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Evil Be Thou My Good (part 1)

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Summary: Nine years ago Vernon Dursley bought an ancient puzzle box. His nephew managed to open it. The entire Dursley family suffered the consequences. Now, in the midst of Voldemort's second reign of terror, Harry Potter is convinced the only way to defeat the Dark Lord; is to call upon an even greater evil. This decided, Harry begins his plans to recreate the Lament Configuration... and to open it... again.

Author's Note: While this *is* an AU, please assume that everything happens exactly the same for the most part, other than those scenes indicated in the story. Now, let's get started; it's time to play...

"Evil Be Thou My Good" - Paradise Lost, John Milton

.oOo.

April 13th, 1988, Number 4 Privet Drive

The house was filled with flickering shadow. The lights were out in every room. In the living room the television provided a small amount of illumination as it crackled with blue-white static. A strange, unearthly light played across the floors, ceilings and walls.

Where it came from could not be discerned, save that it seemed almost alive in its movements, rhythmic and pulsating to an intricate, yet monotonous beat. This was the only sound to be heard, other than the frantic, raw gasps of eight-year old Harry's breath as he sat huddled in the farthest corner of his cupboard.

In a way, he supposed, he was lucky that Aunt Petunia had found him when she had; just as he finished solving the puzzle box that Uncle Vernon had brought home for Dudley. Apparently the plump boy's primary school teacher felt that Dudley needed to work on his problem solving skills.

The teacher had suggested puzzles or models, something to occupy both Dudley's hands and his mind. For once Vernon had not dismissed the recommendation out of hand and had actually gone out to find something for his precious Dudders to play with, which would also provide something of a challenge.

He had returned with a intricately wrought Chinese puzzle box.

Dudley had spent five minutes trying to open the box, before throwing a fit and tossing it to the side as he wailed about the unfairness of it all. That and how he had missed the first few minutes of his favourite cartoon because of it.

It had been Harry that had picked up the box from where it had fallen.

It had been Harry who had solved the puzzle in less time than it had taken for Dudley to give up.

Aunt Petunia had come out of the living room, where she and Vernon were trying to placate their son, to investigate the simple, banal melody that had begun playing as Harry worked his way through the box's puzzle.

"Look, Aunt Petunia, look," Harry had declared with pride, holding the box up for his surrogate mother's inspection. "I did it! I opened it!"

"How dare you!" Petunia had snarled, snatching the box out of Harry's hands. She had hurriedly set it down on the kitchen table and grabbed Harry by the ear, leading him out of the kitchen and into the hallway. "Haven't we told you that you're not to play with any of Dudley's things?"

"But, he didn't--"

Without letting him finish explaining, Aunt Petunia had thrown open the cupboard door and deposited Harry inside, a tad more roughly than he was used to.

"And you'll stay in here until Monday!" she pronounced. It was still early Friday evening and Harry grew upset at the thought of being stuck in the cupboard the entire weekend. Petunia slammed the door shut and closed the latch; locking Harry inside.

That had probably saved the young boy's life.

Harry had easily been able to hear Dudley bawling about how he was missing his show. Vernon had complained loudly about poor reception and Petunia had tried to placate them both. Through it all, Harry could faintly hear the repetitive tune coming from the kitchen, from the puzzle box.

Then the lights had faded and the bell began to toll.

The Dursleys had stopped their talking, confused by both the darkness they had been plunged into and the hollow sound of the bell ringing again

and again. Their confusion had not lasted long. Nor had their silence. All to soon the shouting began. Then the screaming.

Through it all the bell tolled and the music box played its tune.

It seemed to have lasted a lifetime, a blood-curdling cacophony of naked terror and pain given voice, but now all was still. All was silent. Save for the soft notes of the music box, the ceaseless tolling of the bell and Harry's rasping breath.

Suddenly a new sound was heard.

The creak of feet descending the stairs.

The stairs up which the Dursleys had fled.

Up which their killers had followed.

And were now returning.

To his great displeasure, Harry found his curiosity outweighed his fear. With all the skill he could muster, Harry crept over his lumpy mattress and to the door of his cupboard.

Cautious, lest he be discovered, he peered through the slats that afforded him a limited view of the hallway and just a glimpse of the kitchen. He could just make out a corner of the kitchen table, but not the puzzle box resting upon it. At first this was all he could see, this and nothing more.

Then a pale, black-clad figure stepped into view.

Harry stopped breathing.

The figure, a tall, imposing man, seemed to blend into the shadow, save for his head which seemed to float through the air as he walked slowly down the short hallway leading to the kitchen. He was nearly past the cupboard door, looking neither left, nor right, but straight ahead... when he stopped.

Harry's heart joined his lungs in inactivity.

The regal figure tilted his head a fraction to the side, as if sensing something...

...and then he moved on, continuing into the kitchen.

Harry's heart resumed beating and he took a shallow breath of relief.

Licking his lips nervously, Harry leaned against the cupboard wall, trying to see what was happening outside. He could see the dark man entering the kitchen and standing by the table. He saw him reach out a hand to pick up something; the puzzle box. He saw a pair of black, bottomless eyes staring back at him from less than a foot away.

In spite of himself, despite knowing that it most likely meant his death, Harry let out a scream of unadulterated terror and lurched backwards. He fell to the cupboard floor with a loud thump, though not as loud as his cry, and scurried as far back as he could.

Following on the heels of his shout, he heard a deep voice comment, "Almost over..."

He heard the latch click and watched in dreadful anticipation as the cupboard door swung open. A dark figure stood in the doorway, imposing and terrifying despite its slight frame. It was, Harry realized with horror, a woman. Slowly, gracefully, she crouched down and leaned into the cupboard.

"We hear everything, we see everything," she said in a brittle voice.

Harry barely registered her words, his eyes locked at the base of her throat. It had been peeled open and he knew that if he looked closely enough, he would be able to see her spine. Filled with more terror than he thought possible, and unable to move anything else, Harry flicked his eyes upward, meeting her cool gaze.

"Hiding in the cupboard will not save you, child," she said with a shake of her head, somehow speaking even though Harry could see that her voice box had been removed. Her throat was just an empty cavity. She began to reach in, intending to grab hold of Harry and pull him out, when a slender but strong arm intervened.

"No."

The woman looked up. It was the man that Harry had seen enter the kitchen. Harry still did not have a clear view of him, as he was standing just outside the cupboard door, his head and shoulders out of sight.

"No?" asked the woman, clearly confused by the man's actions.

"No," repeated the man, giving a slight shake of his head.

"Why?" asked another voice, from a large figure that Harry could only vaguely discern on the woman's other side.

"You know what happens to those who stand in Hell's way," intoned the man, his voice deep and regal. "The same can be said of those who stand in the way of Fate and Destiny."

Placing a hand on her shoulder, the man urged the woman back to her feet and out of the cupboard entrance. He moved to kneel down, just as the woman had done. Harry stared at him, even more terrified than he had been when faced with the woman's mutilated visage.

The man's face was, like the woman's, ghostly pale - almost blue-white. Deep, bloodless cuts slashed up, down and across his head, spaced about an inch apart. Driven into his skull, where the lines intersected, were long, thick needles that protruded outward about an inch or so. He looked rather like a living pincushion. A pinhead. His eyes, however, were even darker than the woman's, seemingly endless in their depth, their promise of pain unimaginable.

Regarding Harry for a moment, the pinheaded man reached out a hand. Harry could not stop a flinch of fear, but gathered what courage he had left to hold his ground and not retreat into the darkest corners of the cupboard. He had a feeling it would not help, but rather serve only to anger this... demon.

With surprising gentleness, Pinhead brushed his fingers over Harry's forehead, flicking his messy fringe aside and revealing the lightning shaped scar hidden there.

"A scar?" asked the woman, a hint of incredulity in her echoing voice.

"A sign," elaborated Pinhead, "that this one is marked by Fate."

Dropping his hand from where it rested, so cold that it burned like ice against Harry's skin, Pinhead reached behind him. With the same delicate care he had used to reveal Harry's scar, he brought out the puzzle box, which had continued to play its simple tune the entire while.

"This, child," said Pinhead, holding the box up for Harry to clearly see, "is the Lament Configuration." He held it in place for a second or two before lowering it to his lap and explaining. "It is a means to summon us."

He glanced up from the box, which he had been examining, and levelled a menacing stare at Harry, who remained frozen in place, scarcely daring to breathe.

"Remember it," he commanded.

Harry barely managed a weak nod as Pinhead returned his attention to the puzzle box, the Lament Configuration. He watched with morbid fascination as the leader of the creatures that had taken the Dursley family began to return the box to its closed state.

His fingers worked delicately over the intricate faces, sliding various parts back into place. With each manoeuvre, as each section closed off, the soft chimes of the tune grew simpler and less intricate.

"One day you will call for us again, Harry Potter," predicted Pinhead, not bothering to look up as he continued to reset the puzzle box to its unopened condition.

The last sounds of the musical tune, which had been the only constant throughout this ordeal, began to fade away as the box grew closer and closer to being fully closed. In the background Harry was vaguely aware of the throatless female and her fat companion disappearing into the shadows, but his attention was focused almost entirely on the box in Pinhead's hands.

With grim finality, but tempered by inhuman patience, Pinhead slid the final panel into place. The bell gave one final, echoing toll as the demon set the puzzle box down on the floor, directly in front of Harry.

"It is your destiny," Pinhead whispered as he too vanished into the darkness that filled number four.

There was a click from the box as the panel settled firmly into place.

The tune finally stopped.

The last echoes of the bell died away.

There was a brief flickering of lights and the buzz of electricity surging through circuits once more. The lights came on with startling abruptness, just as the television blared to life; a sports commentary playing at full volume.

Harry remained perfectly still for a brief moment, staring at the box laid before him. Finally, with trembling fingers, he picked it up from its place on the floor and stuffed it the pocket of his oversized shirt. With trepidation as to what he might find, Harry stepped out of his cupboard and began to search the house for any sign of his relatives.

Somehow, he knew there would be no bodies. Nothing but spilt blood.

It was as if everything that happened were no more than a dream.

Or a nightmare.

.oOo.

November 5th, 1988, Number 55 Lodovico Street

It had been nearly seven months since that fateful night, when he had opened the Lament Configuration and brought the minions of Hell itself to number four Privet Drive. At great many things had changed for Harry Potter since then.

First and foremost; he was no longer living with the Dursleys. This was, in no small part, because the Dursleys were no longer amongst living. Technically they were still listed by the British police as being missing persons, but Harry knew better. After all, he had met the creatures that had taken them. The Dursleys would never be found. Not on earth, or any other world of the living.

The next big change, as far as Harry was concerned, was that he now knew the truth. He was a wizard. His father had been a wizard. His mother had been a witch. The Dursleys had known this, but for some reason had not seen fit to tell him. This revelation made him feel a bit less guilty about what happened to them. A part of him felt that they deserved it.

The witches and wizards had shown up not long after the creatures from the box had departed. They actually managed to arrive before the... what was the word? Muggle? Yes. The Muggle police had only arrived at the Dursley household several days later, when Vernon's co-workers at Grunnings reported his failure to arrive for work.

By this time Harry had been moved to a place of safety, a massive castle in the highlands of Scotland. Apparently it was a school of magic, called Hogwarts. Harry made a show of being awed by its size and unnerved by the ghosts that roamed its halls, and the portraits that moved and could speak.

In truth, compared to what he had seen that night, Hogwarts seemed more like a place filled with parlour tricks than a place to be taken seriously.

The headmaster, an ancient wizard called Albus Dumbledore, had apparently known Harry's parents. It was he who had sent Hagrid, a giant of a man and the school's groundskeeper, to fetch baby Harry from the ruins of Godric's Hollow on that fateful night when James and Lily Potter had been murdered.

That was another big change in Harry's life. The knowledge that his parents had been murdered. Not killed in a car crash, but actually killed by another human being. Deliberately.

This was a source of some frustration for Harry, as he was having great difficulty in finding out who it was that had killed his parents. Whenever he asked somebody, the reply was inevitably 'You-Know-Who'. Seeing as Harry did not know who, he was beginning to lose his patience and his temper. The closest he had come to a proper answer had been from Dumbledore, who promised to explain things once Harry had settled down in his new home.

"It is never a good thing to take in too much at once," Dumbledore had said, blue eyes twinkling merrily over the frames of the half-moon spectacles perched on the tip of his crooked nose.

This was a change in Harry's life that related to the first; that he was no longer living with the Dursleys. Instead, after much debate amongst the wizarding world, Harry had been turned over into the care of the Merchant family. Apparently they were very distant relatives.

John Merchant, the man of the house, was a fifth or sixth cousin of Harry's father, James Potter. John was married to Roberta, who insisted that everyone call her 'Bobbi'. John was an architect, in both the wizarding and the Muggle worlds, while Bobbie was a mid-level clerk for the British Ministry of Magic, working in the Goblin Liaison Office.

The couple already had a son, Jake, but were more than happy to take Harry in. This was due to the fact that Jake had graduated from Hogwarts the previous year and recently moved out of the house and into a flat in Liverpool. With their son no longer staying with them, they had no qualms about taking in a homeless nine-year old.

It had been late July before Harry had finally been placed with the Merchants - the arguments between various factions as to where he should go had been fierce. As it had been close to his birthday, John and Bobbi had decided to take Harry to France for his first real holiday so that they could get know each other better.

They had stayed with John's second cousin (apparently almost everybody who was anybody was related to each other in the wizarding world) a French toymaker by the name of Phillip Lemarchand and his wife Genevieve. The Lemarchands had been very nice to Harry, almost as nice as the Merchants, and had treated him as part of the family.

They had even introduced him to some friends of theirs; the Delacours, whose eldest daughter, Fleur, was about to start her first year at Beauxbatons, the famous French school of magic. Harry had gotten along quite well with the older French girl, and personally thought she was the most pretty girl he had ever seen, even if neither of them spoke a word of the other's language. Her baby sister, Gabrielle, was as cute as a button as well.

Returning to England a month later, John and Bobbi had brought Harry to their home. It was an older house than number four had been and much larger as well. Harry was enjoying the greater freedom he had here, most notably the full-sized bedroom that now had his name stencilled on the door. It was a vast improvement over the cupboard under the stairs.

When he said as much to John and Bobbi during dinner that first night, he had found Bobbi's explosion of indignation and the ensuing row with Professor Dumbledore to be highly amusing.

Then again, upon learning that Harry had spent seven years living in a cupboard, Dumbledore had let loose a display of raw magic that left John and Bobbi in awe. Harry had not been the least bit impressed. Certainly Dumbledore was powerful, but compared to the creatures from the puzzle box? No, the old wizard's fury over Harry's treatment at the hands of the Dursleys was nothing to be impressed by.

It had been a week later that Harry first had a chance to begin his plans. That was the first time, since he had been left in their care, that both John

and Bobbi had been out of the house. Normally one or the other remained to keep an eye on their young charge.

Harry had not let the opportunity slip past. He had sneaked into the tool shed, tucked away in the corner of the back garden, and sought out the largest, heaviest hammer he could find. He had to use both hands to lift it and even then the head dragged along the floor.

Wrapping it in one of his old shirts, a souvenir of his time with the Dursleys, Harry had proceeded to bludgeon the puzzle box to pieces. He must have raised the hammer over his head a dozen times, dropping it down with all the force he could muster - shattering the box into pieces no bigger than a Muggle stamp.

Now, several months later, he was ready to implement the second part of his plans.

"Guy Fawkes?" repeated John blankly. "What's that?"

After explaining this strange Muggle custom to his guardians, Harry had easily been able to convince John and Bobbi to allow him to build a Guy, which they would place on a large bonfire in the back garden. Getting into the spirit of things, and bearing in mind Harry's explanation, John had purchased a small array of fireworks from some place called Zonkos, which he planned to set off once the bonfire got going.

Using a framework of dry branches, some sticks, some straw and a lot of grass clippings, Harry put together his Guy. While nobody was looking, he hid the broken pieces of the puzzle box inside the effigy, which he then clothed in some of his old Dudley hand-me-downs.

"Can I? Please?" Harry asked Bobbi imploringly once all was ready.

"That's 'may I', Harry," Bobbi corrected gently, handing him her wand. "And yes, you may."

The Merchants, and Jake when he visited, had been grounding Harry in magic and spell work. It would be three years still before he could get his own wand, but for the time being he was more than happy to use someone else's. It wasn't that difficult he discovered, though John had explained that he wouldn't get as good a result with a wand that wasn't properly attuned to him.

"*Inflamarae*," Harry commanded, pointing the wand at the base of the bonfire.

Soon the fire was crackling merrily, the flames rising higher and higher as they slowly crept towards the ragged figure that sat atop the pile of logs John had assembled. Harry, John, Bobbie and Jake (who had come over for the occasion) watched with rapt attention as the Guy finally caught alight. As he watched the flames consume the straw dummy, Harry would have sworn that he could hear the box's melody playing over the snap and crackle of the fire.

"That's a strange tune, Harry," commented Bobbi, drawing Harry out of his almost mesmerised fire gazing.

"Yes," agreed John. "Where did you learn it?"

It took a moment before Harry realized what they were saying. He wasn't hearing the shattered music box's tune; he was humming it. Completely unaware that he was doing so.

"I don't know," he lied.

"Whatever it is, it's catchy," observed Jake, who had picked up the tune and was humming it himself.

"I think I heard it on the Muggle telly," Harry went on, elaborating on his lie. He turned his eyes back to the bonfire, where the Guy had begun to fall apart as the fire burnt merrily away.

With Jake humming the tune, and Bobbi swaying to its gentle tempo as she stood in the cradle of John's comforting arms, Harry had to wonder if it was so easy. The box was more than a simple puzzle box. More than a simple music box. Would a fire be enough? Even after it had been smashed to pieces?

Even as he prayed it would be, he could not help but remember Pinhead's prediction.

"One day you will call for us again, Harry Potter."

The shiver that wracked Harry's thin frame had nothing to do with the gust of cold wind which unexpectedly whipped through the back garden, causing a spray of sparks and embers to erupt from the bonfire. Watching the glowing cinders swirl about and slowly drift to the ground, Harry had a feeling that nothing would ever be enough to truly destroy the box.

After all, some doors, once opened, can never be closed.

.oOo.

September 1st, 1991, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

"Potter, Harry!" called Professor McGonagall.

Gritting his teeth and ignoring the excited chatter that filled the Great Hall, Harry stepped up to the four-legged stool and sat down.

During Harry's first Christmas with the Merchant family Dumbledore had finally explained about Voldemort and the deaths of James and Lily Potter.

Harry had been somewhat put out by the revelation that he was famous for an act he could not even remember. The revelation that he was known as The-Boy-Who-Lived did not sit well with him.

Regardless of how distasteful he found it, he had had three years to get used to the idea, which is why he ignored the hushed whispers of his classmates as easily as he did. Then Professor McGonagall set the hat down on his head where it dropped past his eyes, leaving him sitting in darkness. He waited.

"Hmm," said a small voice in his ear. "Difficult. Very difficult."

Recalling the trouble Ollivander had gone through to find an appropriate wand, Harry had to agree. It seemed that he would never have an easy time fitting in. It was, he supposed, his destiny.

"Yes, my lad," agreed the Hat. "You most certainly do have a destiny to fulfil. I can see it, oh yes. It's there, buried deep within you. Let's have a look, shall we? Oh my goodness..."

"What?" asked Harry bluntly. He disliked the idea of having someone prodding about inside of him.

"Darkness," whispered the Hat. Harry gripped the edges of the stool. "There is darkness within you, lad. A great swell of it, like the still ocean waiting to break upon a shore."

"You're going to put me in Slytherin, aren't you?" asked Harry dejectedly.

Everyone knew that Slytherin turned out more dark wizards than the other three houses combined. If the darkness within Harry, which he suspected he knew the source of, was any indication, he would likely do well in Slytherin. He had no fear that John or Bobbi would reject him if he were sorted into Slytherin, but he would much rather not run the risk of being tempted to give into the darkness within him.

"Slytherin? Perhaps," the Hat admitted. "But the darkness is buried deep inside you, underneath so much else. Plenty of courage, I can see. Not a bad mind, either. There's talent, oh yes, talent... So where should I put you?"

"If I have a choice," pleaded Harry, "then anywhere but Slytherin."

"Anywhere but Slytherin, eh?" said the small voice. "Are you sure? You could be great, you know, it's all here in your head, and Slytherin will help you... your destiny will be that much easier to fulfil."

"Not Slytherin," insisted Harry.

"No? Well, if you're sure - better be GRYFFINDOR!"

Harry heard the hat shout the last word to the whole Hall. He took off the hat, handed it to a smug looking McGonagall, and walked shakily to the Gryffindor table. His relief at avoiding a placement in Slytherin was so great that he hardly noticed Percy the Prefect shaking his hand, while the Weasley twins yelled, "We got Potter! We got Potter!"

Harry sat down opposite the ghost with the ruff he'd seen earlier. From what John and Jake had told him, this was likely the Gryffindor house ghost; Sir Nicholas. The ghost patted Harry's arm, giving him the sudden, horrible feeling of having plunged his arm into a bucket of ice-cold water.

It reminded him of when Pinhead had touched his forehead to reveal his scar. His relief was washed away and he closed his eyes in an attempt to quell the sudden violent churning of his stomach.

"It is your destiny."

The voice sounded so vivid, so real, that Harry snapped his eyes open and looked frantically left and right. He half expected to see Pinhead sitting right next to him. All he saw, however, were the other Gryffindors, who had returned their attention to the remainder of the Sorting.

"Turpin, Lisa!"

"RAVENCLAW!"

Settling back, Harry tried to allow the ceremony to distract him from the cold which had enveloped him. But even as he watched Ron Weasley, who had turned a pale shade of green, he could have sworn he heard the faint tinkling of a familiar tune from a long gone musical box.

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May 25th, 1993, The Chamber of Secrets

"I have many questions for you, Harry Potter."

"Like what?" Harry spat, fists clenched by his side.

"Well," said Riddle, smiling pleasantly, "how is it that a baby with no extraordinary magical talent managed to defeat the greatest wizard of all time? How did *you* escape with nothing but a scar, while Lord Voldemort's powers were destroyed?"

"Why do you care how I escaped?" asked Harry. "Voldemort was after your time."

"Voldemort," said Riddle softly, "is my past, present and future."

Using Harry's wand, Riddle traced his name in the air in shimmering letters. With a wave of the wand the letter rearranged themselves, spelling out the name of the man that had killed the Potters and so many others.

"You see?" whispered Riddle. "It was a name I was already using at Hogwarts."

Harry stared at the words hovering before him, only half-listening to Riddle explaining how he was the heir of Slytherin and had been fashioning himself the personae of Lord Voldemort while still a schoolboy. It was Riddle's last words, however, that caught his attention.

"You're not," he said quietly.

"Not what?" asked Riddle.

"Not the greatest sorcerer in the world," replied Harry.

Riddle snarled viciously at him and demand, "Oh really? And who do you think is?"

Harry shook his head. "I don't know his name," he admitted. He looked upwards, staring into space as his thoughts turned back to the imposing, yet majestic figure that had knelt down in the doorway of a cupboard so that he may speak to a terrified young boy. "I don't even think he's a really sorcerer. He's... something else. Something more. Something you don't hold a candle to."

Returning to the present, Harry dropped his gaze to a murderous looking Riddle. He smiled and went on, "But even then, Albus Dumbledore is a much greater wizard than you ever were! Everyone knows it. Even before I broke your powers, you didn't dare try anything against Hogwarts while he was here!"

"Dumbledore's been driven out of this castle by the mere *memory* of me!" Riddle hissed furiously.

"He's not as gone as you might think!" Harry retorted. He was speaking at random, wanting to scare Riddle, wishing rather than believing it to be true. Even then, he knew, in the darkest parts of his soul, that while Dumbledore was a match for Tom Riddle, the old wizard held no power at all against true evil.

Riddle opened his mouth, but froze.

Music was coming from somewhere. Riddle whirled about to stare towards the entrance to the cavernous chamber. The music was growing louder. It was eerie, spine-tingling, unearthly; a tune that had haunted Harry's dreams and nightmares for longer than he would have liked. Even sung in a way that made his heart swell with hope and courage, Harry recognised it.

As the tune rose to a fever pitch, flames burst into being atop the nearest pillar. A crimson and gold plumed bird the size of a swan appeared, trilling its haunting melody to the vaulted ceiling. Flying down from the pillar, straight at Harry, the bird dropped its ragged burden in Harry's hands before settling heavily on his shoulder.

"That's a phoenix..." said Riddle warily.

"*Fawkes*?" Harry breathed, both amazed and horrified.

The idea that a creature, supposedly so pure and true to the light, would sing the very same tune which had come from the opened puzzle box, caused Harry's mind to stall in place. It took a few moments, and a squeeze of his shoulder by Fawkes' golden claws, before Harry managed to restart his mental processes.

He had other things to worry about.

.oOo.

September 1st, 1993, Hogwarts Express

"Who's that?"

"Who's *that*?"

"Ginny?"

"Hermione?"

"What are you doing?"

"I was looking for Ron--"

"Come in and sit down--"

"Not here!" said Harry hurriedly. "I'm here!"

"Ouch!" said Neville.

"Quiet," said a hoarse voice suddenly.

Professor Lupin appeared to have woken up at last. Harry could hear movements in his corner. None of them spoke. There was a soft, crackling noise and a shivering light filled the compartment. Professor Lupin appeared to be holding a handful of flames. The illuminated his tired grey face, but his eyes looked alert and wary.

"Stay where you are," he said, in the same hoarse voice, and he slowly got to his feet with his handful of fire held out in front of him.

But the door slid slowly open before Lupin could reach it.

Standing in the doorway, illuminated by the shivering flames in Lupin's hand, was a cloaked figure that towered to the ceiling. For a brief second Harry felt the panic begin to rise within him before he realized that whatever this was, it was not Pinhead or any of the other demons that had taken the Dursleys.

The thing beneath the hood, whatever it was, drew a long, slow, rattling breath. An intense cold swept over them all. Harry felt his own breath catch in his chest. The cold went deeper than his skin. It was inside his chest, it was inside his very heart...

Dimly, as though from a great distance, he heard a familiar tune.

Harry stared up at the figure, which had seemingly glided into the compartment, in abject terror. He could hear it, more clearly with each passing second. The tune from the puzzle box seemed to fill the air, louder and louder, like the pounding of his heartbeat in his ears. This thing might not be Pinhead or his fellows, but it must have been associated with them somehow, or that tune would not be sounding.

Somewhere, far away, a bell began to toll.

His legs had grown roots into the compartment floor and Harry had the feeling that not only was he in mortal danger, but his soul was in even greater peril. Biting down on his lip so hard that he drew blood, Harry fought to keep in the scream of unbridled terror that had risen in his throat.

Darkness began to encroach his vision and the sensation of falling gripped him.

"Harry! Harry! Are you all right?"

Someone was slapping his face.

"W-what?"

Harry opened his eyes. There were lanterns above him and the floor was shaking - the Hogwarts Express was moving again and the lights had come back on. He had seemingly slipped out of his seat and onto the floor, where Ron and Hermione were kneeling next to him. Neville and Professor Lupin were standing above them, watching.

Looking about, Harry was relieved to see that the hooded creature from before was gone. Unfortunately, the tune had not departed with it. It was softer now, less incessant, but still playing faintly in the background. Harry glanced around the compartment frantically, but could not determine the source of the melody.

"Are you okay?" asked Ron as he and Hermione heaved Harry back onto his seat.

"Yeah," lied Harry. He was anything but okay, feeling terribly sick and soaked in a cold sweat. "What happened? Where's that - that thing? And where the Hell's that damned noise coming from?"

"What noise?" asked Ron nervously.

Harry looked at his friend and then turned to Hermione. Clearly she could not hear anything either. It began to dawn on him that the tune he could hear was not a real one. It was just a memory, playing over and over again within his own mind, brought to the fore by whatever affect that creature had upon him.

"Nothing," he lied again. "Just my ears ringing."

.oOo.

October 31st, 1993, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

"Anything worrying you, Harry?"

Harry looked up from the chipped mug of tea and stared at his Defence Against the Dark Arts professor, Remus Lupin.

"No," he lied smoothly, a talent he had mastered over the past five years. He took a sip of tea and watched as the Grindylow waved an angry fist at him. "Yes," he said suddenly, putting his tea down. "You know that day we fought the Boggart?"

"Yes," said Lupin slowly.

Why didn't you let me fight it?" Harry asked impatiently.

Lupin raised his eyebrows. "I would have thought it obvious, Harry," he said, sounding surprised.

Harry, who had expected Lupin to deny that he'd done any such thing, was taken aback.

"Why?" he said again.

"Well," said Lupin, "I assumed that if the Boggart faced you, it would assume the shape of Lord Voldemort."

"Voldemort?" repeated Harry incredulously. The idea that some idiot dark lord could possibly inspire any such fear in him was so laughably absurd, that Harry threw his head back and laughed - perhaps a tad hysterically. Recovering, he admitted with all due honesty, "He didn't so much as cross my mind."

Lupin was looking extremely taken aback by Harry's reaction. Nodding slowly he said, "Clearly, I was wrong, but I didn't think it a good idea for Lord Voldemort to materialise in the staff room. I imagined that people would panic."

Harry nodded in understanding. "That makes sense."

"If I may ask, Harry," said Lupin, frowning slightly even as he considered Harry with a curious gaze, "what form do you think your Boggart would have taken."

"A box," replied Harry with a sly smile. "A small, beautiful crafted musical puzzle box."

"A puzzle box?" repeated Lupin, utterly confused.

Not wanting to reveal any more than he already had, Harry leaned back in his seat and drank some more tea.

"So you've been thinking that I didn't believe you capable of fighting the Boggart?" said Lupin shrewdly, having recovered from his momentary confusion, even though he was still in the dark as to Harry's answer.

"Well... yeah," said Harry. He was suddenly feeling a lot happier. "Professor Lupin, you know the Dementors--"

He was interrupted by a brusque knock on the door and the arrival of Professor Snape.

It would be some time before Harry could ask his professor to teach him a way to fight a Dementor.

.oOo.

August 22nd, 1994, The Quidditch World Cup

"MORSMORDRE !"

Something vast, green and glittering erupted from the darkness. It flew up over the treetops and into the sky, trailing sparks of green in its wake.

"What the-?" gasped Ron, staring up at the thing that had appeared.

For a split second, Harry thought it was a formation of leprechauns, similar to those displayed during the Quidditch match earlier that day. Then he realised that it was a colossal skull, composed of what looked like emerald stars, with a serpent protruding from its mouth like a tongue. The small group watches as the sparkling apparition rose higher into the air.

To Harry's consternation screams of terror began to fill the woods. Harry couldn't understand why the hovering skull and snake would elicit such a reaction. Sure, the image was an ugly one and slightly unnerving, but nothing to cause such a fuss over.

"Who's there?" he called, staring into the darkness and trying to catch a glimpse of the person who had conjured up the skull hovering above.

"Harry, come on, *move* !" yelled Hermione, grabbing the back of his jacket and tugging him backwards.

"What's the matter?" he asked, startled to see her face so white and terrified.

"It's the Dark Mark, Harry," she moaned, pulling him as hard as she could. "You-Know-Who's sign!"

Drawing on a hidden strength that he seldom used, Harry planted his feet firmly on the ground. Hermione's struggles to draw him away suddenly became utterly ineffectual. She might as well have been trying to yank out one of the massive trees deep within the heart of the Forbidden Forest.

Harry remained frozen to that spot, seemingly unmoveable regardless of how hard Hermione pulled, and stared up at the glittering skull than shone over the forest like some malevolent moon.

"A skull, with a snake coming out of its mouth," he said in summation. "How... unimaginative."

.oOo.

June 24th, 1995, Little Hangleton Cemetery

The cauldron was simmering, sending its diamond sparks in all directions, so blindingly bright that it turned all else to velvety blackness. It was this blackness, more than anything else, that concerned Harry. He kept expecting to see a pale white face, studded with inch-long pins, emerge from out of it.

And then suddenly, the sparks emanating from the cauldron were extinguished. A surge of white steam billowed thickly from the cauldron instead, obliterating everything in front of Harry, so that he couldn't see Wormtail or Cedric or anything but vapour in the air.

Then, through the thick veil of ghostly pale mist, Harry saw the silhouette of a man, tall and skeletal, rise up from inside the cauldron.

"Robe me," hissed a cold voice.

Harry watched with morbid fascination as Wormtail, sobbing and moaning over the loss of his hand, scrambled to pick up the black robes that were laid out on the ground. In silence he watched as the bleeding man pulled them one-handed over his master's newly risen head.

The thin figure stepped out of the cauldron, staring at Harry... and Harry stared right back.

Lord Voldemort had risen again.

He looked only barely human. Long, spidery fingers. Painfully thin arms and legs, little more than bone, muscle and sinew. A narrow chest, with protruding ribs, and an even narrower waist. His face, with a pointed chin, thin nose and slitted red eyes.

The Dark Lord reached into a pocket and withdrew his wand. He held it up to his face and caressed it, as if greeting a long lost lover. He then pointed it at Wormtail, who was lying on the ground, half-dead from blood loss. With a flick of his wrist, Voldemort hurled his servant through the air, sending him crashing in a bloody heap by the foot of the headstone Harry has bound to.

"My Lord... my Lord... you promised... you did promise..." whimpered Wormtail, cradling the bloody stump of his arm.

"Hold out your arm," commanded Voldemort languidly.

Harry thought Wormtail was pathetic in his eagerness. "Oh, master... thank you, master..."

"The other arm, Wormtail," laughed Voldemort when Wormtail held out his mutilated arm.

"Master, please... *please* ..."

Growing impatient, Voldemort reached down and grabbed hold of Wormtail's uninjured left arm. He pulled back the sleeve, revealing the vivid red of Wormtail's Dark Mark. Voldemort examined the tattoo, ignoring Wormtail's pitiful sobs.

"It is back," he said softly, "they will all have noticed it... and now, we shall see... now we shall know..."

He pressed the tip of one lone, pale forefinger against Wormtail's Dark Mark, which turned black just as Harry's scar flared to life with such pain that he had to bite back a gasp of agony.

"How many will be brave enough to return when they feel it," Voldemort whispered as he straightened up, a look of cruel satisfaction on his snake-like face. "And how many will be foolish enough to stay away?"

He turned to face Harry, staring down at him in consideration for a second. Harry matched his gaze until Voldemort moved away, pacing up and down, gleaming red eyes scanning over the empty graveyard in expectation.

As his nemesis strode back and forth, Harry considered the man responsible for so much of the pain that filled his young life. Voldemort, he decided, cut an intimidating figure. Tall and pale, swathed in black robes that billowed behind him as he moved. The red eyes, which seemed to glow in the darkness, would unnerve all but the most hardy of souls.

In a way, he *was* scary. Perhaps even terrifying, in the right circumstances.

He wasn't scary enough though. And he could not hope to match the terror brought about by the mere presence of those beings that Harry had summoned through the puzzle box.

Harry had to wonder what anyone saw in the grotesque mockery of a man that paced restlessly before him.

.oOo.

July 31st, 1995, Number 55 Lodovico Street

Harry's fifteenth birthday came and went with little to no fanfare this year. He woke up that morning and went down to eat breakfast with John and Bobbi, acting as if it were any other day. After accepting their presents to him, and those his friends had sent via owl, Harry returned to his room and returned to what he had been doing all summer.

Drawing small sketches of the puzzle box.

It had been seven years since he had last seen it, since he had destroyed it. First he had smashed it to pieces with a hammer so heavy that he had barely been able to lift it. Then he had hidden the pieces in a bonfire that had burned merrily for an entire night. What few charred and melted pieces he had been able to find after that, had been disposed of over the course of several months, each piece dropped in a new and different dustbin each time Harry left the Merchant house.

Since then, all Harry had left of the box and the tune it played were his memories.

Which for some reason refused to lay down and die.

At this particular point, those memories seemed intent on forcing their way to the forefront of his thoughts. Harry found it next to impossible to pass by a piece of parchment without leaving behind a brief sketch of the box, or part of the design crafted into one of its sides.

His homework for the summer was liberally sprinkled with such doodles. After redoing his Transfiguration homework three times and his Charms homework twice, Harry eventually gave up and just accepted the fact that his professors would find scores of miniature puzzle boxes adorning his essays. He found some amusement in imagining their reactions.

It worried Harry that he was so preoccupied by the box. True, it was never far from his thoughts, but this was much more persistent than it had ever been before.

Perhaps this was his subconscious mind's way of trying to tell him something.

If nothing else, it certainly took his mind off Voldemort's return and the fact the Daily Prophet seemed intent on making him out as an attention seeking brat, rather than reporting the truth of the matter. At least the Dark Lord seemed to be taking his time, gathering his forces, instead of immediately starting a killing spree as Harry had fear.

He just wished somebody, anybody, would tell him more about what was happening that what he had been able to glean from his perusal of the newspaper. The information blackout was not helping his temper.

Still, a letter from Ron the other day had hinted that he might be joining his red-haired friend and Hermione later in the summer in a secret location of some sort.

Hopefully then he would find out what was going on.

If not, well, he'd probably have to kill someone.

.oOo.

January 19th, 1996, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

"Legilimens !"

Harry wasn't ready for Snape's assault and was unable to form any resistance to the attack on his mind. His view of the Potions professor's office disappeared, replaced by a multitude of images that flickered in front of his mind's eye too fast to keep track of. Slowly the images became easier to discern.

He was five, watching Dudley riding a new red bicycle, and his heart was bursting with jealousy...

A hundred Dementors were closing in on him beside the dark lake...

He was nine, and was standing next Phillip Lemarchand as he introduced the Merchants to René and Yvette Delacour...

Voldemort was rising from the cauldron, white steam billowing about him...

Harry tried to stop the flow of images, but it was like trying to dam a river with only your hands. Snape was bringing up image after image, in no particular order than Harry could make out, and there was nothing he could do to stop it. He was trying to shut the other man out, but didn't know how...

Hermione was lying in the hospital wing, her face covered with thick black fur...

The Guy was burning, and he found himself humming the tune of the music box whose pieces were hidden within it...

He was sitting under the Sorting Hat, and it had discovered the darkness that dwelled within him...

Until now the images had been discordant, jumping about from place to place, person to person, time to time. Now, however, something had garnered Snape's attention. The Sorting had put him on its trail. The darkness that lay buried deep inside Harry's soul...

Aunt Petunia was berating him for touching Dudley's things, dragging him by the ear to the cupboard...

The lights went out and the sound of a bell tolling joined that of the music box...

He was peering through the slats of the cupboard wall, suddenly a pair of black, bottomless eyes were staring back at him from less than a foot away...

He heard the latch click and watched in dreadful anticipation as the cupboard door swung open...

A dark figure stood in the doorway, imposing and terrifying despite its slight frame...

Snape was getting closer to it than anyone else ever had. To this day nobody knew what had happened to the Dursleys. Nobody knew what it was that Harry had unleashed by solving the puzzle box. Nobody. And Harry intended for it to stay that way.

No, thought Harry, as the memory of his meeting with Pinhead began to surface, *you cannot see this, you cannot see what happened... it's not for your eyes...*

Harry's magic gathered within him, moving at such a rapid pace that it actually hurt - burning throughout his chest like the sudden onset of a bad case of heartburn.

He still did not have a clear view of the tall man, as he was standing just outside the cupboard door, his head and shoulders out of sight...

With a roar of defiance, mixed with desperation to keep his greatest secret from being exposed, Harry launched his magic outwards. There was a crack like nearby thunder. The flow of images came to an abrupt stop, leaving a panting young man staring around Snape's office in confusion.

The room looked like it had been hit by a Muggle bomb... and where had Snape disappeared to?

A muffled curse sounded, drawing Harry's attention to the professor's desk. There was Snape, emerging from behind the once pristine but now splintered and smoking desk. He looked to be in much the same condition as the rest of his office. He staggered unsteadily, using one hand on the desk to prop himself up, lest he fall back down.

"What ~~was~~ that?" he finally asked, looking at Harry with wide eyes.

Harry knew that the older wizard was not referring to the burst of magic he had used to free himself of the Legilimency. Snape was asking instead about the images he had managed to glean from Harry's mind before being thrown out.

"You're a rational man, Professor," replied Harry.

"So?" asked Snape, clearly not accepting that as an answer.

"That, as you put it," said Harry with a shake of his head, "was not something a rational man can believe."

"Don't try to avoid this with meaningless claptrap, Potter," countered Snape, his patience wearing thin. "Now, tell me what in Hell those memories were!"

"Hell?" repeated Harry. "You have no idea."

He exited the office without another word, leaving Snape standing in a maelstrom of debris. Harry did not mention the incident again and Snape made no comment when Harry did not return for any more Occlumency lessons.

.oOo.

June 21st, 1996, Department of Mysteries

This room was larger than the last, dimly lit and rectangular, and the centre of it was sunken, forming a great stone pit some twenty feet deep. They were standing on the topmost tier of what seemed to be stone benches running all around the room and descending in steep steps like an amphitheatre, or the courtroom in which Harry had been tried by the Wizengamot.

Instead of a chained chair, which had put Harry in mind of Pinhead and his tortures, there was a raised stone dais in the centre of the pit, on which stood a stone archway that looked so ancient, cracked and crumbling that Harry was amazed the thing was still standing.

Unsupported by any surrounding wall, the archway was hung with a tattered black curtain or veil which, despite the complete stillness of the cold surrounding air, was fluttering very slightly as though it had just been touched.

"Who's there?" said Harry, jumping down onto the bench below. There was no answering voice, but the veil continued to flutter and sway.

For a moment he thought that perhaps it might be Sirius, somehow escaped from Voldemort's clutches, but when a familiar shiver ran up his spine, Harry knew that it was nothing human, nothing mortal, that caused the veil to move.

"Careful," cautioned Hermione, following behind him as Harry made his way down to the pit.

He could not explain it, but for some reason he felt drawn to the veil in a way that was horribly familiar, yet at the same time different to what he expected.

The pointed archway looked much taller from where he now stood. He had the strangest feeling that there was someone else standing behind the veil, on the other side of the archway. Gripping his wand very tightly, Harry edged around the dais, but there was nobody there. All that could be seen was the other side of the tattered black veil.

And in that moment, Harry understood.

Just as the puzzle box had been a doorway, so was this. Perhaps to the same place, perhaps not, Harry could not tell, but he found himself cautiously backing away from the archway. He held his wand at the ready, doors that should not be opened often had the bad habit of swinging both ways, and Harry wanted to be ready to act should anything unexpectedly come through this particular door.

"Let's go," called Hermione from halfway up the stone steps. There was a tremor of nervousness in her voice. "This isn't right, Harry, come on, let's go."

Harry had to agree with her. She sounded scared, much more scared than Harry had ever heard. In fact, he found himself feeling the same way, just not so extreme. Nothing short of seeing Pinhead emerge from behind the veil would get such a strong reaction from him.

"I'm coming," he called back.

But he did not move. He had just heard something. He still could. At first he thought it was faint whispering, murmuring noises coming from the other side of the veil. But it wasn't voices. It was a soft, gentle, rhythmic tune, playing over and over again with monotonous regularity.

"Harry, let's go, okay?" said Hermione more forcefully.

"Can anyone else hear that?" demanded Harry, wondering if this wasn't perhaps similar to the effect of the Dementors, simply bringing his memories of the box and that night to the front of his mind. He prayed that was the case.

"Hear what?" asked Hermione, moving over to where he stood.

"The music, that tune," he said, moving out of her reach and back towards the dais and the veil.

"I can't hear anything, mate," said Ron, appearing on the other side of the archway and moving to intercept Harry.

"I can hear them too. Voices. Whispering voices," breathed Luna, joining them from around the side of the archway. She gazed at the swaying veil with a slightly more aware stare than was usual for her. "There are people *in there* !"

"What do you mean, '*in there*'?" demanded Hermione. "There isn't any '*in there*', it's just an archway - there's no room for anybody to be there. Harry, stop it, come away--"

She grabbed his arm and pulled. Harry followed willingly, actually grabbing hold of her arm and helping to drag them both away from the fluttering veil and the soft tune that droned relentlessly on.

"Yeah," he swallowed, "I think that's a good idea."

"Harry?" she asked, puzzled and a little frightened by his sudden turnaround.

"We have to get out of here, now!" he insisted, tugging on Hermione's arm to the point that she gave a gasp of pain as he pulled too hard. "Hurry - we don't want to attract their attention."

"Who's attention? There's nobody there!"

Without speaking, Harry looked into Hermione's eyes. Her protests died instantly as she somehow understood the urgency which now filled him. She nodded before separating from him to go and fetch Ginny, who was standing by Neville, both seemingly entranced by the veil.

Motioning for Ron to take hold of Neville, Harry went ran over to where Luna stood, staring at the veil with frightening intensity. Grabbing her by the arm, Harry dragged the blonde witch all the way back to the door.

"What d'you reckon that arch was?" Ron asked as the group re-entered the circular room.

"It's a doorway," said Harry, answering before Hermione could speak.

"A doorway? To where?"

"Somewhere you *don't* ever want to go."

.oOo.

June 21st, 1996, Department of Mysteries

"Come on, you can do better than that!" yelled Sirius, his voice echoing around the cavernous room.

The second jet of light hit him squarely on the chest.

Harry released his grip on Neville and began leaping down the stairs. It all seemed to be happening in slow motion as he moved. Sirius fell backward, taking an age to reach the fluttering veil that hung behind him like an awful backdrop. For one fraction of a second it seemed that he was suspended in place, as if he were simply leaning casually against a wall. Then, his face frozen in an expression of surprise, Sirius fell through the ancient doorway and disappeared from view.

Harry skidded to a halt, staring at the veil in horror as it billowed for a moment, as though caught in a high wind, then settled back into place. It was

not his imagination that he heard the hollow toll of a bell, ringing out over the soft play of the puzzle box's tune.

Dimly he could hear the triumphant yell from where Bellatrix Lestrange stood, but his attention was focused on the veil, as if expecting Sirius to reappear on the other side any side...

But Sirius did not reappear.

Harry hadn't really expected him to. Nobody could escape what was on the other side of that veil.

Remus Lupin seemed to appear out of nowhere from one side, grabbing Harry around the chest and pulling him away from the dais and the archway.

"There's nothing you can do, Harry--"

"I know," said Harry, an unnatural calm settling over him.

"--it's too late, Harry," continued Lupin, Harry's words not registering immediately.

"I know," Harry repeated, reaching up to pry Lupin's arms off him with surprising strength for a boy of his size.

Lupin stared at him in surprise, having expected a much different reaction. "Harry..."

A coldness that rivalled the touch of Pinhead's fingers on his forehead, that night so many years ago, descended over Harry as he stepped away from his former Defence professor. Harry's gaze remained on the archway, on the fluttering veil, for a single, timeless moment. Then he flicked his wrist, bringing his wand into hand.

"Lestrange," he whispered, turning away from the veil and the tune that continued to play from behind it. With the same finality of the Grim Reaper approaching his next victim, Harry turned to face the woman that had just condemned his godfather to unspeakable horrors.

Bellatrix's lips were contorted into an ugly smile. It was a look of insufferable smugness, which only served to fuel Harry's cold fury to never before seen heights. It was a look that was replaced by one of pure agony as Harry's wand came up and his magic surged through him, focused with inhuman fury.

"*CRUCIO!*"

All movement in the vaulted chamber came to a standstill. All eyes, at least those of everyone still conscious, snapped from Harry to Bellatrix in rapid succession. The only sound was Bellatrix's screams, which reverberated throughout the room as she writhed helplessly on the floor.

To cast an Unforgivable Curse properly, you have to *mean* it. For the Cruciatus Curse you needed more than righteous anger - you had to really want to cause your victim pain. Right then, Harry wanted nothing more than to show Bellatrix even a fraction of the tortures Sirius now faced. As such, his Cruciatus Curse held more force than anything Bellatrix, or even Voldemort, had ever imagined possible.

It was nothing short of a miracle that the shock alone didn't kill her.

"*AVADA KEDAVRA !*"

It was only his ingrained sense of self preservation that caused Harry to duck out of the way, breaking his curse on Bellatrix in the process. Had it been any curse other than the Killing Curse, he would not have moved. The green flash of the spell streaked through the air, passing only a hand's breadth away from Harry's back as he dropped to the floor.

"Impressive, Potter," said a high, cold voice. "I never thought you had it in you."

Harry looked up from his place on the floor.

Tall, thin and black-hooded, his terrible snakelike face white and gaunt, his scarlet, slit-pupilled eyes glaring down... Lord Voldemort had appeared in the doorway leading out of the Veil Room, his wand aimed at Harry as he stood over the crumpled form of his favourite servant.

"Master, thank you, thank you," sobbed Bellatrix, flinging herself at Voldemort even as she struggled to draw breath after the intensity of Harry's curse. "I never thought--"

"Be quiet, Bella," commanded Voldemort, his eyes not straying from Harry. "I shall deal with you in a moment. Do you think I have entered the Ministry of Magic to hear your bleating pleas for help?"

"But Master," Bellatrix managed, forcing herself onto her knees, "He's here... below..."

Voldemort ignored her, his attention still focused solely on Harry.

"I have nothing to say to you, Potter," he said quietly. "You have irked me too often, for too long. And now I find that you are more dangerous than I had originally believed. *AVADA KEDAVRA !*"

Harry was about to leap to the side, to dodge the curse bearing down on him, when a chunk of shattered stone leapt into the air, intercepting the spell before it had crossed half the distance between the two combatant.

"What?" cried Voldemort, staring around. And then he breathed, "*Dumbledore!*"

How the Dark Lord had failed to notice the headmaster until now was a mystery. Suffice to say, his attention strayed away from Harry entirely, focusing instead on his old professor. The confrontation between these two seemed to spur the other occupants of the room back into action. Mad-Eye Moody had managed to revive Tonks and, along with Kingsley, began firing curses at the remaining Death Eaters.

The battle for the Ministry resumed.

.oOo.

June 22nd, 1996, Hogwarts Headmaster's Office

Harry closed his eyes. If he had not gone to save Sirius, Sirius would not have died... More to stave off the moment when he would have to think about Sirius again, Harry asked, without caring much about the answer, "The end of the prophecy... it was something about... *neither can live ...*"

"...while the other survives," completed Dumbledore softly.

"So," said Harry, dredging up the words from what felt like a deep well of despair inside him, "so does that mean that... that one of us has got to kill the other one... in the end?"

"Yes," said Dumbledore simply.

For a long time, neither of them spoke.

It was with a troubled mind that Harry thought back on the battle at the Ministry, of how he had used the Cruciatus on Bellatrix Lestrange. Proof that he was a powerful wizard. Not many fifteen-year olds could cast that curse successfully, especially not with such force behind it.

That it was one of the darkest of dark spells, one that carried a hefty sentence if convicted, was not something Harry had to worry about. According to Dumbledore, after he had Portkeyed Harry to his office, he had personally obliviated all the Death Eaters that had heard or seen Harry cast the curse. The members of the Order and Harry's friends could be trusted not to say anything.

What was bothering Harry was the fact that he doubted the effectiveness of any of the three Unforgivables when it came to using them on Voldemort. They would most certainly prove useful against his Death Eaters, but against someone who had used any means he could lay his hands on in an effort to achieve immortality?

Harry had his doubts.

He would need something else.

His thoughts strayed back to the prophecy.

The words... *he will have a power the Dark Lord knows not ...*

There was no doubt now. Harry knew what it meant. What that power was. Something that had been a part of his life for almost as long as he could remember. Something intertwined with his life, his soul, in a way that Voldemort would never be able to match. Dumbledore seemed to think that power was love, if Harry had understood what the old wizard had said earlier. Harry knew better.

"One day you will call for us again, Harry Potter."

The words, another prediction made long ago, came unbidden to him.

"It is your destiny."

And after eight years of denying that fact, Harry finally found himself accepting it.

It was his power. The power to call them, to summon them. To solve the puzzle that opened a doorway through which the denizens of Hell itself could raise themselves into this world.

It was his destiny.

.oOo.

July 31st, 1996, Number 55 Lodovico Street

Harry had thrown himself into his appointed task with a fanatical fervour. Everything; all the work he had done before now, for Potions, for Transfiguration, for Charms, for Defence, for Quidditch, it was nothing compared to the focus, intensity and sheer bloody-mindedness that he was putting into this single endeavour.

Had any of his professors seen him, they would have been amazed. Unbeknownst to anyone, save the Hogwarts faculty, Harry was one of the top ten students in his year. But this was something that not even Hermione could have rivalled at her most intrepid.

Massive sheets of parchment and paper, pilfered from John's workshop, now covered the walls of his room in the Merchant house. His Quidditch posters of Ron's Chudley Cannons and Oliver Wood's Puddlemere United have been pulled down, replaced by a multitude of sketches, drawings and designs. Every image was the eerily similar, linked together to greater or lesser degrees, all based on the clearest memory of Harry's life.

The Lament Configuration.

His desk was littered to overflowing with yet more parchment, more paper, filled with more sketches, more drawings and yet more designs. While not labelled or ordered in any way, it was obvious which works were older and which were more recent, as the detail displayed in them grew progressively more intricate, more complex.

There were so many copies, so many attempts, so many reproductions that there simply wasn't enough space left to hold it all, which is why Harry had also appropriated two long benches from John's workshop. They lined the walls of his room and filled up almost all of the remaining space, leaving barely enough room for someone to move from the door to the bed.

"Harry, dear? Harry?"

Harry was so lost in his work that Bobbi's voice completely failed to register. He remained in place at his desk, running his fingers over his latest attempt at reproducing the puzzle box's design. His eyes traced over the still drying ink and the pencil underneath, critically examining each line and curve.

As he worked, as he deconstructed the image from his memory, he began to understand. The more time he spent on it, the closer he came to grasping the concept behind its function. But still, something was missing. Some part of the design was eluding him, hovering just beyond the edges of his perception. Until he found it, everything he committed to paper was so much trash.

"Harry?"

With a frustrated snarl, Harry tore at the sheet of paper he had spent the past three hours working on. He ripped this latest attempt into thick strips, which he bunched together and crumpled into a ball that he then tossed blindly over his shoulder.

"Harry?"

"What?" Harry barked angrily, the incessant calling of his name grating on his frayed nerves.

"Don't take that tone of voice with me," countered Bobbi, standing in the doorway to his room.

Muttering a half-hearted apology, he turned back to his desk and reached for a fresh sheet on which to work. Grabbing his pencil, which was half the length it had been when he started using it, less than a week ago, Harry began scribbling yet another detailed outline of the unknown runes that were supposed to line this section of the box.

Right now he dearly regretted having taken Divination instead of Ancient Runes. Next time, he would go with whatever Hermione recommended, rather than what Ron thought would be easier.

"Harry," Bobbi navigated her way through the mess of discarded papers that littered the floor of his room. Once she managed to reach where he was sitting, she put a hand on his shoulder. "Harry, do you even know what day it is?"

"Tuesday," he hazarded a guess.

"It's Thursday," said Bobbi, sounding worried.

"Oh," accepted Harry, nodding his head but not really paying attention to the conversation.

"Harry... today's your birthday."

Now Harry looked up, his hand pausing in mid stroke. He blinked in confusion several times, processing what his adoptive mother had just told him. It didn't seem right.

"Already?" he asked, wanting confirmation.

Bobbi knelt down on the floor next to Harry, putting both hands on his shoulders and turning him towards her. Harry was startled to see deep lines of worry on her face.

"Harry," she said softly, "you've barely left this room the entire summer. It's been over a week since you had a bath and nearly three days since you last got any sleep - we've seen the light on under your door at all hours of the night. You missed breakfast and dinner yesterday and have been living off what you could scavenge from the kitchen while passing by on your way to the loo."

"But I had dinner..." Harry trailed off uncertainly.

"Yes," agreed Bobbi. "Two days ago."

Blinking at the sudden realization that he apparently lost a few days, and the equally sudden realization of just how tired he truly was, Harry stared blankly at Bobbi for several seconds. He was having difficulty processing the idea.

"I'm sorry, Mum," he finally managed. "I've just," he glanced at the mounds of paper and parchment lying scattered about his room, "just been busy

working."

"It's all right, Harry, I understand," said Bobbi, leaning over to envelop him in a hug. Hesitating for a moment, Harry raised his arms and gently returned the gesture. "You need to rest, Harry," she continued, pulling away from him. "This isn't good for you."

"I know," Harry admitted, running a hand down his face. He was slightly surprised to feel some stubble covering his cheeks and chin. He had only recently started shaving, perhaps once every couple of weeks. What he could feel was nearly that much growth.

He turned back to his desk and the sketch he had just started. The compulsion he felt to continue working on it was almost too strong. He turned back to Bobbi. He could see the honest worry for him in her soft brown eyes, eyes that more and more often reminded him of Hermione. He turned to the desk again.

"Harry?" Bobbi gently shook him by the shoulder.

"I - I have to do this, Mum," he managed to say, staring down at the sheet of paper. It was almost there, so close that he could practically taste it. He turned to Bobbi, a tortured expression on his face. "I have to," he repeated, his mind not able to work its way around that single fact.

"I know," Bobbi told him, cupping his face in her hands and kissing his forehead. She sat back on her heels and looked at him expectantly. Had he been more aware of his surrounding, Harry might have noticed the sly gleam in her eyes. "But you won't be able to do it if you don't start eating and sleeping properly again."

"You're right," agreed Harry, pushing his glasses up as he massaged the bridge of his nose. "You're right. I've been pushing too hard. Trying to do too much too quickly."

"Exactly," said Bobbi, breaking into a relieved smile. "Remember, it's like John always says; '*Rome wasn't built in a day*'. You need to relax a little, before you burn yourself out. Or worse, make a mistake."

This caught Harry's attention most effectively. The idea of making a mistake on a task such as this was something that truly terrified him. It could spell disaster on a scale beyond anything the world had ever seen. Licking his lips and trying to put that thought out of his mind, Harry turned the conversation back to Bobbi's earlier question, when she had first entered his room.

"It's my birthday?" he asked.

"Uh-huh," confirmed Bobbi with a grin. She leaned forward again and gave him another hug. "Sweet sixteen."

Harry smiled back at her for a moment before a horrible thought occurred to him. "My friends aren't here, are they? You haven't arranged a party or something without telling me?"

Bobbi smiled indulgently and informed him, "We did tell you about it. Two weeks ago."

"Bloody hell!" cried Harry, jumping up and almost knocking Bobbi over as he stumbled towards the door. "I have to get cleaned up! I need a shower! I need a shave! Dammit, where did all this bloody paper come from!?"

.oOo.

October 31st, 1996, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Harry's friends were worried about him.

He had been working on the Lament Configuration almost every spare moment that he had been able to find. He had even gone so far as declining to resume his place on the Gryffindor Quidditch team when his previously confiscated Firebolt had been returned to him by Professor McGonagall. His refusal had almost given the Transfiguration teacher a coronary on the spot.

He was still teaching the Defence Association, no longer known as Dumbledore's Army, for a couple of hours every other night. But it was obvious, to those who knew him well, that Harry was not paying it as much attention as he had the previous year. He was just going through the motions. Despite his apparent disinterest, he was still proving quite an effective teacher to his fellow students - so much so that the club had expanded dramatically over the past month.

At the moment he was sitting in the Gryffindor common room, half hidden at a desk in one of the less travelled corners. There he worked on the inner mechanisms of the puzzle box.

Arrayed before him were the six faces of the box, currently separated and unassembled. Attached to the inside thereof were amazingly complex arrangements of miniscule cogs, wheels, springs and other devices. At first glance it looked like a clockmaker's paradise, but closer inspection revealed a crazily haphazard design that seemed to defy some, if not all, of the laws of physical motion.

"Come on," Harry whispered to himself as he peered through a set of powerful magnifying glasses to see clearly as he carefully tightened a screw that was barely larger than a grain of rough sand.

The miniscule part properly inserted, Harry held up the face and the assembly attached behind it. Carefully, keeping a close watch on the machinery, he slid one panel from its closed position to its open position.

As the panel clicked into place the intricate arrangement of gears, and in some cases; facets jewels, began to move. By some inexplicable means,

the mechanism seemed to constantly shift and change, parts starting to move for no apparent reason, while other sections somehow continued to whirl, even though they should have already stopped.

A simple tune began to play. It was only two or three notes, but it was proof enough that the design worked.

Harry sat the arrangement back on the desk, outside face down - the inner working sticking up into the air, some parts seemingly hanging suspended by nothing at all. He reached across to one of the other five separate faces of the box and deftly set it into motion as well.

New and different notes joined the tune played by the first face, giving it more body and more complexity. Harry listened intently for a few seconds, using his memory to fill in the blanks. It was close. Very close. He gently set the two faces onto their sides and then brought them closer together, arranging them in a similar manner as to how they would lie if the box were fully assembled.

"Harry?"

"Just a second, Hermione," he replied, eyes not straying from the arrangement in front of him.

He pulled a sheet of parchment close and began scribbling observations on it as he watched the gears move in some strange manner that defied normal physics.

Suddenly, impossibly, a few extra notes joined the incomplete tune.

Harry froze in place, his quill dripping ink onto the parchment. He stared blankly at the two pieces of the box for a moment, before turning his gaze to one side.

A third face, and its attached mechanism, had begun to move and play by itself. Harry cautiously reached out and shifted it so that he could see the outside face. Nothing had been moved. Every single panel was in its closed and supposedly inactive position. Yet the gears were moving.

"Harry?"

"Not now," he said distractedly. "This shouldn't be happening."

Grabbing blindly to the side, Harry rummaged through the stack of notes he had on hand - piled next to him. He began paging through them, searching for an explanation for what was happening.

A flicker of light caught his attention as he read, making him look up. The two panels directly in front of him continued to move. The few jewels scattered about their constructions were glowing; glittering and reflecting light over the various exposed surfaces and inner panels.

Harry's hands went limp and the notes he was holding fell to the floor.

"Harry, what's wrong?" asked Hermione, worrying filling her voice.

Harry was hardly listening, lost in the movements of his constructs, waiting for something...

Panels started to shift about the two separate pieces, both on the inside and the outside faces. Harry stared, wondering if this was by accident or design. It was definitely not something he had expected to happen.

A pattern began to emerge as the panels entered alignment...

...an unholy light began to shine...

...and then separated again, moving apart a fraction of a second before completion.

Harry heaved a deep sigh of relief. Or disappointment. He wasn't really sure which. He slumped in his chair, staring at the two constructs whirling faithfully in front of him. The third face, the one that started moving by itself, began to wind down, the notes it was adding to the tune dying away.

An arm reached over Harry's shoulder, intending to pick up the third piece of the box.

"Wicked stuff, mate," said Ron from right behind him.

"No! Don't!"

The hint of true panic in Harry's voice was enough to freeze Ron in place, his hand poised a scant inch above the box face he had been reaching for.

"Whatever you do," said Harry with faked calm, "don't move."

Quickly, fear motivating his haste, Harry took the two faces he had been working with and slotted the various panels back into their inactive state. He waited, anxiously, at the relevant mechanisms ground to a halt. With a final click, everything stopped moving and the incomplete tune stopped playing, its last few notes echoing in the air.

Reaching over, Harry then gripped Ron's arm by the wrist - holding it firmly in place. He used his other hand to carefully slide the third box face out from underneath his friend's hand. Once it was clear, he released his hold.

"Okay," he breathed with a relieved sigh. "You can move your arm again."

"Mate," said Ron uncertainly. "What was that all about?"

"You almost touched something you shouldn't have," replied Harry.

"So?"

"That would've been bad."

"Bad?" repeated Ron.

"Bad," confirmed Harry with unwavering conviction.

"Bad as in?" asked Ron, not willing to let it rest at that.

"Bad as in you could've lost that hand," said Harry, not mentioning that the loss of a limb would likely have been the very least of Ron's worries had the red-haired wizard started something he shouldn't have.

"Ah," said Ron, actually taking a step away from the table. "Bad."

"Yeah," agreed Harry.

He slumped in his seat again, the adrenalin that had surged through his veins only moments earlier beginning to recede. He would not be accomplishing any more work tonight.

"Harry," asked Hermione, putting a hand on his shoulder, "what is all this?"

She gestured at the table Harry was working at, the various faces of the Lament Configuration laid out on it, with pieces of parchment detailing various parts of the panels and gear works scattered about.

Looking up at her, seeing her earnest expression, Harry wondered what to say. He had a dozen different lies on the tip of his tongue, but couldn't seem to bring himself to say any of them.

Harry had recently realized that he had developed feelings for Hermione that went beyond friendship. He would have liked to explore the possibility of a romantic relationship with her, but had decided to wait until after Voldemort had finally been dealt with.

He hated to admit it, but he was also slightly afraid of what she, and his other friends, would think of him when they finally saw the means he would be employing to defeat the Dark Lord. He knew without a doubt that, even if they still accepted him as a friend, their perceptions of him would still be forever changed.

"It's just something I've been working on," he finally said.

"Something you've been working on every spare minute you have," Hermione corrected. She shook her head in disbelief and looked over the desk once again. "Now what is it?"

"An idea I had over the summer," Harry stalled.

"What is it?" pressed Ron, leaning cautiously over the desk, examining the exposed box faces and gears.

"A combination of Muggle physics and magic," said Harry.

"Oh? Muggle stuff, huh? Dad would love this," said Ron.

"What does it do?" asked Hermione.

"I'm still trying to work that part out," replied Harry, this time being perfectly honest in his answer.

"You mean you don't know?" asked Ron incredulously.

"It's just an idea I had," said Harry defensively.

He began to pack up. He gathered his scattered notes, including those that had fallen to the floor, and stuffed them into his schoolbag. The various pieces and components of the unfinished puzzle box were carefully laid out in a special box he had bought during the summer to store them in.

"Come on," he said once everything was packed away. "Let's go down to dinner. I'm starving."

"What do you think it does?" asked Hermione, her thoughts still on the box.

"If things go as planned, you'll find out soon enough," Harry said grimly.

Ron and Hermione paused to exchange a suddenly worried look. Harry continued on, not noticing that they were no longer following right behind him.

"Why am I suddenly scared?" Ron asked after a moment in which he and Hermione watched their puzzle box obsessed friend slide out the portrait

hole on his way to dinner.

"Because you're finally using your common sense," Hermione intoned.

.oOo.

December 31st, 1996, Hogwarts Headmaster's Office

It was the New Year and Harry was sitting, waiting placidly, in the headmaster's office. Dumbledore was sitting opposite him, while most of the Order of the Phoenix were scattered about wherever they could find a place to stand or sit. John and Bobbi Merchant were present, both Order members since the summer before Harry's fifth-year, though they had no more idea of what was going on than anyone else present.

The soft murmurs of whispered speculation came to a halt when Dumbledore cleared his throat. Everyone turned to the old wizard, who in turn focused on the young man sitting in front of him.

"I think it's time for an explanation, Harry," he said.

Harry nodded and reached into his school robes. He withdrew a small package, wrapped in brown paper and tied up with a line of string.

"I know I've been... off... for the past few months," Harry began, deliberately inserting a touch of uncertainty and timidity into his voice.

"Try since Black was killed," observed Alastor 'Mad-Eye' Moody with his usual blunt gruffness.

Harry paused and glanced over his shoulder at the retired Auror. He gave the scarred man a look that caused Moody's jaw to snap shut with a clack and his magical eye to freeze in place. Satisfied that Moody would keep quiet for a bit, Harry turned back to the package in his hands. He set it down on the desk in front of him.

"The truth is; I've been working on something to destroy Voldemort," he said plainly.

Molly Weasley shifted in place, clearly preparing to start her usual rant about how Harry should leave fighting the Dark Lord to the adults.

"Harry, dear--"

"The one with the power to destroy the Dark Lord approaches... born when the seventh month dies..." Harry cut her off. He lifted his gaze to stare defiantly into Dumbledore's eyes as he recounted what he had learned in this very room shortly after the debacle in the Department of Mysteries. *"The Dark Lord will mark him as an equal... and either must die at the hand of the other, for neither can live while the other survives..."*

The various members of the Order were rocked by this recitation of the Prophecy's. It was not everything, in fact the wording was slightly wrong as Harry was more or less adlibbing its contents, but it did contain the pertinent bits.

Waiting several minutes for the excited chatter to die back down, mostly due to Dumbledore signalling for quiet, Harry reached up with one hand and brushed aside his fringe; revealing his scar.

"He marked me as his equal, Mrs Weasley," was all he said.

"Albus?" asked Molly, turning to Dumbledore. "Is this true?"

Dumbledore sighed deeply, for once looking his age as he slumped in his chair.

"Yes, Molly," he confessed. "I'm afraid it is. Harry is the one prophesised to defeat Voldemort."

There was a long silence as everyone took in this jewel of information. Harry ignored his growing annoyance at the delay, wanting get on with it. He had to tell them about the box. Particularly...

"Potter, defeat the Dark Lord?" asked Snape incredulously. He gave a soft, disdainful snort and commented, "If that's true, we'd best start making out our wills and putting our affairs in order."

"Severus!" snapped Dumbledore unhappily. He quickly recovered though and assumed a sure and confident manner. "I have every faith that Harry is up to the task."

Bobbi stepped up, John immediately behind her, and knelt down to grab Harry in a fierce hug.

"Oh, Harry," she said, voice muffled. "Why didn't you tell us?"

"Sorry, Mum," Harry replied earnestly, "but once I heard the prophecy... I knew what I had to do."

John managed to pry Bobbi off Harry, pulling her back but not far from their adopted son. He glanced at the wrapped package on Dumbledore's desk, seeing it as a way to distract his wife. Pointing at it, he asked, "What is it, son?"

Harry smiled and reached out to tug on the string, which easily came undone. Without the string to hold it up, the brown paper fell aside, revealing the contents of the package.

they were unnerved by the puzzle box would be an understatement.

"Harry... what was that?" asked Dumbledore, finally breaking the hushed silence that had fallen over his office. Even the portraits of the past headmasters were silent - and not because they were feigning sleep.

"Only a tortured soul could have made a box like this, sir," explained Harry. He gave an inner smile at this combination lie and half-truth. "Why else do you think it would be called the *Lament Configuration*?"

"Oh, Harry!" cried Bobbi, almost pulling Harry from his seat as she grabbed him into another hug.

"Mum, it's okay! Really! I'm fine now," Harry tried to assure her.

John once again pulled Bobbi off the struggling young wizard. Sending his adoptive father a thankful look, Harry continued to explain.

"To build the box, I had to understand suffering. True suffering. That was the only way." He then smiled reassuringly to Bobbi, who was clinging to John. "Now that I've finished building it, I feel... incredible. Like the weight of the world has been lifted off my shoulders."

"This is all well and good, Potter," commented Moody, having recovered from Harry's earlier glare. "But I don't see how a box is going to defeat the Dark Lord, no matter how tortured your soul was when you put it together."

Harry sighed and held the box up, considering both it and his answer for several moments.

"I told you, inside this box are powers beyond imagination," he finally said. "When the time's right, I'll open it, release those powers... and send Voldemort straight to Hell!"

"You believe this to be the power foretold by the prophecy?" asked Dumbledore intently, leaning forward.

"Yes," Harry confirmed in all honesty.

"What d'you mean, sir?" asked Kingsley Shacklebolt. The large black Auror's bald head was dotted with a cold sweat, some of which was trickling down his face, a result of what he had seen in reflected in the box's surface.

"Harry's recitation of the prophecy left out a few parts," Dumbledore patiently explained. "Namely the line that states; *he will have a power the Dark Lord knows not*."

"And that power's inside this box," insisted Harry.

"What power?" asked Tonks.

"I can't explain it, Tonks," Harry replied with a shake of his head and a short shrug. "I don't fully understand it myself... and I built the damned thing."

"No surprise there," murmured Snape, just loud enough for people to hear.

Harry sent the Potions Master a murderous glare, receiving a typically haughty sneer in return. Whatever hesitation Harry might have had about what he had planned vanished. He no longer felt any indecision about Snape's fate.

"It's a form a magic; a manipulation of space, time and so forth," he tried to explain.

"Like Apparation or Portkeys?" asked Bill Weasley, who was holding a shivering Fleur close to him.

"Similar, but not really," Harry allowed after a moment's thought. "It's like oil and water. They're both liquids, but that's where the similarity ends."

Harry reached into his robes again and pulled out a thick sheath of bound parchment, which he handed to Dumbledore. The sheets were covered in sketches of some basic patterns. There was nothing remotely as complex as the Lament Configuration, but the idea was there. Lines of notes were arrayed up and down the sides of the pages.

This was a small compilation of some of what Harry had discovered while working on the puzzle box. If the box was a play by Shakespeare, then this was the ABCs of the English language. It held the guidelines to a type of magic that had never been explored, at least not in recorded history.

"You're saying you've discovered a new field of magic?" asked Hestia Jones, speaking up for the first time at this meeting.

"Yes," confirmed Harry. "The simplest way to describe it is that I'm using the box to alter space and time on a local scale through the interaction of the specific shapes and forms that make up its structure."

"The result of which you believe will destroy Voldemort," concluded Dumbledore.

"Bingo," nodded Harry.

"Bingo?" repeated Arthur Weasley blankly. "What do house-elves have to do with this?"

"It's just an expression, Arthur," sighed Tonks.

"Oh, used by Muggles, eh?"

Dumbledore, in the meanwhile, had paged through the first few sheets of parchment that Harry had handed him. He set the bound pages down and leaned back in his chair, steepling his fingers as he stared in contemplation at the box Harry was holding.

"Are you sure it wise to create such a thing, Harry?" he asked.

Harry stared down at the box in his hands, remembering that night when he first saw it and worked his way through its puzzle, opening it and unleashing what lay hidden within it.

While working through the process of recreating the Lament Configuration, Harry had managed to divine some of the whys and hows behind the its operation. He did not fully understand how the box could open a doorway to Hell, and he suspected that no mortal mind ever would (something he found great relief in), but he did have enough knowledge to create boxes that did other things as well.

Instead of the Lament Configuration he could have just as easily have built a puzzle box that, when completed, resulted in an explosion of nuclear proportions.

The problem was that Voldemort had undergone dozens of rituals in his quest for immortality. Harry didn't know if a mere explosion would be enough to destroy him. There was always the chance that he might somehow survive, existing as a wraith-like spirit, much as he had when he had first lost his body that fateful Halloween night.

Escaping from what lay on the other side of the box, however... not even Voldemort could do that.

"Yes," he finally said, no doubt in his voice. "It's the only way."

"If Voldemort learned of its existence and somehow managed to gain possession of it..."

"Don't worry," Harry assured the headmaster. "I'm already planning to hide it somewhere only I can find it."

Harry sat the box back down on Dumbledore's desk and began wrapping it up again. As he worked, he sneaked a few looks out the corner of his eye at Professor Snape.

The first part of his plan; recreating the box, had been completed. He had just now finished the second part; letting someone other than himself find out about it. Now all he needed to do was set the third part of his plan into motion; bringing word of the box's existence to Voldemort.

Snape was the perfect means to do just that. The only tricky part would be getting the information to Voldemort that Snape was a spy, and then getting the Dark Lord to torture the potions master for information, instead of simply killing him outright. It would take time to set it up, but once it was done; the trap would be laid and set.

He was in no hurry.

It was only a matter of time.

.oOo.

April 13th, 1997, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

It had been nearly three and a half months since Harry told had the Order about the puzzle box.

Three months since Harry allowed Draco Malfoy to overhear the fact that Professor Snape was a spy for the Order of the Phoenix, with valuable knowledge of a means to gain great power.

Two months since Voldemort summoned Snape to his lair in the Riddle House and tortured him for information about the puzzle box, its purpose and where it was hidden.

A month since Snape's dead body was returned to the school, delivered to Dumbledore at breakfast - by a dozen owls, each bearing a separate, blood-soaked package.

And now, a week since Harry had seen it through his scar, the Dark Lord had managed to storm Hogwarts, breaching the castle's ancient wards with the help of a few Slytherin students, and take the entire school hostage.

The battle had been short and brutal. The Death Eaters arrived in the middle of dinner, catching the staff entirely by surprise. Nobody, not even Dumbledore, had thought Voldemort would be so bold to attempt such a thing.

Only Harry had expected it. Indeed, he had known the attack was coming several days in advance. He had not said anything because he could not afford to. Letting Voldemort into Hogwarts was a dangerous risk to be sure, but it was also the only way to get the Dark Lord close enough to use the box.

Which was why he had taken pains to slip a Power Sapping potion into the headmaster's drink at the start of dinner. He knew that Dumbledore was still powerful enough to hold Voldemort off, at least until help arrived. That was something Harry could not allow to happen, so he had taken Dumbledore out of the fight before it had even started, allowing Voldemort an easy victory against the old wizard.

"*Crucio!*"

And now the teachers had been restrained, and the students were under the watchful eye of the twenty-six Death Eaters which had taken part in the attack, Voldemort was attempting to torture the location of the box out of Harry.

"GGGAAAAAAHHH!!!"

To Harry's displeasure, the Dark Lord was doing this by working his way through Harry's friends. He knew that Harry would not submit to torture, having already proven (during their duel in the graveyard) to be somewhat able to shake off the effects of the Cruciatus Curse.

"Stop it, damn you! Stop it!"

At the moment Voldemort had Harry's closest friends, Ron and Hermione, before him, kept in place by Lucius Malfoy and Antonin Dolohov respectively. As Harry was forced to watch, held captive by Bellatrix Lestrange and Peter Pettigrew, his wand in Voldemort's possession, the Dark Lord alternated the Cruciatus Curse between the Boy-Who-Lived's best friends.

"They have nothing to do with this!" screamed Harry. "It's between you and me! Let them go!"

"Then give me the box," countered Voldemort as he released the curse he has been holding on Ron.

Unfortunately, despite the fact that Harry had always intended to do just that, he had to draw it out. He knew that if he capitulated too early, then Voldemort would become suspicious. If Harry was known for anything, aside from being The-Boy-Who-Lived and a damn good Seeker, it was for being stubborn.

"Damn you!" swore Harry. "You know I'll never do that! If I did then I might as well kill them myself!"

"If you insist," allowed Voldemort, turning his wand to Hermione. "*Crucio*!"

"AAAAAAAHHH!!!"

Watching Hermione writhe in agony, Harry could not help but feel a small amount of perverse relief. For a moment, after hearing Voldemort's words, he had thought the Dark Lord was going to cast the Killing Curse.

"No!" he shouted, keeping up the act. "Stop hurting her, you bastard!"

Bellatrix Lestrange did not like the way Harry was referring to her master and acted accordingly. "How dare a filthy half-blood such as yourself speak to the Dark Lord in such a manner?!" she hissed angrily. Fuelled with righteous indignation, she slammed a fist into the back of Harry's head, causing him to stumble forward, almost losing his footing. As he struggled not to fall on his arse, she took aim with her wand.

"*Crucio*!"

Unbelievable pain consumed Harry for a moment, causing him to fall to his knees, before dying down to a tolerable level. Drawing several deep breaths to steady himself against the assault, Harry glared up at Bellatrix and tried to jump at her, intending to tackle her to the ground.

He was in mid-leap when Pettigrew jabbed his silver right hand at Harry.

"*Percussio*!" the treacherous Animagus yelled.

The curse smashed into Harry's chest, slamming him backwards and away from Bellatrix. Collapsing on the floor, Harry gasped for breath, the wind knocked out of him. That was a more physical curse than the Cruciatus and he could not block out its effects.

"Careful, Bella," chided Pettigrew, taking some satisfaction in having been the one to save her from a rough tumble on the floor if Harry's leap had managed to connect. He kept his silver hand aimed at Harry while he spoke, lest the young wizard was faking. "You forget that Potter's resistant to the Cruciatus."

"Yes, I'd forgotten," acknowledged Bellatrix, a note of angry chagrin in her voice.

"Enough," commanded Voldemort, who had paused in his torture of Hermione to watch the brief confrontation. He looked over Harry, still lying on the floor, his red eyes tinged with impatience. He glanced up and ordered, "Bella, Wormtail... pick him up."

The two Death Eaters obeyed immediately and hauled Harry to his knees by his armpits. Pettigrew grabbed his head in both hands and forced him to watch as Voldemort resumes his torture - switching from Hermione to Ron and then back again.

"*Crucio*!"

"No..." Harry groaned.

His friends' screams were a worse torture than being placed under a dozen Cruciatus Curses, made even more so by the fact that Harry could avoid it all by simply giving Voldemort what he wanted. He found it especially difficult to bear whenever Voldemort placed the curse on Hermione.

Harry had to use all his willpower not to acquiesce immediately and give the puzzle box to Voldemort. He wanted to do it, desperate to free Ron and Hermione from their suffering, but it was not the right time. He needed to hold out for just a little bit longer.

Hermione's screaming stopped abruptly as Voldemort lifted the curse. Her laboured gasps for breath sounded almost as loud in the ringing silence.

Your insistance on wearing away my patience, Potter," stated Voldemort. "Tell me where the box is!"

"Never," Harry panted. "I won't let you have it."

Voldemort's face screwed up in anger and he hissed, "*Crucio* !"

Now it was Ron that screamed in pain, his back arching almost to the breaking point as he jerked about in violent spasms that reminded Harry of what the Muggles called an epileptic fit. Voldemort held the curse longer this time, keeping it on Ron for what seemed like an eternity before releasing it.

"Stop it! Please, I'm begging you!" cried Harry, his face holding the most pitiful expression he could manage.

"I don't care how much you beg!" retorted Voldemort insistently. "I want the box!"

"I *can't*!"

"You *will*!" roared Voldemort. He aimed his wand at Hermione. "*Crucio* !"

Deciding that one final act of defiance would clinch it, Harry forced his magic through his veins, through his muscles, suffusing his entire body with power. With newfound strength he ripped free of Bellatrix and Pettigrew's hold on him. He grabbed Pettigrew by his silver hand and performed a clumsy, but effective judo toss that threw the plump man over Harry's shoulder and into the floor in front of him.

With a well placed punch to the jaw to keep Pettigrew down, Harry jumped up and sprinted at Voldemort, shouting a battle cry as he prepared to bodily tackle the Dark Lord to the floor.

He was stopped, however, by Lucius Malfoy, who fired a Bludgeoning Curse into Harry's stomach.

Falling to the floor, his stomach clenched in pain as he involuntarily lost his dinner, Harry's brain managed to work around the agonising pain he was feeling and decided that it was finally time. All he had to do was wait for Voldemort to curse Ron or Hermione again. Then he could make a show of giving in and reluctantly hand over the box.

He glanced up, vomit dribbling from his chin, and saw Ginny and Neville standing opposite him - being held with a group of several other students. They were watching the proceedings with horror and seemed barely able to restrain themselves from attacking the Death Eaters guarding them.

Harry turned his head to the side, looking to where Voldemort was standing.

"I grow tired of this," the Dark Lord hissed. He turned to point his wand at Hermione again. "Avada--"

"No - stop!" screamed Harry. This time the terror in his voice was real, his fear for Hermione's life not an act. He scrambled desperately on the floor, trying unsuccessfully to push himself up, but his aching stomach prevented him from rising. "I give up! Stop! I'll give you the box! I'll give you the box! Just don't kill her!"

Voldemort remained perfectly still for a long moment. A satisfied smile finally reached his thin face. He slowly lowered his wand and pocketed it inside his black robes.

"Finally," he crowed with dark satisfaction.

Relief flooded through Harry as he collapsed again, bile filling his throat as he threw up some more. He could not bring himself to stop, even after he has emptied his stomach and was dry heaving. Lucius' curse had been very powerful and had hurt more than Harry had expected.

"I do not like to be kept waiting, Potter," warned Voldemort impatiently.

Harry nodded and struggled to rise, his hands slipping a bit in the pool of vomit underneath him. The pain in his abdomen, however, was too much and he fell down again. Lifting his head, he wheezed, "Help me up."

Voldemort sneered briefly before commanding, "Wormtail."

Pettigrew came to help Harry to his feet, lifting him up with one arm round his middle and the other under his arm. Once he has him up, standing unsteadily and swaying heavily, Pettigrew promptly knocked him back down with a vicious punch to the jaw by his silver right hand.

Harry's vision actually blacked out for a second. Blood filled his mouth and when he spat it out, he felt a tooth go with it. Pettigrew had actually managed to hit him hard enough to knock one loose. He was still dazed, spots dancing in front of his eyes, when Pettigrew hauled him roughly to his feet again - this time holding him up by gripping his hair.

"Wormtail," said Voldemort calmly.

"Master?" enquired Pettigrew, looking to the waiting Dark Lord.

"*Crucio* !"

Pettigrew dropped to the floor and shrieked in pain. Harry almost fell down with him, but managed to keep his footing and remain upright. Voldemort held the curse for only a handful of seconds, just long enough to express his displeasure.

"I did not give you leave to do that," he informed Pettigrew once he ended the spell. Red-slitted eyes narrowed as he gave a simple, but meaningful warning. "Don't repeat that mistake."

"I'm sorry, Master, I'm sorry," Pettigrew apologised frantically, kneeling on the floor in supplication as he bobbed his balding head up and down. "Please forgive me."

"Shut up and get back in line," instructed Voldemort, dismissing the man.

Without argument, but continuing to apologise for several more seconds, Pettigrew rejoined the rest of the Death Eaters arrayed about the Great Hall. Voldemort watched him go, an annoyed expression on his thin face, before he turned to Harry, who was slowly coming back to his senses.

"Now," he prompted, "the box."

Tenderly feeling his jaw, which had already begun to swell painfully, and probing the now empty tooth-socket with his tongue, Harry nodded in defeated acquiescence. Or at least, that was the impression he gave.

"Harry, no!"

To one side of the Great Hall, near the head of the Gryffindor table, Professor Dumbledore struggled against the invisible bonds holding him and Professor McGonagall prisoner. He was still too weak, however, to break free. The nature of the bonds allowed him limited movement, provided he did not move too quickly or too far, but despite this he could do nothing but watch helplessly.

Harry spat out a mouthful of blood and said, "I have to, Professor."

"You mustn't!" insisted Dumbledore desperately.

"If I don't he'll kill her!" argued Harry, pointing to where Hermione lay.

"Sacrifices have to be made, Harry," said Dumbledore evenly, "lest we are all doomed."

"I'm sorry, sir," countered Harry, having a hard time keeping his temper in the face of Dumbledore's words, "but this is one sacrifice I'm not willing to make."

"How touching," observed Voldemort sarcastically. "Stop wasting time and give me the box."

Harry's hands were on his knees as he drew in deep breaths, gathering his strength for what he had to do. He found himself wondering if, perhaps, he had maybe drawn out his supposed resistance just a bit too long.

"I need a minute to catch my breath."

"You have till the count of three," said Voldemort. He once again took aim at Hermione. "One... two..."

"All right! Please!" implored Harry.

He staggered towards Voldemort, not having an easy time staying on his feet - or navigating in a straight line. At any other time, he would have looked as drunk as a lord. He stopped several paces away, standing between Ron and Hermione; who both lay gasping on the floor and not fully aware of what was happening around them.

"Well?" prompted Voldemort.

"I hid the box using magic," Harry told him.

"Where is it?"

"Right here," answered Harry as he gestured between them. "Invisible and untouchable."

"What nonsense are you babbling on about?" asked Voldemort dubiously.

"Please," beseeched Harry, "the box is here. I just need to bring it out of hiding."

Voldemort glared suspiciously at him, clearly unconvinced, and said, "Do not think I will fall for some idiot ploy to give you back your wand."

Harry shook his head and replied, "I don't need my wand."

"No... Harry... don't..."

Looking down to the source of the weak plea, Harry saw that Hermione was crawling painfully towards him. She could barely move, her body suffering from the after-effects of the Cruciatus, but she stubbornly used all of her remaining strength to try and reach him. He silently cursed Voldemort for putting him in a position where he had to allow her, and Ron, to be hurt like this.

"I have to," Harry told her softly. "I can't let him hurt you. Not any more."

"You... can't... let... him..." Hermione insisted, still struggling on.

"I'm sorry," said Harry, his voice carefully adjusted to sound bleak and hopeless.

He held up his hands in front of him and began a series of complicated gestures, focusing his magic where his fingers passed through the air as he traced a series of patterns there, between himself and Voldemort.

Voldemort raised his wand cautiously and asked, "What are you doing?"

"Fetching the box," supplied Harry.

Several glowing circles began to take shape where Harry was working. The glowing rings were intertwined and formed what might have been a sphere, if they managed to align properly. Voldemort was so surprised by this sight that he actually lowered his wand as he watched.

"What is this?" he asked, caution giving way to curiosity.

"The box's power comes through manipulating space and time," explained Harry, continuing to work. He now used his fingers to twist and turn the glowing circles into the positions he wanted. He slowly began to move them into a specific shape, much as he would do with a puzzle box. "When I was building it, I learnt to apply that technique in different ways."

Abruptly the various circles and rings aligned in the proper fashion. There was a brief flash of light as they merged together to form a glowing, translucent sphere that hung suspended between the two wizards. One side of the orb appeared to be sliced open, which allowed access to its interior.

"I used that know-how to shape space into an invisible pocket," concluded Harry. He reached into the sphere, his hand disappearing from view as he did so. "A hiding place that only I knew the location of. That only I could open."

Harry withdrew his hand from the glowing sphere. With a wave of his other hand, passing through a single line that had been hovering to one side, the glowing sphere broke apart into the individual rings that had combined to form it. The rings spun briefly before they faded away.

Harry held up his arm, revealing the puzzle box that now rested on his open palm.

"Here it is," he offered.

Voldemort stared at the box in rapture. His red eyes flicked quickly about as he took in the sight of the box's design and the intricate patterns that adorned its five visible faces.

"Give it to me."

"No, Harry, don't..."

"Please, Hermione," Harry pretended to beg. "Don't make this harder than it already is."

"Don't..."

Harry took a single step forward and held the box out for Voldemort to claim. The Dark Lord reached out, face alight with anticipation, and plucked it from its perch on Harry's open hand.

"At last," Voldemort whispered to himself. "Power beyond imagination. In the palm of my hand."

"No..." groaned Hermione, collapsing in despair.

"Now let us go," said Harry firmly.

Looking up at him, Voldemort sneered disdainfully. He no longer considered Harry to be a threat, and as such not worthy of any further consideration. His red eyes slid to Lucius and Dolohov. He gave a curt nod of his head.

"Put them with Dumbledore. Potter as well," he commanded before turning his attention back to the box.

"Yes, Master," replied Lucius.

The elder Malfoy reached down and grabbed Ron by the elbow. When he had trouble lifting the redhead, who was just barely conscious, he used his wand to levitate him into the air.

Dolohov simply pulled Hermione up by her hair, eliciting a cry of pain, and then thrust her into Harry's arms. Bloody and beaten as he was, Harry struggled to keep them both upright. With Dolohov's wand pressed against his back, he followed after Malfoy.

"Oh, Harry," exhaled Dumbledore as they approached. "Why?"

"I couldn't let him kill her, sir," he replied as he sat Hermione down on the floor next to Ron. He knelt down at her side as McGonagall examined all three students with obvious concern. He managed a slightly pained smile and added, "Besides, I doubt Voldemort will be able to open the box. Not anytime soon, at least."

"Perhaps," Dumbledore allowed the possibility. "But now that he has it, there's nothing to stop him from killing us all."

"He won't kill us," said Harry with a shake of his head, something that he immediately stopped as it sent bolts of pain stabbing through his jaw.

Wincing, he elaborated, "Not until he opens the box."

"Yes, you're right," agreed Dumbledore after a second's consideration. He glanced to where Voldemort was still examining the puzzle box, his blue eyes lacking their normal sparkle. "He'll want to gloat. To have us witness his moment of triumph."

"We still have time," said Harry, shifting to make himself more comfortable.

"I pray you're right, Harry," was all Dumbledore could said. He turned to McGonagall and asked, "How are they?"

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Evil Be Thou My Good (part 2)

"Not good, Albus," replied McGonagall, her brogue slightly thicker than usual. She glanced worriedly from Ron to Hermione and back, absently stroking some of Ron's sweat-soaked hair from his forehead. "They were both under the curse for so long... they need medical attention."

"Here," offered Harry.

He reached into his robes and pulled out two small potion phials, which he had cast Unbreakable Charms on. He gave brief thanks that the Death Eaters had not searched him, beyond taking his wand, and then uncorked the one phial and poured the contents down Ron's throat. He had to force his friend to swallow by pinching his nose.

"Gak," Ron choked out.

While the redhead was coughing, Harry turned to Hermione. She was slightly more aware of her surroundings than Ron, her greater mental focus having helped her against the curse. She accepted the potion without a struggle, though she grimaced at its taste and had to fight to hold it down. After several pregnant moments, she sighed with relief and visibly relaxed.

"What on earth did you just give them, Potter?" asked an astonished McGonagall.

"Post-Cruciatius Potion," answered Harry seriously. When he saw McGonagall's resulting expression, he explained, "I nicked them from Madam Pomfrey's stores. I had a feeling we'd need it."

"You knew," said Dumbledore with certainty. "You knew he would torture your friends to get you to give him the box."

Harry only nodded slightly in confirmation as he reached into his robe again and pulled out another small phial. This one he uncorked and drank himself. Like Hermione, he grimaced at the bitter taste but soon relaxed as the warm effects of the potion began to fill him. He could feel the pain in his bruised stomach and swollen jaw begin to fade.

"A pain relief potion?" asked McGonagall, watching him closely.

"Yeah," he verified, eyes closed as he took a moment to relax.

"No doubt also 'nicked' from Madam Pomfrey's supplies," added Dumbledore dryly.

Harry opened his eyes and shrugged sheepishly, actually managing to smile properly as the swelling in his jaw began to reduce. He spent a moment probing the empty socket, where Wormtail knocked out his tooth, with his tongue. His smile grew broader when a curse of frustration came from where Voldemort was standing.

Looking over to the raised stage at the front of the Great Hall, Harry saw that Voldemort was glaring at the box with a furious expression. Clearly he was having trouble opening the box. This gave Harry no small amount of satisfaction, yet also gave him cause to worry. His plans would all be for naught, after all, if Voldemort failed to solve the puzzle and open the box.

"It would seem you were right," observed Dumbledore quietly. "Voldemort's having trouble."

"I sometimes think the box almost has a mind of its own," Harry confessed. "Some people can solve the puzzle in less than a minute, while others will spend their lives trying without success."

To his and everyone's surprise, Voldemort had apparently overheard Harry's conversation with the headmaster. He rounded on where they were seated and hissed. His wand seemed to just appear in his free hand, which he raised to take aim at Harry.

"Then you can open it for me," he declared.

"Why?" asked Harry, wanting to avoid that particular option at all costs. "I'm sure you can do it on your own. It'll just take longer."

"You'll do what I tell you, Potter," snapped Voldemort angrily, "or I will reintroduce your *friends* to all the pain you somehow manage to block out!"

Harry had to use all of his considerable acting skills to hide a wince. His plan had been for Voldemort to open the box, thus ensuring that the demons it summoned would come for him. He did not have a contingency laid out for something like this.

He simply hadn't thought that Voldemort's pride would allow him to admit that Harry might be able to open the box faster than him. For that matter, he never imagined that Voldemort would run the risk of actually letting Harry open the box at all, lest he somehow gain control of the powers that it supposedly possessed.

"Are you sure you actually want to open the box?" he asked, stalling for time to think of a way around this. "Do you have any idea what's inside of it?"

"Power beyond imagination," Voldemort replied through clenched teeth. He then turned his wand away from Harry and towards Hermione. "Now, come here."

Harry knew that he was out of options. He would have to open the box himself. After that, well, he was going to have to work out a way to escape what was supposed to be Voldemort's fate.

"All right, I'll open it," he relented.

He rose to his feet from where he had been sitting next to the injured Ron and Hermione. He began to walk, but Dumbledore caught him by the arm in a surprisingly strong grip.

"Harry, you mustn't do this," implored the headmaster. "If you open the box... if Voldemort gains its powers... he will destroy the world!"

"Voldemort can have the world," Harry replied, "as long as the people I care about are safe."

"Harry, no!" said Hermione, reaching out for him. "We're not worth it!"

"Yes, you are," he insisted.

"Please, don't..."

Hermione somehow managed to lurch up and forward, grabbing Harry by his legs as he tried to make his way to Voldemort. He stopped in place, otherwise he would have toppled over. Turning to face her, which was difficult considering how tightly she was holding him, he knelt down in front of her and gripped her shoulders as he tried to offer her some comfort.

"Hermione, there's nothing to worry about," Harry assured her.

"How can you stay that?" she asked.

"Because, everything's going exactly as I planned," he whispered, so softly that only Hermione heard him. He then leaned in to briefly kiss her lips. Then he backed away. "The moment I open the box... Voldemort's fate will be sealed."

Hermione stared at him in disbelief, whether because of his revelation that this was all a plan of some sort, or because of the kiss, he couldn't tell. For that matter, he didn't think Hermione knew either. Harry rose to his feet again and, this time unhindered, marched towards Voldemort, who was waiting impatiently.

As he walked, he muttered his doubts to himself. "I hope."

Coming to a stop in front of Voldemort, Harry held out his hand to accept the box.

"Give me the box," he told the Dark Lord, a slight tremor to his voice.

"Why would I do that?" asked Voldemort sceptically. "You don't need to touch the box to show me how to open it."

Harry almost agreed, being perfectly comfortable with the idea of never laying a hand on the box again. But, however much he did not want to, he felt committed to this action. He would be the one to solve the puzzle, not Voldemort.

"It doesn't work that way," he lied smoothly. "I can't show you how to open it. You have to work that out for yourself."

Voldemort stared at Harry for a long and tense moment, judging whether or not he was telling the truth. Harry could feel pressure against his mind, something he recognised as an attempt at Legilimency. He allowed the entry into his mind, carefully directing the probe to where he wanted it, a false projection of naïve truthfulness.

"Fine then!"

Voldemort jammed the box into Harry's hand, its sharp corners and edges digging painfully into the flesh of his palm. Harry tried to pull it to him, but the Dark Lord did not immediately release his hold on it. First, he leaned in close, eye-to-eye with Harry.

"If you try anything, Potter," he warned, "my Death Eaters will kill everyone you hold dear."

"I give you my oath that I won't do anything but open this box," Harry swore earnestly, meaning every word, "and lay it at your feet."

Voldemort considered this, still unsure if Harry was trying to trick him or not. In the end, fortunately, his impatience got the better of him and he released his grip on the puzzle box.

"Get on with it!" he snapped.

Harry accepted the box, hiding his relief, and took several steps back to give himself space to work. He glanced down at it for a brief moment, realizing that this was the point of no return, and then looked up to stare into Voldemort's slitted red eyes.

Without breaking that eye contact, he began to solve the puzzle. There was a quiet click, then the first panel slid into position. A simple melody began to play, a enticing, twinkling tune.

Nobody noticed that several of the floating candles flickered out, despite being charmed to prevent such a thing from happening.

Harry was quickly progressing through the box's puzzle, never once turning his eyes away from Voldemort, who angrily matched his gaze. The tune was growing more complex with each passing moment.

Somewhere, in the far distance, yet at the same time close by, a bell tolled - as if in anticipation. It sounded with a steady, sombre monotony. The candles were being snuffed out in great numbers now and those torches and fireplaces along the walls had started to flicker unsteadily.

"Almost done..." whispered Harry.

He was now close to finishing the puzzle; twisting, turning, sliding and prodding panels and sections of the box with practiced ease. He found a thrill of excited anticipation beginning to fill him. It had been nine years to the day since he opened the original box. It felt as if it had happened only an hour ago.

Not a sound was made by anyone in the Hall, which was utterly still save for the soft chimes of the music box, whose tune continued to grow steadily more complex. Nonetheless, everyone present could feel it in their bones, resonating through their magic, shivering over their skin... something momentous was about to happen.

Their instincts were screaming for them to flee, but the Death Eaters hold their ground in fear of their master and the imprisoned students and teachers were still being held captive.

"This is it, Tom," Harry announced.

And with one final turn--

"I trust it will be all that you imagined," he said with a dark gleam entering his brilliant green eyes.

The bell tolled.

The puzzle box entered the final sequence of the Lament Configuration, its panels began to inexorably move into place under their own power. With a satisfied smile, Harry set the box on the floor in front of a shocked looking Voldemort. He then calmly backed away as light began to pour out of the box as one of the faces folded itself open.

With quick steps, Harry hurried over to his friends, anxious not to be alone when it finally happened. He rejoined them, Hermione now on her feet, supported by McGonagall, with Ron seated next to them. They were too focused, however, on the opened puzzle box to say anything to him.

He looked across at the box, product of his labours, and could not repress a shiver of terror.

"I've called for them," he said in a soft whisper that only he could hear. "Again." His voice cracked. "Just as he always said I would."

And then Great Hall was abruptly plunged into darkness.

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April 14th, 1997, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

The only light in the Hall was what little streamed out of the now opened Lament Configuration. The only sound was the soft, enticing tune played by that same puzzle box.

Then light began to appear, though from no visible source. Shadows danced enticingly, threateningly over the walls, the floor and the ceiling of the Great Hall. The remaining darkness took on a more surreal, a more solid texture than before.

"What's happening?" asked Voldemort, directing his question to the room at large.

Then the bell tolled again, its hollow ring echoing ominously. As if heralded by that call, four figures emerged from the darkness at the back of the shadow filled Great Hall. The flickering light at their backs hid their features for a moment before they stepped further into the room, revealing themselves to those who had noticed their arrival.

Each of the four was horribly mutilated by hooks and pins and chains, their bodies twisted in grotesque fashions that caused those who saw to shudder from the sight alone. Even their clothes were designed to both express and cause pain, the black, leathery material elaborately designed to marry metal and leather with skin, flesh and bone.

In the lead was a man of regal appearance, though his pale white face was slashed in an array of vertical and horizontal lines. At the intersections of these bloodless wounds, inch long pins had been driven into his skull. He was stately, but terrifying. Possibly the single most frightening figure any of those present had ever been witness to, including Voldemort.

And he was not alone.

By his side was a woman whose neck had been slashed and then pinned open, like something you would expect to see in a medical class... or on a mortuary table. Those who were brave enough to risk a glance into this gaping wound, could see that her voice box had been entirely removed, leaving nothing but the gaping cavity of her throat.

Accompanying these two, who were the most human of the group in overall appearance, was a grotesquely fat man whose eyes were hidden behind large, opaque black goggles. His skin, darker in tone than his pale fellows, had a rubbery appearance that glistened under a sheen of sweat.

Lastly, trailing at the rear, was a truly strange and horrifying creature. It had no eyes or nose, the skin peeled back and layered over and over again into an ugly mass of scar tissue. Its lips had been either sliced away or pulled back, exposing its teeth in a perpetual, skull-like grin.

The group slowly advanced toward the centre aisle of the Great Hall, making their way to the front, where Voldemort and his senior Death Eaters were waiting. To everyone's surprise, however, they paused just short of the raised stage and the staff table. Their attention turned to the side, where Harry was standing quietly in the company of his closest friends.

"Ah, Harry Potter," pronounced the leader in a deep, rich voice. "And we thought you'd forgotten."

"We are so pleased that you finally decided to call us back," said the throatless woman, her voice a brittle and cold counterpart to her companion.

The pinheaded man inclined his head in agreement, before stating, "We'd almost given up waiting for you."

"To play," added the fat man.

Standing at Harry's side, Dumbledore's face was an ashen mask of horror. Of course, so was everyone else's.

"They know you?" he asked.

"We've met before," admitted Harry. He managed a wan smile and said, "You might say they're old friends."

Dawning comprehension arose in Dumbledore's eyes and he gave a horrified whisper, "The Dursleys..."

Harry gave a curt nod of confirmation, his eyes not straying from the four new arrivals.

Pinhead, the name Harry had long since ascribed to this particular demon, strode slowly and elegantly to where Harry was standing. The other three trailed behind their leader. Other shapes, vague and indefinable, moved through the shadows that seemed to consume the edges of the Great Hall.

Finally Pinhead stopped only a step or two from Harry, who faced him without flinching. He looked Harry up and down, as if appraising how he had grown since they last met.

"How quickly the years pass," the demon commented. "I've thought often, since our first meeting, of the pleasures we shall introduce to you."

"Pleasures?" repeated Harry sceptically.

"In a manner of speaking," Pinhead conceded.

"How did you know I'd open the box?" Harry asked with honest curiosity, a question that had plagued him for years.

"It was obvious," replied Pinhead. He reached out a pale hand to brush Harry's hair aside, revealing the lightning-shaped scar upon his forehead. "It was your destiny."

Folding his arms behind his back, Pinhead made a show of looking around the Great Hall as he spoke, as if this were an ordinary conversation. Actually, for him it probably was.

"It was simply a matter of waiting," he concluded.

"We're good at that," chimed the fat man.

"Anticipation can be the greatest kind of pain," agreed the throatless woman.

"And so we've waited. Waited and watched. Watched you grow from the child cowering in a cupboard to the man-wizard you are today," explained Pinhead. He then turned to regard Harry, a look of slightly malicious anticipation in his eyes. "But what to do now? So many possibilities to choose from."

At this the strange creature took an eager step forward, coming to stand right behind Pinhead. Its teeth clicking at a rapid pace as it chattered excitedly, like a mad monkey.

Pinhead took a small step towards Harry, who made it a point to take an equally small step back - maintaining the distance between them.

"I opened the box, yes," Harry admitted, "but it wasn't me that called for you."

"Still playing the innocent Harry? You disappoint me," observed Pinhead drolly. "I had thought you would understand, after so long, how this worked. You want us here."

"If you didn't, you wouldn't have recreated what you destroyed," corroborated Throatless, as Harry had begun to think of the woman with the vivisected throat.

"You opened a door that night, Harry," Pinhead continued, "and it will never close until we get what we want."

"Me," said Harry.

"Ah, so you do understand. If only a little," said Pinhead. He sounded pleased by that. "Your soul is already ours, Harry. We possess it. We are what allows you to touch those darkest places within yourself." Pinhead leaned forward to confide, "You know that."

"You welcome it," said Throatless.

Enjoy it," added the fat man.

"No," Harry protested weakly.

"Oh, Harry," Pinhead mused, clearly amused, "so eager to play, yet so unwilling to admit it."

Pinhead stepped back, so that he and Harry could look at each other more fully.

"You always knew this day was coming. Felt it deep within your dreams. Your nightmares," he said simply. "We will never rest until we get what we want."

"And what we want... is you," Throatless reaffirmed.

Pinhead stepped in close, so that he was standing face-to-face with Harry. "They want you too, Harry," he told him. Seeing Harry's lack of understanding, the demons' leader elaborated, "Your 'family'. They're all still with us, waiting for you; The belligerent uncle, still hating that which he cannot understand; the spiteful aunt who despises you for the memories you bring; and of course, their gross spawn, who aches to chase after his personal punching bag again."

"I'd rather pass on such a charming family reunion, if you don't mind," replied Harry politely. "Thanks for the offer though."

"You are much calmer than I expected, despite having watched you grow," observed Pinhead with interest, even as he stepped back once again.

"Probably because I don't plan to go with you," explained Harry.

"You can't escape your fate," announced Throatless.

Harry glanced at the female demon and retorted, "You'll forgive me if I try."

Pinhead shook his head slowly, like a parent chiding a stubborn child. "The box will never let you go. You solved the puzzle, you unleashed us." Bottomless black eyes lifted to meet gleaming emerald ones. "You know the price, are you prepared to pay?"

"I know the price, yes," Harry admitted.

"Then it's time to play," concluded Pinhead.

"Time to play," agreed Throatless.

"Time to play," agreed the fat, goggled man, who Harry had mentally dubbed Butterball.

The Chatterer voiced, if that was the right word, its own agreement.

Harry stood his ground as the three lesser demons began to advance on him, Pinhead waiting patiently for them to collect the man who had summoned them. Even as Dumbledore and McGonagall shouted for him to flee, as Hermione clutched him in terror, Harry remained perfectly composed.

"What if we made a deal?" he suggested.

"No deals, Harry," countered Pinhead, shaking his head. "It's your flesh, your suffering that we want to experience. Your skill at bargaining is of no import."

"Twenty-seven souls in exchange for mine and the safe return of an unharmed Sirius Black," said Harry flatly.

Pinhead was noticeably impressed by such an offer. He held up a hand, stopping his companions.

"I am... intrigued," he admitted.

"Souls that enjoy suffering," elaborated Harry. He neglected to mention that the Death Eaters tended to prefer suffering other than their own.

"You would bring us so many souls?" asked Pinhead in a calculating tone.

"They're already marked and waiting for you to collect," Harry replied.

He pointed passed Pinhead to where Voldemort (who was looking a tad miffed at having been ignored thus far) and his senior Death Eaters were watching with incomprehension. Pinhead turned and considered them dispassionately.

"Hmm," the demon mused.

"They consider themselves connoisseurs of pain and terror," commented Harry.

That was enough. The demons from the puzzle box would never accept anyone attempting to challenge their place as the ultimate harbingers of unimaginable pain.

"Then I accept," Pinhead readily agreed. He glanced over his shoulder at Harry and warned, "But if this proves to be a trick, your suffering will be legendary... even in Hell."

His business with Harry concluded, at least for the time being, Pinhead turned to approach Voldemort. As he took his first step, Harry daringly spoke up.

"The students and staff won't be harmed," he said.

Pinhead paused. His great, implacable brow puckered; as if in annoyance at this condition. For a moment it seemed as if he would refuse. Finally he gave a small nod.

"Your classmates and your professors will not be harmed," Pinhead promised and then resumed walking. "Physically or spiritually that is," appended the demon as he departed. "I cannot vouch for their sanity when they witness what is to come."

Only those closest to Harry; Hermione, Ron, Dumbledore and McGonagall, heard his soft sigh of relief.

Pinhead and his three followers made a beeline for Voldemort, who glared impatiently at them as they approach. With his stately stride eating up the distance between them, Pinhead was soon standing before the supposed Dark Lord.

"Tom," Pinhead greeted. "I've had my eye on you for some time now."

"Nobody dares call me that!" snapped Voldemort, incensed by this usage of his human name. He drew himself up and declared pompously, "My name is Lord Voldemort!"

"So you say," allowed Pinhead blandly.

"Yessss," Voldemort hissed, comprehending that the figure before him was not in the least bit impressed by him. He gave Pinhead a narrow glare and spoke. "Now then, who are you?"

"Explorers in the further regions of experience," Pinhead replied vaguely. "Demons to some. Angels to others."

Suffice to say, this reply was not as informative as Voldemort would have liked.

"Harry," muttered Ron as this meeting between Dark Lord and demon took place. He was still recovering from his exposure to Voldemort's torture, and so was barely able to sit himself upright to speak. "What the Hell is going on?"

"You know that puzzle box I've been working on?" asked Harry in return.

"Yeah?"

"It's not really a box," Harry revealed.

"It's a doorway, isn't it?" asked Dumbledore, seeking confirmation even though he already knew the answer. "A means of travelling between worlds."

"It's a door all right," Harry told him. "Just like the one in the Ministry."

Dumbledore stared blankly at Harry for a moment before going ashen, just as he had when the four demons had appeared and made their way to speak with The-Boy-Who-Lived.

"No..."

"Who better to get rid of Voldemort than the very demons of Hell itself?" asked Harry rhetorically.

"My God, Harry," whispered Dumbledore, now staring at Pinhead and his companions in true horror. He shook his head and asked, "What have you done? What have you unleashed upon us?"

By now Voldemort had recovered from Pinhead's flowery and uninformative answer to his first question. He drew back and tried a different question. "In that case, *what* are you?"

"A harvester of souls," Pinhead answered. "A destroyer of worlds."

Despite his long life and the experience that he had garnered in that time, Voldemort could not prevent himself from giving a small shudder in reaction to the cold tone of Pinhead's words.

As the Dark Lord and Pinhead introduced themselves to each other, so to speak, Harry's friends and mentors anxiously crowded around him. Aside from Dumbledore, who had some understanding of the situation, they were wondering what exactly was going on.

"You mean those things," asked Hermione, looking at the four figures arrayed before Voldemort, "are demons?"

"If there's a better name to describe what they are, I don't know it," confirmed Harry.

"And you brought them here?" asked McGonagall incredulously.

"A power the Dark Lord knows not, Professor," Harry told her.

"Somehow I don't think that *this* ... that *those* ..." Dumbledore gestured anxiously at the demons, "are what the Prophecy was referring to!"

"What else then, Dumbledore? Love?" rejoined Harry with a snap. He snorted in disgust at the suggestion and crossed his arms defiantly. "Somehow I don't think I'd defeat Voldemort with hugs and kisses."

Meanwhile, Voldemort had managed to shake off Pinhead's evil stare and was now glaring right back at the Black Pope, who met the Dark Lord's gaze without reaction.

"Where did you come from?" demanded Voldemort.

"The box," Pinhead told him. "You opened it. We came."

"The box?" Voldemort repeated. His brow furrowed, then he asked, "It summoned you?"

"Yes," Pinhead confirmed with a regal nod. "You have solved the puzzle. Opened the Lament Configuration."

Harry could not stop a smile, a feeling of pride welling up inside of him as all eyes in the Hall turned to gaze at his creation. He now understood how John Merchant, his adoptive father, must have felt whenever one of the buildings he had designed was finally opened for the first time. The feeling of an artisan displaying his work.

"This was a very bad idea, Harry," murmured Dumbledore.

"I'm inclined to agree," concurred McGonagall.

"Don't worry," Harry assured them. "They'll do what we agreed upon."

"You bartered the Death Eater's lives, not to mention their souls, as if they were livestock!" snapped Dumbledore, his distaste for the idea clear.

"To them," Harry nodded his head to indicate the demons, "that's essentially what we are."

"You made a deal with the devil!" Dumbledore insisted.

"Basically."

"But can we trust them to hold it?" asked McGonagall, casting a wary eye at Pinhead. "They're demons! Monsters!"

"Couldn't be any less trustworthy than the Slytherins," noted Ron from his place on the floor.

"They'll keep to our agreement," said Harry confidently.

"How can you be sure of that?" asked Hermione, gripping his right hand in her left.

"I just am," he answered.

"And if they don't?" insisted McGonagall.

Harry shivered at the thought and said, "Then we'd better start praying... and hope that God's listening."

By now Voldemort's tolerance of Pinhead's half answers had finally worn away and he decided to take control, based on his inaccurate information that opening the puzzle granted one great power.

"Enough of this meaningless prattle!" Voldemort announced. He glared imperiously at Pinhead and asked again, "You came from the box?"

"Yes," confirmed Pinhead.

"And you agree that I was the one that opened it?" asked Voldemort.

"Yours was the will behind the hands. You desired to open the box," Pinhead informed him.

"Then I command you to do my bidding!"

Throatless, Butterball and the Chatter stirred unhappily at Voldemort's tone - affronted that any mere mortal would dare command them to do anything. Pinhead merely stared impassively across at the Dark Lord.

"And what would you have us do?" he asked quietly.

"Show me the power of the box!" demanded Voldemort. "Tell me how to make it mine!"

"You wish to experience what the box has to offer?" asked Pinhead slyly.

"Yes!"

Pinhead smiled. It was a chilling sight, though Voldemort was too worked up to notice. With a slight inclination of his head, the pins shining in the dim lighting, Pinhead silently prompted his fellows to take up their positions.

"Excellent," Pinhead announced. "We will show you experiences beyond all limits."

"Pleasure," said Throatless.

"Pain," said Butterball.

"Indivisible," concluded Pinhead.

The three lesser demons had begun to spread out, each moving closer to individual Death Eaters. Most did not even notice them approaching, their attention focused entirely on the two men at the front of the Great Hall.

With almost all eyes on Pinhead and Voldemort, only Harry noticed the vague shapes that occasionally seemed to just emerge from the shadows before disappearing. The four demons already present obviously had backup waiting in the wings, in the unlikely event they should need it.

"But first," Pinhead stepped back, giving himself room to manoeuvre. He turned around, presenting his back to Voldemort as he addressed the rest of the Hall. "Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to introduce myself."

The Great Hall suddenly grew darker, the flickering lights dimming, the hue shifting from blue to red. The soft chimes of the Lament Configuration were now joined by the bell, which had silenced itself when Pinhead had spoken to Harry. Now it resumed its toll, signalling the start of Hell unleashed.

Pinhead seemed to swell, to grow larger and taller as he stood at the head of the Great Hall, his imposing figure backlit by coruscating sheets of unholy crimson light.

"I... am... *pain* !"

His voice was deep, echoing and sounded with the same finality as the bell that tolled in the background.

A brief, imperious gesture of his head... and Antonin Dolohov was impaled by a myriad of hooked chains, which shot out of the darkness above, moving faster than the eye could easily follow. One moment the Death Eater was simply standing in place, mesmerised by Pinhead's words, the next; he was screaming.

"GGAAAAAAHHHHH!!!"

"What?" gasped Voldemort in shock, not comprehending what he saw.

Dolohov hung suspended above the stone floor for a moment, the hooks digging deep into his flesh as they held him up, like a puppet on strings. Then the chains reeled themselves in, pulling the struggling wizard up into the darkness enshrouded ceiling, where he vanished with barely a chance to scream.

"NNNOOOOOOooooo..."

The short cry that he did manage, slowly faded away, as if receding to a great distance.

"Sweet Merlin!" gasped Lucius Malfoy.

"Not quite," commented Pinhead, matter-of-factly.

Looking up at the ceiling, Ron posed the question on everyone's minds. "Where the Hell did he go?" he asked frantically. "They couldn't have pulled him through the ceiling, could they?"

"The ceiling really isn't there any more," supplied Harry.

Everyone was so preoccupied gazing up at the spot where Dolohov had vanished from sight, that they failed to notice as the fat, goggled man, Butterball, seemingly appeared out of nowhere, right in front of Lucius Malfoy.

"Time to play," Butterball said, announcing his presence.

Before Malfoy could even begin to move, Butterball drew a thick, serrated hook from its place on his back. Moving with inhuman speed, the large demon slashed the hook across Malfoy's stomach.

Malfoy stared down at his eviscerated torso in open horror. A high pitched keening sound escaped his lips as his belly burst open and his steaming entrails spilt over the floor of the Great Hall.

"Do you want to play?" asked Butterball conversationally.

In a slow, deliberate manner, Butterball lifted his goggles away from his eyes, as if hoping to see the results of his strike better. The removal of his eyewear, however, revealed that his eyes had crudely sewn shut with thick, rusted wire.

With a smile, Butterball reached out with one hand and grabbed a fistful of Malfoy's bowels. He tugged teasingly on the dripping coil. Malfoy was desperately trying to stuff his leaking insides back into his body, but it was to no avail.

"Let's play," said Butterball.

Using his hold on Malfoy's intestines like a leash, Butterball led the dumbstruck Death Eater towards the blackness that now encompassed the back wall of the Great Hall. For such a large figure, the demon moved with surprising grace and fluidity.

Malfoy followed mindlessly, disappearing into the shadows with nary a protest, aside from his thin wail of madness. Left behind, to mark the pair's passage, was a thick trail of glistening blood and other fluids on the floor.

A horrified silence filled the hall once Malfoy and Butterball vanished from sight. If what had happened to Dolohov was shocking, Malfoy's fate was simply unbelievable.

Several of the less sturdy souls present had either begun emptying their stomachs, the smell now filling the hall made this easy, or had already passed out from shock. The rest simply stared at the three remaining demons, filled with dreadful anticipation as to what would happen next.

"Ugh," burped Ron weakly. "I think I'm going to hurl..."

"Me too..." agreed Hermione, looking decidedly green.

"RAAAHH!!" Recovering from his own shock, Voldemort roared with fury and rounded on Pinhead. He bared his teeth in a furious snarl and hissed, "I'll see you burn in hell for that!"

"Burn?" repeated Pinhead. He clucked with amusement. "Oh, such a limited imagination."

Standing calmly where his group of friends, Dumbledore and McGonagall, were huddled, Harry observed this exchange and then shook his head.

"Big mistake that," Harry said softly. "He's going to take it as a challenge."

Pinhead made a languid gesture with one hand. Four chains shot out of the darkness, wrapping themselves around the wrists and ankles of Bellatrix Lestrange. With a startled and pain filled yelp she was hoisted a foot into the air, like a fly trapped in a spider's web. Standing close to her side, was the female demon; Throatless.

"Bellatrix!!"

Rodolphus Lestrange tried to run and help his wife, but found his way barred by an excited Chatterer. He drew his wand and tried to curse it, but the heavily scarred demon moved with lightning quickness and grabbed his hand in an iron grip.

With frightening ease, the Chatterer plucked the wand from Rodolphus' trapped hand and tossed it aside. It seems to consider the hand in its grasp for a moment, though how it did this without any eyes was a mystery. Then, in a display of monstrous strength, it snapped the struggling man's wrist like a dry twig.

"AAAAAHHH!!!" Rodolphus screamed in agony.

The move has not been an economical one, but rather as vicious and brutal as the Chatterer could manage. The shattered bones of Rodolphus' wrist tore through his flesh and skin, jutting out of his arm with a spray of blood as the demon released him to collapse in a heap on the floor.

In the meanwhile, Throatless had pressed herself against Bellatrix in an almost seductive manner, rubbing her leather-clad body against the struggling woman. She leaned in close, so that her breath caressed Bellatrix's face as she spoke.

"I shall enjoy your suffering," Throatless told her. "And I shall greatly enjoy making *you* enjoy it as well."

"You bitch! Let me go!" snarled Bellatrix. "I'll kill you for this! You and your freak friends! Let me go!"

"You assume you have a choice in the matter, my darling Bellatrix."

Throatless ran the back of one hand over Bellatrix's cheek. It almost seemed like a lover's caress, but there was a hint of something far more sinister to the movement.

"I think you're teasing me," decided Throatless as she lifted her other hand to cup Bellatrix's face. She tilted her bald head quizzically and asked, "Are you teasing me?"

"I'll kill you," rasped Bellatrix, her voice hoarse with both fury and terror. "I'll torture you to death... slowly."

"Oh, such sweet nothings you whisper," said Throatless, not reacting to the threat. She traced the tip of one finger over the pout of Bellatrix's mouth. "Such wonderful lips deserve a kiss."

The demon then leaned in and pressed her lips against Bellatrix's. She struggled to pull away, but her head was held in place by the irresistible grip Throatless' hands had on her.

It was a strangely erotic sight... until Bellatrix's struggles became frantic. She bucked and jerked about wildly, as thin streams of blood began to trail down both woman's chins, escaping from between their kissing lips. Muffled shrieks of terror and agony could be heard from deep within the captive witch's throat.

"Bellatrix!!" screamed Rodolphus, struggling to his feet, his ruined wrist cradled to his chest. He was prevented from running to his wife's rescue when the Chatterer grabbed hold of him by his uninjured arm, twisting and pulling on it to force his surrender.

With a terrible, bloody smile Throatless finally released Bellatrix from the kiss, backing away as Bellatrix continued struggling to free herself, ignoring the chains that tore into her wrists and ankles. Blood was pouring from her open mouth and an incoherent scream filled the air.

Throatless opened her mouth and wiggled her tongue at Bellatrix. Both of them. It quickly became obvious to all watching that the demon had bitten off the trapped witch's tongue and somehow integrated it into her body.

"*Bella!*"

Reaching out, Throatless grabbed hold of Bellatrix's robes, despite her struggles, and tore them from her body - exposing the darkly coloured, but well tailored clothes beneath. More chains emerged from the darkness above, this time called by Throatless. They lashed out and wrapped themselves tightly around Bellatrix.

These chains were different to the ones that simply held Bellatrix in place. They had not only hooks, but also razor-edged links as well. The blood flowed like a river down Bellatrix's body as the chains tore her remaining clothes away as they bound themselves to her. Apparently the chains were to replace her garments, like some demented dominatrix outfit - which barely covered the necessities, but doing horrible damage to those parts of her body in the process.

"*Bella!*"

Finally, once her new "clothes" were in place, the chains that held her in place released their hold on Bellatrix's wrists and ankles. She collapsed in a heap on the floor, still screaming wordlessly and writhing in agony as the chains which now covered her body sliced into her flesh with every movement she made.

"*Bella!*"

The Chatterer was becoming annoyed at Rodolphus' continued screams for his wife. It released its hold on his arm, only to reach out and grab the man by his throat. Holding him in place with one hand, it forced his mouth open with the other. It then took a firm hold of Rodolphus' jaw and tore it free with a rough jerk.

Now it was both of the Lestranges that lay on the floor screaming wordlessly; Bellatrix without her tongue, and Rodolphus without his lower jaw.

Even Harry, who has prepared himself for things like this, found himself fighting down the bile that rose to his throat. Fortunately his stomach was already empty, thanks to Lucius's Bludgeoning Curse. The demons were even more brutal than he remembered. Of course, as he had been locked in the cupboard at the time, so this was his first hands-on exposure to their depravities.

The Chatterer stared down at Rodolphus for several seconds, looking at him by some unknown means, before lifting up the severed jaw held in its hand. It considered the bloody body part for a moment and then snapped it in two - an action that many recognised as something akin to the snapping of a wishbone.

The other Death Eaters were beginning to panic, only now realizing that they were trapped. They could not Apparate away while inside Hogwarts... and all the entrances to the Hall had vanished into the darkness which encircled them. Wands were drawn and aimed as they begin to cluster together in small groups, backs together and wands facing out.

Even Voldemort seemed to be at loose ends, standing in place and horrified at the brutal loss of two of his lieutenants and the terrible mutilations performed so casually on two more. Visibly shaking himself in an effort to regain control, he rose up to his full height and glared death at the calmly observing Pinhead.

"I will have you suffer a thousand deaths for this!"

"You already said you planned to kill me," noted Pinhead. "Why repeat yourself?"

Otherwise ignoring Voldemort and his ranting, Pinhead watched as Throatless kneeled next to Bellatrix, who's struggles had grown weaker and less frantic.

"Come, my darling," Throatless said, coaxing her victim to rise. "It's time to stop teasing like this. Time to taste our pleasures. Get up."

Bellatrix's will to resist had seemingly been broken and she meekly complied. Throatless had to help her stand, lending a steadying hand as the mutilated woman coughed and choked on the blood that's now pooled in her mouth.

Finally standing upright, Bellatrix's nearly nude body (which had held up nicely over the years) seemed almost painted with a sheen of blood, the red contrasting against the few tattered remains of her clothes and the steely glint of the chains that bound her breasts and crotch.

She followed without protest as Throatless took her by the hand and led her off to the side. The pair paused as they drew alongside the Slytherin table, where Neville, Luna and Ginny were being guarded by unmoving Death Eaters. Swivelling her head to face Neville, Throatless gave a small nod of acknowledgement before resuming her trek into the shadows - Bellatrix following like a lost puppy.

"Rreeellaaagh! Rreeellaaagh!"

Even without his lower jaw attached, Rodolphus was still trying to scream his wife's name as he watched Throatless lead her away. He was so busy watching the two women disappear into the shadows, that he failed to notice the Chatterer's ominous form lean over him.

Apparently it was becoming angry over the fact that nothing it did seemed to stop Rodolphus from shouting for Bellatrix. Reaching down, it grabbed hold of the man by means of his upper jaw, its fingers digging into the roof of Rodolphus' palate.

"Nngh!" grunted Rodolphus in pained protest.

Using Rodolphus' mouth as a handhold, the Chatterer began to drag the frantically struggling man into the same shadows Throatless and Bellatrix had disappeared into. A small group of three petrified Death Eaters that happened to be in the way, literally scrambled over each other to clear a path for the monstrous demon and its victim.

"*Enough!*" bellowed Voldemort, his high-pitched voice filled with great fury. He drew his wand and pointed it at Pinhead, who finally turned back to face him. "You consider yourself pain incarnate? I shall prove you wrong!"

"Oh, good," Pinhead smiled in anticipation. "A fight."

"*Crucio!*"

It was a sign of how badly rattled the Death Eaters were that this was the first curse to be fired. Four of their number had already been taken, all in brutal fashion, yet only now was any retaliation taking place.

The Cruciatus Curse slammed into Pinhead... and did nothing. It failed to even rock him back on his feet.

After a moment of consternation, Voldemort repeated the curse, this time more forcefully.

"*Crucio!*"

The second attempt also had no effect.

Pinhead continued to smile faintly at the futility of Voldemort's attacks. As the Dark Lord continued to throw curse after curse, the remaining Death Eaters now began to join in. Jets of coloured light crisscrossed the Great Hall, some hitting their mark, others missing by wide margins.

"Bloody hell!" yelled Ron, covering his head with his arms as a Cutting Curse flashed overhead.

"Students! Keep your heads down!" shouted Dumbledore, himself dropping to the floor.

Then Pinhead began to slowly advance towards Voldemort. Curses continued to rain down upon him, all to no effect. He did not stop. Nor did he speed up. He just kept walking. Confident of his invulnerability. Inexorable in his purpose.

As the leader of the demons got closer to Voldemort, the Death Eaters began to halt their fire, afraid to risk it, lest they accidentally curse their leader. Voldemort had also stopped casting spells and now stood staring across at Pinhead in disbelief. He was panting slightly from the exertion of all the magic he had been hurling at the creature standing within arm's reach of him.

"Which do you find more exhilarating, Tom? The pleasure... or the pain?" asked Pinhead.

With a lazy seeming motion, Pinhead batted at Voldemort's outstretched arm, knocking the wand from his grasp. There was a loud crack as the bones in the Dark Lord's hand broke under the impact. Voldemort staggered back, clutching his broken hand to his chest.

"Personally I prefer the pain," Pinhead informed him. He leaned closer to Voldemort, as if sharing a secret, and admitted, "I find it a far more lasting experience than pleasure."

With a defiant yell, Voldemort leaped forward and pushed his way past Pinhead. He began to run down the length of the Great Hall, hoping to make a break for it. Pinhead remained perfectly still, just watching the fleeing man. It was clear that he thought Voldemort's effort a hopeless one.

"The bastard's going to get away!" yelled Ron.

"Harry! No! Stay down!" cried Hermione as Harry jumped to his feet.

Several others also rose to their feet, having been huddled together to avoid the curses that had been flying about earlier. But unlike Harry, they were mostly interested in gaining a better view of what was happening. Voldemort had just managed to make it halfway to the back of the Hall.

"*Supplanto!*" uttered Harry forcefully, using nothing but his empty hand to cast a Tripping Jinx. The blue-coloured curse crossed the intervening distance in an eyeblink and sent Voldemort tumbling to the floor.

"NO!"

Pinhead smiled.

"Thank you, Harry," he said.

It was not gratitude, for Harry's intervention had not changed anything. Voldemort would not have been able to escape.

Then, with a motion of his pin adorned head, the air was suddenly filled with the sounds of chains whipping out. They were moving too fast for Voldemort to stand any chance of avoiding, even if he were still on his feet.

Gleaming hooks sank into Voldemort's body from all sides. His arms and legs were impaled, the chains binding him in a way similar to Bellatrix, but this time actually digging the hooks into him rather than wrapping around his limbs. More hooks buried themselves into his chest, his back and his

sides. The only part left clear and free to move, was his bald head.

"GAH! NO!" protested Voldemort with a pained gasp.

"You cannot leave, Tom," chided Pinhead. "*We* cannot leave."

Throatless, Butterball and the Chatterer emerged from the darkness behind the staff table. They smoothly rounded the table and arrayed themselves at Pinhead's side.

"Not alone," Pinhead continued.

With a come-hither gesture of his hand, Pinhead commanded the chains holding Voldemort to move. They dragged him back down the length of the Great Hall, to deposit him on his knees in front of the arrayed demons. In the dim red light, he looked like a prisoner being brought before a panel of judges.

"Not without you."

Voldemort was struggling desperately to free himself, but only managed to cause the hooks to tear even deeper into his pale skin. His body and black robes were growing slick with the blood from his wounds.

"Wait!" he pleaded frantically.

"The time for talking is over, Tom," Pinhead informed him, ignoring the plea. "It's time to play."

"You've come to this world before?" asked Voldemort, hoping to distract the demon, even if only for a moment.

"Many, many times," Pinhead admitted readily.

"Whenever someone opens the box?"

"Yes," confirmed Throatless.

"What happens to them? To whoever opens it?" asked Voldemort, though the answer was more than obvious.

"They come with us," answered Pinhead. "They taste our pleasures."

Now Voldemort's eyes narrowed as he asked, "Potter's opened the box before?"

It was Butterball that answered, a simple, "Yes."

Voldemort pounced on this, eagerly asking, "How did he get away?"

"Nobody escapes us," said Pinhead told him with certainty.

"Potter did!" shouted Voldemort. He tried to jab a bony finger in Harry's direction, but eventually settled for gesturing with his head. "He's right there!"

"Yes," admitted Pinhead, "but he did not escape."

"Yes, he did!" Voldemort insisted, motioning at Harry again. "He's right there! I can see him!"

"You see, but you do not understand," Pinhead replied calmly.

"We let him go," elaborated Butterball.

Voldemort stared up at the four monsters standing over him and, with pure frustration, demanded to know, "Why?"

Pinhead considered the fallen Dark Lord for several seconds before answering, "Because when I first saw him, I knew he would open the box again."

"And thus he has given us a bounty of souls," elaborated Throatless

By now Voldemort was beginning to comprehend that his death, final and absolute this time, was approaching at a brisk clip and there did not seem to be anything he could do to prevent it.

"Just tell me what you want," he asked desperately.

"Look at that box," said Pinhead, turning slightly to grant Voldemort a clear view of the puzzle box.

The Lament Configuration was still resting on the floor where Harry placed it before Voldemort just after he completed the puzzle and opened it. It seemed to be centred in a small pillar of light, completely isolated from all that transpired around it.

With their attention returned to the box, everyone became aware that it was still playing its tune, and had been this entire time. Soft, repetitive and... now that they knew... sinister.

Voldemort focused on the box, his red eyes wide with the pain of the hooks digging into his flesh.

"Potter... Potter created the box..." he wheezed. He looked up at Pinhead. "He created you?"

"Don't be an idiot," said Harry contemptuously. "The box isn't a container, it's a door."

He briskly strode over, avoiding several large puddles of blood that had pooled on the floor. He appeared completely unconcerned by his close proximity to the four demons. He came to stand next to Pinhead before squatting down in front of Voldemort.

"They," he nodded at Pinhead, "were on the other side."

"H-how?" gasped Voldemort.

"How what?"

"How did you know?"

Harry smiled, mysterious but at the same time slightly sinister. He rose to his feet again, staring down at Voldemort without any compassion or mercy, just that faint smile. His eyes briefly touched on Pinhead.

"It was my destiny," he said simply.

Still smiling, perhaps a little broader, Harry turned his back on Voldemort and walked back to where his friends, Dumbledore and McGonagall were standing in shocked and horrified silence. It was an action that completely dismissed Voldemort as being of any importance.

"The box is a means to summon us," Pinhead picked up where Harry left off. "A pathway to Hell. A map."

Pinhead reached down to grab Voldemort's chin and forced his head up so that he could look into his eyes. Cold, bottomless black peered into the very depths of a burning, hateful red.

"There are many of these maps in existence," Pinhead continued. "One is in a vault in the Vatican, hidden in ancient writings. A second in a monastery in the Himalayas. A third is a topiary maze in Berlin. A fourth, a veiled archway residing in your Ministry of so-called Magic. Yet another in the form of an Origami exercise, once possessed by the Marquis de Sade."

Pinhead glanced up at Throatless, who obligingly held out a small origami figure. It took Voldemort a moment, but he then realized that it was not made from paper, but from folded human skin instead.

"Wherever there is hate, violence, and human depravity -- a door will always be found," explained Pinhead. "There are dozens of such doors in this world, some more potent than others."

Now the Black Pope gestured to the Lament Configuration once again.

"But this... this simple musical puzzle box... is the ultimate passage," he informed all who were listening. "The original was created centuries ago by a French toymaker." Pinhead glanced briefly at Harry. "It was destroyed nine years ago by Harry, over there, shortly after he opened it and we claimed his relatives."

All eyes turn to Harry in shock, amazement or horror. Harry ignored them entirely, focusing instead on Pinhead and Voldemort. This was the final confrontation, he knew, and nothing in Heaven or Hell would make him miss a moment of it.

"It was his destiny to open it," Pinhead droned softly. "His destiny to destroy it. To remember it. To rebuild it. It was his destiny... to reopen it."

"But why accept his offer?" asked Voldemort bitterly. "Why take me and not him?"

"Those who stand in Hell's way are consumed by its fury," explained Pinhead. He shook his head a fraction. "Those who stand in the way of Fate and Destiny are likewise swept aside. Even us."

Voldemort resumed his struggles against the chains and hooks. He put on an admirable show of it and actually managed to pull free of several, but they tore large chunks out of him in the process. The pain soon grew too much for him and he slumped to the floor, his blood pooling around him.

"This is the end, Tom. You can't run forever," said Pinhead. "Eventually you must stop playing this game... and start playing ours."

The chains holding Voldemort began to draw themselves taut, tearing the Dark Lord's flesh in the process.

"No more delays. No more teasing," said Throatless. "Time to play."

"Time to play," agreed Butterball.

The Chatterer twittered in agreement, doubtless expressing the same notion; that it was time to play.

"Time to play," concluded Pinhead, giving the words his benediction.

Time to play.

Voldemort began to writhe in terror and begged, "For God's sake please--"

"Do I look like someone who cares what *God* thinks?" Pinhead interrupted mildly.

"Wait! Stop!" Voldemort was growing more frantic with each passing moment that the hooked chains pulled him higher and higher. "I'll make you a deal! A better offer!"

"We already have a deal. A better offer," responded Pinhead dispassionately. "We have taken it."

The hooks had by now pulled Voldemort up, spread-eagled and being tugged insistently in all directions at once. He fought with insane terror, snarling and screaming incoherently. The chains simply pulled tighter, resisting his attempts to tear free of their hold.

As if becoming aware of the watching Death Eaters, staff and students for the first time, Pinhead swept his cold gaze across the hall as he addressed them.

"This isn't for your eyes," he announced.

The Great Hall was plunged into darkness just as a sickening tearing sound erupted from where Voldemort was hanging suspended. The impenetrable blackness lasted for several long heartbeats, in which time a shriek of unspeakable pain filled the air. It was Voldemort, though his voice was scarcely recognisable. In the time it took to draw one deep breath, his death rattle faded away, leaving behind silence... and the perpetual chiming of the puzzle box.

Then there was the sound of the bell ringing. Slowly light returned to the Great Hall, revealing that Voldemort was gone... as were the four black-clad demons.

The surviving Death Eaters were frozen in place, for the most part too scared to risk moving. Finally two of them hesitantly made their way towards the now vacant stage where the staff table resided. They no longer had their Death Eater masks on, revealing them to be Peter Pettigrew and the executioner, Walden Macnair.

"What do you think?" asked Macnair as the pair surveyed the scene. His hands clenched and unclenched nervously on the haft of the massive axe he always carried.

"What do I think?" repeated Pettigrew. He looked around and hopefully offered, "I think it's over."

"Yeah. Right."

Pettigrew turned to Harry, fear etched in plain on his blubbery face and in his watery eyes. Desperate for the need to feel safe and secure, he protested, "But they're gone!"

Harry simply pointed at the Lament Configuration, which sat innocuously on the floor near Pettigrew's feet, still playing its tune.

"The door's still open," he said.

As if to prove his words, a monstrous figure dropped from out of the blackness covering the ceiling. It fell like an anvil and landed on Macnair with a loud crunch of breaking bone. Pettigrew stumbled back, both in surprise and fear.

Whatever this beast was, it was just as terrifying as the four earlier demons had been. It was vaguely humanoid in shape, only far more muscular than what was normal. If anything it looked like a cruel joke of what might happen if someone combined the remains of a man and a dog that had been in a particularly ugly car crash.

"W-wuh-wha?" Pettigrew sputtered dumbly.

His feeble attempt to question the beast's origins were cut off as a spray of blood splattered across his front. The dog-like beast had begun tearing at Macnair with its claws and gaping, fang filled maw. The massive Death Eater tried to fight against it, but his axe had been knocked out of his reach when it first slammed into him. It was a battle lost before it even began.

With a honking roar, like the baying of circling hyenas, the beast literally tore Macnair in half. In an eruption of blood and fluids, the man's bottom half skidded into Pettigrew's legs, while his top half remained trapped under the animal's great bulk. Blood spread out over the surrounding floor, covering it almost an inch deep.

"Ah," exclaimed Pinhead as he emerged from the shadows behind the staff table, "it would seem my pet could not contain his hunger any longer."

It was McGonagall that summed up everyone's thoughts with one, single, eloquent word.

"Fuck."

This was a fitting epitaph for the remaining Death Eaters, who found themselves facing a mob of other demons, who began to emerge from the shadows, each seemingly more terrifying than the last.

Spells, hexes and curses soon filled the air, as did screams of terror and pain. Slowly the latter became more prominent while the former less so as the demons grabbed hold of the Death Eaters and hauled them back into the darkness from whence they came.

Pettigrew was scabbling backwards across the floor on his hands and knees, having been knocked off his feet by Macnair's severed lower body

and legs. He was trying to avoid the beast, which had begun feeding grotesquely on Macnair's top half, as well as trying to escape the notice of the demons currently chasing after his comrades.

He froze in place when his silver right hand unexpectedly bumped into something. He looked down and saw that it was the Lament Configuration. The box was still open, a soft light shining out of it, and quietly playing its tune amidst the screams that currently filled the Hall.

"Who do we have here?"

Peter looked up to see Throatless, Butterball and the Chatterer standing over him.

"Oh no..." he whimpered.

"Hello, Peter," greeted Throatless, smiling coldly. "Time to play."

"I... I have the box," Peter managed to say. He quickly grabbed the box up in his hands and held it before him, like a crucifix used to ward off vampires. "It brought you here... it can send you back!"

Throatless' face creased in contemplation as she looked down at Pettigrew. She knew that he didn't have a prayer of a chance at closing the box. He simply wasn't intelligent enough to do it. Not in the time he had left. Thus, she decided to humour him. The mental torture as he failed would be delicious.

"Please," she allowed, "feel free to try."

Pettigrew ran his fingers desperately over the box. He pushed and prodded at it, turning it this way and that.

Nothing.

It remained open, the light continuing to shine out and the tune continuing to play. His hands dropped hopelessly into his lap and he started to sob.

"I can't... it's too hard. I don't know how."

Throatless smiled coldly again and leaned down to pluck the puzzle box from Pettigrew's numb fingers. She stood upright, holding the box in front of her like a prize. Pinhead appeared at her shoulder to take the box from her. As he did so, he seemed to notice Pettigrew for the first time, lying in a sobbing heap on the floor.

"No tears, please," Pinhead told him sternly. "It's a waste of good suffering."

What little courage Pettigrew ever had was suddenly fuelled by fear for his life. He raised up his silver right hand and planted it against Throatless' sternum. She looked down at it with obvious amusement.

"And what--"

"*REDUCTO!*"

While Pinhead could weather strikes from just about any force in creation, Throatless was not quite that strong. The curse caused her chest to erupt in a spray of cold, black blood and necrotized flesh as it blew her off her feet and through the air. She landed in a crumpled heap twenty feet back.

Pinhead, Butterball and the Chatterer looked back to where their comrade had fallen. Slowly they turned back to Pettigrew, who's spirit seemed bolstered by this apparent success.

Those who had noticed this small battle amidst the chaos consuming the Great Hall, couldn't decide what to do. They were torn between cheering for Pettigrew striking a killing blow to a evil greater than Voldemort, or crying in outrage that one of those helping to destroy the Death Eaters had been struck down.

The-Boy-Who-Lived, however, had a different reaction. He dropped his head into a hand and shook it.

"Oh, Wormtail, you dumb fool," Harry muttered. He looked up and sighed, "That'll only make her angry."

Pinhead sent a pointed glance at the other two demons and nodded his head briskly. Responding to the prompt, Butterball took a quick step forward. Moving faster than Pettigrew could react to, he grabbed hold of him by the wrist.

"*REDUCTO!*" screeched Pettigrew.

Unfortunately for Pettigrew, Butterball was holding his silver hand in such a way that the fallen wizard could not take proper aim. His curse sailed harmlessly over the demon's shoulder, eventually disappearing into the darkness surrounding the Great Hall.

As Butterball held his hand immobile, the Chatterer knelt down next to Pettigrew. Chittering excitedly, it leaned in and attacked the offending arm with its exposed teeth. Pettigrew let out a piercing shriek as the demon quickly gnawed its way through his wrist, severing the silver hand from his arm.

"No... no... not again..." he groaned, clasping his left hand over bleeding stump of his right.

Butterball reached down to pick up the silver hand, which had fallen to the ground once the Chatterer had done its task. As he held it up for

inspection, it began to lose its shape and slowly dissolved into a silvery mist that eventually vanished entirely.

"That is no way to treat a lady," announced a brittle voice, twenty feet away.

Pettigrew, and everyone else, excepting Pinhead, Harry and the other two demons, looked up in pained horror to see that Throatless had righted herself and was staggering unsteadily back to where Pettigrew was being held. It was not pain that limited her movements, but rather the fact that a good part of her spine was now missing, thanks to the gaping hole (which one could actually see through) in her chest. Her internal organs seemed to be missing as well, if they had ever been there.

Throatless returned to where she had been standing when Pettigrew cursed her. She reached down and grabbed him by the throat, lifting him up into the air with no visible effort, in spite of her injury. Pettigrew struggled to free himself with both his left hand and the bloody stump of his right, but her grip was like iron.

She leaned in close to him, staring into his eyes with her own - now burning with the icy fire of cold fury.

"I shall have to make a point of teaching you proper manners," she told him.

With her free hand, Throatless tore open Wormtail's robes, revealing the clothing beneath. Her black eyes not straying from Wormtail's face, she ripped open his shirt to expose his pale and somewhat flabby chest.

After everything they had seen up till now, nobody was too surprised when Throatless dug her fingers into the flesh of Wormtail's ribcage. There was the crack of bone snapping and then she literally pried the broken rib out of the struggling man's chest, tearing it through his flesh until it stuck out at an angle to one side.

"Yeah, he made her angry," Harry summed up.

"Oh my God, Harry," exclaimed Hermione. She buried her face against his chest, not wanting to see any more.

Throatless repeated this process of partly extracting Wormtail's ribs again and again, swapping hands when she moved to the ribs on the other side of his chest. It took her several minutes, but before long all of Wormtail's ribs had been wrenched free of his chest and pulled aside.

It was as if Throatless were performing thoracic surgery, only without the benefit of anaesthetic or actually bothering to properly open Wormtail's chest. For the most part, the skin of his chest is still in one piece, holding his heart, lungs and other organs inside of him, his exposed ribs arching out like a mock cradle.

Wormtail's screams were the last to fill the Great Hall as Throatless carried him to the side, Butterball and the Chatterer following on her heels. His cries reached a fever pitch as they began to merge with the shadows... and then abruptly the sound cut off.

The only one of the dark figures remaining was Pinhead, who stood alone in the centre of the hall. The bell tolled in the silence that had suddenly descended now that it was finally over. The only other sound was the soft chiming of the music box, which Pinhead held in his pale hands.

"Almost over..." he announced.

"Almost," concurred Harry. He stepped forward, managing to slip out of Hermione's grasp and past Ron and Dumbledore before they could try to hold him back. He strode calmly and confidently to stand opposite Pinhead. They stood in silence for a moment, regarding each other.

"You have surprised me, Harry," Pinhead finally acknowledged. "That does not happen very often."

It did not take someone skilled in reading the signs to tell that Pinhead was not often surprised primarily because he did not enjoy the experience.

"I have a way of doing that," confessed Harry lightly.

Pinhead nodded his head in what seemed like bemused agreement.

"It seems I underestimated you," he admitted. "You have grown to be quite ruthless."

"I had the best kind of inspiration," Harry explained honestly.

Pinhead smiled, almost smugly. The proud parent of a child that has learned his lessons well. He half turned away from Harry, regarding the otherwise silent Great Hall and the assorted students that stood frozen in place, watching and listening anxiously.

"Using Hell to fulfil the prophecy was to play with fire," Pinhead commented casually.

Harry raised an eyebrow and retorted, "Appropriate I think." He looked around and saw that there were no more Death Eaters, or demons for that matter, amidst the shadowy gloom, the flickering lights or the swaying chains that now filled the Hall. It looked like the war was finally over.

"Tom and his Death Eaters?" he asked.

"They are all with us now. Twenty-seven souls, as you promised," replied Pinhead.

"And Sirius?" asked Harry.

"He will be returned to you, as we agreed," Pinhead promised. "Expect him to pass through the veil before sunrise."

"And he'll be safe? Unharmred?"

"He has experienced both pleasure and pain beyond limits," was Pinhead's ambiguous reply.

Harry considered that and acknowledged that it would be next to impossible for Sirius to be unharmed. It had been nearly a year, which might not seem so long a time; but for someone suffering in Hell, it would have been an eternity.

Sadly he asked, "Will he recover?"

"Perhaps. Perhaps not," replied Pinhead. "Only the passing of time will tell."

"Then you have no reason to remain here," Harry said with unnatural calm.

Everyone watching marvelled at his almost total lack emotion. They themselves were almost hysterical from the shock, the horror, the fear and just about everything else they had experienced over the past hour or two.

"Yes, time to leave," agreed Pinhead. He paused and added, "But first, I think you'll be wanting this."

Pinhead lifted his hand, revealing that he held a slender wooden rod. It was a magic wand, which Harry recognised as his own. The demon lord held it out, handle first, for Harry to take.

"We found it in Tom's possession," explained Pinhead.

"Thanks," said Harry gratefully. He accepted the wand, feeling a warm rush streak through his body as he did.

Pinhead then reached behind him and pulled out the Lament Configuration. He held it up, examining it for a time, before extending his arm to hand it to Harry.

"You accomplished its recreation with admirable skill," he complimented, dropping it into Harry's hands.

Harry had pocketed his wand to take hold of the cube with both hands. He held it gently, despite the knowledge that it looked far more delicate than it actually was. It was Fate and Destiny that had allowed him to destroy the original, else nothing short of the apocalypse could even damage it.

"Thank you."

"No." Pinhead nodded his head in acknowledgement. "Thank *you* ."

With that said, the demon turned and began to walk away; towards the doors of the Great Hall. The massive doors were still shrouded in shadow and flickering lights, but were the first time visible once more. As he moved, idling passing through the chains dangling from the ceiling, he was joined by the forms of the other three demons; Throatless, Butterball and the Chatterer.

Watching them walk away, Harry began the process of closing the puzzle box. As he had when opening the box for Voldemort, he did not drop his gaze to see what he was doing, instead working by touch and experience alone.

"Goodbye Harry Potter," Pinhead spoke. "I do not expect for you to call us again."

The room had grown darker, the flickering lights of Hell dimming. The chains disappeared into the gloom, one by one.

"A pity though..." murmured Pinhead as he and the others faded from sight, slowly merging into the shadows. "What appetites I could have taught you. What endless hungers you could have learned..."

Harry continued to return the box to its closed state. His every movement was confident and sure, an old hand at this particular challenge.

Looking after the departed demons, he smiled almost sadly and whispered, "Goodbye... old friend."

The bell tolled one last time as Harry's fingers urged the final panel into place with a click.

The torches mounted along the wall flickered alight once more, as did the multitude of candles hovering in the air. The fireplaces roared back to life, flaring tall and proud before settling down to a soft crackle. The stars twinkled silently above, shining down from the enchanted ceiling.

It was as if everything that happened were no more than a dream.

Or a nightmare.

.oOo.

April 22nd, 1997, Hogwarts Hospital Wing

Harry Potter had survived Voldemort's latest, and final, attack against him.

He had also survived, though just barely, Madam Pomfrey's bedside manner.

Harry's injuries had been quite severe. Pettigrew's Battering Curse had managed to crack several of his ribs, one of which had grazed against his

lung, but luckily not pierced into it. Lucius Malfoy's Bludgeoning Curse had done far more harm, actually rupturing Harry's spleen, bursting his appendix and bruising his liver.

It had taken some time, and more potions than you could shake a broomstick at, but the Hogwarts Matron had managed to heal the damage before it became necessary to send Harry to St. Mungos. It had been an unpleasant experience. There had also been the matter of regrowing the tooth that Pettigrew had knocked out - an return encounter with Skele-Gro that Harry would rather have avoided.

The only good thing about the experience was that, for once, Harry had a great deal of fellow patients to keep him company during his convalescence. First and foremost were Ron and Hermione, who had both suffered greatly under Voldemort's repeated use of the Cruciatus Curse.

Despite Harry's timely application of Post-Cruciatius Potion, they had still required further treatment to fully heal their battered nervous systems. Ron had been placed in the bed immediate to Harry's right, while Hermione was directly opposite him, on the other side of the room (being female and thus requiring some degree of separation from the two wizards).

There had been others, who had received injuries during the Death Eater's capture of the castle, but not many of them had required such extensive stays in the hospital wing.

Neville had stayed over the first night, having a broken right arm (and several broken fingers) healed. He had gone after Rastaban Lestrange during the fight for Hogwarts. He had broken his fingers while trying to pummel the man into a bloody heap - as revenge for his parents, Frank and Alice. Bellatrix and Rodolphus had been busy duelling with Harry and Hermione, so the second Lestrange brother had been the recipient of his righteous fury. Unfortunately Rastaban had been saved by Rookwood, who had blasted Neville off of his companion, which resulted in the broken arm.

Luna had spent several days in the bed next to Hermione, much to the bushy-haired witch's chagrin. She had taken a blow to the head early in the fight and suffered a rather severe concussion. As such she had missed most of what happened after that, being conscious for only some parts, but had been filled in on events once she woke. She believed all she was told with her typical good cheer and ready acceptance.

The other patients had been either members of the staff, such as Hagrid (who had suffered several deep gashes during his fight with Macnair) and Professor Flitwick (who had been caught unawares by Rookwood), or various members of the Defence Association.

Unsurprisingly every single student injury of note had been from Harry and Hermione's little 'study group', who would have normally been more than a match for Voldemort's Death Eaters, save for the fact that Harry had needed to have those same Death Eaters win the fight for Hogwarts.

Despite Harry's subtle sabotage of their effort, the DA students were all being hailed as heroes of the wizarding world - with Harry and his friend receiving even higher accolades. This was undoubtedly thanks to the fact that nothing had been said of exactly how Voldemort and his servants had met their ends. Harry wondered if his current popularity would survive the revelation of all he had done.

Now, however, and for the past two days, it had been only the infamous Gryffindor Trio that were kept waiting for their release. The way Madam Pomfrey was talking, they would be still there for several more days - something that really didn't sit that well with Harry and Hermione (who were waiting to visit the nearest broom cupboard) or Ron (who really wanted to have a proper Hogwarts meal in the Great Hall).

"Ahem."

Professor Dumbledore's arrival interrupted a rather heated argument between the three with regards to what they would do first once Madam Pomfrey finally decided to send them on their way. Ron wanted to stop by the kitchens for some 'proper food', Harry wanted a long, hot shower and Hermione wanted to find out what homework they had missed.

"I see you are feeling considerably more energetic than Poppy would have us believe," Dumbledore commented as he entered the room, Ginny, Luna and Neville following behind him.

"Madam Pomfrey likes to make it sound as if her patients are at death's door," replied Harry.

"She does at that," agreed Dumbledore, taking a seat to Harry's left.

"So, why are you here, sir?" asked Harry, already knowing the answer. It was, he knew, time to pay the piper - something he had been dreading this past week. "Somehow I get the impression it's not a social call."

"Indeed not, Harry," Dumbledore confirmed. "Now that you are once again in full health, I believe an explanation is in order. A proper one this time."

Harry made a bit of a show about looking around the room.

"Where's the rest of the Order?" he asked.

"This is a conversation best kept between us, Harry," said Dumbledore seriously. "I will share with the Order whatever information I deem pertinent."

"The Ministry?" asked Harry.

"I have already offered the Ministry's investigators an explanation for the events that took place that night," replied Dumbledore, passing along a piece of information that greatly relieved everyone present. "They do intend to interview you, once you are released, but it will be little more than a formality."

"And my friends?" asked Harry. He glanced to Ron, Hermione, Neville, Ginny and Luna. He found it surprising that the headmaster was willing to speak while they were in the room. "You're not going to kick them out?"

Mister Longbottom, Miss Weasley and Miss Lovegood have insisted upon being present," Dumbledore explained with a rueful glance at the three students in question. "And I know better than to try and stop Ron and Hermione from attending."

"Hmph," decided Harry, leaning back in his bed and folding his arms. "Maybe you can be trained after all."

Dumbledore managed to ignore this slight dig against him, fully aware that he had most likely earned it. However, this was not the time for such introspection, thus he returned to the matter at hand.

"Now, Harry, an explanation, please," he prompted sternly.

"Where would you like me to start?" replied Harry.

"The beginning," said Dumbledore. "And the truth about what happened that night at the Dursleys."

Harry settled back, making himself comfortable for what was likely to be a long story. Once he was seated comfortably, he proceeded to relate the events of nine years ago.

He told of how Dudley's teacher had wanted to improve the oversized boy's problem solving skills. How Vernon had brought back the original Lament Configuration in an attempt to do so. How Dudley had briefly tried to open it and then given up. How Harry had taken the box and succeeded where his cousin failed.

There were some cries of outrage from his friends when Harry told of how Aunt Petunia had locked him in the cupboard under the stairs as punishment for playing with something that was supposedly Dudley's.

"Those... those... ooh!" Hermione shook her head, shaking with indignant fury. She vehemently declared, "I hope those horrible people got what they deserved!"

"Trust me," replied Harry honestly, "They did. In spades."

Harry went on to tell his friends and headmaster of how Pinhead and his three companions had appeared before the Dursleys. How his relatives had tried to flee, hiding in the upstairs portion of the house. How the four demons had followed after them. Of the screams of terror and shrieks of agony which had imprinted themselves in young Harry's mind.

"I'm so sorry, dear boy," said Dumbledore regretfully upon hearing that. He sat slumped tiredly in his chair, looking as if he had aged a dozen years in as many minutes. "I knew they had mistreated you... but I never imagined you had actually born witness to their demise."

Continuing, Harry explained how the throatless woman had found him, still locked in the cupboard. How Pinhead has stopped her from claiming him like they had the Dursleys. How he had learnt that he was marked by Fate and had a Destiny, one intimately entwined with the Lament Configuration.

He told them of how he had searched the house, finding no bodies, no sign whatsoever of the Dursleys, aside from the blood dripping from the ceiling, streaking the walls and pooled on the floor. He told them of how Dumbledore and the Ministry Aurors had found him, sitting at the kitchen table and gorging himself on the food that had long been denied him by his supposed family.

He told them of his brief stay at Hogwarts, while his disposition was debated by the Wizengamot. He explained how he had faked his awe of the castle and his fear of the ghosts that roamed it. He explained his mounting frustration at how nobody would tell him the name of the man who had killed his parents and tried to kill him.

After this he went on to detail his introduction to the Merchants, John, Bobbi and Jake. How they had taken him into their home and their hearts, treating him as if he were their own son. He revealed how he had arranged to destroy the original Lament Configuration, first by smashing it to pieces and then by burning the remains.

"And after all that... you rebuilt the bloody thing?" asked Ron incredulously. Seeing Harry nod in confirmation, he shook his and demanded to know, "Are you insane?"

Harry sat on his bed, as if thinking about the question.

"I'm marked by Fate," he finally said. He shrugged. "So, yes, I probably was."

"What happened next, Harry?" asked Hermione, deeply enthralled by the story thus far.

Harry glossed over the next few years, in which he learned what being part of a family truly meant. He mentioned his occasional encounters with other children his age; Ron, Neville and even Draco, once or twice. Then he came to his return to Hogwarts, and the Sorting.

"The bloody thing wanted to put me in Slytherin," he grumbled unhappily. "Said it would make fulfilling my destiny easier for me."

"I often thought your link to Voldemort would prompt it to make such a suggestion," revealed Dumbledore.

"It wasn't Voldemort that caught it's attention," countered Harry.

Harry explained how the Hat had been able to sense his destiny, having detected the darkness left within him from his single encounter with Pinhead and the puzzle box. That was the reason why it had wanted to put him in Slytherin.

From there Harry briefly touched on the next five years; his encounter with Voldemort in their fight for the Stone; his meeting with Tom Riddle's memory, Fawkes singing the puzzle box's tune; What he heard when a Dementor was near; the form his Boggart assumed; His lack of true fear when seeing Voldemort reborn; The sounds of the box playing from behind the veiled archway.

Lastly he told of how Dumbledore had finally revealed the prophecy to him, and how he had reached the conclusion that it was speaking of his ability to recreate the Lament Configuration, using it as a trap to lure Voldemort into the hands of the demons that it called.

"What the leader of the demons told you when you were a child," Dumbledore mused thoughtfully, stroking his silvery moustache. "That it was your destiny."

"Once I believed that, it became almost self-fulfilling," agreed Harry.

"Interesting," concluded the headmaster.

"And that's when you started work on rebuilding the puzzle box?" asked Hermione.

"Yes," admitted Harry. He sent her and his other friends a sheepish grin. "You remember what I was like during the first half of the summer."

Picking up the tale again, Harry recounted how he had struggled to recreate the box, first trying to find the right design, and then trying to puzzle out the inner mechanisms that made it work. Once he accomplished those two aspects, building the physical box itself was almost too easy.

"A week later I brought it to your office and showed it to the Order," he concluded, looking to Dumbledore.

"Why didn't you tell us what the box really was? What it really does?" asked Dumbledore, truly puzzled (if you'll excuse the pun).

"Are you kidding?" asked Harry incredulously. "If I had, you would've done everything possible to take it away from me and destroy it."

"True," admitted Dumbledore.

"I told you exactly what I needed you to know."

Dumbledore tilted his head to one side, clearly confused, and asked, "What do you mean?"

Harry steepled his fingers in front of him, a pensive expression on his face as he thought back. After so much time and effort expended on his plan, his memories of it all had taken on an almost dream-like quality.

"It was all a trap," he explained. "To lure Voldemort here with the intent to open the box and claim what was inside."

"I understand that," said Dumbledore, "but how did telling the Order accomplish that?"

Harry levelled a blank look at the headmaster, expecting him to work it out for himself. Unsurprisingly, however, it was Hermione that made the connection and understood his meaning first.

"Professor Snape," she murmured, just loudly enough for the other to hear.

"Yes," confirmed Harry.

"Miss Granger?" asked Dumbledore, turning to her for his answer.

"Harry made sure Snape knew about the box," explained Hermione patiently, "and then he made sure Voldemort got the information out of him."

"But Severus was..." Dumbledore trailed off he began to comprehend what she was saying. "No..."

Harry smiled a cold smile. His friends immediately noticed how similar it was to Pinhead's smile.

"Sacrifices have to be made, Professor," he said, hammering the truth of the matter home as he threw Dumbledore's own words back at him, "lest we are all doomed."

Dumbledore was reeling at this revelation. It was a good thing he was already sitting down, or else he would have probably keeled over from the shock. After nearly a minute of stunned silence, he managed to recover his shattered composure.

"I never would have thought you could be so cold, Harry," he said.

"I prefer to think of it as being calculating," retorted Harry dismissively.

"The fact that you hated Snape's guts must've help," commented Ron.

"Yeah," Harry agreed, musing it over. "I probably couldn't have done it if I'd actually liked the man."

"So..." Dumbledore resumed quietly, "once Voldemort was aware of the box's existence..."

"I had to make sure he came into a position to get hold of it," finished Harry.

"You knew about the attack before it happened," said Dumbledore with absolute certainty.

Harry nodded in admission and revealed, "By nearly a week."

Dumbledore closed his eyes and leaned back. "Why didn't you warn us, Harry?"

"I couldn't risk it," Harry responded calmly. "If Voldemort wasn't convinced that he'd won, in a proper fight, he wouldn't have taken the bait."

"My sudden lack of strength during the battle..."

"A Power-Sapping Potion in your drink at dinner."

Dumbledore sighed and silently admitted that Harry had seemingly thought of everything while planning Voldemort's final downfall.

"Okay, I get all that," said Ron, speaking up. He had a puzzled expression on his face as he asked, "Then why didn't you give him the box when he was in the castle? Why fight him over it?"

Harry ducked his head and stared at his lap, unable to meet his friends' eyes.

"He couldn't, Ron," said Hermione, answering for him. She understood why Harry had done what he had. "Voldemort would have suspected something if it had been that easy."

"So he let You-Know-Who torture us? Just for show?" asked Ron, his volume rising.

"I'm sorry," was all Harry could bring himself to say.

Ron seemed at odds with what to say or do. In the end he gave a frustrated sigh and crossed his arms. "Fine," he grouched before sending Harry a meaningful look. "Just don't ever do anything like that again."

"I won't. I promise," Harry swore, managing a weak smile.

Now it was Neville that asked a question that had been bothering him. "How'd you know those... things... would accept your offer for the Death Eaters' souls?"

Harry winced and reluctantly confessed, "I didn't."

The headmaster and his five friends (even Luna) stared at Harry in open disbelief.

"You mean your entire plan hinged on a gamble like that?" questioned Dumbledore once he recovered his voice.

"Of course not," Harry retorted, slightly affronted that they would think that he risked so much on such a chance. "If Voldemort had opened the box himself, it wouldn't have been an issue. They would have come for him and only him. The rest of us would have been inconsequential to them."

"But he didn't," observed Dumbledore.

"Having me open it for him was something I hadn't counted on," revealed Harry.

"Bad luck that," said Luna dreamily.

"Tell me about it," agreed Harry.

"So exchanging Voldemort and the Death Eaters for yourself and Sirius..." Ginny trailed off, letting him finish her partly formed question for her.

"I was inspired by desperation," Harry admitted.

"You didn't show it," noted Ron.

"I'm a good actor," replied Harry.

"Please, Harry," scoffed Ginny. "You couldn't lie to save your life."

Harry gave only a sly smile by way of answer.

"Unless..." Hermione looked incredulously at him. "That was also an act?"

"The best way to hide the fact that you're a good liar," revealed Harry, a tad smugly. "When you're lying about the little, unimportant stuff; lie badly."

"Son of a bitch," groaned Ginny in disbelief.

The conversation halted when Dumbledore rose to his feet, looking every bit the part of the stern authority figure. He seemed to loom over Harry's bed, a severe expression on his face.

"What you did that night," he said grimly, "was reckless and foolhardy beyond words. It placed the souls of every student in this school in mortal peril and very nearly killed all of those people you were supposedly trying to protect."

"Yes, headmaster," Harry said simply, looking straight ahead.

"Ignoring the last two points, which we *will* come back to later," Dumbledore continued, "What you did was so reckless and foolhardy that the Wizengamot has voted unanimously to award you, Harry Potter, the Order of Merlin, First Class."

Dumbledore rather enjoyed the look of unfettered surprise that appeared on Harry's face.

"You're joking," blurted Ron.

"Not in the least, Mister Weasley," assured Dumbledore happily. "Though I do know several good jokes about golf and the meaning of life."

"Bloody hell, no," complained Harry, dropping his head into his hands.

"Really, Harry, I don't think they'd be that bad to listen to," said Dumbledore, pretending to defend his rather bad jokes even though he knew that was not what Harry had been referring to.

"I meant this Order of Merlin nonsense," elaborated Harry, looking up and glaring at the headmaster.

"Oh, it's not nonsense, dear boy."

"There'll be a ceremony?" asked Harry.

"Undoubtedly," confirmed Dumbledore, not bothering to hide his growing amusement at The-Boy-Who-Lived's reaction to his new-found fame and glory. He had, after all, been expecting as much.

"With lots of guests, dignitaries and other important people?"

"Dozens, perhaps hundreds of them."

"I'll have to give a speech?"

"But of course."

"Like I said," Harry groaned and dropped his head down again, "bloody hell, no."

"Unavoidable, I'm afraid," Dumbledore told him.

"Bugger," summed up Harry.

"Not to worry, Harry," soothed Dumbledore, patting the young wizard on the shoulder. "I am certain your friends and family will be there to lend their support."

"Damn right," agreed Ron staunchly.

"Of course we'll be there," confirmed Hermione.

"The fact that you, yourselves, will be receiving the Order of Merlin, Second Class, practically assures it," nodded Dumbledore, his moustache and beard twitching with another smile.

"WHAT?!"

This mention of friends and family, however, reminded Harry of something he wanted to know. Being trapped in a hospital bed for the last week meant that he and his friends had not received much news beyond the basics.

"What about Sirius?" he asked abruptly.

"Ah, yes," said Dumbledore, his good cheer dropping away as the mention of Harry's godfather. "No doubt you are anxiously awaiting the details of what has happened in that regard."

Dumbledore resumed his seat by Harry's bed and began to fill the six students in on what had happened. He explained how, shortly after securing the school and students, following Voldemort's defeat, he sent Kingsley, Tonks and Moody to keep watch of the veiled archway in the Department of Mysteries.

It had been ten minutes before dawn when Sirius Black fell out of the veil and onto the stone dais. The three Aurors had immediately seen that he was in terrible condition and would likely not survive very long without proper treatment. His injuries were more than Madam Pomfrey could deal with, especially as the Hogwarts infirmary was now filled with injured students and staff, so they had been forced to take Sirius to St. Mungo's, where he remained.

He had regained consciousness several times over the past week, but seemed lost in delirium and fever. Remus Lupin had remained by his side the entire time, sometimes in the company of Tonks or other members of the Order.

"And the Ministry?" asked Harry, afraid that Fudge and his cronies would cause trouble.

Having taken Sirius to St. Mungo's, Dumbledore explained, it was impossible to hide his return from the authorities. Luckily, however, Dumbledore had been able to take action before Fudge or anyone else did something stupid.

Based on testimony from himself, some of the Hogwarts staff and members of the Order, not to mention several hundred eye witness accounts of Peter Pettigrew's involvement in capture of Hogwarts, Dumbledore has managed to arrange for Sirius to have a hearing before the Wizengamot to determine his guilt or innocence.

"But Sirius is recovering in St. Mungos," Hermione pointed out. "How can he go to trial like that?"

"In all likelihood, Miss Granger," explained Dumbledore, "Sirius will not need to attend the preliminary stages. I expect he will have to come in, briefly, to undergo questioning through Veritaserum, but that will be much later."

"When will it start?" asked Harry.

"The hearing has been set for mid-May. The sixteenth, I believe," replied Dumbledore.

Now Harry asked the important question. "Do you think he'll be found innocent?"

Dumbledore smiled softly and nodded. "I have the highest hopes for such a verdict,"

"Will we be called to testify?" asked Luna suddenly.

"Most probably, yes," Dumbledore confirmed. "I've already arrange to allow you to attend on the relevant date."

"Me? Testify in front of the Wizengamot?" repeated Ron, eyes growing wide. "Bloody hell!"

Harry now glanced to his bedside table. It was adorned with a morasses of get-well cards, letters, gifts and presents of all kinds. There were so many that the small table was overflowing with them and most of had been set down on the floor next to Harry's bed, as well as the next bed over.

"Sir, I've been meaning to ask," he said, "where's the box?" He waved a hand at the mounds of gifts covering the bedside table and noted, "It wasn't here when I woke up the next day."

There was a long moment of silence, in which Dumbledore looked at Harry with a troubled expression.

"The puzzle box has been confiscated by the Ministry of Magic," the headmaster finally revealed.

"*WHAT ?!*" roared Harry, sitting upright so suddenly that he almost toppled off the mattress.

"It had been classified as a dangerous artefact of unknown origin and purpose," elaborated Dumbledore calmly, but with a heavy tone underlying his words. Clearly he did not approve. "As such it has been handed over to the Department of Mysteries for study."

"Damn it, are they out of their minds?" demanded Harry, now highly agitated. "They could accidentally open it!"

"The possibility has occurred to me," agreed Dumbledore. He held up a hand to stave off Harry's oncoming tirade. "I have been working to have it returned to your possession as soon as possible."

"Hurry," urged Harry.

"I am," Dumbledore promised.

Now Dumbledore rose from his seat once again, this time without assuming his role as the headmaster of Hogwarts. He smiled warmly at Harry and his friends.

"There is still much work that requires my attention. Have a good day, all of you," he said, beginning to walk away from the group. He glanced at Harry as he passed the foot of his bed. "Harry, I shall speak to you again tomorrow."

"Goodbye, sir," said Harry. "And... thanks. For Sirius. For everything."

"My pleasure, dear boy. My pleasure," Dumbledore grinned broadly. Just as he reached the doors leading out of the infirmary, the headmaster paused and looked back at the six students. "Oh," he announced, "I would suggest you try your best to avoid Mister Filch for the immediate future."

"Why's that, sir?" asked Hermione curiously.

"It would appear that the house-elves are refusing to clean the Great Hall," explained Dumbledore. "When asked, they only state that it is a bad place, a dark place, which they will not enter. Understandably, Argus is somewhat aggrieved at having to do the job himself,"

"Um..." Harry understood that the house-elves must have been referring to the taint left behind in the Great Hall by the demons' presence. He offered a weak apology, "Sorry?"

"Quite all right, Harry," Dumbledore assured him with a smile. "In the end, it is but a small price to pay. Good day."

Dumbledore stepped outside, closing the infirmary doors behind him and leaving the three bedridden students alone with their three more ambulatory friends.

The six youngsters sat and talked easily amongst themselves, having developed a close friendship after fighting against the Death Eaters in the Department of Mysteries the previous year. A bond had formed between them that would likely last for their entire lives.

They spoke of light-hearted and unimportant things, steering away from the darker topics that had been part of Harry's discussion with the headmaster.

Ron was rhapsodising to Luna and Ginny about the first meal he intended to consume once he finally escaped the hospital wing. Hermione was asking Neville about the classes she had missed and seemed genuinely disappointed when he revealed that classes would not resume for another week. Harry simply sat back against his pillows and basked in the feeling of normalcy that washed over him.

The quintet's good cheer vanished like morning dew in front of a blast furnace when a familiar voice cleared its throat.

"Heh-hem!"

"Under-Secretary Umbridge," said Harry in a low voice.

"Mister Potter," greeted Umbridge as she stepped into the infirmary.

"What brings you here?" asked Harry with false politeness. "Business or pleasure?"

"Where you're concerned, Mister Potter, it will always be a matter of business," Umbridge replied, her bulging eyes narrowed as much as she could manage as she approached the group.

Ron had been busy glaring at Umbridge from the moment she stepped into the room, as had the other four of Harry's friends. None of them had forgotten, or forgiven, Umbridge's actions the previous year when she had been assigned by the Minister as their Defence Against the Dark Arts professor. The red-haired wizard, however, was the first to act upon his feelings of intense dislike.

Clicking his tongue, Ron made a series of clip-clopping noises; not unlike the sounds of hooves against hard soil. Umbridge jerked in fear for a moment before recovering and glaring furiously at him. Ron stared back insolently, challenge in his eyes.

"Mister Weasley," Umbridge ground out.

"Umbitch," replied Ron, using the bastardized version of her name, which the students preferred.

"Really!"

Harry interrupted before a full-blown fight, with curses and hexes, started between the two. It was not that he feared for Ron, he was sure his friend could out duel the Ministry official with one hand tied behind his back and using a broken wand as a weapon.

"Either tell us why you're here, or get out, Under-Secretary," he announced loudly, drawing Umbridge's attention away from Ron and back to Harry. "Though I doubt you'd understand why, you're not welcome and we'd prefer you not stay any longer than you had to."

"Fine," snapped Umbridge. She hurried over and sat down in the chair that Dumbledore had used earlier, settling her oversized handbag on her lap as she made herself comfortable.

She seemed quite at home, which surprised Harry. He, and most of the school, had long since been of the belief that Umbridge's natural habitat would be beneath a mouldy rock somewhat. Either that or at the bottom of a scum-filled pond.

"Well? What is it?" pressed Ron impatiently.

Umbridge glared at Ron again. He glared right back. With a disdainful sniff, Umbridge opened her handbag and pulled out something that caused Harry and his friends to jerk upright.

"Where did *you* get that?" he asked.

It was the Lament Configuration. It was not open, not yet, but Umbridge had clearly been working to solve its puzzle. Some of the panels had been shifted correctly and the first few notes of the music box's tune was playing softly.

"This was confiscated by Unspeakables from the Department of Mysteries," Umbridge explained. She gave Harry a suspicious look and said, "Apparently you used it to defeat He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named."

"Oh, so you're actually admitting that he was back, are you?" observed Hermione snidely.

Umbridge glared over her shoulder at Hermione for a second, before turning back to Harry. She continued to stare at him, much like the toad she reminded him of, and stated, "We want to know how it did that."

"So you're trying to open it," Harry concluded, his eyes still fixed on the box, as they had been from the moment Umbridge had removed it from her handbag.

"What's inside it?" asked Umbridge.

"Why should I tell you?" asked Harry in return. He looked up, finally meeting her gaze with a steely one of his own. His voice was dangerously low as he held out a hand. "That box is my property. I want it back. Give it to me."

"Don't be an idiot, Potter," sneered Umbridge, making sure to pull the puzzle box out of his reach. "This box contains a power that can't be left in the hands of an arrogant little brat like you."

"But it's perfectly safe with you, is that it?" asked Neville sarcastically.

"Exactly," Umbridge confirmed, either ignoring the sarcasm or missing it entirely. She glared at Harry, her eyes watering as she tried not to blink. "Now tell me how to open it."

"Sorry, can't help you," Harry replied with a shrug. "You have to do that for yourself."

"Tell me, damn you, or I'll--"

"Or you'll what, Umbitch?" interrupted Ginny. The red-haired witch was holding her drawn wand in clear view. "Threaten to use the Cruciatus Curse on us again?"

"If I have to," muttered Umbridge. "The secrets of this box are too great to risk losing."

Harry stared at her for a moment, thinking furiously though no sign of this showed on his face. He sat up slightly and leaned forward, a thin smile on his lips. "I can't show you how to open it," he said in a soft, almost mesmerising voice, "but I will give you a clue that'll help."

Hermione turned to look at him incredulously. "Harry?"

"I have to Hermione," Harry responded blandly, but with a dangerous intent beneath that blandness which only his friends were able to detect. "This is clearly for the good of all wizardkind. Especially our beloved Under-Secretary here."

"Right," agreed Ron, nodding in understanding. He smiled viciously at Umbridge. "Give her the clue, Harry."

"If she opens it, she deserves to see what's inside," concurred Ginny, also beginning to smile.

Seeing that Neville and Luna were also nodding in agreement, Hermione gave a small sigh before reluctantly giving her own consent to what Harry had planned. In fact, the more she thought about it, the better it sounded.

"Well... if it's for the greater good," she agreed.

Umbridge was getting excited at the possibility of finally opening the box. She leaned forward, clutching the box to her breast as she did. "Tell me!"

"It's all a question of desire," revealed Harry, still using a bland tone of voice. "The more you want to open the box, the more you desire to see what's inside... the easier it'll be."

"What nonsense is that?" demanded Umbridge, not understanding.

"Just the truth," replied Harry with a faint smile, one that then turned sour. "But you wouldn't know much about that, would you?"

He held up his hand, the one with the scars from Umbridge's Blood-Quill. Thin white lines still traced the words, "I will not tell lies," into his skin.

Umbridge's face pinched in anger as she stuffed the puzzle box back into her handbag and clambered to her feet, muttering curses about Harry and his friends under her breath as she did so. Without another word, she stormed out of the hospital wing, handbag clutched possessively in both hands.

"Under-Secretary!" called Harry as she was leaving.

Umbridge paused by the doors to the infirmary and looked back, over her shoulder, at Harry.

"Be sure to pass along my regards," he told her earnestly.

"I'll be sure to let the Minister know," Umbridge snidely assured him.

"Not Fudge," corrected Harry. "*Him*."

"Who?"

Harry smirked coldly, knowingly, and said only, "You'll see."

.oOo.

May 1st, 1997, Office of the Minister of Magic

Cornelius Fudge was sitting behind his desk, slumped lazily in his oversized chair. Opposite him was Dolores Umbridge, the Ministry's Under-Secretary. She was holding up a small, beautifully designed and intricately wrought puzzle box for his inspection.

The puzzle was partly completed and the box was well on its way to being opened. Its tune was playing softly, only missing a few notes here and there.

"I almost have it, Minister," Umbridge was saying eagerly. "Just a few more pieces."

"Excellent," said Fudge, leaning back even further into his plush leather seat. He raised his eyebrows a fraction and commented, "Though I'm

surprised it took you so long."

"It's harder than it looks," she defended her lack of progress.

"Which explains how Harry Potter was able to open and close it in a matter of seconds,"

"That boy..." Umbridge growled under her breath.

"Careful, Dolores," Fudge cautioned, holding up a finger. "That boy, as you put it, can currently do no wrong in the eyes of the public or the press. It would be a bad move to speak of him in such a manner. For now."

"Yes sir, but - ah!"

Umbridge had managed to find the next part of the puzzle, another panel sliding into place. The music box was almost open, only a single move away from being completed. The tune was playing almost fully now, soft and unassuming.

"We're almost there, Minister, I know it!" Umbridge enthused eagerly.

"Let me have a try," Fudge commanded, holding out a pre-emptory hand. "Perhaps I'll have better luck, or we might be kept waiting another week."

Still embarrassed by the face that it had taken her so long to get this far, Umbridge carefully handed the box over to Fudge. The Minister held it in his hands, as if it were very delicate, and examined it with unfettered amazement mixed with a healthy dose of awe.

"Such a small thing. So delicate and fragile," he observed as he turned the box over. "Yet hidden inside it is the power that destroyed You-Know-Who and all his Death Eaters."

"It was a good thing I got it away from Potter and Dumbledore when I did," commented Umbridge, trying to remind Fudge that it was her actions which had brought the puzzle box into their possession. "Who knows what they might have done with it."

"Yes, that was a smart move on your part," agreed Fudge.

Umbridge visibly swelled, almost glowing with satisfaction at this small bit of praise. Fudge ignored her and continued to examine the box, turning it this way and that. He ran his fingers over the many panels of its intricate filigree, hoping to find the last section that needed to be moved to complete the puzzle.

"Perhaps we *should* turn it over to the Unspeakable," he muttered, having had no success after several minutes of searching. "They'd probably have an easier time of it."

"It would be a dangerous risk - letting that box out of our hands," cautioned Umbridge.

"Maybe, but--" Fudge paused as his eyes lit up in triumph. "Ah ha!"

There was a soft click as the last part of the puzzle slid across and settled into place. The tune seemed to pick up, now a full melody, its completion heralding the activation of the box's final mechanism. Fudge practically dropped it onto his desk as the various panels and faces began to move of seemingly their own volition.

The ornate fireplace, by the plush couches Fudge kept in his office to use when entertaining important guests, sputtered and was extinguished in a rush of wind. The lights flickered and went out, leaving the office in near total darkness.

Somewhere, in the far distance, yet at the same time close by, a bell tolled.

"What the Hell?" asked Fudge, looking around in confusion.

The varnished wooden panels lining the office walls creaked and groaned, as if straining against some unknown force that was pushing against them. An unearthly blue light slowly appeared, waving and dancing across the floor, the walls and the ceiling. Though it seemed to be everywhere, the room's two occupants could not spot its source.

"Dolores, what's going on? What's happening?" demanded Fudge, his confusion beginning to give way to another emotion; that of fear.

"I - I don't know," confessed Umbridge, her voice filled with uncertainty.

"Is the box doing this? Is this its power?" Fudge wondered, looking down at his desk, where the puzzle box rested - light streaming out of one face as it continued to play.

Then, to Fudge and Umbridge's surprise, the door to the office swung inwards. However, instead of seeing the outside waiting room, all they could see was a brilliant light that poured into the office. They held up their hands to shield their eyes, squinting against the light until a shadow fell over them.

Lowering their hands, now that the light had been blocked, Fudge and Umbridge were startled to see a tall, dark and very imposing figure standing in the Minister's doorway. The light was shining brightly behind him, hiding his features in shadow. As if heralding this person's arrival, the bell tolled once again.

"Well, well, well," the figure intoned, the office walls seeming to groan at the sound of the deep, masculine voice. "Such a short wait this time. How

delightful."

The figure stepped into the room, emerging into the light more fully as the shadows seemed to slip away. His face was bone pale and hairless, scarred by deep slashes with inch-long pins driven into his skull at their intersections.

Displaying more intelligence than most would credit her, Umbridge literally jumped out of her seat and scurried around Fudge's desk, putting it between herself and the approaching figure. As he walked towards them, he looked around the room, taking in the office's decor, the fireplace, the chairs, the desk, Umbridge and the Minister. Utterly impassive.

"Ah, Cornelius," greeted Pinhead with a polite nod. "Dolores," he said, acknowledging Umbridge as she stood nervously at the Minister's side. "How good of you to call."

Pinhead came to a stop, standing right in front of the Minister's desk. He paused for a moment, then flicked the long tails of his garment up as he gracefully lowered himself into the chair Umbridge had just vacated. He sat there like a king, regal and stately despite his terrifying appearance.

"Who - who are you?" Fudge managed to ask. "How did you get in here?"

"The box," Pinhead replied. He motioned to the Lament Configuration, still on Fudge's desk. "You opened it. We came."

"We?" repeated Fudge a tad weakly.

The cold click of booted feet on stone, despite the fact the Fudge's office was fully carpeted, drew the Minister and Umbridge's attention back to the door. There, emerging from the light, just as Pinhead had done, were three figures that were every bit as terrifying as he who had preceded them.

One was a large man, his face smooth and rounded with rolls of fat. His skin was darker than his companions and gleamed with a sheen of sweat. His eyes were hidden behind large goggles with thick, opaque black lenses. Despite his formidable size, he moved with a preternatural grace and fluidity.

Slightly behind the fat man was a terribly disfigured creature that could only just be identified as having once been human. For the most part its body and limbs were untouched, save for the occasional hook driven into its flesh as part of its clothing. Its face, however, was little more than a single great mass of scar tissue, which covered its eyes and nose with utter totality. The final aspect of its features was its lipless mouth, baring its teeth in an endless grin.

The third new arrival had at one time been a woman, but was scarcely recognisable as one now. Her face had been left almost untouched and could almost have been considered beautiful, were it not for the pale complexion and complete lack of hair.

Beyond that, however, she was the most gruesome of the trio. Her throat had been slit and the sides of the wound pulled open and pinned in place. Her chest was occupied by a gaping hole, the result of Wormtail's desperate curse. Apparently she had decided to keep it. There had been a few improvements made to the wound, most notably Peter Pettigrew's severed head, which now filled her hollowed chest cavity.

Wormtail's eyelids had been wired open with tiny hooks, forcing him to never stop watching what was happening around him, and his mouth had been sewn shut with fine, but rusty chains. This had been imposed on him because of his tendency to scream mindlessly whenever the throatless woman tried to go about torturing damned souls.

The three demons moved to stand behind Pinhead, who remained seated and continued to stare impassively at the frightened witch and wizard opposite him.

"Who are you people?" asked Fudge in horror. "Why are you here?"

"Connoisseurs of experience," answered Pinhead each question in turn. "Here because you summoned us."

"Well, I bloody unsummon you!" blurted Fudge. He waved at the door to the office, still open and with the unholy light streaming through its doorway. "Get out, or I'll have a dozen Aurors here in a minute to arrest you!"

The Chatterer twittered excitedly, giving voice to its companions' silent amusement.

"A minute is all the time we need," commented the throatless woman.

"To take you back with us," elaborated the fat man.

Umbridge was suddenly struck by an epiphany. It was such a shock that she stumbled back, crashing back into the bookshelves lining the wall behind the Minister's desk. She was so fixated on the calmly waiting demons opposite her, that she did not even notice the books that toppled from their places and fell over her.

"He - he knew. He knew," she stuttered in realization. "Potter knew you'd come."

"Of course he did," replied Pinhead blandly.

He made a small motion with one hand, signalling his companions. The three demons began to round the desk, heading towards the now cowering Fudge and Umbridge with their inexorable relentlessness.

Remembering Harry Potter's last words to her, Umbridge managed to blurt out, "He sends his regards."

She seemed to be of the belief that passing this message along would spare her.

"Ah, Harry," said Pinhead, smiling fondly as Butterball and the Chatterer grabbed hold of Fudge, who struggled against their iron-grips, while Throatless took hold of Umbridge by the shoulder and led her towards the couches.

It seemed the man-wizard's destiny continued to involve the Lament Configuration, even if not on a personal level. This suited the grand figure sitting patiently before the Minister of Magic's desk just fine. He had a feeling that this was not the last time young Harry would solve a problem by employing the puzzle box.

Pinhead's nostalgic smile grew broader as screams of terror and pain filled the office.

"That's my boy."

Fin.

Afterword: Eighty-seven pages and nearly forty-thousand words long. As Ron would say; bloody hell (in this case, perhaps literally) that's a lot! Amazingly enough, I did it all in just a week as well. Inspired, I supposed. Or possessed, if you consider the subject matter.

Various excerpts have been borrowed from the books; *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* , *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* , *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* , *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* and *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* , and then duly adjusted to play out how I wanted them to.

The Cenobites (though I don't actually refer to them as such) are based on my interpretations their characters from the first two movies; *Hellraiser* , *Hellbound: Hellraiser II* , and the later sequels; *Hellraiser: Bloodline* and *Hellraiser: Hellseeker* .