinigami.”

Harry stared up at the giant of a man in disbelief before turning his gaze to the sword that now lay across his lap. While he knew next to nothing about swords in general, despite having once wielded the Sword of Gryffindor, he easily recognised the weapon as a katana, not unlike Kenpachi’s own blade.

“Couldn’t I have a wand instead?” he asked impulsively, the words escaping his mouth before he could think them through. “I am a wizard, after all.”

Kenpachi stared blankly at him for a very long time before answering. “Never bring a stick to a swordfight.”

“This isn’t a swordfight,” insisted Harry. He tried to stand and hold his new weapon up for emphasis, but found that the zanpakuto was a lot heavier than it looked. He needed both hands to keep it from falling to the ground. “None of the Death Eaters have a sword and neither does Voldemort.”

“Good! You’ll have the element of surprise,” rejoined Kenpachi.

“Spells and curses have more reach than a sword,” Harry argued. “They’ll kill me - again - before I can get close enough!”

“Then we’ll train to make you faster, gaki.”

Kenpachi emphasised this idea by drawing his sword so quickly that it seemed to just appear in his hand. Even Harry’s Quidditch honed Seeker eyesight could barely detect the blur of motion. Fortunately the shinigami was kind enough to attack at a much slower speed; otherwise he would have simply decapitated his student with his first blow. This was only “training” after all.

“Gahk!” exclaimed Harry, barely raising his own sword in time to block the strike.

The force of Kenpachi’s hit, despite its reduced speed, was still great enough to knock Harry’s zanpakuto out of his hands and send it flying across the street. It also broke both of the Boy-Who-Lived’s wrists with a resounding double crack.

“GAAAAHHH!”

Suffice to say, Harry’s training in the ways of the sword was over for the day. The rest of his time was spent practicing his skills in dodging and evasion, as Kenpachi resumed chasing after him yet again. Apparently a pair of broken wrists did not preclude the ability to run and jump.

The arrival of Yachiru, intent on “helping” her Ken-chan in properly training Rat-Hair, only served to make Harry’s day seem to last an eternity.

-oOo-

It was strange how his new sword has somehow managed to repair itself. Useful, yes, but strange. Considering how easily Kenpachi had broken the sword in the first place, Harry got the feeling his... zanpakuto... would have to do something similar on a daily basis for quite a while.

He turned the sword over in his hands as he inspected it. With both hands and wrists in thick plaster casts, he fumbled and dropped it. Again.

Fortunately, it did not fall to the floor, seeing as Harry was once again bedridden.

Unfortunately, the sword fell heavily in his lap and very nearly crushed Harry’s crotch under its weight.

It did not help that the sword had grown in size considerably overnight. Retsu had explained that a zanpakuto was, in many ways, an extension of its wielder. That also explained why the blade had changed its shape from a plain, unadorned katana into something closer to a traditional English broadsword, vaguely resembling the sword of Gryffindor.

Of course, the sword of Gryffindor was not six and a half feet long. This new sword’s blade alone was five feet long and half a foot across at its widest.

Harry spent a little while, trying to ignore the pain of his bruised groin, imagining Malfoy's reaction to seeing it for the first time.

Hopefully by then it would be slight smaller and somewhat more manageable to wield. According to Retsu, it was Harry's poor control over his spiritual energy that caused his sword to be so large. Once he had better rein of his abilities it should shrink down to a more traditional size.

Lifting the sword up again, Harry resumed inspecting the sheathed blade. He knew its edge was razor sharp and had no desire to risk having parts of his anatomy cut off if he dropped it again. He already had enough trouble with Kenpachi and the little pink-haired monster.

Again according to Retsu, who was kind enough to explain everything Kenpachi did not, his sword was somewhat alive and definitely aware. It was widely considered that their souls were as real as a human's.

Harry had uncomfortable thoughts about horcruxes when that titbit was revealed.

Ignoring his concerns, which Retsu assured him were unfounded, he resumed trying to 'connect' with his sword.

Apparently all zanpakutos had a name.

If Harry wanted to survive his "training" he would need to find out what that name was.

-oOo-

"Wake up, gaki!"

"AAAAAAHHH!"

Harry landed in a roll and sprang to his feet. As Kenpachi jumped down after him, he drew his still unnamed sword and held it in front of him like a club.

"God dammit! Will you stop doing that!"

"No."

Backing away as Kenpachi drew his own ragged edged sword, Harry tried to reason with the advancing shinigami.

"Can't you teach me something that doesn't involve me going back to the infirmary?" he asked.

Kenpachi continued to advance. "Learn how to dodge or block properly and you won't."

"But you haven't told me how to block!"

"Use your sword, gaki."

"But I can hardly lift the bloody thing!"

"Then get stronger."

"That takes time!"

"Not if you train harder."

"Oh, come on," moaned Harry.

Kenpachi paused, as if to consider this. Then, to Harry's amazement, he sheathed his sword.

"How about I give you a chance? Cut me anywhere you want before we get started," Kenpachi offered, holding his arms out wide and leaving himself completely exposed to attack.

"Are you serious?" asked Harry in disbelief.

"Of course, I'm serious," replied Kenpachi blandly.

"You're mad! I could *kill* you!" Harry pointed out. He paused as that fact sank in. Something of a demented gleam entered his emerald-coloured eyes. "I could kill you."

Kenpachi snorted, as if the idea were absolutely absurd. "Gaki, I'll be surprised if you manage to even cut my kimono."

Harry took barely a second to consider this. He *had* been "training" under Kenpachi for a while now.

"DIE!!!"

He was most surprised when he lunged forward, plunged the tip of his sword into the shinigami's chest and promptly experienced the horror of seeing his blade shatter like fine china. He took a step back and stared at what was left of the zanpakuto, which was little more than just the hilt, pommel and maybe an inch of steel. As Kenpachi had predicted, he was completely untouched by the attack. Even his kimono was barely ruffled. Harry nearly began to cry.

Then Kenpachi decided to continue “training”, despite the damage to Harry’s sword.

“My turn.”

-oOo-

“Do not think too badly of Zaraki-taicho, Potter-san,” said Retsu as she wrapped yet another layer of bandages round Harry’s torso. This was the third ream. “Although his methods may leave much to be desired, he is only trying to help.”

“The man’s mad,” muttered Harry, barely able to gather the strength of speak.

“Just a little,” Retsu agreed amiably, “but his *is* one of our strongest captains.”

“The man’s mad,” Harry repeated.

“Mmhhh, now try not to put too much strain on your lower back for at least the next hour, okay?”

“The man’s mad.”

“Perhaps, but you’ll find that very few shinigami are the picture of sound mental health,” replied Retsu, moving her ministrations to the battered Boy-Who-Lived’s legs. She had already set the bones, again, and strapped on the splints, again. Now she began to, once again, roll out the bandages. She made a mental note to have her vice-captain order some more. Having Potter-san as a patient was causing their supplies to dwindle faster than she would have liked.

“The man’s mad.”

-oOo-

“Wake up, gaki!”

“AAAAAAH!”

Harry was clearly becoming far too used to waking up like this. He managed to reorient himself in midair and land lightly on his feet. He was not quite fast enough draw his sword in the same movement, but he was getting there.

This was proven as Marauder, his zanpakuto, cleaved through the air behind him to impact against Kenpachi’s ragged blade. This was the first time since his “training” had begun that Harry had managed to make the first strike. He briefly wondered if this sudden improvement had something to do with having discovered his sword’s name the previous evening. He stopped wondering as Kenpachi began raining blows of his own, not allowing Harry a chance to follow through on his attack.

“Mmph,” grunted Kenpachi blandly, “you’re getting to be almost competent.”

“Facing a painful death every day for months tends to do that,” replied Harry, struggling keep up and block Kenpachi’s attacks.

“Death and pain are a small price to pay for the enjoyment of battle!” the spiky haired maniac explained, accelerating the pace and beginning to slip the occasional strike through Harry’s defences.

A whisper that he could barely make out distracted him for just an instant. It was Marauder, the soul of his sword, trying to tell him something.

The moment’s distraction was a moment too long, allowing Kenpachi to step in and backhand his student across the courtyard they were fighting in.

“Pay attention, gaki! Don’t take your mind off the fight!”

Swear.

Harry blinked, dazed by the blow.

Swear.

The whisper was louder now. And clearer. But what did it mean?

Swear.

Harry shoved that question out of his mind. He had more important things to worry about right now. Like how Kenpachi had leapt after him and was currently swooping down on him like a diving raptor.

He brought Marauder up to divert the attack. He did not flinch as his right wrist cracked. He had managed to block the strike, which was all that mattered.

Swear.

-oOo-

There! All done! What d'you think, Rat-Hair?"

Harry hardly bothered to pay any attention to Vice-captain Kusajishi Yachiru, as she announced the completion of her latest artistic masterpiece. Namely him. When she held the mirror up so that he could see the results of her hard work, he barely deigned to take in his reflection.

Yachiru had, for whatever incomprehensible reason, spent the last hour giving "Rat-Hair" a make over. The core of this, ignoring the eye shadow, blush and lipstick, involved tying every single lock of Harry's hair in an individual braid.

The effect was such that his hair looked more like a tangle of black spaghetti instead of a rat's nest.

It was hardly an improvement.

"Looks great," he mumbled, not really bothering to pay too much attention to what had been done to him. Compared to everything else, this was nothing.

"Yay!!" cheered Yachiru, bouncing around like a nuclear powered Energizer Bunny.

Harry mostly ignored her, focusing instead on the massive broadsword currently resting across his folded legs. He was trying something new today, the next step in harnessing Marauder's power.

The shinkai, or initial release in English, could only be acquired after learning a zanpakuto's name. Of course, there was more to it than that, but Harry's attention had been drawn more to the substantial increase in power than anything else.

Harry would not rest until he had achieved Marauder's initial release.

He would need it to kill Kenpachi.

-oOo-

"Get up, gaki, we have stuff to do."

Kenpachi blinked as he stood in the doorway to what had long since become Harry Potter's personal room in the Fourth Division's main infirmary. There was something wrong with the sight before him; namely the fact that Harry Potter was not present in said room.

Darkly considering the possibility that the wizard had tried to run away during the night (again), Kenpachi almost missed the attack when it came.

"DIE!!!"

The only reason that Harry's sword struck its target was because Kenpachi did not care to dodge. The blade sliced into the big man's neck with enough force to cut through a stone pillar. It was barely enough to penetrate his skin and draw blood. As it was, the tiny trickle of red dried up almost as quickly as it had formed.

Kenpachi turned to regard his student, who was staring at him with both a murderous glare and a gleeful expression. Both were perfectly understandable. Harry hated his shinigami "trainer" with a passion that could not be described by mere words. Harry had also never managed to draw blood from his "trainer" in all the times they had fought. The shinigami captain had a hard time choosing between congratulating the boy for finally landing a half-way decent hit, or smacking him for daring to lay such a cowardly ambush. The Eleventh Division, as a rule, preferred to simply charge into fights head on - anything less was considered extremely bad form.

"Not bad, gaki," he said. "Not bad."

His backhand knocked Harry clear across the room and out the window.

"AAAAAAHHH!"

In the end, he decided to do both.

-oOo-

Harry stared at the man who was supposed to not only send him back to the living world, but back through time as well. He now knew exactly why Kenpachi referred to the man as a freak. Harry's uncle, Vernon Dursley, had often called Harry a freak. Had the stocky man ever chanced to happen upon Kurotsuchi Mayuri, captain of the shinigami's Twelfth Division, Vernon would have instantly relabelled his nephew as being the epitome of normal by comparison.

To start with, Mayuri looked like a somewhat deranged cross between a street mime, an ancient Egyptian pharaoh and a painting by Salvador Dali.

"This will be as easy as breaking a baby's neck," the shinigami scientist declared, clapping his hands together in his enthusiasm.

Oh yes, the man was apparently psychotic as well.

The situation was not aided by the fact that the Twelfth Division's headquarters, where Harry and his escorts had gathered, bore more than a little resemblance to a much twisted and sinister version of Frankenstein's laboratory.

To round things off, there was Mayuri's female laboratory assistant and vice-captain, who bore the same family name. Nemu, as she was called,

was dressed up in what might once have been a standard black shinigami kimono, but one that had subsequently been trimmed down to the point where she looked more like what Molly Weasley would have termed a scarlet woman. This was entirely at odds with her extremely reserved, almost timid nature.

"The timegate is ready for usage, Mayuri-sama," Nemu softly announced.

"Yes, yes, I can see that already you useless woman! Stop repeatedly telling me things that are blatantly obvious!" snapped Mayuri as he led the group into the next room.

Entering the indicated chamber they saw a large metal ring, set in the stone floor, with nine massive gems studded evenly around its circumference. This, Harry deduced, was the timegate. The walls on either side of the ring were filled from floor to ceiling with bank after bank of computers with a great many blinking lights. He suspected that these were mostly for show, as Mayuri ignored them entirely to cross to the far side of the chamber, where seven archaic looking switches were set in the wall.

"Right; same procedure as every time the Potter boy dies," the bizarre looking scientist proclaimed. "The subject stands in the centre of the timegate and the rest of you somewhere outside - and don't touch anything!" This last admonishment seemed directed at Yachiru, even though the energetic little girl was still perched on Kenpachi's shoulder.

"Please, Potter-san, if you will do as Mayuri-sama commands," prompted Nemu as she led Harry to his place in the exact centre of the ring in the floor. The methodology of time-travel in the afterlife seemed a little more complicated than a magical time-turner.

"Hurry up, woman - I have more important things to do with my time!" yelled Mayuri.

"Well, I guess this is it, gaki," said Kenpachi emotionlessly. There was nothing in his voice or expression to indicate that he cared what happened next.

"Good luck, Rat-Hair!" chimed Yachiru, waving an enthusiastic goodbye.

Ignoring the urge to throttle the little brat, Harry turned to regard the other shinigami present. All things considered, there was a surprising number of people present. Such a turnout would normally have filled him with feelings of gratitude, or maybe some other kind of heart-warming emotion. Unfortunately, Harry did not actually like most of the assembled group and thus felt nothing more than the mounting anticipation that he would soon be free of having to endure their presences.

"Any last second advice?" he enquired.

"Yes," said Ise Nanao, vice-captain of the Eighth Division. "Sign this."

Harry looked at the sheet of paper the bespectacled woman was holding out to him. She reminded him somewhat of his supposed soul mate; Hermione. "What is it?" he asked, taking the proffered paper and glancing over it. After just a cursory examination he otherwise ignored it. Despite however long he had been in the afterlife, he had never gotten round to learning how to read Japanese. He could recognise the kanji for the thirteen divisions and knew enough swearwords to make a sailor blush, but that was about it.

"It's the contract granting you permission to retain your memories of everything that has happened," Nanao explained.

He almost decided against signing, as the thought of forgetting Kenpachi's "training" was very tempting. However, he was also aware that everything he had learned since dying would doubtless make things much easier upon his return to... actually, he still wasn't sure *when* they were sending him back to. He scrawled his signature next to the indicated X and handed the form back to the woman who, for all intents and purposes, handled the bulk of the shinigami's administrative details.

"Anything else?" Harry asked as Mayuri flipped the first switch.

"Engaging timegate chevrons!"

The metal circle that was the timegate revealed itself as being comprised of two separate rings, with one mounted within the other. The inner ring began to rotate in place, slowly at first before quickly gaining speed. After several revolutions, there was a loud thunk as the inner ring came to an abrupt halt. One of the jewels embedded in the outer ring lit up and glowed a brilliant red.

"Chevron one is locked!" announced Mayuri, rather unnecessarily. He flipped the second switch, causing the inner ring to resume rotating; only this time in the opposite direction.

"Remember your training and don't die until you're supposed to," rumbled Kenpachi. The threat of, "or else," was left unsaid.

Harry was used to hidden threats from Kenpachi. He was also used to not-so-hidden threats from his "trainer". For that matter, he was also used to the blatantly obvious threats that Kenpachi directed towards him on a regular basis. Much as Dobby the house-elf had once claimed, Harry received threats of one kind or another a dozen times a day in the name of "training". He was used to them.

As such, Harry ignored this piece of advice as being rather self-evident and more common-sense than anything else.

"Chevron two is locked!"

"Buy lots of candy and make lots of friends!" cheered Yachiru.

Harry ignored the little pink-haired monster without a second's thought. The tiny vice-captain was a sugar-addict; hence her advice regarding the

sweets. She also had the frightful habit of becoming even more energetic and uncontrollable after having consumed said sweets. The number of shinigami she dispatched to the Fourth Division's infirmary trebled whenever she entered a sugar rush.

As for her suggestion of making "friends", Harry was well aware that Yachiru's definition of the word was vastly different than anyone else's. Case in point; she seemed to be under the impression that she and Harry were friends, regardless of anything Harry said to the contrary. She also insisted that he and Kenpachi were "friends". By her reckoning, Harry and Voldemort should be bosom buddies.

Frankly, Harry would already have enough people trying to kill him upon his return. He had no desire to seek out more.

"Chevron three is locked!"

"Don't forget to use your mind's eye to anticipate your enemy's attacks," advised Madarame Ikkaku, the Eleventh Division's third seat officer.

This advice, Harry actually listened to, though somewhat dubiously. His only experience with any kind of metaphysical eye was Professor Trelawney, which explained his scepticism. For some reason, the bald shinigami had a habit of sprouting such things, despite being a man with a love of battle that almost rivalled Kenpachi. It was a big almost.

Still, he had learned a fair bit from Ikkaku, who often reminded Harry almost painfully of Sirius, only without the pranking streak. Or the hair.

The lack of which he was extremely touchy about, as Harry had learned through painful experience.

Still, he was perhaps one of the more level-headed members of the Eleventh Division.

Sad, but true.

"Chevron four is locked!"

"Do try and get rid of that ugly scar that makes you look so hideous," said Ayasegawa Yumichika with a disdainful sniff. "Don't bother with the hair though; that's clearly a lost cause."

Yumichika was the last of the Eleventh Division's shinigami that Harry had regular contact with and held the position of fifth officer in the division. The narcissistic, effeminate, metro-sexual fifth seat frankly unnerved Harry, mostly because of how he resembled a competent Gilderoy Lockhart.

Only prettier.

In fact, Harry had initially mistaken Yumichika for a girl. He had soon learned that the strange man was not someone to be trifled with. He had missed almost a whole day's worth of "training" as a result of the subsequent beating that arose because of his little gender faux pas.

On the other hand, the scar that so offended Yumichika was likely to fade away over the next decade or so. This was thanks in part to a combined effort by Kenpachi and Yachiru, who had worked together to finally rid Harry of the horcrux that had been unwittingly in the scar. Apparently there was some concern that getting rid of it later would only serve to kill him yet again - something that Kenpachi was vehemently against. The procedure had consisted of Kenpachi holding him down while Yachiru drew her zanpakuto and stabbed it into Harry's forehead. Captain Unohana had been livid when she found out and had actually barred the two shinigami from visiting Harry for a whole week.

Harry had felt almost like a new man after enjoying life without a fragment of Voldemort's soul stuck in his skull. The reprieve from "training" had certainly helped as well. At least until that heavenly week had ended and Kenpachi had gotten hold of him again.

"Chevron five is locked!"

"Take care of yourself, Potter-san, and do try to avoid being thrown out of any more windows," Retsu told him with her usual calm.

Harry considered the elegant woman who had personally put him back together more times than he cared to count. He considered her advice to be even more self-evident than Kenpachi's and was a bit put out that she assumed he had had a choice in the matter.

For that matter, he had mixed feelings about her. She had, as stated, healed him after Kenpachi's daily "training" sessions. On the other hand, however, she had rarely done anything to limit or restrict those brief slices of hell.

As such she mostly fell under the same category as Madam Pomfrey.

That is; a necessary evil.

"Chevron six is locked!"

Harry looked over the other shinigami who had come to see him off. He knew them all to greater or lesser degrees. The ones he knew better were usually the ones that had lent a hand in his "training" at one point or another. Naturally, those were the ones he was less than fond of.

The only one Harry even vaguely liked was Aizen Sosuke, the mild mannered captain of the Fifth Division. He couldn't help but feel a certain degree of camaraderie with the man whose mop of brown hair was almost as messy as his own. The glasses helped as well. Yes, Harry actually liked him, though not nearly as much as the man's vice-captain, Hinamori Momo, did. Her rabid devotion to her captain often reminded Harry of a young Ginny Weasley.

Aizen matched Harry's gaze for a second. For some reason his mind skipped to an image of Voldemort's glowing red reptilian eyes. Or maybe it was an image of Dumbledore's grandfatherly twinkle. Perhaps both.

"Good luck, Harry-kun," said Aizen with a benevolent smile.

Harry couldn't help but to smile back.

"Chevron seven is locked in place! Temporal vortex is active!"

The world flickered and swirled. Colours inverted and melted into each other. Everything flipped and flopped and then spiralled down the drain into oblivion.

Harry was rather happy that his physical body ceased to exist at that moment.

He would have thrown up otherwise.

-oOo-

"Cedric Diggory!"

The boy in question jumped up from his place at the Hufflepuff table and accepted the wild cheers of his housemates and the enthusiastic applause of the other three houses. Well, aside from Slytherin, of course. He then strode purposefully up to the front of the Great Hall, happily shook hands with the headmaster, a tearful Professor Sprout and several Ministry dignitaries, before being led away. All eyes turned back to the near mythical Goblet of Fire, awaiting the announcement of who would be representing the other schools in the Triwizard Tournament.

All eyes, save those belonging to one fourth-year Gryffindor.

Harry Potter sat in stunned silence at his house table, barely even aware of where and most importantly *when* he was. He had hardly reacted at all to the calling of Cedric's name and had, to Hermione's displeasure, not bothered to either cheer or applaud the Hogwarts Champion.

He was far too busy revelling in one very important fact.

He was away from Zarak Kenpachi.

He was -finally- free of the horror that was "training".

"Harry Potter!"

Yes, he was finally free to relax. Even if he was back at Hogwarts, even if he had to attend potions classes with Snape, even if Voldemort was lurking on the horizon, even if Fudge was still Minister of Magic... at the moment, Harry was in far too joyful a mood to let all that bother him.

"Harry Potter!"

Oh, sure, he was vaguely aware that there were a great many things that needed doing (again), but at this point could scarcely bring himself to care. He was free! He no longer had to sleep in fear of being tossed out the window by his personal shinigami as a wakeup call. He no longer had to worry about bite marks across his skull from the little pink-haired horror that followed wherever Kenpachi went. He no longer had to bear the lectures on the glory of the Eleventh Division by that bald maniac or swallow criticism from the Soul Reaper version of Gilderoy Lockhart.

"*Harry!*" the hissed whisper from Hermione, and a sharp elbow to the side, managed to draw him out of his daydreams.

Shaking his head rapidly, Harry pulled himself out of his euphoric daze and turned his attention to the girl that was apparently his soul mate. "Hmm? You need something, Hermione?"

Hermione blinked in surprise. Harry seemed impossibly distracted, but then again, he was often prone to some degree of brooding. He was, however, currently grinning like an idiot and also staring at her in a way that made her insides squirm.

"Your name just came out of the Goblet, Harry," she explained cautiously. She had a feeling that he was, for some reason, entirely oblivious to what had been happening in the Great Hall these last few minutes and was not likely to react positively to this news. "You need to get up and join the rest of the Champions."

Harry blinked in confusion.

Then he finally realised exactly *when* he was in the timeline.

Harry had endured much in that infinitesimal time between his forty-first death and subsequent return to life. He had endured the "training" of Zarak Kenpachi. He had endured the "games" of Kusajishi Yachiru. He had endured being the personal chew-toy of most of the Eleventh Division. He had endured the scorn and ridicule of several other shinigami captains and their lieutenants who had learned of his presence in the afterlife. He had suffered indignities to his mind, body and soul that not even an exceptional and experienced warrior could have tolerated without immense difficulty.

Needless to say that while Harry Potter was a great many things, an exceptional and experienced warrior he was not. In fact, when you got right down to it, the famed Boy-Who-Lived was an average wizard with mediocre skills, no outstanding talents or abilities and was still, in the final analysis, only a teenager.

Unsurprisingly, while he had endured his time in the afterlife, he had not emerged unscathed.

Albus Dumbledore, on the other hand, did emerge unscathed (if only just) when Harry jumped high into the air, pulled an impossibly massive English broadsword out of nowhere, leapt all the way from where he had been sitting to the front of the Great Hall and then proceeded to hack the Goblet of Fire to death amidst a furious diatribe of English, parseltongue and bastardized Japanese swearwords, interspersed with bouts of such maniacal laughter that everyone, even Professor Snape, thought better than to dare try and stop him.

Yes, there was little chance that Harry would be dying before his time again.

Anyone or anything that set him off, however...

-oOo-

Harry Potter swiftly made a name for himself in the magical world that had absolutely nothing to do with his former moniker of the Boy-Who-Lived.

Unfortunately the title, "That-Lunatic-With-The-Sword," was scarcely much of an improvement.

This was mostly due to the fact that Harry had developed the habit of solving just about every problem put before him by hacking it to pieces with his zanpakuto. He also had a tendency of taking said sword everywhere with him, despite the fact that the staff would confiscate it at least twice a day. It was soon concluded to be impossible to separate Harry from his sword, not that it stopped the staff from trying.

Somehow it always found its way back into his possession.

That particular fact was first discovered by Ron Weasley, shortly after he began to accuse Harry of cheating his way into the tournament. Apparently his friend's reaction earlier that evening had failed to make an impression. His rant died off, however, when he realized that Harry was staring murderously at him and fingering Marauder's hilt, which was now slung across his shoulders. It was at this point that the redhead remembered what had happened to the Goblet of Fire. He duly shut up.

Harry had also developed the habit of calling Draco Malfoy "gaki" whenever they spoke. It was not a frequent occurrence, as Draco was almost desperate in his attempts to avoid him whenever possible. This was a result of the events of the first morning after Harry's return; when he had drawn his sword and chased Draco from one side of the castle to the other and back with it. Attempts by the staff to stop him were utterly unsuccessful. Especially in the case of Professor Snape, who managed to get him away from the terrified Malfoy - only to have himself end up as the target of Harry's ire. That particular chase around Hogwarts earned Harry the undying devotion of several Gryffindors (most especially the Weasley twins) and the appreciation of all the other non-Slytherin students.

As a bonus, the Potter Stinks badges were abandoned with alacrity by all their wearers.

His popularity, or notoriety if you prefer, soared to new heights upon his first meeting with Rita Skeeter during the weighing of the wands ceremony. Of course, that might have had something to do with the fact that Harry had absolutely no intention of letting the malicious little reporter actually interview him. As such, he had fallen back on the "training" he had received from Kenpachi.

He threw Rita out the window.

They were only five floors up and the room overlooked the Hogwarts Lake. Aside from being very wet, Rita was otherwise unharmed. The resulting article in the Daily Prophet was vicious beyond anything she had ever before produced. Harry had accepted this with what seemed like perfect poise and good cheer. His early morning visit to Rita the next day, in which he repeated his action of throwing her out the window, this time from her own bedroom, was enough to convince her to never again write an angry word about him.

The visitors from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang avoided him with alacrity.

Especially after he completed the first task of the Triwizard Tournament by drawing Marauder and charging straight at the dragon without a second thought. That the dragon was soon trying to flee in fear for its life only served to enhance his reputation even further. It was almost enough to counteract the fact that only a maniac or a fool would try to attack a dragon, of all things, without magic.

The Yule Ball was soon upon them and promptly caused Harry to take Viktor Krum to one side when he noticed the Bulgarian's eyes turning to Hermione.

Viktor shortly found himself asking a blushing Millicent Bulstrode to the ball. Nobody bothered to ask why he would turn white as a sheet every time he saw the second Hogwarts champion.

As for Hermione, she happily agreed to be Harry's date for the night. Well, once she got passed the almost unintelligible stuttering to decipher his request. Apparently while Kenpachi's "training" was enough to turn him into a seemingly fearless swordsman, Harry still found it embarrassing to ask a pretty girl out on a date; especially when said girl was also his best friend.

Ron's jealousy was held firmly in check by the gleaming steel blade of Marauder, which never left Harry's side for very long and which he spent a good deal of time polishing.

The Yule Ball went by without incident, though there was some comment on the fact that Harry attended wearing a black kimono instead of the expected dress robes that Mrs. Weasley had bought for him. Nobody said anything too inflammatory, of course, as Marauder was still to be found in its usual spot across its wielder's back. Likewise, nobody drew any connection between it and the uniform of a shinigami. After all, it was a well known fact that British Soul Reapers wore black three piece suits and bowler hats.

Little surprise was found when term resumed and it was made public that Harry and Hermione's friendship had escalated to a higher level. Some people may have been unhappy with this development, but no-one at Hogwarts was dumb enough to give voice to their objections. Several howlers and nasty letters did reach the couple but those dried up after the authors found themselves being visited in the dead of night and thrown out of the nearest window. Judicious swings of Marauder might also have been involved. Things settled down quickly after the first few days.

On the night before the second task, Professor McGonagall came into the Gryffindor common room and made her way towards Hermione. Harry, who was sitting next to her and happily polishing his sword, became perfectly still. The only thing to move were his eyes - which locked intently upon the deputy-headmistress.

McGonagall proved herself to be an intelligent witch as she promptly bypassed Hermione and approached Ron instead.

"Mr. Weasley, how would you like to take part in the second task of the Triwizard Tournament?" she asked, her voice pitched perhaps just a hair higher than normal.

Ron, naturally, agreed without thinking.

Thus, on a cold February morning, Harry found himself faced with the problem of rescuing the same hostage he had the first time round. He was also left with the quandary of how to accomplish this, as hacking the lake to death was not an option.

In the end he decided to use a simple Bubblehead Charm, just like Cedric and Fleur. He did, however, keep a handful of gillyweed ready in case of an emergency.

Even without Myrtle's help, which was not forthcoming as every ghost in the castle was now completely terrified of him, Harry was the first to reach the underwater merpeople village. He looked over the slumbering forms of Ron, Millicent Bulstrode, Cho Chang and Gabrielle Delacour. He briefly entertained the notion of repeating history this time and waiting for the other champions to rescue their hostages, but chose not to. He knew, if nothing changed too drastically, that Cedric and Viktor would arrive in time. It was only Fleur that would not make it this far. He briefly considered taking both Ron and Gabrielle, but decided against it. While his rescue of the girl had put him on better terms with Fleur in the past, it had not made that much difference. The merpeople would look after her.

Besides, if they did let any harm come to her... he drew Marauder and sliced away Ron's as if they were nothing.

He demonstrated exactly how strong and sharp his sword was by casually cutting the statue holding the hostages in half. He turned to the nearest merman, who was staring at him in disbelief, and spent a few moments indicating that he would be displeased if anything untoward happened to Gabrielle.

-oOo-

The Great Hall became absolutely silent when Harry entered. It was not his arrival or presence that caused this, but rather the fact that his expression was one of pure glee. Demented glee. Also, for the first time since Halloween, his oversized broadsword was absent from its usual place, slung across his shoulders. In its place was a small, simple cloth sack, bulging oddly in places and thumping lightly against his back with each skip.

Yes, Harry was skipping.

This worried everyone even more than the insane grin he was wearing. The worrying became frantic after one of the first-year Hufflepuffs made the suggestion that Harry's sack was filled with recently decapitated heads. Harry ignored them all, save for a cheerful wave to a concerned Hermione, as he skipped down the Great Hall to where Professor Dumbledore was sitting at the head table.

"Heee~ey! What'cha doin'?" he greeted cheerfully as he came to a stop.

Shivers of pure terror ran a marathon up and down everyone present's spine.

"Hello, Mr Potter," Dumbledore nodded, ignoring Harry's form of address. "You seem to be in a rather good mood."

"Yep!" agreed Harry, still grinning maniacally at the old wizard.

"May I ask what it is that has put you in such good spirits?" asked Dumbledore when it became obvious that Harry was not going to elaborate.

"I got them all!" Harry declared, swinging the sack off his shoulder and holding it up for inspection. "It took a while, especially the last one, but I finally got 'em all!"

"All of what, Harry?" asked Dumbledore, eyeing the bulging sack curiously, as well as cautiously.

Harry's grin, impossibly, grew even wider. He seemed to have a lot of very white teeth. He set the bag down and began rummaging about inside of it. He finally withdrew the first item and held it up for all to see.

"One ring to rule them all - one ring to bind them!" he cackled, watching carefully to see the effect this would have on the old headmaster's expression. He took vindictive pleasure as Dumbledore's eyes grew wide in shock upon his recognition of the Gaunt family ring and its now cracked Resurrection Stone. He set the ring down on the tabletop, directly in front of Dumbledore's dinner plate. He then moved quickly to grab and display his next trophy before the other wizard could recover and compose himself.

He dangled Slytherin's locket in front of Dumbledore's nose. It swung back and forth, almost as if he was trying to hypnotise him. This one had been

relatively easy and simple to acquire. The most difficult part of the whole thing was talking Sirius into allowing him entry into Grimmauld Place. After that it was almost pathetically easy, especially after he had a talk with Kreature.

He released his hold on the chain and let the locket clatter to the table. He hardly noticed, already rooting through the sack for the next of Dumbledore's "gifts".

"Say, are you thirsty?" he asked. "I don't know about you, but all this talking has made me thirsty."

He produced the cup of Hufflepuff with a flourish and set it down right next to Dumbledore's half-full goblet of pumpkin juice. He smiled merrily at the almost resigned expression that was beginning to make its way onto the old man's face. He was clearly coming to acknowledge, if not accept, that Harry was obviously operating on something other than sheer dumb luck.

Grabbing the nearest carafe of juice, Harry made a show of pouring it into the battered cup, musing over his retrieval of the fourth horcrux. Being as this had been locked up in the Lestrage vault at Gringotts, it had been the most difficult item to procure. While part of him, a fairly new part that had been nurtured by Kenpachi, wanted to simply charge into the bank – sword swinging, Harry had decided against trying to steal the cup a second time and had instead tried something that would have left Kenpachi shaking his head. Diplomacy. He had explained the situation to the goblins and then made his proposal. A good deal of bargaining and counter-bargaining followed before they finally reached an agreement.

Harry then had to break into Dumbledore's office and steal the sword of Gryffindor. That had been tricky.

Setting down the carafe and raising the now misshapen cup in a mock toast, Harry enjoyed a sip of the pumpkin juice therein, even as he held up the next horcrux for viewing. Ravenclaw's diadem had been almost embarrassingly easy compared to the others. He had simply walked into the Room of Requirement, found the cursed thing and then introduced it to Marauder. It barely took five minutes.

In a fit of mischief, he reached out and settled the diadem in place on Dumbledore's brow.

"Now, this one was a tricky bastard to get hold of," he declared, reaching into the bag for the last horcrux. "Not because of any traps or the like, but because I had to be extra careful not to let anyone notice me when I snuck in to get it. Of course, it won't be long before they realize she's missing, but... what can you do?"

Giving up on removing the horcrux from the sack, Harry simply lifted it into the air and upended it. The Hufflepuffs and more than a few students from the other houses left out screams of horror and disgust as the decapitated head fell out and landed on the table with a web splat. A few drops of blood managed to stain Dumbledore's beard even as what was left of Nagini rolled unsteadily off the table top and dropped to the floor. Harry absently kicked it aside, rather like a scaly football.

Dumbledore was sitting back in his chair, so pale that his face and beard were almost indistinguishable. He was staring at the assembled items with wide eyes and an expression that was a mix of dumbfounded shock, mounting horror and sheer disbelief. All of Voldemort's horcruxes were now arrayed before him, save two. Tom Riddle's diary had been destroyed two years prior, which was why Harry had not bothered retrieving it. The last horcrux, however...

"And let's not forget the most important one," he concluded, reaching up to brush aside his fringe to reveal his famous scar.

It was incredibly satisfying for Harry to watch as Dumbledore's already wide eyes grew even wider. There was also a vindictive pleasure as the all the remaining blood drained out of the old wizard's face as he realized that Harry obviously knew that carefully guarded secret as well.

Harry then leaned in close and smiled a death's head grin. Dumbledore was chilled to the bone by the expression, but it was what he said next that caused the headmaster's blood to truly run cold.

"I've only got one word to say to you, old man," Harry rasped, reaching for the sword that now appeared on his back. "Run."

For such an old wizard, Albus Dumbledore proved to be surprisingly spry when chased through every corridor and up and down every staircase in the castle by a sword-wielding Harry Potter. He was forced to spend a week in the infirmary recovering from exhaustion and a mild heart attack. By the time he was fit enough to leave the third task had arrived.

-oOo-

Harry sat patiently by the headstone Peter Pettigrew had tied him to. Winning the third task had been just as easily accomplished as winning the first and second tasks. Five feet of gleaming steel had cut through the maze hedges with next to no resistance, allowing him to reach the Triwizard Cup in only a few minutes. He had moved so quickly there was no chance for Cedric to catch up and risk getting himself caught. Not this time.

"Robe me."

His attention returned to the figure of Lord Voldemort, who had just now emerged from the ritual cauldron. It had been difficult for Harry to allow Pettigrew to stun him, bind him and then bleed him. It went entirely against his training to submit to such things. It was only the fact that he already knew what was coming that stopping him from using his sword on the traitorous little rat.

On a related note; Voldemort's resurrection was far less terrifying the second time around. Of course, compared to Zarak Kenpachi and the rest of the Eleventh Division, the Dark Lord and his Death Eaters were hardly worth acknowledging.

"Untie him, Wormtail, and give him back his wand."

Returning to the present, Harry realized that it was no longer just the three of them in the graveyard. The other Death Eaters had arrived in answer to their master's call. He forced himself not to grin. Voldemort had just finished his welcome back speech. That meant it was almost time. Pettigrew

approached and released the ropes that bound him to the tombstone of Tom Riddle the senior. The pudgy little man reached to pull Harry to his feet, but found that the young wizard was eager to stand up without any need for manhandling.

"Finally," grumbled Harry, just loud enough for everyone to hear. "I thought I was going to fall asleep from all the talking."

The assembled Death Eaters shifted, nervous as to Voldemort's reaction to this insult. The Dark Lord, however, was made of sterner stuff. If he was angered in any way by Harry's taunt, he did not show it. Instead, he matched Harry's seemingly bored gaze and offered the slightest nod of respect - that his opponent was not too terrified to fight back.

"Come then, Harry Potter," he declared, "take up your wand and prepare to duel."

Harry obligingly reclaimed his wand as Pettigrew offered it to him. He then absolutely stunned everyone, Voldemort included, by casually tossing it aside.

"Phft, don't be ridiculous," scoffed Harry as Voldemort and the Death Eaters stared at him in stunned disbelief. He reached over his other shoulder and gripped the haft of his zanpakuto, which obligingly appeared out of nowhere. "Only an idiot brings a stick to a swordfight," he concluded with a vicious grin that actually made some of those assembled feel nervous. Drawing his sword free, thus revealing its truly massive blade, caused that nervousness to climb to something bordering fear.

Voldemort stared at him for a very long time. His expression, while minimal, vacillated between a variety of emotions. Finally he settled on one. He began to laugh. It was not loud, or boisterous or maniacal, but closer to a low and throaty chuckle of amusement. Taking the laughter as permission, the Death Eaters soon joined in, their laughter much more raucous.

"I had not truly believed the stories in the Daily Prophet, even if they did substantiate Barty's reports," said Voldemort, his soft laughter dying away as he regained control.

"I'll deal with that fake Moody later," replied Harry.

This time Voldemort's surprise was less pleasant. He did not like the idea that someone as supposedly unobservant as Potter could see through his loyal servant's disguise. He regarded Harry narrowly after this small revelation; his change in demeanour prompted the Death Eaters to grow quiet once more.

"That's a very large sword, Harry Potter," Voldemort observed, turning his eyes to the blade in question.

"Thank you," accepted Harry, twirling the massive weapon as easily as if it were the wand he had just discarded.

"It's so very large, however," continued Voldemort silkily, "that one might almost think you were... over compensating for something."

Harry's amiable expression fell away at this insinuation. The Death Eater's laughter caused all emotion to disappear off his face, leaving behind only a stony mask. It was a silly little thing to get angry over, he knew, but angry he became.

"I'm going to castrate you for that," he said plainly.

Voldemort gave a bark of laughter - something decidedly odd for the snake-like man. "Ha! Brave words for a mere child, but to be expected from a Gryffindor." His red eyes narrowed to near slits as he continued in a more appropriately ominous tone, "You will find, however, that I am far less intimidated by your bravado than the dragon you terrorized."

"I don't care if you're intimidated or not," declared Harry stoically. "The last thing I'm going to do before I kill you is cut your bloody bollocks off."

"Very well," agreed Voldemort, quickly regaining his composure. "Let us begin."

The Death Eaters took an obliging step back, making room for the duel to come. There had been no explicit instruction, but they knew better than to dare get between Voldemort and someone he planned to kill. For that matter, considering his recent behaviour, most of them had no intention of getting between Harry and someone he obviously planned to hack to death.

"Do you know how to duel, Harry Potter?" asked Voldemort, taking up traditional dueller's stance.

Harry rolled his head, causing his neck to emit a series of pops and cracks. "Of course I know how to duel," he replied. "I was taught by a maniac who makes you look sane."

Voldemort stared at him for a moment, not entirely sure how to take such a declaration.

"Then you know what to do next, do you not?"

Harry stared blankly at him, his face a stony mask.

Voldemort narrowed his eyes. "Bow, young Potter. Bow to me. Bow to Lord Voldemort."

Harry continued to stare at him, not bothering to reply.

"Bow! *Imperio!*" commanded Voldemort aiming his wand at Harry and unleashing the first of the Unforgivables.

Harry felt the curse wash over him. It was even easier to ignore now than it had been the first time.

He continued to stare at his opponent without any obvious expression. It was a look he based off the one Kenpachi usually gave him.

Voldemort's expression soured as the seconds began to stretch. Eventually, after a minute without result, he lowered his wand.

"Impressive," he muttered, ignoring the uneasy shifting of the watching Death Eaters. "Barty reported that you could resist the Imperious."

Harry continued to stare at him, without moving.

Voldemort's already thin lips drew together into an almost invisible line.

"Very well, let us begin," he declared, resuming his formal duelling stance. He waited a single heartbeat before snapping his wand forward. "*Crucio*!"

Marauder twirled in Harry's hand with such ease that those watching would believe it to be almost weightless. The bare steel flashed red as the curse impacted against the blade. Harry's lips curled into a grimace as the magical backwash played over him. It was not nearly as painful as an unblocked Cruciatius would have been, but it was uncomfortable.

Uncomfortable meant nothing to Harry by this point.

Seeing his attack blocked so easily, Voldemort ended the curse before firing off a second (a bludgeoning curse) a third (a disembowelling curse) and then a fourth (a flesh rotting curse) in rapid succession. These were blocked by the massive blade of Marauder with the same ease as the Cruciatius Curse had been.

"That is no ordinary sword," observed Voldemort, lowering his wand just a fraction.

Harry smirked and shook his head. "Nope. Marauder is far from ordinary."

Voldemort arched a brow. "You gave it a name."

"Every zanpakuto has a name; you just have to hear it," explained Harry.

"A zanpakuto," repeated Voldemort thoughtfully. "A soul cutting blade."

"You've heard of them?"

"I have a passing familiarity with the language," Voldemort admitted. "*Avada Kedavra*!"

Having apparently decided to stop playing around, Voldemort fired off the Killing Curse like a proverbial lightning bolt, but Harry was hardly concerned. Kenpachi regularly attacked him at a much greater pace. He casually stepped aside and allowed the spell to slip harmlessly by. He smothered a grin as the Death Eaters immediately behind him scrambled out of the way.

The dark lord fired off a second Killing Curse, just as fast as the first. This time Harry chose not to dodge. Instead he hefted Marauder like a cricket bat and played a classic stroke he had seen when Vernon had watched that last Ashes on the telly.

This time he was unable to suppress a smile as he watched the green streak of magic rebound off his sword's blade and slam into Lucius Malfoy.

Harry turned to Voldemort, who was beginning to go a little red in the face. His smile was as vicious as he could make it, again an expression he had learned from Kenpachi. He gave his sword a twirl and quietly intoned the short phrase needed to activate the zanpakuto's initial release.

"Marauder; I solemnly swear that I am up to no good."

-oOo-

As promised, the last thing Harry did before killing Voldemort was cut the poor bastard's bollocks off.

Fin.

Author's Note: Yep, Harry's personal grim reaper was none other than Bleach's Zarakhi Kenpachi himself. I had almost considered making it Aizen, which would likely have had the end result of Harry turning into the greatest Slytherin to have ever lived since the original, but I went for Kenpachi because of the 11th Division's avoidance of Kido, the shinigami equivalent of spells. Since Harry is a wizard, having him not learn a stitch of "magic" during his euphemistically named training seemed to offer the best contrast.

As you might guess this is not even remotely to be considered a serious fic and as such most of the scenes are played for laugh. I did have plans to write out some parts that were, by necessity, reduced to brief paragraph descriptions, but I might add an omake chapter at later date if I ever haul them out and finish them. Also, I'm currently under attack by a plot bunny involving Harry's cupboard under the stairs connecting to NERV's airducts in Gregg Landsman's *Nobody Dies* universe. For some reason the idea of Harry Potter growing up with the Ree as bestest best friends is strangely appealing.

Lastly, as usual, a little extra for those that bothered to scroll this far down...

/oOo\

One hundred and twelve years later...

!oOo!

Harry gazed around at the familiar surroundings. He knew exactly where he was and how he had gotten there. That worried him. Well, it worried him a *little*. After everything that had happened to him during the course of his life, it took a great deal to truly bother him. Of course, since he knew *where* he was, as well as *what* was doubtless waiting for him here...

Yes, he was a *little* worried.

On the other hand, however, he was looking forward to seeing his beloved wife and soul mate again. It had truly devastated him when Hermione had passed on, three years before him. True, he had the support of his children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren and even a few great-great-grandchildren to lean on, but such absolute separation from Hermione caused his strength and his spirit to slowly drain away. He was glad that he had not outlived her by too long, even when he had always known that they would be reunited.

Thinking of Hermione, which he had done a great deal of since getting married, almost made him wince. He just *knew* she was not going to be happy with him. Not for dying - no, he was quite sure she would be more than delighted that they were finally being reunited. No, she was likely to be upset about that one little thing he had long since planned to do.

He had known that death was inevitable, that he would one day visit the afterlife for a forty-second and final time.

And he had trained and prepared accordingly.

“Harry!”

With a delighted laugh, the former Boy-Who-Lived swept his wife into a hug and buried his face in her hair. He had not had much chance to look at her as she had literally flung herself at him the moment she had come into sight, but he knew that years had melted away from Hermione; leaving her looking just as she had on their wedding day. That he had also been likewise rejuvenated left him gleefully anticipating the more intimate part of their reunion - later when there were no witnesses.

“Hello, Hermione,” he whispered in her ear.

“Oh, Harry, it’s so good to see you again,” she replied.

“Didn’t keep you waiting too long, I hope,” he joked, releasing his hug slightly, but keeping both arms around her.

“Only three years, darling; a short wait.” Hermione wiggled in his loose grasp; like an excited puppy squirming with pleasure. “Oh, it’s so wonderful to have you here at last! Everyone’s so excited! We’ve arranged a hall near the First Division barracks - everyone’s waiting for us there so we can celebrate!”

“Everyone?” asked Harry.

Hermione nodded eagerly, “Yes! Your parents, Sirius, Remus and Tonks. Ron and Ginny, of course, and Neville - oh, even Albus is attending!”

Harry arched a brow, “Dumbledore? Huh.”

“Yes, though we are missing a few members of the old crowd,” she continued, “It was the distance, I’m afraid. Not everyone could make it in time.”

“Distance?” repeated Harry, a bit confused.

“Oh, honestly, love,” Hermione huffed with fond exasperation. “Only you, Harry Potter, could live your entire life in Britain and yet somehow be assigned to the Japanese afterlife.”

Harry paused to consider that, his mind once again returning to the plans now over a century in the making.

“Does that mean...”

“Hey, look! It’s Rat-Hair! Hiya, Rat-Hair!”

Harry’s expression became utterly flat in an instant.

“You...”

Hermione, who knew her husband very well after over a century of marriage, blinked at the sheer loathing injected into that single word.

“Hi!” waved Yachiru from her place on Kenpachi’s shoulder.

“Mmph,” grunted Kenpachi in lieu of a proper greeting.

Various other shinigami followed behind the pair, all of them at one point or another having either met Harry or having helped with his “training”.

“Well, looks like this is it, gaki,” declared Kenpachi, “Forty-second time’s the charm, I guess.”

“Wait,” said Harry, holding up a hand. “I’m really dead this time? For good? You’re not going to send me back or anything else?”

"You're a hundred percent dead for good this time, gaki," Kenpachi confirmed.

To the surprise of almost all of those present, Harry burst into laughter. The only one who wasn't surprised was Hermione, who instead bore the tired expression of a wife who had tried repeatedly to talk her husband out of something and had eventually given up and resigned herself to what was to come.

"You seem rather happy to be dead, Potter-san," noted Unohana Retsu, the Fourth Division Captain who had personally put the poor Boy-Who-Lived back together for most of his time under Kenpachi's care.

Harry's crazed laughter trailed off as he focused once again on his personal "death". Kenpachi seemed rather annoyed to have been met by such a reaction and was scowling in displeasure. Or he was bored with the whole thing and grumbling about this waste of time when he could be doing something fun; like fighting an absurdly strong opponent, be they human, shinigami or otherwise.

"You know, Zarakai-taicho," said Harry, no longer laughing but instead grinning like a lunatic, "I never got a chance to thank you for all your help 'training' me, the last time I was here."

"Bah," scoffed Kenpachi. "You were weak. I made you less of a wuss."

"Still," Harry insisted, "You helped a lot. I couldn't have accomplished half of what I did if it hadn't been for you."

"Fine. You've thanked me. Great. Now get out of here. You're dead for good and're no longer my problem."

"Oh, no, I couldn't," said Harry silkily, as he moved his hand to grip the hilt of the broadsword that now hung at his waist. After a century of use and practice he had gained enough control over his spiritual energies that Marauder; his zanpakuto, his Soul Cutting blade, now resembled a more regularly sized sword, rather than the massive cleaver it had started out as. "I couldn't possibly leave," he continued, "not until I've shown you exactly how much I've improved since then."

"Honestly," grumbled Hermione, walking off in search of some soothing tea. Perhaps that nice Unohana lady could brew a decent cup.

Harry grinned a feral smile he had learned from the man standing in front of him and then whispered a single word.

"Bankai ."