

Something Grim This Way Comes

Title: Something Grim This Way Comes

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Summary: Harry is about to start his first year at Hogwarts. With him comes his cynical, somewhat unofficial (not to mention bent on world domination) girlfriend; Mandy. And they're also bringing their mutual best friend (i.e.: indentured servant) the Grim Reaper himself.

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"Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law.." - Mandy, The Grim Adventures of Billy and Mandy.

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September 1st, 1991

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A trio of highly unusual characters stood silently at the entrance to the train station at King's Cross. They exuded an aura of... well, such oddness that the bustling crowds of commuters unconsciously gave them a wide berth, most making a point of going out of their way to avoid coming too close.

On the left was Harry Potter, otherwise known to most of the magical world as the Boy-Who-Lived. Harry was possibly one of the most famous wizards alive, a fact he had learned a little over a month ago when his Hogwarts acceptance letter had arrived with the morning post.

He was dressed in faded and somewhat ragged jeans and an equally faded and ragged button-up shirt. While the clothes were, at the very least third, perhaps even fourth generation hand-me-downs, they did at least fit his slender frame reasonably well. It had been several years since his Aunt and Uncle had forced him to wear Dudley's old cast-offs; though they still refused to spend any money on buying Harry new clothes.

Brushing several stray locks of his untameable black hair out of his eyes, briefly exposing the lightning shaped scar that adorned his forehead, Harry adjusted his glasses and cast a glance to the right.

Immediately next to him was Harry's closest and dearest friend, Mandy Maxwell. Her blonde hair was cropped short, framing the gentle oval of her face and swept back and up in a fashion that gave the impression of a pair of horns. Her sharp eyes, so dark a shade of blue as to be almost black, scanned over the many boarding platforms arrayed before them.

She was wearing one of her favourite outfits; a pink sundress that ended just above her knees and fit snugly over her slender, almost boyish frame. Nestled between the slight swells of her prepubescent breasts was a large print of an overly bright yellow sunflower.

At first glance she appeared to be quite the cute, demure and innocent little girl. At first glance. But only at first glance. Those that knew her were well aware that Mandy was hardly demure and could never be described as innocent, though she might once have been (although that was only a rumour). Still, she *was* quite cute, at least when she was only wearing her perpetual scowl and not openly glaring at people.

"What was the platform number again?" she asked, her American accent still noticeable despite several years of living in England. Failing to receive a prompt answer, the slight scowl on Mandy's face deepened a fraction as she glanced to the third member of the trio and impatiently demanded, "Well?"

Standing behind the two eleven-year-olds, was a tall, quite thin, very dark and exceptionally ominous (at least to those that didn't know him) figure clad in a flowing black robe. A wicked looking scythe, its mirror finish gleaming and seeming to thrum with malevolent power, was clutched in a skeletal right hand. A bleached-white skull, with sharp cheeks and a very pronounced jaw, was visible within the blood-red shadows of the robe's hood.

This was none other than Death given form, the Grim Reaper himself, and Harry's second closest and dearest friend. Of course, if anyone asked Grim, he would launch into a loud and vehement denial of the possibility that he felt anything save utter loathing for both Harry and Mandy.

Grim's enforced friendship with the two mortal children had come about roughly three years earlier, shortly after Mandy's family had moved into

number five Privet Drive, on the opposite side of the street from the Dursleys. Grim had ripped open a dimensional portal into the blonde girl's room when he had come to reap the soul of her dog; the perpetually drooling (but aptly named) Saliva.

Unwilling to give up her pet's life without a fight, Mandy had challenged Grim to decide the dog's fate. If she and Harry were to lose, then Grim would claim Saliva (and Harry as well, despite his protests over Mandy including his soul as part of the bargain). In a moment of prideful arrogance, Grim had sweetened the deal by promising that if the two were to win, then he would be their best friend forever.

After all, he was the Grim Reaper, and he did not lose.

Especially in a limbo contest.

Yet lose he did, as Mandy proved to be better at cheating than Grim could ever hope to be. After all, Saliva did so enjoy burying bones and Grim (being a skeleton) had been a most convenient source of quite a number of bones to bury.

"Nine and tree-quarters," replied Grim, in a deep baritone voice and an oddly appropriate Jamaican accent.

"And where exactly is that?" asked Mandy pointedly.

"Why, tree-quarters of de way between platforms nine and ten, of course."

"Well, that's helpful," muttered Mandy, returning her gaze to the boarding platforms.

"Let's find platforms nine and ten, like Grim said," suggested Harry. "Nine and three-quarters is a magic platform, after all, so it's probably hidden away from normal people."

"Got a point there, Harry," agreed Mandy. "Come on."

The trio made their way further into the station, the crowds parting for them like a proverbial Red Sea. Harry and Mandy walked along, looking up and counting the platform numbers as they went. Grim, however, seemed to glide smoothly behind them, grumbling under his breath as he pushed the trolley carrying their school trunks.

Ordinarily Harry would have handled his trunk by himself, but when Mandy told you to do something, not even Death could put up much of an argument. And Mandy had long since decided that Grim would be responsible for all the more onerous tasks that she would prefer not to do herself. Harry had likewise long since given up trying to talk her out of having Grim do their chores for the both of them.

Besides which, he never got tired of the looks on the Dursleys' faces whenever they were in the same room as Grim.

Even now, nearly three years later, his family were only just beginning to recover from their first encounter with Grim. Aunt Petunia still referred to the incident as her 'skeleton episode', wherein she had suffered from a nervous breakdown after walking in on Grim while the skeleton had been showering. She had spent several months convalescing at Aunt Marge's house, whereupon she returned only to find that Grim had moved in with them.

For that matter, the Dursleys were still recovering from meeting Mandy for the first time. She had introduced herself to the other children of Privet Drive during a game of Harry Hunting, wherein she reduced Dudley to tears with only a few well-chosen words. After that, for whatever reason, she decided Harry was the one person in the neighbourhood least likely to annoy her and thus spent most of her time with him.

She had been less than impressed with him at first, mostly because of the greatly oversized clothes he had been forced to wear. Upon learning that they were Dudley's cast-offs, and that he was actually related to the blubbery boy, she had been even less impressed. When it was revealed that Harry lived in the cupboard under the stairs, she decided to do something about it.

Harry never found out what she said, and she never told him, but that same day Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon had moved him out of the cupboard and upstairs into the second bedroom. They also disposed of Dudley's old clothes and actually bought him some appropriately sized clothing, even if they were the cheapest to be found in the thrift shop.

"Platform nine," announced Mandy before looking at the next platform over, "and platform ten."

"Do you see anything?" asked Harry, looking around in hopes of finding the entrance to the elusive platform that was listed on the ticket that had been included in his Hogwarts letter.

"Nope," Mandy shook her head. "You?"

"Nothing," Harry glanced at Grim, who had stopped behind them. "Grim, what about you?"

"Give me a moment to catch my breath," replied the skeleton.

"You don't have lungs," observed Mandy.

"So?"

"So, you don't have any breath to catch, Bonehead."

"True," mused Grim. "Let's have a look den."

Before Grim could do just that the trio were nearly bowled over by what, at first glance, appeared to be a small horde of stampeding redheads. There were four boys and a girl, being led by a plump matron that was mumbling under her breath about the profusion of 'Muggles' cluttering up the station.

Harry and Mandy exchanged a look before following after the red-haired family, Grim trailing behind them. They caught up with them just in time to hear the mother confirm their suspicions by asking, "Now, what's the platform number?"

"Nine and three-quarters!" answered the girl, who seemed about a year or so younger than Harry and Mandy. "Mum, can't I go..."

"You're not old enough, Ginny, now be quiet," interrupted the plump woman. "All right, Percy, you go first."

Percy, the oldest looking of the four boys, marched towards the brick wall that separated platforms nine and ten. A sudden crowd of tourists hurried past and by the time they were gone, Percy had vanished from sight.

"Interesting," said Mandy blandly. She and Harry were both accustomed to displays of magic and other supernatural powers. Being best friends with Grim meant that such things were an almost daily occurrence. In such a situation a person either adapted, and got used to the idea very quickly, or they had a nervous breakdown.

Indeed, the two children were so inured to the idea of magic that the truth of Harry being a wizard barely fazed them. It had taken some doing, mostly thanks to Grim looming menacingly in the background, but eventually Aunt Petunia had given an abridged explanation of the deaths of Lily and James Potter and how Harry had come to be placed in the Dursley household.

Getting the rest of the story had been a tad more difficult, but Grim had managed to fill in the gaps. Being a veritable fountain of arcane knowledge, Grim had told them about the hidden world of magic. Hogwarts, the Ministry, Diagon Alley, Gringotts and all the rest.

Then he had gone into detail about the happenings of Halloween night, 1981.

A maniacal dark lord, who was apparently so scary that almost nobody could even manage to say his name, had been on a killing spree that had actually managed to leave Grim feeling overworked. To make things worse the lunatic had somehow managed to give Grim the slip when baby Harry had blown him up.

Upon learning these details, Mandy had ordered Grim to change her from a normal person into a witch. Her reasoning for making such a change was that her conquest of the world would be much easier to achieve with some magical powers backing her up.

Neither Harry, nor Grim, could tell if she was joking or not.

Unable to think up a good enough reason not to try, Grim delved into his chest of goodies and eventually found what they were looking for in an old recipe book of his grandmother's. Recalling several past disasters brought about by the use of various other items from the chest, Harry was sceptical about its chances of success, but Mandy had tried it anyways.

The next morning she gave an incautious Dudley a pig's tail, nose and ears.

"Fred, you're next," said the mother, directing her attention to her next child.

Fred graced his mother with an aggravated expression. "I'm not Fred, I'm George," he told her, sighing deeply in a put upon manner. "Honestly, woman, call yourself our mother? Can't you tell I'm George?"

"Sorry, George, dear," apologised the mother, waving for her son to proceed through the illusionary wall.

Fred manoeuvred himself into position, waiting till the coast was clear of spectators and then said, "Only joking, I am Fred," before pushing his trunk laden trolley into and through the wall. A moment after he disappeared from view he was followed by his twin brother, the aforementioned George.

"Excuse me... excuse me!" called Harry, wanting to catch the plump woman's attention before they all disappeared.

"Hullo, dears," she greeted as Harry and Mandy walked up to her. "First time at Hogwarts? Ron's new too." Ron, the last and youngest of her sons, gave them a nervous grin as his mother pointed him out.

"Yes," said Harry. "The thing is --"

"How do we get on to the platform?" asked Mandy, cutting straight to the point.

The woman gave a surprised blink at the blonde girl's directness, but quickly recovered and gave them a kindly smile as she began explain. "Not to worry," she said. "All you have to do is walk straight at the barrier between platforms nine and ten. Best do it at a bit of a run if you're nervous."

Harry and Mandy turned to stare at the wall dividing the platforms. It looked solid. They turned back to the plump woman, who continued to beam pleasantly at them. They then leaned in to each other to have a whispered conference.

"What d'you think?" asked Harry.

"I think these magical folk are touched in the head," replied Mandy.

"Well, she did send three of her children through, so it must be safe."

"Maybe."

"Want me to go first?" Harry offered valiantly.

"No, better we use someone..." Mandy shifted her gaze towards Grim, "expendable."

The two children's companion was standing a short distance away, propped up against the trolley he had been pushing and wearing an expression that was both tired and bored.

"Oh, Grim," called Mandy.

"What?" asked Grim warily.

"You go first," Mandy commanded flatly.

"What?!"

"Oh, come now, dear," said the plump woman, who directed her attention to Grim. She had apparently failed to notice him before now. Her voice trailed off, however, as she registered exactly what she was looking at. "It's nothing to... get... excited..."

Grim turned to the red-haired woman, planning to thank her for the offer of assistance, even though he did not need such. This gave the plump witch a clear view of his bleached white skull, surrounded by a halo of blood-red shadow within the blackness of his hood. He then made the mistake of gracing her with a benevolent smile.

"Tank you, ma'am--"

"A DEATH EATER!!" shrieked the woman, sweeping her arms out to grab her two remaining children and drag them behind her, so that she might shield them from Grim's presence with her own body. "RON, GINNY, STAY BEHIND ME!!"

"Well, no, not really," rumbled Grim slowly, put out by her reactions but at the same time resigned to it. "Actually, ma'am, I am de Grim--"

"DEATH EATER!!" the woman screamed again, this time drawing her wand from within the folds of her robe. "Stay back, or else," she threatened, holding her wand up and aiming directly between Grim's empty eye-sockets. "I'm warning you, stay back or I'll hex!"

"Madam," Grim put his hands on his hips indignantly, "I am not--"

"*Expelliarmus!*"

With a flash of red light the curse slammed into Grim, impacting solidly against his brow and knocking his skull clean off of his neck. It clattered to the ground, several feet away from his body, rolling along a few times before settling.

"Here now!" protested Grim, "Dat was uncalled for!"

The plump woman looked in horror at Grim's disembodied skull and then at his body. The rest of Grim's skeleton had by now dropped onto its hands and knees as it fumbled blindly about, searching for its missing head.

"Gross," gagged the redheaded boy, Ron, who was peeking out from behind his mother.

"Ah, dere we are," said Grim as his hands found his skull and picked him up. With several deft, and well practiced twists, Grim refastened his skull to his neck. "Now, dat's better."

"An Ineri," breathed the woman. She shook herself out of her shock and stood straighter, taking aim once again with her wand, this time aiming for Grim's ribcage rather than his skull. "Undead monstrosity!" she snarled, looking and sounding remarkably reminiscent of a sabre-toothed tiger.

"Stay away from my family! *Incendio!*"

The spell rocketed towards Grim as little more than a blur. Grim was prepared this time, or at least more so than he had been with the first spell, and managed to partially duck out of the way. The spell still managed to catch the trailing hem of his black robes, setting them ablaze with astonishing swiftness.

"Ah! I'm on fire! Help!"

"Beast! *Incendio! Reducto!*"

"Ow!" cried Grim as he ducked the first spell, only to be struck by the second. He was blown backwards through the air, his left arm and several ribs scattering about as he did so. His flight ended abruptly as he collided with a loud crash against the train currently waiting at platform nine. "Ma'am, please! Ouch!"

"Should we try to stop her?" Harry asked his companion.

"Why?" retorted Mandy, her eyes not leaving the one-side fight for a second. "I haven't seen anything this funny since General Skarr moved next door to you and tried to steal Grim's scythe."

"What about that time Dudley convinced Grim to help arrange a secret surprise birthday party for you, five months before your birthday?"

"That wasn't funny, that was pitiful."

"Dudley or Grim?"

"Both."

"Aaaaaah!"

At this point the plump woman had finally scored a direct hit against Grim, catching him dead centre and literally blowing the skeleton to pieces. Assorted bones rained about, like pins scattering before a bowling ball. By chance, Grim's skull rolled across the platform floor until it bumped into Mandy's shoe.

"Alas, poor Grim!" proclaimed Mandy, picking up Grim's skull and holding it in one hand.

"Oh, ha ha, very funny," muttered Grim.

"I thought so."

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Albus Dumbledore was feeling particularly apprehensive at the moment. In truth, he had been suffering from a particularly bad case of what he described as 'Encroaching Doom Syndrome' for the past three years. It was characterised by the feeling that something was terribly wrong and that vast quantities of death and destruction would be the end result.

That feeling had been growing more and more prominent with each passing day and was now at the point where the headmaster had contacted his solicitor earlier that morning and arranged to update his will.

He simply could not think of a reason for such feelings of apprehension.

Admittedly, yes, Gringotts had been broken into and the Philosopher's Stone nearly stolen - no doubt by Voldemort. Luckily Dumbledore had managed to arrange for Hagrid to collect the Stone and bring it to Hogwarts. Even then though, things were occurring that were decidedly... odd.

The school's newest Defence Against the Dark Arts professor, Quentin Quirrell, was proving to be a stuttering, nervous wreck. The man practically jumped at his own shadow and had actually fainted from fright when he had first been introduced to Professor Snape.

Then there had been the matter of Harry Potter's acceptance letter. A note acknowledging receipt of his Hogwarts letter had been delivered to Professor McGonagall several days later by a beautiful snowy white owl.

While this in itself was not particularly odd, Dumbledore had expected Harry's guardians, the Dursleys, to put up at least a small bit of token resistance to the idea. He had even planned to send Hagrid to hand deliver a letter, if need be. Yet, there had been no trouble, no fuss, whatsoever.

And this had only been the beginning.

Since returning from his trip to Gringotts, Hagrid had reported that the Thestral herd, used to draw the carriages to and from Hogsmeade, had been acting increasingly restless. Indeed the massive groundsman had delivered that report nursing a plethora of minor injuries, as well as several cracked ribs - much to Madam Pomfrey's displeasure.

Fawkes, Dumbledore's phoenix, had for some incomprehensible reason undergone five burning days in the past month and had been doing so more and more fiercely with each occurrence. The last time Fawkes had actually managed to melt his perch into a lump of misshapen metal, despite the stand having been specially charmed to withstand the intense heat of a phoenix's death and rebirth.

The ghosts were also acting in a restless manner, flitting about the castle in tight-knit groups and holding whispered conversations that immediately ended whenever one of the living passed by. Carefully worded and subtly made inquiries had yielded nothing save the fact that the ghosts appeared to be afraid of something...

Dumbledore was brought out of his musings by what sounded like a series of explosions and frantic bellows.

"Come back here, you mother lode of supernatural terror!"

"No! No! Stay away! Somebody, anybody, help!"

"Stop running and face your end, foul creature!"

"No! Please! I'm not a demon! I'm not possessed!"

"Liar!"

From the sound of it, Professor Quirrell was fleeing for his life from an uninvited lunatic of some sort, or he was having another panic attack for whatever reason. Or maybe even both, with the former being the cause for the latter.

Either way, Dumbledore decided to descend from his office and see what all the fuss was about.

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"You kids will be de death of me!"

Harry and Mandy ignored Grim's whinging as they settled into the empty compartment they had located aboard the Hogwarts Express. It was not that they were insensitive to what he had to say, at least Harry wasn't, but the fact that Grim had made a similar proclamation at least once a day since meeting them somewhat dimmed their attention to his complaints.

"Never in my whole life, have I been treated in such a manner," continued Grim as he reattached his left shin bone to his left knee bone. This in turn was duly attached to his left thigh bone and so on and so forth. "At least not until I met de two of you!"

"Quit griping," commanded Mandy. "We did help pick up your pieces, didn't we?"

"Only after letting dat crazy woman blow me to bits," he grumbled back, now working on his right leg bones.

The train had only just left the station when the door to the group's compartment slid open without warning, and the youngest of the four red-haired boys that they had seen earlier, Ron, made his way inside.

"D'you mind if I sit here with you?" he asked, pointing at the open space next to Grim. "Everywhere else is full."

Harry silently gestured for Ron to take the seat and the boy sat down. He glanced uncertainly at both Mandy and Grim, taking several extra seconds inspecting the battered and still grumbling black-robed skeleton. Finally he turned back to Harry and blurted, "Are you really Harry Potter?"

"Yes," answered Harry.

"You mean Fred and George weren't putting me on?" asked Ron, sounding amazed by that fact. He pointed to Harry's forehead and asked, "And have you really got - you know..."

Harry obligingly brushed his hair aside, revealing his infamous lightning-shaped scar.

"Woah," Ron breathed in wide-eyed awe. After a few moments of gaping he managed to shake it off and gave a grin as he introduced himself. "I'm Ron, by the way. Ron Weasley."

Shaking Ron's hand, Harry introduced his companions. He began with the only other living person present in the compartment. "This is my friend Mandy Maxwell," he said, with a wave at the blonde-haired girl beside him.

"Pleased to meet you," said Ron, holding out a hand.

Mandy regarded Ron's outstretched hand and then levelled a frigid scowl in his direction. Ron almost literally withered under the glare. Finally she said, "Charmed," sounding anything but, and turned back to staring out the window at the passing landscape.

Ron looked uncertainly at Mandy and then leaned close to Harry.

"Er, is she usually like that?" he whispered.

"Not really," Harry readily admitted. "She's not usually so polite."

"That was polite?" asked Ron, incredulous.

"For Mandy," confirmed Harry. He then turned to Grim, who had been sitting quietly next to Ron and concentrating on the last few bones he had to reattach to himself. Harry began to introduce him to Ron, but hesitated as he couldn't quite think of how to go about it. "And this is, uh..."

"I believe your mom's already met Grim," observed Mandy dryly.

"Lunatic woman," grumbled Grim, rubbing a rueful hand over his battered skull.

"Uh, yeah," sputtered Ron. "Pleased to meet you."

Grim arched an incredulous eyebrow, something of an accomplishment considering his face was nothing more than bare bone, and observed, "Dat will a first."

Ron graced Grim with a look that was even more uncertain than the one he had give Mandy earlier. Once again he leaned in close to Harry, this time asking, "He's not going to steal my soul, is he?"

"No," Harry grinned.

"That's my job," said Mandy blandly.

"She's joking... right?" asked a suddenly very nervous Ron.

Harry knew that Mandy actually was joking and this was only an example of her rather peculiar sense of humour. Or at least an example of her mile-

wide sadistic streak. In point of fact the two did tend to overlap. This time, for some reason, he decided to play along.

"Of course she is... maybe," he said.

"Well," commented Grim eagerly, "if she doesn't, den I get second dibs."

Ron was looking about ready to make a run for it. Indeed, beads of nervous sweat were already dotting his upper lip and forehead. He was also frequently casting anxious glances from Grim and Mandy towards the compartment door, clearly trying to gauge if he would be able to make it.

"Relax boy," suggested Grim, "or you'll do yourself an injury."

"Hee hee," Ron giggled with a slightly hysterical edge.

"Please excuse Grim," said Mandy. "He has an inferiority complex and likes to scare people in a futile attempt to make himself feel superior. It never works, because he really is inferior."

"Hey!"

"We're just pulling your leg, Ron, don't worry about it," Harry assured him.

Ron began to settle down, but suddenly it seemed to dawn on him that he was actually sitting next to Grim. It was almost possible to see the light bulb pop into being above his head when this happened. Harry and Mandy simply sat back to watch and see how he handled the situation.

Mandy shifted closer to Harry and whispered, "I bet he starts panicking again."

Harry shook his head and replied, "Not if he's anything like his mother."

In the meanwhile, Ron had managed to gather his wits and now turned brightly towards Grim, who was also watching the redhead with some interest.

"So... you're the Grim Reaper, huh?"

"Yes."

"Wicked."

"Are all your family wizards?" asked Harry, which directed the following conversation along the lines of family, of which Ron seemed to have an inordinate amount. Five brothers, all older than him, and one younger sister. Harry could scarcely imagine having a single sibling, let alone half a dozen.

Talk in the compartment centred around family for several minutes; Harry giving a general idea of his life with the Dursleys, something that had improved dramatically since Mandy and Grim's arrivals. Ron seemed unwilling to believe that the famous Boy-Who-Lived could ever be mistreated by anyone, but Harry persisted until the redhead was convinced.

Mandy and Grim likewise gave accounts of their families, though compared to Grim's Mama and Auntie, Mandy's parents seemed incredibly dull and where thus only mentioned in passing.

Pets became the next subject of discussion as Harry and Mandy related how Grim's attempt to reap Saliva had lead to his eventual entrapment (though that was not the word they used) as their friend. As dogs were not permitted at Hogwarts, the cause of Grim's relationship with the two children had remained at Privet Drive, being looked after by Mandy's folks.

Hedwig, the snowy owl which Mandy and Grim had given to Harry as a birthday present when the trio had visited Diagon Alley for the first time, was flying ahead to Hogwarts. Harry disliked the idea of locking such a magnificent bird in a cage for the duration of the trip, so preferred to allow her to make the journey north on her own.

Ron, much to his obvious embarrassment, was only able to produce a motley looking rat for a pet. Scabbers, who seemed to almost die of fright upon spotting Grim, had apparently been with the Weasley family for nearly a decade. Harry and Mandy thought it odd for a rat to live so long, but Grim confirmed that magical creatures did tend to have longer lifespans. Of course, the idea of a magical rodent was a bit odd, but they trusted Grim to know what he was talking about.

"I got the useless lump from Percy," said Ron, holding the sleeping rat up by his tail.

"Why's that?" asked Harry, wondering how any animal could sleep through that.

"He got an owl from my dad for being made a Prefect," explained Ron, though it sounded more like a complaint, "but they couldn't aff-- I mean, so they gave him to me now."

They were interrupted shortly after twelve by a smiling, dimpled woman with a trolley stacked high with assorted sweets and wizarding snacks. Harry, who willingly admitted to having a sweet tooth, bought a little of everything. The only item he did not buy any samples of were the Liquorice Wands, which Mandy hinted as affecting male virility. Harry wasn't quite sure what that involved, but decided against risking.

There was a knock on the compartment door a short while later. A round-faced boy stuck his head in and asked, "Sorry, but have you seen a toad at all?" Receiving shakes of the head from all four occupants, the boy wailed, "I've lost him! He keeps getting away from me!"

"He'll turn up," said Harry, trying to cheer the boy up.

"Yes. Well, if you see him..." agreed the boy before he left.

"Don't know why he's so bothered," wondered Ron. "If I'd brought a toad, I'd want to lose it as quick as I could. Mind you, I brought Scabbers, so I can't talk."

Scabbers, having roused himself long enough to steal and dine upon a Chocolate Frog, was once again snoring on Ron's lap.

"He might have died and you wouldn't know the difference," said Ron in disgust.

"I would," said Grim.

Slightly unnerved by this comment, but hiding it relatively well, Ron continued, "I tried to turn him yellow yesterday, to make him more interesting, but the spell didn't work."

"A yellow rat," mused Mandy. "Now there's an idea."

"I'll show you," said Ron, "look..."

Ron set Scabbers down on the space next to him and then fumbled about in search of his wand. It was a battered looking thing and seemed ready to snap at the slightest jostle, but Ron held it up with a flourish as he prepared to cast the spell.

He was interrupted, however, before he could even begin the incantation. The compartment door swung open and a young witch with bushy brown hair, larger than usual front teeth and a bossy sort of voice leaned inside. "Has anyone seen a toad?" she asked, "Neville's lost one."

"No toads in here, I'm afraid," answered Harry.

"Oh, well, sorry for--" She broke off when she saw that Ron had his wand out. She stepped fully into their compartment and looked at the redhead, and the still slumbering Scabbers, with interest. "Oh, are you doing magic? Let's see it, then."

"Er..." was all Ron could manage, taken aback by her forwardness.

"I tink what de boy is saying--"

Grim was cut off by a loud squeak when the girl took proper notice of him. She jumped back, obviously trying to flee the compartment, but banged up against the door, which had slid shut after she had entered.

"Relax," Harry told her. "Don't worry," he said, trying to forestall the imminent panic attack that usually set in when most people encountered Grim for the first time. "Grim won't hurt you - he's perfectly harmless."

"Says you," grumbled Grim.

"That's..."

"Grim," supplied Mandy.

"The Grim Reaper," said the girl breathlessly. "The Grim Reaper's sitting right here..."

"Easy there," soothed Harry.

"Easy? Easy?!" the girl repeated, looking at Harry incredulously. She stabbed a finger at Grim and asked, "That's DEATH sitting there opposite you and you want me to be easy?!"

"Well, yeah," said Harry, as if it were nothing out of the ordinary.

"How can you expect that?" demanded the girl.

"He's one of my best friends," explained Harry patiently. Deciding that a distraction might be in order, he introduced himself. "I'm Harry, by the way, Harry Potter."

The girl stared dumbly at Harry, not really comprehending what he was saying. She looked from him to Grim and back several times, the idea that the two were friends obviously not sinking in properly.

Uncertainly she asked, "You're friends with the Grim Reaper?"

"Pretty much," Harry confirmed.

"Dey forced me into it," protested Grim.

"I don't believe it," muttered the girl.

"Why not?" asked Mandy, arching a wry eyebrow. "It can't be any more unbelievable than magic."

"Well, yes, I suppose so," agreed the girl, starting to nod. She then began to talk at a rapid pace, apparently forgetting Grim's presence in the process. "Nobody in my family's magic at all, it was ever such a surprise when I got my letter, but I was ever so pleased, of course, I mean, Hogwarts is the very best school of witchcraft there is, I've heard - I've learnt all our set books off by heart, of course, I just hope it'll be enough - I'm Hermione Granger, by the way, who're you?"

Seeing that Mandy, Grim and Ron were all looking at Hermione in surprise, most likely because of her runaway speech which had been made without any pause for breath, Harry decided to make proper introductions.

"I'm Harry," he repeated "and this is my other best friend; Mandy," he wave a hand to indicate Mandy. He then motioned at the seats opposite him. "You obviously recognised Grim, or at least know of him, and this is Ron."

"Hi," waved Ron timidly, uncertain of what to make of the bushy-haired girl.

Hermione, however, had by now taken proper note of Harry's name and reacted accordingly.

"You're Harry Potter? Really?" she asked. "I know all about you, of course - I got a few extra books for background reading, and you're in at least three of them, mostly the historical ones, of course."

"I am?" asked Harry.

"He is?" asked Mandy.

"Goodness, didn't you know, I'd have found out everything I could if it were me--"

"Take a breath, girl," Grim interrupted, "or you'll suffocate and den we'll be on much more personal speaking terms."

"Eep!" squeaked Hermione, once again going pale and backing into the compartment door.

"Grim," chastised Harry. "Stop scaring everyone we come across."

"I can't help it," said the skeleton, "it in my nature."

Harry turned to Hermione, who was eyeing Grim uneasily, and reassured her. "Don't worry about Grim, he just likes scaring people for no reason. He won't hurt you."

Mandy gave a sharp nod and added, "Not if he knows what's good for him."

"He's our friend," repeated Harry.

"How did that happened?" Hermione finally asked.

"Have a seat," offered Harry, pointing out the empty space next to himself and Mandy. "It's a bit of a long story, so I think you'll want to sit down for it."

.oOo.

"I can't believe it," said Hermione incredulously an hour or so later, shaking her head at Harry. "You actually threw your own *cousin* into an inter-dimensional portal?"

"Couldn't be helped, he'd swallowed de book," said Grim with a shrug.

They were referring to an incident early in Grim's stay at number four, when Dudley had gotten his hands on one of Grim's older tomes; *The Bad Book*, the official illustrated handbook to the underworld, and managed to unleash all manner of trouble - namely a strange inter-dimensional being by the name of Yog Sothoth.

Nobody really understood why Dudley had done this. For that matter, none of them knew how or why Dudley got involved in any of their little adventures. He might have been imbecilic, but he was also positively terrified of Grim - who ranked only slightly lower than Mandy when it came to Dudley's list of people to avoid.

"Besides, it wasn't me who pushed him in," Harry defended himself. "It was Mandy."

"Hey, it worked," was all Mandy said.

"Pity it spat him back out," mused Grim.

"How can you say that?" asked Hermione, looking horrified at such callousness.

"If you ever meet Dudley, you'll understand," explained Harry dryly.

The group's reminiscing over some of Harry, Mandy and Grim's adventures was interrupted when the door to the compartment slid open once again.

"We're certainly popular today," commented Mandy.

Their latest visitor was a young wizard, about their age, with pale skin, a pointed face and platinum blonde hair. He was flanked on either side by what appeared to be a pair of troglodytes in human clothes.

"Is it true?" the blonde boy demanded a tad pompously. "They're saying all down the train that Harry Potter's in this compartment. So it's you, is it?"

"Yes," answered Harry absently. He was more interested in the two lunks than the pale-faced boy. He had never seen such throwbacks before. Even Dudley seemed civilised by comparison, albeit not by very much. Darwin, he concluded, would have been delighted to meet them, as being proof of the existence of a Missing Link.

"Oh, this is Crabbe and this is Goyle," introduced the boy, having noticed Harry's examination of his companions. He then assumed a lofty expression and continued, "And my name's Malfoy, Draco Malfoy."

The situation, already tenuous, promptly deteriorated from there on, mostly as Ron and the newly introduced Draco began a verbal confrontation. Apparently something of an unofficial feud existed between the Weasleys and the Malfoys, with Ron's dad trying to link Draco's dad to various dark activities. The elder Malfoy used his money and influence to deftly avoid the accusations, all the while making disdainful references to the Weasley's lack of material wealth.

Things did not improve when Draco discovered that both Mandy and Hermione were Muggleborn students and not, as he phrased it, proper pure-blooded witches. For some strange reason, Draco did not take much notice of Grim, who was quietly watching proceedings with interest.

"You'll soon find out some wizarding families are much better than others, Potter," Draco assured him smugly. "You don't want to go making friends with the wrong sort. I can help you there."

Draco held out his hand in offering. Harry regarded it in much the same manner he would a venomous serpent.

"I think I can tell who the wrong sort are for myself, thanks," he replied.

"I'd be careful if I were you, Potter," Draco hissed, his cheeks pink as he blushed with anger at Harry's rebuffal. He retracted his proffered hand, his expression turning ugly. "Unless you're a bit politer, you'll go the same way as your parents. They didn't know what was good for them either."

Harry really did not like it when people insulted his parents, even if he had never really known them.

"Grim," he said blandly, rising to his feet but not turning his glare away from Draco.

"What?"

"Lend me your scythe for a minute..."

"Oh no," Grim raised a finger and wagged it back and forth in a negative manner. "Remember what happened de last time? Halloween wit Jack O' Lantern and all o' dem pumpkins?"

"Fine," grumbled Mandy impatiently as she finally stood up from her seat. She put a hand on Harry's shoulder and gently nudged him out of her way as she moved to confront Draco. As she stepped past, she told him, "I'll handle them, Harry."

Draco gave a derisive snort and asked, "Why am I not surprised Potter's hiding behind his little mudblood girlfriend?"

"Don't call her that!" snapped Harry. He did not know was a 'mudblood' was, but could tell that is was not a term to be mentioned in polite company.

"Defending her honour, are you?" asked Draco. He looked Mandy over and sneered, "I guess love truly is blind."

"Love is for the weak-minded," countered Mandy. She then took two quick steps forward and imbedded her shin into Draco's crotch. All of the males, even Grim, winced in sympathy as the blow landed.

Draco turned a shade of pale that was as white as Grim's bones, before turning a livid red and then a pale shade of green as he clutched his injured privates. With a pitiful whimper he collapsed into a foetal ball on the compartment floor, unassisted by Crabbe and Goyle, who could only watch dumbly.

Ron, hands protectively covering his own groin, swallowed convulsively. "Wow, she's... evil."

"You have no idea," muttered Grim.

Mandy calmly returned to her seat, giving no indication at all that Draco's current agony was the result of her actions. Harry joined her a moment later, resuming his place between her and Hermione.

"Thanks," he said.

"No problem."

"Don't you think that might have been a little excessive?" asked Hermione, eyeing the curled up Draco with worry.

"No," replied Mandy.

"But you could've seriously injured him!"

"That was the idea."

"Yeah," agreed Ron. "Quit complaining about it."

"But--"

Hermione was cut off by a voice from behind Crabbe and Goyle, "Excuse me, but could you get out of my way?"

Crabbe and Goyle dutifully stepped aside, grabbing hold of a shivering Draco as they did so and dragging him out of the way as well. The blonde boy did seem to be starting on the road to recovery, but was still taking deep gulps of air between his sobs and was wearing an expression of pure suffering.

The latest visitor to the compartment, which was starting to get a little crowded, was revealed as he stepped fully inside. Initial impressions were that he bore a startling resemblance to Harry, although with sharper features, predominantly black clothes and an unnerving green glow illuminating his glasses from behind.

"Harry! Hell--" the newcomer greeted with a smile, one which suddenly became much less enthusiastic when he noticed Grim and Mandy, "--oh, you're here as well..."

"You... you know them?" Draco managed to gasp out.

"He's my cousin," Harry said by way of explanation.

"Nergal Junior," intoned Mandy.

Nergal was a powerful, yet lonely being from the fiery centre of the earth's core. Harry and Mandy had first encountered him when he decided to kidnap them to be his friend forever. Grim had initially been delighted, but had eventually come to their rescue, claiming that he was saving them only so that he could eat them later.

The group had encountered the shadowy Nergal on several other occasions that finally came to a conclusion, of sorts, on Valentine's Day, two years ago. Feeling exceptionally depressed by his perpetual lack of friends, Nergal had decided, for some incomprehensible reason, to woo none other than Marge Dursley. Oddly enough, they actually got along and a whirlwind romance followed, despite Vernon and Dudley's attempts to prevent it.

Shortly thereafter the blissfully happy newlyweds (everyone else still shuddered at the thought) somehow managed to have Junior. Taking into account the nature of his father, nobody bothered to question the shortness of the pregnancy, or why a boy who wasn't even two years old yet appeared much the same age his cousins and Mandy.

Oddly enough Junior got along fairly well with Harry, despite their not being actual blood relatives. This might have had something to do with the fact that Junior was properly disgusted by Dudley, his true blood cousin. That and Dudley had screamed like a newborn when he first Junior's natural form - which even Harry had to admit was enough to turn anybody's stomach.

While the pair might have been somewhat amiable, Junior's relationship with Grim and Mandy was slightly less than friendly, more than likely due to the fact that Mandy once decapitated Junior's teddy bear, Mister Bonkers.

"Nergal?" repeated Malfoy snidely. He was still breathing heavily, but could now more-or-less stand on his own with only minimal support from Crabbe and Goyle. "What kind of name is Nergal?"

"It's my father's name," muttered Junior, eyes narrowing dangerously. Before Draco could retort, Junior lashed out with one hand and grabbed the blonde by the throat. As he hoisted the other boy into the air, a dozen thin, black tentacles emerged from his back, writhing about in agitation. "It's the name of someone a lot more dangerous than you."

Crabbe and Goyle tried to move to help Draco, but were each gripped in the hold of one of Junior's tentacles, which wrapped around their thick waists. Without any effort, Junior lifted them up and briefly electrocuted them. Green energy crackled over their bodies for several seconds before he tossed them, none too gently, out of the compartment.

With the immediate threat removed, Junior turned back to Draco, who was struggling weakly in his grip.

"Junior," cautioned Harry.

"What?"

"You're not allowed to kill the other students."

"Why?"

"Because those are the rules."

"Well," Junior glared hatefully at Draco, his eyes glowing an unearthly green, "maybe I want to be a rule breaker."

"But that's not right!" exclaimed Hermione, more outraged by the fact that Junior had no qualms about breaking rules than by the fact that he was

strangling Draco. Junior merely gave her an incredulous stare. So for that matter, did Ron. Feeling the need for help, she turned to Harry and Mandy. "Stop him!"

"Actually, I was kinda hoping he'd hurry up," replied Mandy.

"With pleasure," said Junior, grinning maliciously.

"Harry!" Hermione pressured.

"Junior..."

"Spoilsport," Mandy muttered in a soft aside to Harry.

"Come on, Harry, he deserves it," pleaded Junior.

"Maybe," acquiesced Harry, "but it's not his time."

"How d'you know?"

Harry cocked a thumb at Grim, sitting on the other side of the compartment, and observed, "Grim isn't looking as excited as he usually does when someone's about to die."

Grim nodded in agreement. "True."

"Hmm..."

Reluctantly, Junior released his hold on Draco. Since he was holding the blonde boy six inches above the floor, Draco dropped in an undignified heap. As soon as he was free of Junior's grasp, Malfoy scabbled backwards - trying to get as far from Junior as he could. Unfortunately for him, Draco accidentally found himself climbing onto Grim's lap.

"Dat better be sweat coming down your leg, boy," warned Grim after several moments, ignoring the fact that Draco was clinging to him like a nervous barnacle, "or I'm going to be getting medieval on you."

Draco finally took proper notice of Grim, turning to find himself nose to nasal cavity with the disgruntled Reaper's skull. For a brief fraction of a second, he blanched so pale that his skin was almost as white as bone.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAHHH!!!"

With a piercing shriek that had all the blood-curdling qualities of a scythe blade scraping against stone, Draco released his hold on Grim and leaped from the skeleton's lap. He shoved Junior out of the way and fled the compartment as quickly as his legs could carry him, trampling over both Crabbe and Goyle in the process.

The occupants of the compartment stared blankly after Draco for several seconds, listening to his receding wails, before Harry leaned across Hermione and slid the compartment door shut.

"That went well, I think," he mused.

"Immeasurably," agreed Mandy wryly.

"I don't like him," announced Junior, retracting his many tentacles as he sat down opposite Harry, on Ron's free side. "I don't even know his name, but I don't like him."

"Draco Malfoy, and he seems to have that effect on people," replied Harry.

"What the bloody hell was that?!" Ron suddenly exclaimed, gaping openly at Junior.

"Ron?"

"Am I the only one who noticed the black tentacles that come out of his back?" asked Ron, pointing at Junior. He only then realized that Junior was actually sitting right next to him. "No offence," he quickly added, "but that's not normal."

"So everyone keeps reminding me," grumbled Junior.

"You're not human, are you," asked Hermione after some brief introductions were made.

"Not entirely," Junior admitted.

"I could've told you that," muttered Ron.

"My mother's human though," said Junior hopefully.

"Marge Dursley," put in Harry as an explanation. "She's my Aunt Petunia's sister-in-law."

"Nobody's really sure what Dad is, not even Dad," continued Junior.

"Some sort of ancient Babylonian god," said Mandy.

"Sumerian, not Babylonian," corrected Grim.

"I thought he was Mesopotamian?" asked Harry.

"Same ting," Grim shrugged.

"Not really," said Hermione. "As a matter of fact--"

"You're not going to give us a lecture on ancient civilizations and their gods, are you?" interrupted Ron.

Hermione responded with a huff before turning her nose up and away from Ron. Harry, in the meanwhile, looked curiously at Junior and said, "I didn't know you were a wizard."

"I'm not, even though I can do a bit of magic," Junior replied.

"So, why are you coming to Hogwarts?" asked Harry. "I would've thought your dad would teach you magic."

"Well, uh, it's embarrassing," said Junior. Seeing that everyone was watching him, obviously waiting for him to explain, he went on. "I was hungry, see, and, uh, well, Mother's dog..."

"Wait," Mandy held up a hand to forestall him. "You're saying you ate Ripper?"

"You ate Aunt Marge's prize-winning bulldog?!" exclaimed Harry incredulously.

"I was hungry," was all Junior could say.

"He ate a dog? He actually *ate* a dog?" asked Hermione, her disbelief even greater than Harry's and tinged with a healthy dose of horror.

"Ew, gross," was Ron's summation of the news.

"Afterwards, Mother decided I was... 'lacking discipline'," Junior resumed.

"What did Nergal have to say about it?" asked Mandy.

"Actually, Dad increased my allowance," admitted Junior sheepishly.

"He never did like Ripper," mused Harry.

"Who did?" asked Grim rhetorically. He folded his long arms across his narrow chest and grumbled, "Horrid little beast - always nipping at my ankles."

"Would you rather he buried you, like Saliva does?"

"No tanks."

Ron, who was by now beginning to warm to the strange boy sitting beside him, strange black tentacles notwithstanding, decided to ask, "So, why're they sending you to Hogwarts?"

Junior sighed and answered, "Mother thinks that boarding school will teach me 'proper etiquette'."

Ron nodded in commiseration and said, "Sounds like something my Mum would try as well."

Conversation halted as the compartment door opened yet again. This time, however, it was a return visit from one of their earlier visitors. The dark-haired, slightly plump boy, who Hermione introduced as Neville, appeared to still be in search of his missing toad; Trevor.

"Sorry to bother you again," he apologised weakly, "but I don't suppose you've seen Trevor since last time?"

"Trevor?" asked Junior, looking to the others for explanation.

"He's Neville's pet toad," said Hermione. "I was helping to look for him earlier."

"Oh... a toad," said Junior. He suddenly adopted an obviously fake expression of innocence as he turned to Neville and stated, "Sorry, haven't seen him."

"Oh, well, if you do..."

Before Neville could leave, Mandy shared a look with Harry. "Not so fast, Neville," she said, causing the boy to pause in the doorway. She directed a dark scowl towards a nervous looking Junior. "Junior..."

"Yes?" asked Junior brightly.

"What did you do to the toad?"

"What toad?" asked Junior. Mandy's dark scowl became a frigid one. "I didn't do anything."

"Then why are you trying to look innocent?" asked Mandy.

"I am innocent!" Junior protested.

"Ri-ight," drawled Mandy sarcastically.

"Er, what are you guys talking about?" asked Neville uncertainly.

"Junior," began Harry, his own suspicions now mirroring Mandy's unspoken ones. "You haven't done anything... inappropriate, have you?"

"No... maybe," confessed Junior.

"You know where Trevor is?" asked Neville hopefully.

"What happened to the toad?" asked Harry.

"It's not my fault," insisted Junior.

"You *do* know where Trevor is!" exclaimed Neville, a relieved smile breaking out on his face. "Oh, thank you!"

"I wouldn't thank him just yet, Neville," Mandy cautioned, before turning back to Junior. "I have a sneaky suspicion about what happened."

"What happened to the toad, Junior?" Harry asked a second time.

"I, um, I was feeling a bit... peckish..."

"Oh... my... God..." breathed Hermione in understanding.

"What?" asked Ron, not getting it.

"He ate it," Hermione started to babble. "He ate the toad," she said, voice rising in pitch, "He *ate* Trevor!"

"WHAT?!" Ron looked at Junior with a mixture of horror and disgust.

"Trevor?" Neville quavered with horror.

"You ate him? Why on earth did you do *that*?" asked Harry.

"I told you; I was hungry," reiterated Junior unhappily.

"De boy takes after his father, dat's for sure," noted Grim, not sounding the least bit surprised. "Unpleasant to be around - especially for people's pets."

"Okay," Mandy pointed from Junior to the floor. "Cough up the toad."

"But--"

"No excuses. Cough it up," commanded Mandy. Her dark blue eyes narrowed dangerously as she threatened, "Unless you want your teddy to have another... accident."

"You wouldn't," said Junior, clearly alarmed by the thought.

"Oh yes, she would," Harry confirmed.

"You better believe dat," agreed Grim.

"Fine, I'll try," Junior relented. He began taking deep, sucking breathes.

"What's he doing?" asked Ron, edging away from Junior and closer to Grim.

"Coughing up the toad," said Mandy.

By now Junior had stopped sucking in air and was currently wracked with hacking convulsions that were beginning to alarm the various occupants of the compartment, save for Harry, Mandy and Grim. It took a lot to alarm those three, especially when it involved Nergal and his family.

"What's wrong with him?" asked Ron.

"It sounds like he's choking," observed Hermione.

"Trevor?" asked Neville, still in shock after learning what happened to his pet.

Finally Junior gave a wet cough, not unlike a cat spitting out a hairball, and promptly deposited a sizeable blob of... something slimy, on the

compartment floor.

Mandy grimaced in distaste and said, "Ew."

"There you go," announced Junior, wiping off his lips and chin. "One toad."

"Trevor?"

A clearly traumatised Trevor, coated in saliva, mucous and some foul-smelling black ichor, was barely able to manage a wheezing croak of acknowledgement.

Unsurprisingly, Neville finally passed out.

.oOo.

It was dark by the time the Hogwarts Express pulled into the station at Hogsmeade and the air held a chill, causing most of the children to draw their robes close as they disembarked.

Harry, Mandy and Grim stood like an isolated island of calm amidst the crowds of students. Nobody really knew why they made a point to avoid these three, but it probably had something to do with either Mandy or Grim. Hermione, Ron and Junior stood nearby, but remained slightly apart from the trio.

"So," asked Mandy, "Where to now?"

"Haven't a clue," replied Grim.

"I guess we just follow the older students," suggested Harry, spotting the twins and their friend Lee Jordan further down the platform. "They can lead us to the school."

"Right," agreed Mandy with a curt nod. "Let's go."

The trio moved to collect their friends, those being Ron and Hermione. They weren't sure if Junior could be classified as such, but included him as well. Their school trunks had already been unloaded and set aside with all the others, to be taken to the school by some unnamed means.

They had barely taken a dozen steps to join Fred and George, when an oddly familiar voice called out to them. It was a tad higher-pitched than they were used to, but they recognised it nonetheless.

"My, look who we have here."

Turning in that direction, they found themselves under the scrutiny of an equally familiar face, albeit looking a good many years younger than they were used to.

"Oh crud," chimed Harry and Mandy together.

"Dere goes de neighbourhood," agreed Grim.

By rights she should have been a woman in the full of her youth, mid-to-late twenties. Instead she had somehow regressed her apparent age to that of an eleven-year old. Her thick mane of blonde hair remained unchanged, as did the slight glint of madness that seemed to burn within her large, bright eyes. She grinned with devious mischief as she sauntered towards them, exposing a slight gap between her upper front teeth.

She was wearing a standard set of Hogwarts school robes, but had not changed her usual Greek garb other than to have them resized to fit her decidedly less voluptuous figure. The contrast between the brilliant white of her bodice and wrap, under the black of her robes, was eye-catching. It would have been indecent, had she still been an adult.

"Eris," acknowledged Grim when she reached them. He set his hands on his hips and scowled with disapproval, asking, "What are you doing here? Does your daddy know what you're up to?"

"Of course Daddy knows," said Eris with an idle wave. "Who d'you think signed my acceptance papers?"

"So you're coming to Hogwarts as well?" asked Harry, dreading the answer.

"Harry, dearie," Eris purred, as she strutted up to him, which fortunately was not as effective now that she was only an eleven-year old. "You look so *cute* in those robes."

"You know her?" Hermione asked Mandy.

"Unfortunately," growled Mandy through clenched teeth.

"Who is she?" asked Ron.

"Eris," Mandy answered, watching as Eris draped herself over Harry. Ron and Hermione could have sworn that they saw flames blazing in her

midnight blue eyes.

"Who?" asked Ron again.

"The goddess of chaos and discord?" asked Hermione, having recognised the name.

"Ah, I see my reputation precedes me, as always," drawled Eris happily.

"You make dat sound as if it were a good ting, girl," countered Grim.

"Of course it is!"

"Why are *you* here?" demanded Mandy.

"I was bored," explained Eris, propped up against Harry and tracing circle's over his chest, much to his embarrassment. Then she grinned and added, "At least I was, until I saw you and your friends on your way here."

Harry twisted his head to look at her and asked, "So you decided to come with because...?"

Eris gave him an incredulous look and asked in return, "You're kidding, right?" Seeing that he was not, she decided to elaborate, the glint of madness in her eyes growing into a fiery glow as she spoke. "An entire school, filled with witches and wizards. Magic running through every corridor, filling every room and permeating every stone block... can you think of a better opportunity for pure, unadulterated *CHAOS* ?!"

Oddly enough, this explanation actually made sense to those that knew her. They were all well aware of the fact that when Eris Kallisti Discordia, Goddess of Chaos and Discord (as the name implied), was bored out of her pretty blonde-haired head, then she was bound to do something completely off the wall. For that matter Eris would likely have done so even if she weren't bored.

"Great," muttered Grim dourly. "Dis is going to be a terrible year."

"Oh, don't be so grim, Grim," Eris told him.

"You and dose golden apples are nuttin' but trouble."

"*CHAOS* !" exclaimed Eris, the fire burning even brighter.

"Same ting," said Grim.

"*CHAOS* !"

"We get de idea."

"Perhaps," said Eris, suddenly calm. "Just remember--"

"Everyone's a target," stated Mandy, the only rule that Eris ever played by.

"Why, yes, Mandy," Eris agreed. "*EVERYONE* ! Ah-hahahaha!"

"Eris, calm down," suggested Harry, subtly trying to wiggle his way out of her grip.

"Oh," Eris stopped cackling and actually blushed slightly as she apologised. "Sorry about that, Harry. Wicked laughter is rather like peanuts, don't you think?"

"Peanuts?" asked Ron.

Eris finally took proper notice of the rest of Harry's companions; namely Ron, Hermione and Junior. It was Ron, somehow, that managed to capture her attention. She discarded Harry in a trice, much to both Harry and Mandy's relief, and slinked over to the now sweating Weasley.

"Ooooh, such fiery red hair, such sparkling blue eyes, such a noble nose, such *cute freckles* !" extolled Eris as she grabbed hold of Ron in a grip reminiscent of an octopus. "What's your name, dearie?"

"Uh, Ron?"

"Clingy tramp," Mandy grumbled quietly.

"She's just... affectionate," said Harry, but without much conviction.

"She's trying to make me jealous," declared Mandy staunchly.

"Apparently she succeeded," observed Grim. Mandy replied by giving Grim a murderous glare for suggesting any such thing. Grim wisely shut up and settled back to watch as Eris molested Ron.

"Ooooh, such *big* hands!" she crowed, holding up one of Ron's arms and examining it closely. She gave the poor boy a salacious grin, entirely out of place on her childish face, and said, "You know what they say about that... you're going to be *gifted* when you grow up, aren't you?"

Er... I suppose?"

Watching this with a mixture of bemusement, bafflement and confusion, Junior leaned over to Harry and asked, "Is she flirting with him?"

"Look's like it," confirmed Harry, happy that it was Ron suffering such a fate and not himself.

"Slut," grumbled Mandy, still displeased by Eris' earlier actions. "Hasn't left my Harry for even a minute and she's already trying to get in another boy's pants." Harry gave Mandy a slightly surprised look at her possessive attitude regarding him.

"Ack! What are you doing?" demanded Ron, his voice rising to a squeak.

"Please, Ronnie-poo? I wanna see!" pleaded Eris.

Everyone turned back to Ron and Eris to see that the goddess had unbuttoned Ron's school robes and was now trying to pull Ron's trousers out so that she could peer into them. Ron, who hadn't known her for even five minutes, was naturally trying to resist the attempt.

"Ron! Eris!" exclaimed Hermione. "Stop that! It's indecent!"

.oOo.

Some minutes later the various first-year students had been gathered up by Hogwarts' Groundsman and Keeper of the Keys, a veritable giant of a man who introduced himself as Hagrid. After leading them to a dock and following a short boat ride across the lake, Harry, Mandy, Grim and their schoolmates (which would apparently include both Eris and Junior) finally arrived at the castle.

"The first-years, Professor McGonagall," Hagrid presented.

"Thank you, Hagrid. I will take them from here," acknowledged Professor McGonagall. The deputy-headmistress was in the process of pulling the massive front doors to the school open when she spotted Grim. He was not hard to miss, not when taking into account the fact that he was a couple of feet taller than all of the surrounding children.

"Who are you?" she asked sternly, "and what are you doing with the children?"

"He's with us," said Mandy, before Grim could reply.

Professor McGonagall turned her attention away from Grim's lanky form and regarded Mandy, taking note of the pink sundress beneath her school robes, the horn-like appearance of her short blonde hair, the piercing cobalt eyes that were narrowed in a slight frown and the down turned scowl of her lips.

"He's a student?"

"Yes," confirmed Mandy, just as Grim forcibly stated, "No!"

"Yes," reiterated Mandy firmly, giving Grim a glare.

"No, I'm not!" insisted Grim unhappily

"Yes, you are," said Mandy with utter finality.

Grim turned to the impatiently waiting professor and gave a resigned sigh before nodding, "I am."

McGonagall regarded Grim sceptically, but eventually decided to accept his presence amongst the first-years, if only for the moment. She then turned to Mandy, who was standing next to skinny young boy with a rat's nest of black hair and bright emerald green eyes that she immediately recognised as Harry Potter.

The professor's attention, however, remained on Mandy, as she could not help but notice how similar the girl's expression was to that of the school's potions master.

"Excuse me, dear," McGonagall asked, "but you don't happen to be related to Professor Snape, are you?"

"No," replied Mandy curtly. "Why?"

"Oh, no reason," McGonagall dismissed the thought. She then gazed out over the rest of the waiting students and said, "Follow me, all of you." She then led the students, and Grim, out of the Entrance Hall at a brisk clip.

"This place is giving me the creeps," muttered Neville, looking around at the bare stone walls and the flickering torches lining them.

"I kind of like it," said Mandy.

Trailing behind Professor McGonagall, the first-years soon found themselves filing into a small chamber off to one side of the Entrance Hall.

"Welcome to Hogwarts," announced McGonagall. "The start-of-term banquet will begin shortly, but before you take your seats in the Great Hall, you will be sorted into your houses."

Everyone listened attentively as McGonagall explained about the four houses and the points system. All except for Eris, who was ho-humming from boredom. The professor was not pleased by this and seemed even more offended when she took note of the rather... revealing garments Eris was wearing beneath her school robes.

"I shall return when we are ready for you," she said, giving Eris one final look of annoyance before departing. "Please wait quietly."

"How exactly do they sort us into houses?" Harry asked Ron, once McGonagall closed the door behind her.

"Some sort of test, I think," said Ron uncertainly. "Fred said it hurts a lot, but I think he was joking."

"They're obviously not going to hurt us, Ron," interject Hermione. She rolled her eyes and asked, "Honestly, what kind of school would this be if they did?"

"But Fred..."

"Can it, dork," ordered Mandy.

"Huh?" Ron looked at her blankly.

"She means; shut up," explained Grim.

"Oh, well, why didn't she say so?"

The entire group turned as the students behind them gasped, and in one or two cases shrieked, in alarm. What they saw was a dozen or so silvery figures emerging from one of the sides walls and into the room with them.

Harry stared and asked, "What the - ?"

"Ghosts," supplied Mandy, eyes widening slightly. "Lots of ghosts."

"I wonder if I know any of dem?" asked Grim.

"I'm sure they all know you," said Mandy.

The ghosts, however, were as yet oblivious to Grim's presence. For that matter, they seemed utterly oblivious to the watching students as well. They appeared to be in the midst of an argument of some sort.

"I'm telling you, it's a sign," insisted a rather fat ghost that appeared to be wearing the robes of a monk, or possibly a friar. "Can't you feel it?"

"Of course I can," said a stuffy looking ghost, dressed in centuries old clothing that was resplendent with ruffles. "But it doesn't mean *he* is coming here. It could just be a matter of some catastrophe taking place nearby, or a similar occurrence - oh, I say, what are you children doing here?"

The ghosts had finally noticed the students and paused to look them over.

"Hey," Grim suddenly spoke, pointing at the ghost in ruffles, "I remember you."

Every single ghost present stared at Grim and, if possible, grew even paler than they already were.

"I was right! I knew it!" exclaimed the fat friar, looking at once both vindicated in the proof of his assertions, yet also positively terrified by them as well. "He's here!"

"It's the Reaper!" screamed the ruffled ghost, backing away.

"He's come to finish the job!"

"Run for your afterlives!"

"Mommy!" cried another ghost, whose baronial clothes were stained with silvery blood.

Chaos ensued, much to Eris' delight, as the ghosts panicked enmasse and fled in terror from a grinning Grim. The ruffled ghost startled a great many students when his head flopped loose from his neck, remaining attached by only a thin sliver of flesh, as he made a run for it, straight through Draco, Crabbe and Goyle. Once everything settled down the students, save Harry and Mandy, turned baffled gazes towards a smug-looking Grim.

"Heh heh," Grim chuckled. "I've still got it!"

"*CHAOS!*" shrieked Eris in satisfaction.

"Boneheads," groaned Mandy.

"Er, why did they do that?" asked a pretty Indian girl, clearly one of a pair of twins. "They're ghosts, it's not like anything can hurt them."

"Dat's what you tink," rejoined Grim, popping his scythe into being and brandishing it above his head as he burst into a deep and bellowing bout of laughter. "Bwahahahaha!! Muahahahaha!!"

"Hey," Harry elbowed Grim in the ribs. "No evil laughter, you'll scare them."

"Dat was de idea," said Grim before putting his trademark tool away.

He did so just in time, as Professor McGonagall returned a moment later. "Move along now," she ordered, beckoning them through the door she had entered from. "The Sorting Ceremony's about to start."

.oOo.

The first-years followed Professor McGonagall into the Great Hall with varying degrees of nervousness. Those who weren't half sick with worry, looked around them and took in their first sight of the Great Hall.

Four great tables were arrayed next to each other, crowded with black-robed students, while a fifth table had been set perpendicular to them, at the front of the hall, where the school's teachers sat. Banners, resplendent in the colours of the four houses, hung from the walls. Hundreds, perhaps even thousands of candles floated above their heads, their flames soft and flickering as they drifted back and forth.

It was the ceiling, however, that caught everyone's eyes. It seemed to simply fade away as it arched up from the walls, solid grey stone giving way to an inky black night sky, dotted with twinkling stars.

"It's bewitched to look like the sky outside," Hermione whispered, correctly guessing that Harry and Mandy were wondering how the effect was accomplished. "I read about it in *Hogwarts: A History*."

"It's like a giant skylight," replied Harry in a hushed voice. A crick was beginning to form in his neck as he craned his head back to take in the ceiling's splendour.

"Quaint," was Mandy's sole comment.

"You have no appreciation for beauty, do you?" muttered Grim.

"Function over form, Grim," Mandy rejoined.

"What's with the hat?" asked Junior, forestalling the age-old debate and turning everyone's attention to the front of the hall, where McGonagall was leading them. Resting placidly on a stool in front of the staff table, was a weather-beaten and time-frayed wizard's hat.

Harry eyed the hat and then asked, "You don't suppose we have to pull something out of it, do you?"

"I could pull a werewolf out of it, if you like," offered Grim.

"Not again," said Mandy, having seen that trick too many times over the years.

"How about a sabre-toothed, man-eating bunny rabbit?" suggested Eris, none too innocently.

"Oh no," said Grim. "No chaos for you until after you're sorted!"

"Phooey."

By now all the first-years had gathered before the staff table and the hat, Professor McGonagall gazing sternly back at them. They stood and shuffled about anxiously, waiting for whatever was to happen next. To everyone's surprise, not to mention consternation, the frayed rim of the hat suddenly split open and began to move in song.

It took several seconds, and most of the first verse, before they properly understood that the hat was actually singing a song that detailed the sorting they were about to partake in. Harry, Mandy and several others exchanged incredulous looks, the gimmick of a singing hat a bit too unreal to give credence to.

"So we've just got to try on the hat!" breathed Ron in relief once the Sorting Hat had finished its song and the students and staff applauded. "Merlin, that's a relief."

"Let me guess," said Hermione, "your brothers said you'd have to wrestle a troll or something."

"Bloody prats," said Ron by way of confirmation.

Harry leaned against Mandy's shoulder and whispered in her ear, "What d'you think?"

"I stand by my earlier statement," Mandy muttered back. "These magical folk are touched in the head."

"But you have to admit," commented Grim, "de tune was catchy."

"When I call your name, you will put on the hat and sit on the stool to be sorted," announced McGonagall, taking the Sorting Hat in hand and holding it up. In her other hand she held a piece of parchment that appeared to be a list of all the first-year students. Consulting the list, she called out, "Abbott, Hannah!"

A pink-faced girl with blonde pigtails reluctantly moved forward and took her seat on the stool. Professor McGonagall set the Sorting Hat down on her head, most of which disappeared beneath the hat's wide brim. Several moments passed, Hannah fidgeting nervously, before the Hat bellowed, "HUFFLEPUFF!"

Hannah quickly removed the hat from her head, whereupon it was snatched up by Professor McGonagall before it could fall to the floor, and scurried over to the Hufflepuff table. There she was greeted by a welcoming applause, before finding a seat near the front of her table to watch as the Sorting continued.

"Bones, Susan!" called McGonagall, reading off the next name on her list.

"HUFFLEPUFF!"

"Seems a rather odd way to sort people," commented Harry as 'Boot, Terry' was sorted into, "RAVENCLAW!"

"I bet that hat can read people's minds," said Mandy. "Remember what it said about not being able to hide any secrets in our heads from it?"

"I'm not sure I want my mind read by some strange hat," said Harry after taking that in.

"Especially such a decrepit one," agreed Eris, looking disdainfully as the hat was removed from 'Goyle, Gregory'.

"Granger, Hermione!" called McGonagall.

"Wish me luck," muttered Hermione before she hurried up and eagerly sat on the stool.

"GRYFFINDOR!" yelled the hat after some consideration.

"Gryffindor?" repeated Ron in obvious surprise, watching as Hermione handed the Sorting Hat back to Professor McGonagall and then hurried over to the Gryffindor table. Ron looked to Harry and said, "The way she prattles on, I'd have sworn she would be a Ravenclaw."

"Dork," muttered Mandy with a roll of her eyes.

The group watched as the Sorting progressed, only ever taking particular interest when someone they knew was called up, such as Neville Longbottom, who was sorted into Gryffindor after a long minute's wait. This was a bit of a surprise when you considered his dismal reaction to when Junior regurgitated his toad.

Then another name was called that they recognised.

"Malfoy, Draco!"

This time the Sorting Hat had barely touched the boy's head when it yelled, "SLYTHERIN!"

"No surprises dere," observed Grim as Draco wore an incredibly smug smirk when he hopped off the stool and strutted to where Crabbe and Goyle were waiting at the Slytherin table.

"Great," grumbled Mandy.

"Problem?" asked Harry.

"I'm planning on being in Slytherin," she revealed, earning an alarmed look from Ron.

"You certainly have all de right traits," acknowledged Grim.

"I don't want to put up with Malfoy all year," Mandy continued, her penetrating stare tracking to where the blonde wizard was now sitting. Her scowl deepened. "At the rate he's going, I'll have to kill him before Halloween."

"Hmm," Harry hummed thoughtfully.

Soon it was Harry's turn to be sorted, following two pretty Indian witches, who were identified as the Patil twins, and a dark-haired girl by the name of Sally-Anne Perks. Professor McGonagall did not react in the slightest as she called his name out from the list.

"Potter, Harry!"

Unfortunately the rest of the hall more than made up for the professor's lack of reaction by breaking out in a stream of frantic whispers and murmurs.

"Did she just say *Potter*?"

"It's the Boy-Who-Lived!"

"*The Harry Potter*?"

Mandy gave him a look that was almost sympathetic and commented, "Well, somebody's popular."

Harry ducked his head and muttered, "Yay."

"Oh, don't be such a worrywart," said Grim.

"Who's worried?" asked Harry sarcastically. "A raggedy old hat's about to decide my future at Hogwarts."

"If you would, Mister Potter?" prompted McGonagall. "We don't have all night."

"Right, sorry," Harry quickly apologised, blushing slightly with embarrassment. Reluctantly leaving his friends with the remaining first-years, he scurried over to McGonagall and took his place on the stool. He felt some relief as the stern witch set the Sorting Hat on his head, which sank down until it covered his eyes and cut off his view of the Great Hall, as this gave him at least some shelter against the many curious stares being directed his way.

"Oh my," said a little voice in his ear. "Oh my!"

"Oh my, what?" thought Harry, somewhat worried that he now seemed to be hearing voices in his head.

"You are a difficult one. Very difficult," said the voice, which Harry began to suspect as belonging to the Sorting Hat. "Courage a plenty, that's for certain. Almost a fool's worth. A good mind, sharp and quick, if a trifle under-used. And what's this? Oh ho! Now this is unexpected... incredible... impossible even..."

"What?" asked Harry, though careful not to speak the actual question out loud. None of the other students that had been sorted had spoken and he would feel a right fool if he were the only one to do so.

"Friends with the Grim Reaper, or more accurately something of a master-slave relationship," said the Hat, its voice rich with lazy amusement.

"Well, not really," Harry protested weakly.

"Ah, yes, I see," the Hat agreed after a short pause. Its amusement seemed more pronounced. "It's actually the girl that holds death under her heel. Remarkable."

"That's a good way to describe her," agreed Harry, his thoughts turning to Mandy.

"You feel quite strongly for her, don't you?" asked the Hat.

"She's my best friend," said Harry simply.

"Nothing more?"

"Huh?"

"As clueless as your father was at this age, I see," sighed the Hat. "How reassuring."

Sensing where that particular vein of conversation might lead, and not wanting to go there, Harry decided to ask something he had been considering for the past few minutes.

"About Mandy..."

"Yes?"

"Can you put her in the same house as me?" he asked.

"And why should I do that?" the Hat asked in return, still sounding bemused. Harry had the feeling the Hat thought he was asking out of some sort of misguided romantic notions - as implied by its earlier statements regarding Mandy.

"She expects you to put her in Slytherin," Harry tried to explain, "but you've already put Malfoy there..."

"Young Draco? Don't like him, eh?" asked the Hat, not having any difficulty in picking up Harry's feelings of distaste for the pale wizard. "Afraid he might do something to your friend?"

"Actually, it's the other way around," confessed Harry, relaxing somewhat as he felt he was now on more familiar ground. Discussing Mandy's stated dislike of Malfoy, and the possible consequences thereof, was something he could do more readily than talking about some hat-imagined romantic relationship with her. "If he annoys her too much, Mandy might kill him - and I don't want her getting expelled for it."

"Come now, Potter," chided the Hat. "I doubt she would do Mister Malfoy any lasting harm."

"Trust me, she would," insisted Harry.

"Really? Let's take a look then..." The Sorting Hat grew quiet for what felt like a long time, obviously looking through Harry's memories of Mandy. His thoughts drifted to her once again during this, brief images of moments past flashing in front of his mind's eye. This quiet, and rather enjoyable drifting down memory lane came to an abrupt halt as the Sorting Hat's voice suddenly bellowed within his mind, "GOOD GOD BOY! ARE YOU INSANE?"

"Huh?" asked Harry intelligently.

"HOW COULD YOU HONESTLY WANT A - A MONSTER LIKE HER IN THE SAME HOUSE AS YOURSELF?!" demanded the Hat, its voice

losing none of its volume. "FORGET ABOUT DRACO'S SAFETY AND WORRY MORE ABOUT YOUR OWN!"

"Don't say things like that about Mandy!" protested Harry unhappily.

"THE GIRL'S EVIL INCARNATE!" insisted the Hat.

"I don't care! She's my friend!" Harry obstinately declared, doing the mental equivalent of crossing his arms over his chest and glaring defiantly at the Hat.

"SHE WANTS TO RULE THE WORLD!"

"So?"

The Sorting Hat was momentarily dumbfounded by Harry's easy acceptance of Mandy's goals in life, and spent several seconds spluttering incoherently. Finally it recovered and attempted to reason with the boy whose mind it was currently perusing, this time trying a more oblique approach.

"That ambition is the same one that drove the man who murdered your parents," it said.

Harry perked up slightly and asked, "Voldemort?"

"Yes," confirmed the Hat sagely. "I have sorted every student to come through this school's gates since the Founders. I remember them all - even the ones that others fear to speak the name of."

"He was a Slytherin, right?" asked Harry.

"...Yes," the Hat answered after a reluctant pause.

"Then put Mandy in another house," said Harry, calmly arguing his case. "It doesn't have to be the same house as I'm in, just not Slytherin."

"Not Slytherin, eh?" asked the Hat, thoughtfully. It could scarcely believe that it was actually contemplating what the boy was suggesting. "And what makes you think that will make any difference?"

"Mandy won't try anything too bad if I'm there to talk her out of it," Harry assured it. That he had never actually succeeded in talking Mandy out of any of her wilder schemes was something he felt he would do well not to bring up.

"Hmm..."

"You're the one that's worried about what she might do when she gets older," pointed out Harry.

"Worried isn't quite the word I'd use to describe my feelings about that little monster you call a friend," muttered the Hat in undertone.

"Stop saying things like that about her!" snapped Harry.

"You certainly have loyalty in your heart. Enough for a dozen Hufflepuffs, and more to spare," mused the Hat, a tinge of amusement returning to its voice. "You'd do well in all the houses. You have their traits. The bravery of Gryffindor. The intelligence of Ravenclaw. The loyalty of Hufflepuff. And a thirst to prove yourself that would serve you well in Slytherin."

"Er... I thought we'd agreed against Slytherin," said Harry nervously.

"That was with regards your lady friend," corrected the Hat, its amusement growing. It was having some fun making Harry sweat while it made its decision. "You on the other hand..."

"Not Slytherin, anywhere but Slytherin," begged Harry.

"Are you sure?" the Hat asked, playing the devil's advocate. "You could be great, you know, and Slytherin would help you on the way to greatness, no doubt about that."

"Mandy can be great," said Harry in earnest. "I'd rather just stay out of it."

"Well, if you're sure, better be GRYFFINDOR!"

A loud roar of approval sounded from the Gryffindors, though Harry scarcely noticed. He was too busy being relieved at having avoided Slytherin. He walked shakily to the Gryffindor table, where he was greeted by a smug looking Percy Weasley, who pumped his hand firmly, while the twins yelled, "We got Potter! We got Potter!"

The remainder of the Sorting went quickly, as there were only a few first-years left unchosen. 'Turpin, Lisa' was duly sorted into Ravenclaw, before Professor McGonagall called out Ron's name. The young Weasley was looking decidedly green as he stepped up, but was dispatched to Gryffindor almost as quickly as Malfoy had been sent to Slytherin.

"Well done, mate," said Harry once his new friend has joined him at the Gryffindor table.

"Bloody hell," mumbled Ron, collapsing into the seat next to Harry. He was still several shades paler than normal. "I've never been so nervous in my life. I was scared I'd throw up."

"Well, you didn't," said Hermione from her seat next to Percy, "so don't worry about it."

The Sorting Ceremony was over.

The only problem was that not everyone had been sorted.

.oOo.

The occupants of the Great Hall stared curiously at the four figures in the centre-aisle that remained unsorted, though Professor McGonagall had finished her list. The four, consisting of Mandy, Grim, Junior and Eris, stared back. This state of affairs lasted for nearly a minute before Mandy became impatient.

"Well?" she asked.

Professor McGonagall glanced down at the parchment still in her hands and made to read it over again, just in case she had somehow missed any names. Her perusal complete she looked up and peered over the rims of her glasses at the four and said, sounding affronted by the fact, "You are *not* on the list."

"Of course we're not," replied Mandy.

"Then what are you doing here?" demanded one of the professors at the staff table, a pallid-faced man with greasy black hair that hung almost to his shoulders in limp tangles.

"Professor Snape, I see no need to be confrontational," said Professor Dumbledore, holding up a hand. Once Snape gave a curt nod of concession, the headmaster turned his attention to Mandy. "Please, dear girl, could you explain?"

"I don't know about these two," Mandy indicated Junior and Eris, "but I'm not on your list because, until a month ago, I wasn't a witch and couldn't do magic of any kind."

"You mean you... you were a *Muggle*?" asked McGonagall in pure disbelief.

"Yeah, that's what you call them," confirmed Mandy.

Something of a calamitous roar broke out at this revelation, the staff and already sorted students blurting out questions or declamations. Mandy did not so much as bat an eyelid. Instead she waited impassively, as she was wont to, for the commotion to settle down. It was Professor Dumbledore who restored some order, using his wand to shoot red sparks into the air, accompanied by a loud bang that sounded like a cannon being fired.

"Silence, please! Silence!" the headmaster commanded in a tone of voice that brooked no dissension. Once some measure of peace had settled over the students and his faculty, Dumbledore returned his gaze to the blonde girl that had so easily stirred up the hornet's nest. Silently he motioned for her to go on.

"I was a Muggle," explained Mandy simply, as if to a child. "Now I'm a witch."

"You can do magic?"

"Yes."

"She tried to turn my cousin Dudley into a pig," called out Harry, corroborating Mandy's tale. A smile formed on his lips when he recalled the incident. "Gave him a matching tail, nose and ears."

"I would've succeeded too," said Mandy, "if he weren't already so much like one that there's next to no different."

"I see..." mumbled Dumbledore, though it was obvious that he was currently at just as much of a loss to explain such a miraculous transformation as everyone else present. His recently mounting 'Encroaching Doom Syndrome' was now close to reaching what he felt to be its peak. Clearing his throat and gathering his scattered wits, he asked, "How did you accomplish this?"

"Turning Dudley into a pig, or becoming a witch?" asked Mandy. "Be specific."

"Becoming a witch," Dumbledore clarified.

"Oh, that was easy," said Mandy dismissively. "I had Grim do it."

"Grim?"

"Enough of this boring dawdling!" interrupted Eris, pushing past Mandy and stepping forward. She strode confidently past a still dumbfounded Professor McGonagall and settled herself down on the stool. "I am Eris Kallisti Discordia," she announced pompously, "and if anyone's going to be sorted first, out of us four, it's going to be me!"

Dumbledore, his attention temporarily diverted from Mandy, focused on the other unsorted blonde witch. It was a measure of how unsettled he was that the headmaster did not recognise the name she had given. "This is highly irregular," he said. "If you're not on the list of first-years then I very

much doubt that you have the appropriate papers and parental permissions to attend..."

Eris casually waved a hand in Dumbledore's direction and the headmaster trailed off as a short stack of papers appeared before him. "All there, dearie," she told him smugly with a toothy grin. "A bit short notice, I admit, but I think you'll find everything in order. In fact, I even included all you need for Harry's cousin and dear little Mandy as well."

"What's your hurry?" asked Grim suspiciously.

"You're the one who said it, Grim," Eris explained. "No chaos until after I'm sorted. Therefore, the sooner I get sorted, the sooner I can get started with some *CHAOS!*"

"Everybody needs a hobby, I suppose," Grim reluctantly admitted.

"Well," said Dumbledore, paging through the forms, "Everything seems to be in order..."

"Yes," agreed Eris. "You have no idea how much that pains me."

Not finding anything wrong with any of her paperwork, including documented proof that all necessary fees had been paid as well, Dumbledore could not refuse Eris' entrance into Hogwarts, so he motioned for Professor McGonagall to proceed with the sorting.

McGonagall, who had by now fully recovered from her earlier surprise, quickly gathered her wits and moved over to where Eris was sitting. "Ahem, very well then," she said, holding up the Sorting Hat. Though Eris was already in place and did not need to be called up, McGonagall announced her name anyway. "Discordia, Eris."

"Well now, this is unexpected," proclaimed the Sorting Hat after it had settled in place on Eris' head. "I've never been asked to sort a goddess before."

"Goddess?" repeated an astonished McGonagall.

"Of Chaos and Discord, dearie," confirmed Eris from beneath the hat.

"I did not think the children of Zeus visited this world any longer," commented the hat with audible curiosity. "You have not done so since the years of Merlin, before the Founders were born and I myself was made."

"Oh, we do," Eris assured, "It's just that we don't make such big entrances as we used to."

"Yes, so I see," agreed the hat. "Very well, let's begin..." The Sorting Hat fell silent, contemplating the goddess now wearing it. It sat on Eris' head for what seemed like a very long time, occasionally humming or hawing or making some other thoughtful sound.

Finally, it spoke up once again, "It would be beneficial for all if someone were to remind Salazar's chosen that they are not as superior as they wish to believe. In order to change that, best I send you to *SLYTHERIN!*"

Slytherin welcomed the newest addition to their house with a surprised and stony silence. Eris, seeming not to notice the lack of enthusiasm that greeted her, skipped over to the Slytherin table. Not finding a suitable place to sit, she gave a puggish looking girl a hard shove, knocking her out of her seat, and settled down opposite Draco Malfoy.

"Oh, you're a wicked looking one," she noted, looking Draco over. She reached into her school robes, which had somehow contrived to drape themselves artistically around her when she sat, and promptly withdrew a gleaming gold apple which she then offered to him. "Care for an apple, dearie?"

Draco was too distracted by the somewhat revealing nature of Eris' clothing, despite the fact that she appeared no more than eleven, that he completely failed to notice the maniacal gleam in her eyes as he reached for the apple.

"Should we stop him?" Grim asked Mandy as they watched.

"Why?" asked Mandy in return.

Just as Draco's fingertips brushed against the apple, Eris flicked her wrist and tossed the apple into the air. Draco was not fast enough and it dropped into his lap. There was a sudden explosion of light and noise, accompanied by a fair bit of smoke, which eventually cleared to reveal that Draco was nowhere in sight.

"Draco!" cried the girl whose seat Eris had claimed.

A moment later the question of what happened to Draco was answered when a silver-furred ferret thumped down onto the Slytherin table from above. It did not move from where it had landed and remained perfectly still, frozen in what could only be shock.

"Whoops?" asked Eris with insincere innocence. Seeing the stunned expression on Draco's face, or what currently passed for it, she began cackling with demented glee. "Ah-hahahaha! *CHAOS!!* Ah-hahahaha! *EVERYONE!!*"

Across the hall, at the Gryffindor table, the Weasley twins observed these happenings with envious eyes.

"Girl's got talent," acknowledged George.

"Yeah," agreed Fred. "Pity she's in Slytherin."

"A ferret," whispered Ron in awe. "She turned Malfoy into a ferret."

"That's Eris for you," said Harry.

"I think I'm in love."

The greasy-haired professor, who Dumbledore had referred to as Snape, had by now leapt to his feet, hurried around the staff table and stormed, in an impressive display of billowing black robes, across to the Slytherin table, where Eris was continuing to cackle over Draco's misfortune.

"*CHAOS!*"

"WHAT THE DEVIL DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING GIRL?!" demanded Snape, grabbing Eris by the shoulder and viciously pulling her out of her seat and around to face him. "HOW DARE YOU DO SOMETHING LIKE THIS TO ONE OF MY STUDENTS?!"

"Oh, don't get your knickers in a twist, dearie," Eris told him calmly. "It's just in good fun."

"GOOD FUN?!" roared Snape in disbelief. He waved a furious hand at the still shell-shocked ferret. "YOU'VE TRANSFIGURED MISTER MALFOY INTO A FERRET! THERE IS NOTHING 'FUN' ABOUT THAT!"

"Oh yes, there is," maintained Eris, not even blinking against the professor's rage.

"Professor Snape," Dumbledore said, trying to calm Snape.

"Turn him back!" demanded Snape. "Now!"

"Um... no," chirped Eris happily, turning her back to Snape and admiring Draco. "That's some of my best work, right there," she said. "Why would I ever want to undo it?"

With a muttered hiss, Snape drew his wand from within his robes. He forcibly shoved Eris out of his way, knocking her to her knees, and began waving his wand in Draco's direction.

"*Finite Incantatem!*"

Nothing happened.

"*Finite Incantatem!!*" snarled Snape, trying again.

"Won't work, dearie," said Eris, climbing to her feet. "I didn't transfigure him, after all."

"What did you do?" asked Snape, whirling about and looming dangerously over her.

"I turned him into a ferret," said Eris simply, as though it were obvious. She gave a disinterested shrug and explained, "No magic involved, just *CHAOS!*"

"Professor Snape," called Dumbledore from his place at the staff table, "Might I suggest--"

"The *you* change him back!" ordered Snape, now grabbing Eris and pushing her towards the twitching Draco. Eris, now possessing the skinny and ill powered body of an eleven-year old, was unable to resist the force with which he propelled her and subsequently crashed into the Slytherin table, crying out in pain as she did so.

"Here now!" cried Grim, gliding forward. "We'll be having none of dat!"

While he and Mandy had been content to simply stand back and watch events unfold, having Snape physically manhandle Eris was something the reaper would not stand for.

"Stay out of this!" snapped Snape, glaring over his shoulder as Grim approached.

"I don't tink so," Grim told him, interposing himself between the potions master and Eris. "She might be a handful of trouble, most of de time," he said, absently helping Eris up, "but she's a girl - and no man treats a lady like dis."

"She turned one of my students into a ferret," growled Snape.

"So?" asked Grim. "Have you forgotten dat she's one of your students as well? She was sorted into Slytherin, after all."

Snape glared at Grim, unwilling to admit that the Reaper was right. "That's even worse! She attacked one of her housemates and changed him into an animal, using some form of Dark Arts, I don't doubt."

Grim arched an eyebrow. "Dark Arts? What Dark Arts?"

"I can't change him back," spat Snape. "Only the Dark Arts are that powerful."

"Phft," scoffed Grim. "Dat was just one of her golden apples. Dey're not Dark Arts, just chaos."

"How would you know?" demanded Snape.

"I am an expert in de Dark Arts," Grim proudly declared.

"*Stupefy!*"

Snape whipped his wand towards Grim and fired the spell off at point-blank range. Grim stood no chance to dodge and caught the blast of red magic directly in his ribcage. The impact blew him off his feet and knocked him back several yards, where he collapsed in a heap.

"Really now, Professor Snape," said Dumbledore, rising to his feet. "There was no need for that."

"The man claimed to be experienced in the Dark Arts, headmaster," said Snape, explaining his seemingly unprovoked attack. "Do you really want an unknown Dark Arts practitioner running about the school unhindered?"

"You're such a wimp."

Everyone turned to see Mandy, who was standing next to the robe encased pile of bones that was Grim. She was looking down at the battered skeleton and shaking her head at him. To everyone else's surprise Grim began to rise up from his position on the floor, clearly not as disabled by the spell as one would expect.

"Oh-kay," Grim declared ominously, slowly rising to his full height in a manner which belied the fact that he had a body. He moved as if composed of the same liquid shadow that his robes sometimes appeared to be woven from. "Somebody's gonna get hurt *real* ba-ad!"

"Better be careful," cautioned Mandy, unconcerned. "He might knock you around some more."

"He can knock me about all he likes," said Grim. "Sooner or later though, I will get him. Nobody beats me."

"What about Mrs Doolan?" asked Mandy, referring to the woman that had once lived in an old house out on the edges of Little Whinging. She had beaten Grim in many sports, from tennis to boxing, until her death. Even then, though, she had survived as a ghost, clinging to this earth and refusing all of Grim's attempts to send her to the netherworld. Of course, it went without saying that Mandy had also beaten Grim at his own game, perhaps even more successfully than Mrs Doolan had.

"Insufferable woman dat one," grumbled Grim. "But I got her in de end."

"She seemed rather spry when I saw her," noted Mandy.

"Maybe," admitted Grim, before smiling with satisfaction, "but she was still dead."

"*Stupefy!*"

Snape's second spell, cast while Grim was distracted by Mandy, hit in the exact same spot as the first and with just as much force. Grim was tossed back once more, this time crashing up against the Ravenclaw table and forcing several of the closest students there to evacuate their seats.

Gasps, yells and screams sounded as the hood to Grim's robes was knocked back during his impact with the table, for the first time fully revealing his bare skull to the hall's occupants.

"I was right!" cried Snape in vindication, clearly pleased that Grim had been revealed for what he was.

"Foolish mortal!" bellowed Grim, rising up once again, faster this time. "I don't tink you know who I am..."

"Maybe not," admitted Snape, "but I know what you are. Some foolish Death Eater impersonator, trying to make a name for himself by sneaking into Hogwarts, using the new students to mask your presence before you strike." Snape's wand remained fixed on Grim, even as the rest of the school's staff rose to their feet behind the high table.

"I am hardly looking to make a name for myself - I already have one!" rejoined Grim, holding his right hand out to one side, away from his body. "Let me give you a hint to what it is..."

Shadow coalesced around Grim's outstretched hand, swirling around with purple lightning that danced around its edges. This was more for effect than anything else, a flashy trick to intimidate the ignorant. Right now it was doing its job pretty damn well. The pulsing mass began to take form, elongating into a straight staff with a wicked, curving blade emerging from one end. As the shadows and dark energies melted away, it became obvious what was now held in Grim's hand.

Death's scythe.

Grim's skeletal hand gripped the weapon tightly and held it up above him, the gleaming arc of the blade shining as it reflected the torch and firelight. It was an impressive pose, enhanced by the scythe's thrum of barely restrained power, which reached a climax as Grim seemed to swell up and loom over the suddenly uncertain Professor Snape.

"I am de GRIM REAPER!!!" intoned Grim, his voice deeper than any chasm and reverberating ominously.

Billowing black clouds swirled into being and filled the night sky while a cold wind blew, lightning cracked and thunder rumbled, all this reflected through the enchanted ceiling of the Great Hall. The air throughout the room suddenly grew cold, turning breaths to vapour and leaving fine layers of

frost on any exposed metal surface.

The black pools of Grim's empty eye sockets bore down on Snape as he slowly glided forward, his black robes flowing like water across the stone floor. Snape actually took a step back, almost tripping over a reclining Eris. At some point during this confrontation she had conjured up a small mountain of plush cushions to recline on and was now sipping some tea as she watched things play out.

"*Sectumsempra!*" yelled Snape, brandishing his wand.

A bolt of energy flashed towards Grim, but this time the Reaper was prepared for the professor's attack. Deftly twirling the scythe with the ease that came of millennia of practice, Grim deflected the curse up into the air, where it exploded harmlessly against the ceiling.

"Ask not for whom de bell tolls," Grim announced, leaning in close and hefting the scythe so that Snape's pale face was reflected in the mirrored finish of the carefully polished blade. "It tolls for thee!"

"Okay, Grim, that's enough," declared Mandy.

"I'm not done yet," replied Grim, lifting the scythe up in preparation to take a swing with it.

"I said that's enough," repeated Mandy, striding up to Grim, amazing most of the hall's occupants with her blatant lack of fear as she did so, and gave the menacing figure a swift kick to the shin.

"Ouch!" exclaimed Grim, dropping his scythe and clutching the offending shin.

"You're such a wimp," repeated Mandy as Grim hopped about on one leg.

"What did you do dat for?" demanded the unhappy Reaper.

"Ahem," Professor Dumbledore announced his presence, having left his seat to intercede before events escalated beyond what they already had. He put a hand on Snape's arm and forced the younger wizard's wand down to the floor. "I think it best, Professor Snape," he said, "if you would return to your seat."

"Headmaster," Snape began, but was cut off by Dumbledore's raised hand.

"We can discuss this, as well as your use of such a dangerous Dark Arts curse in front of the students, in my office, once the Sorting is over," said Dumbledore patiently.

He waited for the potions master to depart and then turned to Mandy and Grim, the latter of which had stopped hopping and was now glaring balefully at Mandy. Unsure of what to make of the blonde girl, who now held Grim's scythe slung over her shoulder and returning his gaze with a penetrating stare even he found unnerving, Dumbledore turned to Grim.

"You truly are the Grim Reaper?" he enquired cautiously.

"I am," confirmed Grim.

"Might I ask what you are doing here, at Hogwarts?" asked Dumbledore, beginning to feel that Death's arrival was most probably the cause of his 'Encroaching Doom Syndrome'.

"De kids brought me wit dem," explained Grim.

It was Harry Potter, however, speaking up from across the hall at the Gryffindor table, that tried to explain the Reaper's somewhat ambiguous statement. "Grim's our... uh..." He trailed off, unsure of how exactly to explain Grim's relationship with Mandy and himself.

"Friend slave," supplied Mandy. "He lost a bet and promised to stay with us forever."

"Yeah, that's about right," concurred Harry happily.

"I hate you both," pouted Grim, wrestling his scythe away from Mandy.

"Think of him as our butler," suggested Harry to the headmaster.

"Butler, maid, chef, chauffer," Mandy listed, ticking off her fingers. She gave Grim a pointed glare and said, "He's whatever we want him to be. And does whatever we tell him to do - or else."

"Rasafrasaring girl," grumbled Grim unintelligibly.

"I see," managed Dumbledore, doing a reasonable job of hiding his absolute consternation at this turn of events.

"Don't worry," Mandy assured the headmaster. "He's perfectly harmless."

"I am not harmless!" protested Grim, affronted by the idea. "I am de Grim Reaper, death itself give form, feared by all, wielder of de scythe, de only true constant of dis universe and one of de oldest and most powerful beings in all of creation!"

Mandy listened to Grim's proclamation before turning back to Dumbledore and blandly repeating, "He's harmless."

Clearing his throat, Dumbledore peered at Grim and asked, "You aren't planning on reaping any students, are you?"

"Not unless it's their time," replied Grim.

"And if it is their time?"

"If dey gotta go, dey gotta go."

"I see," repeated Dumbledore, just as confused as before.

"I'm only here because Harry and Mandy wanted me wit dem," explained a resigned Grim. "I wouldn't even be a student, if I could help it. After all, dere's nuttin' you mortals could teach me about magic dat I don't already know."

"Well, in that case... Grim, if you really don't want to be a student, and as I suspect forcing you to leave will not be within my abilities," considered Dumbledore thoughtfully, "then I suppose we'll simply have to treat you as one of the children's pets."

"What?!"

Dumbledore nodded, as if this peculiar conclusion were perfectly logical, and began to make his way back to his place at the staff table. "Yes," he concluded, "you can move into the first-year Gryffindor boys dormitory as Mister Potter's pet, or I suppose we should call you his familiar."

Grim stared after the headmaster in amazement, "But... but... but..."

"Carry on, Professor McGonagall," Dumbledore ordered as he resumed his seat. Seeing that Grim had not moved from his spot, indeed the Reaper seemed to be frozen in place in a manner not unlike Draco the ferret, he clapped his hands together in an effort to spur the skeleton on. "Chop chop, Grim, no time to dawdle, as Miss Discordia would say."

"Quite right, dearie," agreed Eris, finishing her tea and tossing the empty cup over her shoulder. The resulting explosion left both Crabbe and Goyle covered in soot and looking somewhat char-grilled. "*CHAOS!* I love it!"

Grumbling despondently, Grim glided across the hall and settled down next to Harry at the Gryffindor table. The only ones there to greet his arrive with any reaction beyond horrified silence, was Harry himself, Ron, Hermione and the twins, Fred and George Weasley, who seemed to think the whole thing to be some sort of giant practical joke.

Masking her shock at recent events, most notably the revelation of Grim's identity, Professor McGonagall turned to the closest of the remaining two children. She looked him over, taking note of the sharply defined features, the black hair styled into a quiff and the black eyes set in glasses that seemed tinged with a green light. He stood perfectly still, perfectly, like a monk in meditation, and regarded her intently.

This was apparently Potter's cousin, at least according to Eris. Though she could see some resemblance between him and the Boy-Who-Lived, there was hardly any similarity between this boy and the overweight blonde bundle called Dudley that Petunia Dursley had been carrying about ten years earlier. Perhaps he was from another side of the family, she concluded.

"So, child, you're a wizard, I trust?"

"I can do magic," Junior obfuscated, unwilling to reveal that he was not, in fact, a wizard. Indeed, he was not even fully human, but still managed to remain strictly truthful while answering McGonagall's inquiry.

"What's your name then?" she asked.

"Junior," replied Junior.

"Junior what?"

"Nergal."

"Nergal what?"

"Junior."

Professor McGonagall closed her eyes, realizing that she had come full circle. Taking a quiet, but deep breath, she tried again. "What is your family name?"

"Nergal," answered Junior promptly.

"And your name?" asked McGonagall.

"Junior," repeated Junior, starting to look a bit annoyed at the repetition.

"All right," accepted McGonagall with a resigned sigh, deciding that surrender was the better part of valour in this particular instance. She held up the Sorting Hat and called, "Nergal, Junior."

Junior quickly stepped up and took his seat on the stool, letting McGonagall settle the Sorting Hat over his head. There was a long moment of silence, then the rim of the hat twisted oddly.

"Another one?" asked the Sorting Hat incredulously. It shimmered about on Nergal's head, until it appeared to be facing where Harry sat. "Death himself, a goddess and now this? You certainly rub elbows with those in high places, m'boy."

"Low places, actually," corrected Junior from beneath the hat's rim.

"Hm? Yes, I suppose so," agreed the hat. "Now, young godling, let us see where to put you..." Several long moments passed before the hat opened its brim wide and shouted, "HUFFLEPUFF!"

"Hmph," snorted Grim as Junior returned the Sorting Hat to Professor McGonagall. "I would've thought the boy would be in Slytherin wit Eris."

Harry cast his friend a knowing glance and asked, "You're never going to forgive Nergal for electrocuting you with his tentacles, are you?"

"Nope."

Junior was greeted by two other first-year boys when he arrived at the Hufflepuff table. The two smiled at him in welcome as he prepared to take a seat.

"Hi, I'm Ernie," greeted the one boy, sticking out a hand.

"And I'm Justin," said the other.

"I'm Junior," said Junior with a broad smile, which proved to be a bad idea, as it revealed a mouthful of teeth that would make a Great White shark envious.

Suffice to say the timid Hufflepuffs went into a state of near shock. When they tried to move as far from Junior as they could, his feelings were understandably hurt and he responded by extruding his tentacles and using them to grab hold of Ernie and Justin before they could flee.

"Where d'you think you're going?" Junior demanded petulantly. The evil green glow behind his glasses intensified as he drew them back, much like a fisherman reeling in a catch. "We're housemates now, remember?" Ernie and Justin could only manage several mindless whimpers by way of reply. "Housemates stick together, like family."

"F-f-f-fah-fah-family," stuttered Ernie in terror.

"Yes, Ernie, family," confirmed Junior with a thin smile. He set Ernie down next to him on one side and Justin on the other, both boys clearly petrified with fear. "I think this is going to be the start of a beautiful friendship. Full on friendship."

The Great Hall was dead quiet as the assembled students and professors watched this play out. Those watching, who were not in Hufflepuff, did not know whether to find it amusing or horrifying. After Eris and the Grim Reaper, they had not thought the remaining two children could be any stranger. Being proved wrong so quickly was worrisome.

It was Professor McGonagall that finally broke the silence by turning to her house's table. "Potter," she asked, a hint of exasperation tingeing her voice, "are any of your friends normal?"

"Well," Harry glanced from McGonagall to Grim, to Junior, to Eris and finally to Mandy. He pointed towards his impatiently waiting friend and said, "Mandy's just an ordinary girl."

Mandy arched an eyebrow, appearing to be slightly insulted at the idea of being an ordinary anything.

"Well, thank goodness," said McGonagall. She turned to Mandy and asked, "What's your full name, dear?"

"Mandy Maxwell," she replied calmly.

"Let's get you sorted then," announced McGonagall, holding up the Sorting Hat. Mandy stepped up and took her seat on the stool. "Maxwell, Mandy."

It was at about this point that the Sorting Hat realized exactly who the deputy-headmistress was about to settle it down on. For a simple piece of frayed cloth and fabric, it panicked very well.

"AAH! GRYFFINDOR! GRYFFINDOR!! PUT HER IN GRYFFINDOR, LIKE POTTER WANTED!" the hat screamed at the top of its non-existent lungs, its voice filled with unbridled terror. "PUT HER ANYWHERE, ANY HOUSE, JUST DON'T PUT ME ON HER HEAD!!"

Nobody could help but stare in amazement as the Sorting Hat made a good attempt at climbing its way up McGonagall's arm in a bid to put as much distance as it could between itself and Mandy. The only ones who did not react overtly to this display were those who had some prior experience with Mandy, which led them to expect something like this.

The Sorting Hat continued to shriek and gibber until Professor McGonagall pulled it away from Mandy, eventually setting it down on the staff table, where it quivered shakily for several more minutes before calming down.

"Um..." McGonagall turned a flustered gaze to Dumbledore and then to Mandy, clearly unsure how to proceed. The Sorting Hat had never before refused to sort a student, let alone absolutely refused to even sit upon a student's head.

"I think, Professor McGonagall," said Dumbledore with a hint of amusement, "that we simply follow the Sorting Hat's suggestion regarding Miss Maxwell's placement."

"What suggestion?" asked McGonagall, a lead weight settling in her stomach at what Dumbledore was proposing.

"I believe it said, quite forcefully too, that she should be placed in Gryffindor."

"Ah, yes, of course," she managed, trying unsuccessfully not to let her own disquiet show. If the girl could terrify the hat, without even wearing it, what would she end up doing to Minerva's poor students?

"Gryffindor, huh?" said Mandy, rising from the stool.

"A fine house," observed Dumbledore, his eyes sparkling with mirth.

"Right," agreed McGonagall, regaining her composure. "Go join your housemates, Miss Maxwell, so that we can start the feast without any more delay."

Mandy nodded simply and then strode down towards the Gryffindor table. Her new housemates were absolutely silent, all, save Harry and Grim, wondering what to make of the petite blonde witch with the pink dress beneath her school robes.

"Dammit, Harry, what did you tell that rag?" demanded Mandy as she took her place at the seat next to Harry, which he had saved for her. "I wanted to be in Slytherin." She held up a clenched fist. "Prestige, influence... power, it would have all been mine!"

"Yeah, but at least now you don't have to worry about killing Malfoy," replied Harry.

"I was never worried about killing him," dismissed Mandy.

"That's a relief," said Hermione.

"I was worried about how I was going to get rid of the body."

While Hermione, Ron and the others (save Harry and Grim) gawked at Mandy's response, Dumbledore finally stood to give his start-of-term speech. The assembled students grew quiet and settled back to listen intently.

"Welcome!" Dumbledore proclaimed happily. "Welcome to a new year at Hogwarts! Before we begin our banquet, I would like to say a few words. And here they are: Nitwit! Blubber! Oddment! Tweak!" He clapped his hands with a flourish and the house tables were suddenly overflowing with trays and bowls and platters of food. "Thank you!"

"Is he - a bit mad?" asked Harry of anyone who might answer.

"More than a bit, I'd say," opined Grim.

"Mad?" asked Percy, who was sitting nearby. "He's a genius! Best wizard in the world!"

"I'm sensing a but here," commented Mandy.

"But he is a bit mad, yes," nodded Percy. He held out a bowl. "Potatoes?"

Dean Thomas, a black boy who had been sorted into Gryffindor with them and was currently sitting between Seamus Finnegan and Neville, directly opposite Mandy, leaned across the table to talk with her. This action annoyed Harry for some reason, despite the fact that Mandy was not officially his girlfriend. Or unofficially for that matter. But the two of them did have an unspoken understanding that they were together.

"Hullo there, Angel Face," Dean purred. "I'm Dean, Dean Tho..."

"What did you just call me?" asked Mandy in a soft, yet dangerous tone.

"Uh..." Dean hesitated, sensing that he had made a mistake. "Angel Face?"

"Now listen to me... Dean?" Mandy paused until Dean nodded in confirmation. "I have a question for you."

"Yes?"

"Do you want to live to see tomorrow?"

"Uh... yes?" managed Dean, now sweating slightly.

"Then don't call me that. Ever," said Mandy.

"Okay, I'll never call you that again," agreed Dean, nodding his head furiously. "Never, ever, ever, ever--"

"Don't push it."

"Right," Dean stopped and composed himself. "Sorry sweetheart."

Mandy's eyebrow slowly arched all the way to her hair band as she repeated incredulously, "Sweetheart?"

Grim, who had been watching Dean's attempt to woo Mandy with amusement, was the first to comment on this latest faux pas. "The boy has a death

wish..." He wiped away an imaginary tear of joy. "How beautiful..."

Harry sat back and made a show of visibly saying a prayer, asking in a loud murmur for any deity that happened to be listening (other than Eris) to watch over Dean's soul in the afterlife. Ron and Hermione only watched with trepidation, having witnessed some of what Mandy was capable of when she took down Malfoy on the Hogwarts Express.

Mandy, however, appeared perfectly calm as she spoke. "Dean..."

"Yeah?" asked Dean, so smitten that he failed to realise the mortal danger he was in.

Mandy reached across the table and grabbed him by the back of his head. "I think you should know..." Abruptly and without warning she slammed Dean's head down, smacking his face against the top of the Gryffindor table. "I'm not sweet," she said, before repeating the action, slamming Dean into the tabletop twice in quick succession, "and I don't have a heart."

"Urkle... phmpf..."

Dean, with a bloodied nose, split lip and two rapidly forming black eyes, slipped out of his seat and onto the floor of the Great Hall, no longer fully conscious. The room was perfectly silent. Nobody was saying or doing anything, save stare at an unconcerned Mandy.

Unsurprisingly, not even the teachers seemed willing to censure Mandy for her actions. The girl was, after all, apparently a friend of the Boy-Who-Lived, the self-proclaimed goddess of chaos, some strange boy with tentacles that sprouted out of his back, the Grim Reaper himself and had also managed to scare the Sorting Hat out of its wits.

Finally, Grim leaned over the table to examine Dean's insensate form.

"I do believe you're going soft girl," he announced upon completing his inspection. "You didn't even give de poor fool a concussion."

"It was only his first offence, so I went easy on him," explained Mandy, returning to her steak.

"But, when Malfoy..." Hermione trailed off.

"Dean's an idiot, Malfoy's obnoxious. There's a difference," said Mandy.

Having managed to lift Dean back into his seat, with Neville's help, and prop him against the table so that he would not topple over, Seamus Finnegan turned an awed gaze to Mandy. He proved his new-found Gryffindor status by asking the question most of those in the hall were silently wondering. "What are you?"

Mandy graced him with, what was for her, an innocent look. "Just a pretty little girl."

"Spawn of Satan is my opinion," was Grim's comment.

.oOo.

Peeves was busy planning how to ambush the students once they left the Great Hall, as he hadn't able to get to them before they entered for the Sorting ceremony. He was drifting aimlessly, upside down of course, and looking for something that he could use to bombard them with as they exited the hall.

"Well, what have we here?" rumbled a deep, gravelly voice, from out of the shadows. "Something that needs exterminating, from the look of it."

"Who's there?" asked Peeves, startled out of his thoughts of mischief. He spun around, looking for whomever it was that managed to sneak up on him, righting himself in the process. He quickly spotted the shadowy figure lurking in one of the corridor's alcoves, between two tarnished suits of armour.

"Your worst nightmare, foul creature from beyond!" spat the man, not moving from his place.

"Eh?" asked a completely befuddled Peeves, something which seldom happened. "What did you call Peeves? Foul? And from where?"

The figure stepped out of the shadows, revealing himself to the confused poltergeist.

"Ooooh," gasped Peeves in delight, thinking that he now had a chance to start some mischief earlier than planned. He then clapped his hands in anticipation and cheered, "It's the newsie professor!"

"Now, there's something I want you to do for me," said the professor.

"What's that?" asked Peeves, perking upright, "A professor actually *wants* Peeves to do something?"

"Yes," confirmed the man, now taking careful aim. "Please remain perfectly still..."

.oOo.

"Ahem - just a few more words now that we are all fed and watered. I have a few start-of-term notices to give you," announced Dumbledore cheerfully, having just caused Ron great distress by clearing the house tables of the many puddings and desserts which the redhead had yet to sample.

The students slouched back in their seats, most of them feeling barely able to move, they had eaten so much. Even Mandy, for whom a compliment was as rare as birds teeth, had found the feast to be more than satisfactory - though she had commented on the odd inclusion of mint humbugs.

Seeing that he had everyone's attention, rapt or not, Dumbledore began. "First-years should note that the forest in the grounds is forbidden to all pupils. And a few of our older students would do well to remember that as well." The headmaster flashed a bemused glance in the twins' direction as he said this. The twins, irascible as ever, rejoined by waving merrily back at him.

Chuckling at their antics, Dumbledore continued, "I have also been asked by Mr Filch, the caretaker, to remind you all that no magic should be used between classes in the corridors."

The first-years looked to where Dumbledore had indicated and found themselves, almost as one, vowing to stay as far away from Filch as they could manage. The man looked positively belligerent. His cat, a scrawny creature that did little to no justice to the feline breed's reputation for fine grooming, seemed much the same.

Now Dumbledore's expression turned slightly more serious, though the twinkling of his eyes did not abate. "It is my sad duty to inform you that Professor Quirrell, who was slated to be Hogwarts' Defence Against the Dark Arts professor this year, will in fact not be taking the position."

Soft murmurs arose from the older students at this news. Even the staff turned surprised eyes towards Dumbledore, this being the first they had heard of Quirrell's inability to take up his position. Mandy, never one to appreciate being left in the dark about something, asked, "What's the big deal about that?"

"The Defence job--" started Fred.

"--has a curse on it," finished George.

"Nonsense," scoffed Percy, adjusting his glasses.

"It does," insisted Fred.

"Everyone knows it," said George.

"Cursed? In what way?" asked Hermione, sounding almost as sceptical about the idea as Percy was.

It was the twins' friend, Lee Jordan, a likeable boy with a full head of dreadlocks, who answered. "None of the Defence teachers have ever lasted more than a full term," he said. "We've had a different one each year."

George nodded in agreement. "Been that way for ages."

"Bill and Charlie told us about it," added Fred.

"Quick turnover of staff that," observed Mandy.

"Well... yes, I suppose so," Percy reluctantly admitted.

"If dey need someone for de job, I could do it," offered Grim sincerely.

"You?" asked Percy, growing pale at the prospect.

"Of course," confirmed Grim, failing to notice the alarmed expressions of several of the nearby Gryffindors. "I'm de Grim Reaper, after all. Who better to teach you about de Dark Arts?"

"What happened to the professor, sir?" one of the older Ravenclaw boys asked of Dumbledore.

Everyone promptly turned back to the staff table, eager to put the idea of Grim holding classes out of their minds. Dumbledore had been listening to the students' whispered discussions and now maintained a carefully schooled expression of mild bemusement as he resumed talking.

"Sadly," he said, "Professor Quirrell had the misfortune of being possessed by the formless spirit of Voldemort..." There were gasps and cries of alarm from most of those present at the mere utterance of the Dark Lord's name. "...who managed to attach himself to the back of the poor man's head, hidden away beneath the layers of his turban."

"Damn!" cursed Grim. "Missed him again!"

"Better luck next time," offered Mandy.

"Yeah," Harry quickly agreed, his expression growing dark as he thought of his parents' murderer. That Voldemort had managed to give Grim the slip, once again, caused him to clench his jaw so tightly that his teeth groaned in protest.

"Don't worry," Grim assured him, understanding the cause of Harry's anger. "Next time, I'll get him. I always do."

"Luckily, however," continued Dumbledore once the latest bout of whispers ended, "I have managed to secure an immediate replacement; the very same man that unmasked and then foiled Voldemort's--" gasps once again filled the air "--attempt to penetrate the security of Hogwarts. I had planned to introduce him to you tonight, but he is currently making a sweep of Hogwarts in an attempt to flush out any further... I believe the words he used were, 'Mother lodes of supernatural terror and spawn of demonic evil'."

The students, and other members of staff, only stared at Dumbledore in disbelief. Not because he had managed to obtain a replacement so quickly, but rather because of the last sentence he had repeated. There was something disturbing about the idea of a professor that would say such a thing.

During this short period of silence, Mandy spoke up. "Sounds familiar."

"You don't suppose..." Harry trailed off.

"With both Junior and Eris here, I wouldn't be surprised if it was," she replied.

Murmurs once again began to fill the Great Hall as the students began discussing the new professor, making wild guesses as to his identity. Silence fell a few minutes later when Dumbledore raised his hands and called for their attention again.

The headmaster gazed out at the students, confirming that he had their full attention, and then proceeded to give the one announcement he considered most important of all. "Finally, and most importantly, I must tell you that this year, the third-floor corridor on the right--"

Whatever Dumbledore had planned to say, it was lost before the words could be spoken as the doors leading into the Great Hall burst open with terrific force. They swung wild and slammed into the walls before rebounding, retaining much of their initial impetus and almost catching the terrified creature that zoomed into the room.

"Headmaster! Help!" Peeves screamed in desperation. "Save me from the crazy man!"

A writhing beam of supernatural energy lanced through the air and clipped Peeves' hat, setting it afire and toppling it from the poltergeist's bulbous head. A moment later a tall, muscular figure dived through the narrow gap between the still swinging doors, slipping past at the last instant as he chased after his fleeing prey.

He was built like a professional bodybuilder, muscles layered upon muscles until he seemed to fairly bulge with them. His hair was a thick mane of unkempt red that fell to his shoulders. A black patch covered his left eye and his right hand had had long ago been replaced by a cybernetic replacement.

A grey, sweat-stained muscle-shirt strained to contain his barrel of a chest and tight, black leather pants creaked with each movement of his legs. Massive combat boots adorned his feet, looking as if they could be used to crush solid rock, utilizing nothing but their own considerable weight.

"It's Hoss Delgado," identified Mandy, not a hint of her surprise in evidence.

"Hoss Delgado?" asked Grim, leaning back in alarm.

"Hoss Delgado?" asked Ron and Hermione in confusion.

"Hoss Delgado," confirmed Harry.

It was Neville that asked the question on everyone's lips. "Er... who's he?"

Harry gave a nonchalant shrug. "The world's craziest Spectral Exterminator,"

"And apparently our new Defence Against the Dark Arts professor," added Mandy, watching proceedings with interest.

"YAAAAARRRR!!!"

Hoss was now standing in the centre of the Great Hall, yelling a battle cry and firing more energy streams from the hi-tech attachment protruding in place of the prosthetic right hand he usually used. He was shooting wildly in an attempt to hit the terrified Peeves, who was desperately trying to escape - crackling orange and blue protonic energy following just behind him.

"AAAAHH!!!" screeched Peeves, ducking and weaving through the air. He was trying to make for the staff table, but Hoss was constantly cutting him off. "Headmaster! Headmaster! Please protect poor pitiful Peeves!"

"Stop running and return to the hell that spawned you, demon!" shouted Hoss, shaking his fist.

"I'm not a demon," Peeves yelled desperately over his shoulder. "I'm just a poltergeist!"

"I knew it!" Hoss exclaimed as he fired a short burst from his proton-stream cannon, which hit close enough to vaporise Peeves' bowtie. "Obviously the work of a malevolent inter-dimensional being, probably Yog Sothoth again!" It was then that Hoss skidded to a halt, noticing Grim for the first time. "YOU!!!"

"Oh, brudda!" moaned Grim, covering his eye sockets with a hand.

"Who?" Peeves stopped fleeing from Hoss long enough to look over at whoever it was that had unluckily caught the insane Defence professor's attention. He stared at Grim in incomprehension for several seconds before recognition sank in and he once again began to panic. "THE

REAPER!! AAAAHH!! Headmaster! Save me!"

"Now I have you!" yelled Hoss. The proton blaster Hoss had been using to take pot-shots at Peeves abruptly retracted into his wrist and was replaced by his robotic right hand, which he smacked into the palm of his real hand. "Let's disco!" he snarled, suddenly breaking into a run, charging straight for the Gryffindor table and Grim. He body slammed into Grim, smashing him up against the table's edge.

"Wait!" protested Grim.

"Gotcha!"

Hoss grabbed Grim in a fierce bear hug, crushing him in his thick and muscled arms, as he heaved the skeleton up and then tossed him over his shoulders and into the floor. Grim crashed with a resounding thud and barely had time to realise he was no longer flying when Hoss jumped on him once again.

"What foul scheme are you playing at this time, eh?" demanded Hoss, straddling Grim's back. He took hold of the Reaper's skull and slammed it into the floor. "Talk!" He raised Grim's skull and slammed it down again. "Talk!" And again. "Talk, damn you! Talk!"

"But I'm not doing anything!" Grim managed to say between blows.

"Hmm..." Hoss paused to consider this possibility. After a second to think it over, he came to a conclusion and slammed Grim's head into the floor again. "LIAR!!"

Everyone watched incredulously as Hoss continued to pummel Grim's skull into the floor for some imagined evil activity, not really able to believe that anyone could attack Death himself like that. It was only Harry and Mandy that seemed to be more amused by this than anything else, though neither of them made any move to intervene.

"He's our new--" began Fred.

-- Defence professor?" finished George.

"Yep," confirmed Mandy.

"Wicked!" the twins chorused.

By now Hoss had decided that he would not be getting a confession, and so slammed Grim's skull into the floor one final time before leaping off, incidentally using the battered skeleton's back as a springboard. He waited until Grim managed to stagger to his feet, the Reaper looking very displeased and now gripping his scythe firmly in hand.

"And now... the piece of resistance!" Hoss announced, butchering his French, as the cybernetic hand retracted into his wrist. A moment later a chainsaw, of all things, emerged to take its place. Hoss cranked it up, using his teeth for some reason, and then charged. "YAAAAARRRR!!"

"AAAAHH!!"

Grim ducked at the last second, the chainsaw slicing through the air above his skull. Without anything to stop it, it sliced into the haft of his scythe. With a torturous grinding sound it cut through the wood and neatly severed the blade from the scythe's haft.

Grim looked at his ruined tool in dismay and cried, "My scythe!"

"Yield!" ordered Hoss, waving his chainsaw in a threatening manner.

"Fool!" boomed Grim, rising to his full, intimidating height. He raised up what was left of his scythe, mostly the shaft, which suddenly flared to life as it was engulfed in a glowing field of blood-red energy. "Your primitive toys cannot match the power of the dark scythe!"

"No!" exclaimed Hoss, his single eye widening in shock as Grim brandished his light-scythe. "It's impossible!"

Grim swung his light-scythe at Hoss, who tried to block with his chainsaw. The scythe, however, sliced through the metal with supernatural ease. Lengths of chain and various other bits and pieces scattered with a clang as the chainsaw abruptly cut off, now neatly bisected.

"Ha!" barked Grim after making this decisive blow. He stepped in close for the follow up and made a downward strike which severed the remaining section of the chainsaw from Hoss's arm, cutting just about the wrist mounting. His blows dealt successfully, Grim backed off several feet, giving them both some breathing room.

"AAAARR!!" cried Hoss, clamping his hand over the sparking wrist. "My hand!"

"Bwahahaha!!" laughed Grim victoriously. He lowered his light-scythe to a guard position and mockingly asked, "Now what are you going to do, you muscle-bound oaf?"

"Grr..." Hoss growled, hefting his wrist, and exclaimed, "Laser sword!"

"What?" Grim's sockets grew wide in surprise.

The shattered ruin of the chainsaw's mounting retracted back into Hoss' wrist, immediately replaced as a new attachment emerged. A second later it thrummed to life and formed a metre-long blade of blue energy.

"YAAAAARRRR!!" bellowed Hoss as he leapt forward.

"AAAAHH!!" screamed Grim, raising his light-scythe to repel the attack.

"*CHAOS !!*" cackled Eris, watching the scuffle with delight.

"Go Grim! Go Hoss!" cheered Harry, unwilling to pick sides as he considered both fighters his friends.

"Full on friendship!" announced Junior, tentacles drawing a comatose Ernie and Justin in for a group hug.

"Oh yeah," said Mandy, summing up the situation succinctly, "school here is gonna be good."

RIP.

Author's Note: The world's first *Harry Potter/Grim Adventures of Billy and Mandy* crossover. Inspired, as a matter of course, by the hilariously unsubtle episode involving Toadblatt's Summer School of Sorcery and the exceptionally wimpy Nigel Planter.

As Mandy's surname is never mentioned (nor for that matter is Billy's) I decided to enact my powers as the almighty writer (BOW DOWN AND WORSHIP ME!) and used my poetic license to give her a last name of Maxwell, as a tip of the hat to series creator Maxwell Atoms.

With regards to Billy, who isn't featured in this story, I decided to do a split wherein everything Billy ever did that wasn't completely stupid ended by being done by Harry, while all the rest was transferred to Dudley. This left Dudley as the equivalent of the village idiot, as Billy hardly ever did anything intelligent.

No geeky Irwin, either, I'm afraid, but I think Dean Thomas filled that role reasonably well.

.oOo.

A Little Extra

.oOo.

Two unlikely companions sat before the fireplace, reclining in plush armchairs and warming their feet by the crackling magical fire. The one pair of feet were ensconced in some thick wool socks (bright orange with electric purple horizontal stripes), while the other pair were clad in a set of bunny slippers (of the fuzzy neon-pink variety).

"Actually, Grim," Dumbledore admitted, "there's a question I'd like you to answer for me."

Grim gave the headmaster a cautious look and asked, "What?"

"How is Elvis... and have you seen him lately?"

"Well now," said Grim as he clapped his skeletal hands together and rubbed them in anticipation. He so seldom had the chance to regale someone with morbid tales of his reaping days. "Dat's a long story..."

Something Grim This Way Comes Something Grim Is Here To Stay

Title: Something Grim This Way Comes

Author: Ruskbyte

Disclaimer: This story is based on characters and situations created and owned by JK Rowling, Maxwell Atoms, and various publishing houses, animation studios and the like. No money is being made (how I wish it were otherwise) and no copyright or trademark infringement is intended.

Author's Note: Sod it. This is the crossover plot bunny that refused to lay down and die like all good one-shots are supposed to. I suppose that was probably Mandy's doing, or perhaps Grim. Wouldn't put it past either of them. In fact, it might even have been Harry (I think Mandy's been having a positive influence on the lad). Still, here it is. Who knows, there might even be some more in the future.

IMPORTANT NOTE – THE STORY BELOW WILL FOLLOW THE ORIGINAL CANON PLOT CLOSELY.

SORT OF.

So, please, don't bitch about it as *that's the point* - to see what would happen in predefined circumstances now that several... ah,... outside elements have been added into the mix. I'm fully aware that the introduction of Mandy, Grim, Eris, Junior, Hoss and everything else would completely throw off the timeline, but that would prevent us from seeing what would happen to known events as those events would likely never happen. If you want something completely original, then my alternate take on this situation; *Masters of Death*, should be more to your liking.

Summary: Harry, Mandy and Grim settle in for their first year at Hogwarts. Before too long they uncover a secret treasure hidden within the school walls, one that Voldemort seems to have an interest in. Naturally, they decide to get their hands on it before he can.

"Once upon a time. The end." - Mandy, reciting her version of a nursery rhyme.

/oOo\

Chapter Two - Something Grim Is Here To Stay

/oOo/

Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore was wondering when he was going to wake up. And he was hoping, very much so, that it would happen sooner rather than later.

The causes of the great wizard's... distress, for lack of a better word, were currently sitting at their house tables. All of them were blissfully unaware of the strain they were putting on Dumbledore's heart and nerves. This was the only reason he could not bring himself to resent their presence at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

It had all begun several years ago when Dumbledore had suddenly and inexplicably felt a sense of sheer and utter dread wash over him. That feeling had not diminished since then and had, in fact, only grown in intensity. Unable to explain this phenomenon, which he privately thought of as '*Encroaching Doom Syndrome*', Dumbledore had little option but to wait until something came his way and provided some enlightenment.

Said enlightenment had arrived on the Hogwarts Express a little less than a month ago.

This year was supposed to have been a very special year, marking the return of the Wizarding World's saviour from his isolated childhood with his Muggle relatives; the Dursleys.

Harry Potter, however, had not come to Hogwarts alone.

Indeed, the famed Boy-Who-Lived had arrived with four decidedly... unique companions.

Eris Kallisti Discordia, the first of Harry's friends to reveal herself, just so happened to be the Goddess of Chaos, Discord and Strife. The young girl, quite striking in appearance with her thick mane of golden hair and the skimpy white wraps she wore under her school robes, had apparently grown bored at some point and decided to come to Hogwarts in an attempt to alleviate that boredom. Suffice to say she was already living up to her reputation.

Then there was Harry's cousin; Junior. The boy was of no true blood relation to Harry, but was actually the progeny of Vernon Dursley's sister; Marge, and a strange demon-like creature from the centre of the Earth, called Nergal. From what Junior said, his mother had sent him to Hogwarts in an attempt to provide him with an education in proper etiquette. Just what could be considered 'proper' for a child who had a habit of eating the other students' familiars had not yet been determined. The Hufflepuffs were still in the process of recovering from Junior's placement in their house,

particularly his fellow first-years.

Most worrisome of Harry's friends, however, was the very personification of death itself; the Grim Reaper. The black shrouded figure, who was taller than anyone in the school save Hagrid and sported a delightful Jamaican accent, had caused quite a stir upon announcing his presence at Hogwarts. That he was nominally one of Harry's best friends, despite being a walking skeleton, was the only reason Dumbledore had any hope that his students might survive the year.

Dumbledore paused in his retrospection.

No. Grim, he decided after a moment, was in fact only the *second* most worrisome new arrival. First place, undoubtedly, was reserved for the person Harry happily declared to be his best friend of all. Her name was Mandy Maxwell, and she was unlike any other child that Dumbledore had ever encountered. Considering the presence of Eris and Junior, that was definitely saying something.

Her eyes were the deepest and darkest blue he had ever seen and left Dumbledore with the feeling that she was reading his mind as easily as if it were an open book, despite the fact that he was a master of Occlumency. Her short blonde hair gave the impression of a pair of horns when viewed from the right angle, something that provided her with a formidably menacing aura. Oddly enough, she tended to wear rather bright clothing - usually pink dresses, instead of anything that the Muggles might consider part of gothic angst. Taken from afar you could easily mistake Mandy as being a cute young witch, despite her being an acerbic, conniving sociopath. It was an interesting dichotomy, all things considered.

Harry himself was only vaguely as Dumbledore had expected, but considering his friends, that was understandable. The newly-minted Gryffindor seemed completely inured to the various oddities of those around him. His memories of her had been enough to send the Sorting Hat into a state of gibbering terror, yet he acted as if this were perfectly reasonable. Indeed, he not only accepted but apparently encouraged Mandy's stated goals to gain unlimited prestige, influence and power. And Grim's daily death threats were ignored as if they were all in good fun.

Dumbledore had never imagined the existence of children like these. They were all proving to be intelligent, independent and easy-going. All these things were traits he would have encouraged in any other students. Save that young Mandy was possibly a greater menace to the Wizarding World than Voldemort could ever hope to be. And the others trailed not very far behind her. And it was only a month into the school year.

Still, he had to admit; they *did* liven the castle up a bit.

They even seemed to already know the new Defence Against the Dark Arts professor; Hoss Delgado.

That was a story in of itself, wherein Hoss had somehow found his way into Hogwarts (despite being a Muggle) and in short order had discovered that Professor Quirrell was playing host to the disembodied spirit of Lord Voldemort. The ensuing battle, which had run from one end of the castle to the other, had ended with an impressive amount of collateral damage and sent a badly brutalized Quirrell fleeing into the Forbidden Forest. Dumbledore had offered Hoss the newly vacant Defence position on the spot.

Since then things had proven anything but dull, as Harry, Mandy and Grim quickly stamped their presence throughout the school. Eris and Junior were likewise making their presences felt. The most notable incident had been the day following the Sorting, wherein the entire student body had discovered that they had literally seen Death and could now discern the Thestrals that drew the school's supposedly horseless carriages. Dumbledore had received well over a hundred Howlers the following morning; the students' parents expressed their displeasure at having the children suffer something so traumatic.

There had also been something of an episode during one of the first-year Potions classes, most notably with the combined Gryffindor and Slytherin group. Of course, the entire incident was perfectly understandable, more-or-less, provided you were aware that this had been the first Potions lesson of the year for Harry, Mandy, Grim and Eris...

-oOo-

The first-year Gryffindors and Slytherins were waiting, well, perhaps not eagerly, but certainly filled with an odd sense of anticipation. Their first class in the art of brewing potions was about to commence. The Potions classroom, located in the Hogwarts dungeons, was a cold and dank locale of the sort that Grim usually made use of for storing his trunk.

Professor Snape stepped into the room as the chimes of the school's Great Bell sounded, not a second early or late, but exactly on time. The door slammed shut behind him with all the finality of a coffin closing.

His robes somehow billowing impressively as he walked, Snape crossed to his desk to collect the sheet of parchment that contained the role. Skimming briefly over the list of names, he then looked up at the assembled students. He immediately took notice of Grim, who was sitting next to Harry and Mandy. He did not say anything about the Reaper's presence in his classroom, but settled for glaring balefully at the skeleton. Clearly the events of the Sorting were not forgotten, nor forgiven.

Returning his attention to the parchment in his hands, Snape began to take role. He called out name after name in a slow and steady monotone, working his way down the list. This indifference only lasted until he came to one particular name. Oddly enough, it was not Harry's.

"Eris Discordia," called Snape, uttering the name with a displeased curl of his lips.

"Here, Sewie-poo!" replied Eris with a cheerful wave.

This answering call was so unexpected, not to mention insolent, that it took the professor several seconds before he properly comprehended the manner in which he had just been addressed. Suffice to say, Snape blew his top with impressive speed and fury.

"WHAT!?!?"

"Oh, come on, dahling," said Eris, exaggerating her accent. She was sitting by herself --all of her fellow Slytherins too afraid to sit next to her-- and dismissed Snape's righteous anger with a languid wave. "No need to get so uptight about things - it's all in good fun!"

Snape's normally pallid cheeks flushed a deep pink as he glared murderously at the youthful goddess. Eris remained utterly unperturbed and unconcerned. With a furious hiss, unable to bring himself to deduct points from his own house, Snape turned back to the role.

Continuing past Eris' name, Snape called off the remaining students. He promptly encountered another problem when he called the name of his favourite student, Draco Malfoy. When no immediate reply was forthcoming Snape peered about the classroom in search of the youngster in question.

"Um, that might be a problem, Professor," said Pansy Parkinson finally.

"Meaning?" asked Snape, directing his stare towards the puggish witch.

With an unhappy wince, Pansy leaned over and reached into her book bag. In a manner not unlike a Muggle illusionist pulling a rabbit out of a top hat, she promptly produced a silver-furred ferret, and deposited him on the desktop in front of her.

Snape took one look at the morose animal and immediately knew who was responsible. He rounded on Eris, his cheeks tinged pink once more. "Discordia!" he spat angrily, pointing at Eris and then to the ferret, "You will return Mister Malfoy to his natural form! Now!"

"Uh uh, not going to do it," Eris refused, shaking her head resolutely. "Not until he learns to be polite."

Snape made a sound like a kettle boiling, but could do nothing to change Eris' mind. She was, after all, a goddess. There was also the fact that she might use one of her golden apples of chaos on anyone that bothered her. Or even those who did not. Even the headmaster, the most powerful sorcerer on the planet, could not hope to stand against a recalcitrant deity. Resigned to this fact, at least for the moment, Snape moved on to the next name on the class register.

"Amanda Maxwell."

"Mandy," corrected Mandy.

Yet again Snape paused and directed his gaze at one of the students. Mandy met his stare with a bland impassiveness, not unlike how she normally appeared. The only indication that she was even aware of the ire being directed towards her was the fractional narrowing of her dark blue eyes.

"What did you say?" demanded Snape, his voice deceptively soft.

"I prefer to be called Mandy," repeated Mandy patiently. "Not 'Amanda'."

As the young blonde witch was not one of his Slytherins, nor a goddess, Snape did not hesitate to stomp over and loom imposingly over her. He was both perturbed and delighted by how she matched his gaze and stared right back at him. It perturbed him by how readily she shrugged off his look; without fear, wariness, disquiet, unease or any other kind of emotion. Her eyes held the same flat, blank and lifeless stare of a shark. He was delighted, however, by this seemingly god-given opportunity. His eyes almost cut to where Eris was sitting as he remembered her presence in the classroom. He silently amended his statement. This was a lucky happenstance.

Everyone in the castle, himself included, wanted to know more about Harry Potter and his... unusual friends, but no-one had yet worked up enough courage to ask. One possible solution would be legilimency, but even Snape knew better than to try prying into the Grim Reaper's thoughts, no matter how brow-beaten the skeleton might appear. Likewise, the workings of Eris's mind was definitely not something he wanted to experience. Mandy Maxwell on the other hand...

Calling on his magic, Snape focused on the girl's dark blue eyes and struck.

As she had no mental shields to speak of, it took only an instant for him to gain entry into her mind.

"AAAAEEEEIIII!"

It took only an instant after that for Snape to unleash a piercing squeal of unadulterated terror. As his mind recoiled in numb horror his body acted on its own by falling to the floor and curling itself into as tight a ball as it could manage. Thankfully he did not soil himself in any way, but that was only because every muscle in his body was clenched tight enough to prevent any release.

"Professor Snape!" exclaimed Hermione and most of the Slytherins. Draco was still a ferret and thus unable to say anything aside from some high-pitched squeaks and hisses. Eris threw her head back and cackled insanely. Nobody moved to help the fallen figure of their professor, however.

"Uh, was that 'aaaaeeiii' with one 'i' or two?" Harry asked Grim, continuing to transcribe the lesson even though it had not yet properly begun. He never once bothered looking up.

"Bloody hell," whispered Ron in awe.

"Is he... sucking his thumb?" asked Seamus Finnegan, staring with appalled curiosity.

Closer examination revealed that, yes, Snape had at some point jammed his right thumb into his mouth and was sucking on it with all the desperation of a starving newborn. Having this dreadfully embarrassing fact pointed out to all and sundry was enough to shake the trembling professor out of his terror induced stupor. Removing his thumb with a pop, Snape scabbled to his feet. Once upright, he drew himself up to his full

height and found himself unable to do anything but stand in place and seethe.

Never in his life had he been so utterly humiliated, not even by James Potter and Sirius Black at their worst. Of course, the fact that he was still scared half out of his mind only served to drive him to greater heights of anger. The reason for this was simple; his rage at what had just happened was just about the only thing strong enough to dull the unmatched dread and sheer panic that his brief encounter with Mandy's mind had caused to surge through him.

A low growl from the back of his throat was all the articulation that Snape could manage in the face of Mandy's defiance. He tried to stare her down, but the girl's cool and unrelenting posture deflected his attempt as readily as a ping-pong ball bouncing off a concrete slab. The only movement made during this standoff, other than the twisted contortions of his face, were the clenching and unclenching of his hands. Murder was undoubtedly on his mind as he glared at Mandy, incapable of forming coherent speech, his expression one of such furious hatred that some of the students were tempted to replicate his earlier actions.

"Wow, I didn't know anyone could turn that shade of purple," Ron whispered to those around him, even as Neville Longbottom silently slipped off his stool and sought refuge under the table.

Mandy sat perfectly still the entire while, her gaze unwavering as she examined the professor with the same dispassion a Muggle scientist might reserve for scrutinising a bacteria culture. The standoff grew longer, as did the tension that seemed to almost crackle between the two.

Finally, swallowing convulsively, Snape whirled round and retreated to his desk. "Very well," he ground out through clenched teeth, "I shall note your preferred manner of address on the role, Maxwell."

The blonde girl's only reply was to incline her head the barest fraction, as if giving him permission to do so. Seeing that he had lost this round, which seemed to be the trend for the day, Snape skilfully hid a relieved sigh and settled behind his desk. He reclaimed the parchment role and, with only a trace of pink in his cheeks, resumed reading through the students' names. Moving past the remaining 'M's, he proceeded quickly through the 'N's and 'P's, until...

"Ah, yes, Harry Potter..." sighed Snape very softly. He sounded tired.

"Yes sir?" said Harry, though it was more a question than a confirmation of his presence.

"...The only *normal* one of the lot," Snape concluded.

"Yes sir," Harry readily agreed.

Snape stared at the boy that he had spent the last decade cultivating a deep loathing for. The boy had an open and earnest expression on his face, exactly what the professor had been expecting. Unbidden, his eyes darted from Harry to Grim, then to Eris and finally to Mandy, sitting placidly at the black-haired wizard's side. It took great effort not to piss himself as he was assaulted by memories of what he had just endured. He gave the Boy-Who-Lived one final look, a weak and lacklustre glare that would not have intimidated a puffskein, before calling off the last few students without interruption.

Deciding not to tempt fate any further and refrain from his usual interrogation of some hapless first-year, in this case it would have likely been Harry, Snape rose to his feet and approached the blackboard.

"Get out your quills and start writing this down," he began, forgoing the carefully prepared speech he had ready.

As soon as class was over though, he would be visiting his office where a well hidden bottle of Black Pearl Rum was waiting for him.

-oOo-

All things considered, the entire episode could have gone a great deal worse. Especially for Professor Snape, who seemed prone to bouts of uncontrolled tremors whenever Mandy was present, as well as having developed the habit of gnashing his teeth whenever the other first-years were mentioned. Apparently he had gotten off on the wrong foot with Nergal Junior as well, though that was a story in itself. Suffice to say it had taken the rest of the staff nearly an hour to get the Potions Master down from the ceiling. Even now, weeks later, nobody was quite sure how the seemingly timid boy had managed it and Snape was certainly unwilling to say on the matter. He was also prone to bouts of uncontrolled tremors whenever Junior was present too.

Dumbledore turned his gaze to Hoss Delgado.

The school's latest Defence professor was an entirely different kettle of fish. In fact, Hoss was more a kettle of some strange creatures that had yet to be identified.

While normally very outspoken and energetic in his quest to stamp out anything that could be considered even remotely evil, Hoss was currently sitting almost peacefully at the high table and eating his dinner. Seated next to him was a slightly pale Professor Sinistra, who was struggling to keep her dinner down as Hoss regaled his colleagues with tales of hunting down stalker Sasquatches in the back alleys of suburban America. Thus far it seemed that only the irrepressible Professor Flitwick was paying any attention to the graphic and doubtless untrue story.

While the man's sanity was definitely questionable, the fact remained that he was proving to be extraordinarily popular amongst the students. Dumbledore could not recall the last time that Defence Against the Dark Arts had been such a hot topic of conversation during meals. That the students were often reduced to little more than gibbering wrecks seemed somewhat secondary to the fact that they were actually paying attention during their classes. Of course, that may have had more to do with their professor's teaching methods than any desire to learn, but one took what one could get.

Rapt attention was something of a must in the Defence classroom, as Hoss had the odd, some might say lunatic, habit of shooting things at his students in an attempt to 'keep them on their toes'. Normally this would not be considered too much of a problem, indeed, several past Defence professors had done something similar. The trouble lay in the fact that Hoss occasionally forgot where he was and subsequently used his wrist-mounted crossbow to fire off petrol-powered chainsaws at his students.

Madam Pomfrey had already experienced two separate nervous breakdowns, having found herself in the unenviable position of having to reattach various arms, legs and other body parts on an almost hourly basis.

To make matters even more complicated was the fact that Hoss was essentially a Muggle, despite whatever experiences and skills he had regarding supernatural phenomena. As such, it was next to impossible for the robust man to teach any of his students any practical applications of defensive magic.

Hoss had thus far managed to circumvent this failing by having the children read through their textbooks, generally in the form of homework assignments, and then later practice on each other while he stood back to observe. Most lessons consisted primarily of theory, with the occasional anecdote thrown into the mix, some degree of duelling between the students and one grand finale where Hoss would 'volunteer' a student to help him demonstrate some of the techniques he used to combat 'ultimate evil'.

Nobody, not even Dumbledore, was certain if the Longbottom boy would ever fully recover...

-oOo-

It was with a healthy amount of trepidation that the students entered the classroom where they would be learning the one branch of magic that was more... energetic... than anything else in the curriculum. This, of course, would be Defence Against the Dark Arts - as taught by Professor Hoss Delgado.

The reason for the students' caution was not the subject matter, but rather the person that would be teaching it to them. After all, they had all been witness to Hoss' manic pursuit of the school poltergeist (Peeves had still not recovered from that traumatic event) and his subsequent wrestling match and lightsaber duel with Grim. Any doubts they might have had about the scruffy man's sanity had been firmly cemented over the past few days after hearing stories from those students that had already had the misfortune to attend one of his classes.

"The man's mad," Fred Weasley had concluded.

"Utterly bonkers," agreed the other twin, George.

The pair had then confirmed the rumours about their own sanity by sharing a grin and chorusing, "It's so cool!"

Harry and Mandy were the only two first-year Gryffindors to enter the Defence classroom without pausing at the threshold, as if expecting to be attacked. They were closely followed by Ron, who despite any misgivings felt that he would probably be safer if he did not stray too far from the odd couple. Hermione and the others were a tad more hesitant to step inside, but eventually made their ways to their desks in time for the lesson.

Grim decided to wait outside, rather than risk becoming a target for Hoss' fervour yet again.

Finding their professor waiting for them, leaning back in his chair with both feet propped atop his desk, the students waited uncertainly for class to begin. Several minutes passed in an uneasy silence, which for obvious reasons failed to affect either Harry or Mandy, before Hoss pulled his feet off the desktop and rose upright.

"The name's Delgado," he rasped, looking out with his good eye from beneath a thick fringe of red hair. His eye skimmed over the assembled students. "Hoss Delgado."

Once he had their attention, Hoss turned his gaze to a sheet of parchment on his desk and began to read through the role. Not to anyone's surprise, he seemed to take some measure of satisfaction in seeing that Harry and Mandy were going to be students in his class.

After confirming that all the Gryffindors were present and accounted for, Hoss moved to stand in front of the massive blackboard at the front of the class. Clasping his hands behind his back and regarding the waiting students with obvious scepticism, he began, "Now, I'm sure you're all wondering what makes me qualified to teach you the Art of Defeating Ultimate Evil!"

"Actually; no," called Grim from outside the classroom. "We were wondering why you haven't been locked away in a nice, padded cell."

Hoss responded to this remark by shifting his cybernetic hand into a rather rotund looking cannon, the fuse of which he promptly lit with a matchstick that he struck against his chin. A few short seconds later there was an impressive bang, followed by the door to the classroom having a dinner-plate-sized hole blown through it. A few pitiful groans from Grim could barely be heard over the sound of falling wood debris.

Turning back to the now dumbstruck class, Hoss continued as if there had been no interruption. "As I was saying; I've been bitten by ghosts, haunted by werewolves, and chased by vampires," he listed, counting off a finger for each monster he claimed to have faced. He ended this short speech with a bellow of, "So you better not go thinking that I don't know my stuff!"

"Oh, we're going to die!" lamented Seamus, already recalling the horror stories told by the older students.

Mandy looked solemnly at the Irish boy and nodded, "Yes, you are."

Hoss was by now looking over the class, attempting to size up the students one at a time. He paused briefly to give both Harry and Mandy a broad grin and two thumbs up, at which point his attention fixated on the pale figure of Neville.

"Largebottom!" he ordered. "Front and centre!"

"Er, it's Longbottom, sir," mumbled Neville as he nervously left his desk and shuffled to the front of the classroom, his every step filled with trepidation.

"That's what I said, son," nodded Hoss.

"Ah, yes sir."

"Now, Shortmiddle," Hoss clapped Neville on the shoulder, "I called you up front here to make a man outta you."

"Aye carumba," muttered Mandy, already knowing where this was going.

"First things first," proclaimed Hoss, looking Neville up and down with a critical eye. "That funeral dress you're wearing has to go. No hero worth his cahones fights ultimate evil while cross-dressing."

"Um, these are my school robes," Neville protested weakly.

"I don't care, son," insisted Hoss. "The only thing right about that getup is the colour."

"Yes sir."

With great reluctance, Neville divested himself of his robes. The instant the cloth cleared his body, Hoss was in motion. The class was treated to a brief flash of pale flesh as the professor tore Neville's shirt away and quickly replaced it with a dark grey muscle-shirt.

"Drink this," commanded Hoss, handing the flustered boy a potion flask. "I got it from the greasy Chemistry teacher."

With even greater reluctance than before, considering the concoction was evidently one of Snape's brews, Neville sniffed at the drink and then quickly gulped it down. There were a few moments of quiet expectation, as everyone watched to see what would happen. To the students' surprise, Neville promptly burped up a small storm of purple bubbles with orange polka dots.

"Excuse me, sir?" called Hermione, raising a hand into the air.

Hoss ignored her, focused as he was upon Neville. He regarded the now furiously blushing boy, his face set in a grimace of concentration.

"Missing something... ah ha!"

With a flourish, Hoss slipped an eye patch onto Neville's head and settled it in place over the boy's right eye. Neville only managed to blink in both surprise and confusion - having by now fallen into an almost trance-like state. That he now bore a vague resemblance to the professor was noted by all.

"Sir! Professor Delgado!" called Hermione insistently, wildly waving her arm back and forth.

"Call me Hoss, little lady," Hoss commanded, finally moving away from Neville and to his desk. He began to rummage about through one of the drawers. "What d'you want to know?"

"What was that potion you gave Neville, uh... Hoss?"

"Pain Killer," replied Hoss absently.

"Pain Killer?" repeated Hermione.

"Pain Killer?" squeaked Neville, rapidly emerging from his trance-like state and into a state of nervous panic, which promptly increased as Hoss pulled several yards of surgical tubing into view.

"I may be making a man outta you, Thintop," explained Hoss, advancing on his victim. "But right now I don't think you're tough enough to take it like a man."

Grabbing Neville's right arm by the wrist, Hoss lifted it high into the air over their heads. He directed a piercing blue-eyed gaze at the trembling boy and ordered, "Hold it up and keep it up, son," before deftly tying the length of rubber tubing around Neville's wrist as a sort of crude tourniquet.

"When I say so, pull it tight," explained Hoss. "We want to minimize the blood loss."

"B-b-b-blood loss!" repeated Neville, his uncovered eye growing wide.

Hoss stepped back, giving himself some room, and retracted his cybernetic hand into his wrist mount. A second later the artificial limb was replaced by a wicked, but functional-looking crossbow. Most of the students were at a bit of a loss as to why the professor would need such a device, but its purpose became clear when Hoss produced what all the Muggleborns instantly recognised as a petrol-powered chainsaw and loaded it onto the crossbow.

"All right then, hold still," Hoss ordered, taking careful aim. He leaned in, grabbed the chainsaw's pullwire between his teeth and pulled. A deep grumbling roar filled the Defence classroom as the Muggle device came to life, its jagged steel blade whirling round at a furious pace.

"YEEEEAAAARRRRRRGH!!" bellowed Hoss, triggering the crossbow's release and sending the chainsaw flying.

“AAAAAAEEEEEE!!!” screamed Neville, instantly dropping to the floor and losing control of his bladder.

“AAAAAAHHHHH!!!” shrieked the watching students, who were all seated behind where Neville had been standing. With him now out of the line of fire, the chainsaw was heading straight towards them. As one, with the sole exception of Harry and Mandy, the Gryffindor first-years dropped to the classroom floor and sought refuge underneath their desks.

Of the entire group Parvati Patil had the misfortune of being slower than her classmates, as well as being almost directly in the path of the careening chainsaw. The whirling blade missed slicing into her neck by less than an inch. It was close enough, however, to buzz its way through the young witch’s long ponytail. A second later the chainsaw slammed into the rear wall of the classroom, imbedding almost the entire length of its blade into the ancient stone.

“My hair! My hair!” screeched Parvati, reaching up to her shorn locks. “He cut off my hair!”

“You could’ve been decapitated... killed... and you’re complaining about your *hair*?” asked Dean incredulously from where he was cowering beneath his desk.

“But he cut my *hair*!” wailed Parvati insistently.

“Pity he missed,” said Mandy blandly, having not even twitched in her seat.

“Ha! Soon I’ll have my sidekick! Then all I’ll need is a corndog with relish and some pepper spray!” exclaimed Hoss, happily oblivious to the fact that Neville curled into a ball of miserable terror at his feet, while almost his entire class were in a vaguely similar state.

“I think all he needs,” grumbled Hermione, cautiously peeking out from behind her desk as Hoss prepped and loaded up another chainsaw, “is a couple of men, or ten, in white suits with the best straitjacket money can buy.”

-oOo-

It was now approaching the end of September, and by all accounts Harry had just finished his first flying lesson in spectacular fashion. Professor McGonagall was practically glowing with satisfaction and had earlier threatened Dumbledore with his life should he not grant permission for Harry to become the Gryffindor Quidditch team’s new Seeker.

Dinner that evening started off rather quietly, at least by recent standards. Eris had not used her golden apple of chaos to transform her fellow Slytherins into Leprechauns astride beaver-tailed babies. Junior was eating quietly with his ‘friends’ at the Hufflepuff table, his multitude of black tentacles retracted. Professor Delgado was actually sitting at the high table and eating with the staff, rather than chasing after the castle’s various ghosts...

Dumbledore turned his attention to the Gryffindors. From what he could make out, Harry was chatting eagerly with Ron Weasley about his placement as Seeker. Hermione Granger was sitting opposite them and trying to scold them both. Grim was next to her, with a night edition of the newspaper; *The Evening Oracle* in front of him. And Mandy... appeared to be playing with a doll?

Dumbledore blinked and took a second look. He could not believe that such a taciturn girl as Mandy would deign to play with dolls of any sort. Especially in such a public setting. Closer inspection, however, revealed that the stuffed doll was dressed in a crude imitation of school robes, trimmed in green, and had a tuft of platinum blonde hair stuck to its head. Mandy was also determinedly and frequently poking the doll with what looked like one of the needles the first-years had recently made in Transfiguration, using matchsticks as a base object.

Understandably curious, Dumbledore quietly cast a Hearing Aid Spell on himself, which would allow him to surreptitiously listen in on the conversation taking place.

“Ah, my favourite part of de newspaper,” Grim announced cheerfully.

“The funnies?” asked Ron.

“The crosswords?” asked Hermione.

“De obituaries,” revealed Grim.

Draco Malfoy chose this moment to interrupt. His first week at Hogwarts had been spent as a silver-furred ferret, thanks to Eris’ apple of discord. After recovering his human form, only because Dumbledore had politely requested it, the young Slytherin had used every spare moment he had trying to avenge himself upon the goddess. His second favourite activity was causing trouble for Harry and his friends, most likely because Eris was technically counted as a part of the group.

Having heard the details about Harry’s first time on a broom, and how he had rescued Neville Longbottom’s remembrall, it was easy for Dumbledore to discern why Draco was looking so unbearably smug. He swaggered over to the Gryffindor table, flanked by his bodyguards Crabbe and Goyle, clearly under the belief that Harry was in trouble for his actions.

“Having a last meal, Potter?” gloated Draco. He looked over at Mandy, who had paused her attentions to the doll upon his arrival. His face twisted into a sneer and he asked, “When are you getting the train back to the rest of the freaks?”

Mandy frowned at the insinuation, which caused many nearby Gryffindors to pick up their plates and edge away. It wasn’t that Mandy was scary. The OWLs and NEWTs were scary. But the blonde-haired young witch that never strayed far from Harry Potter made those particular scholastic trials look comforting by comparison. Even Grim had a difficult time matching the menace she could exude. To sum it up; when Mandy was about, and

particularly when she frowned, those around her were too busy being terrified to be scared.

"You're a lot braver now you're back on the ground and you've got your little friends with you," retorted Harry, indicating the lumbering Crabbe and Goyle.

"Cowards and bullies are like that," observed Mandy calmly.

"How dare you?" hissed Draco, flushing red at the insult.

"Very easily," Mandy informed him. "Harry's obviously more than a match for you."

"I can take him whenever I like, mudblood!" Draco spat angrily.

Harry's wand was instantly in hand, drawn from its place in his robe pocket in a quick move that Mad-Eye Moody would have greatly approved of. The wand's tip jabbed sharply under Malfoy's chin as Harry snarled, "I told you not to call her that, Malfoy."

"You want a fight, Potter?" asked Draco, though obviously unnerved at the speed of Harry's reaction as well as the fact that he was not nearly as protected by Crabbe and Goyle as he had assumed. He glanced towards the professors and asked, "With the teachers watching?"

"If you don't apologise," promised Harry coldly.

"Why bother?" asked Mandy.

She gently pushed Harry's arm aside, rotated round and promptly drove her knee into Draco's crotch. There was a dull thwack, which caused every male present to wince, and then a moment of silence. The two remained perfectly still, frozen like statues, before the platinum-haired boy collapsed in a heap, tears streaming down his rapidly purpling face.

Crabbe and Goyle utterly failed to react and instead stared dumbly down at Draco, much as they had done the first time Mandy had taken such action against their patron. As with most incidents revolving around Mandy and the others, none of the professors made a move towards them. It was possible that Snape might have said or done something, but the potions master had become increasingly reluctant to share meals with the rest of the school and was thus not present.

Hermione was the first to speak. "You really shouldn't do that, Mandy," she said sternly, though her cheeks were tinged pink. "You could seriously hurt him if you hit him the wrong way."

Mandy arched an eyebrow and replied, "I'll try to remember that."

Grim, who had watched the exchange from over the top of his newspaper, remarked, "If only so you can do exactly dat de next time de boy boddies you."

Not to anyone's great surprise, conversation at the Gryffindor table promptly resumed as if the interruption had not taken place. A few moments passed before the other houses did likewise, including the Slytherins, though one and all cast the occasional glance at Draco's huddled form.

"Fine," Draco finally gasped, still recovering and yet to fully regain his breath. Mandy's blow had been a forceful one, even discounting the sensitive region she had targeted. After dragging himself upright, using Goyle as an aid to pull on, he turned to Harry and challenged, "A duel. Wizard's duel. Tonight."

"Accepted. Where and when?" said Ron, speaking up before his friend could reply.

"Midnight," said Draco. "We'll meet you in the trophy room, that's always unlocked."

Draco then did an about-face and returned to the Slytherin table, though his walk was somewhat bowlegged. Crabbe and Goyle stayed a moment longer, staring blankly at the Gryffindors, before following.

"Ron," said Harry, watching his nemesis depart. "Did you just get me involved in something I should know about?"

"He's arranged for you to fight Malfoy in a duel. An illegal one, I might add," said Hermione.

"Oh."

"Don't worry," Grim assured him. "Almost nobody dies in dese tings."

Those who had heard what was going on turned to stare at the Reaper, who was once again thoroughly engrossed in his newspaper. Nobody was quite sure how to take his apparent lack of concern for Harry's wellbeing.

"Almost?" asked Mandy.

"Well... not anybody as young as you lot," said Grim after a moment's consideration.

"How the devil am I supposed to duel him?" asked Harry. "I don't know any spells for that!"

"Throw your wand at him and then punch him in the nose," suggested Ron.

"You really *shouldn't* go wandering about the school at night," insisted Hermione unhappily. "Think of the points you'll lose if you're caught."

"It's a matter of honour," countered Ron staunchly.

As his two newest friends, the most normal of the bunch, began a heated argument over the merits of midnight duels, Harry absently jabbed his fork into the upturned rear end of Malfoy's discarded effigy.

"AAAAHH!!! MY ARSE!! MY ARSE!!"

Everyone stopped whatever they were doing and stared in amazement as Draco writhed and scabbled about in pain, clutching his buttocks as he screamed. Harry's eyes eventually turned to the fork-speared doll. Noticing his distraction, everyone in the immediate vicinity was also soon focused on the object of his attention. He contemplatively pulled the fork free. Draco promptly collapsed with a sigh of relief. At least until Harry jabbed the doll again, this time with an audible poink.

"AAAAHH!! NO! NOT AGAIN! MY ARSE!"

Harry removed the fork and Malfoy again breathed a sigh of relief. Harry's eyes switched from the fork, which he was staring at intently, to the doll and then to Malfoy. He repeated this process several times as the connection was made. Then his gaze settled on Mandy.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" she prodded. "Jab him again!"

Poink.

"AAAAHH!!"

Once again Draco began to howl in protest, this time jumping up and running round in small circles, clutching both hands to his bottom. This continued for several seconds before Harry pulled the fork back, at which point Draco relaxed. After a minute passed without a repeat, the greatly embarrassed and blushing Slytherin returned to his seat amidst sniggers from the rest of the students.

"What did you stop for?" asked Mandy, seemingly disappointed.

"Yeah," agreed Grim. "Dis is hilarious."

"I thought you might like a go," answered Harry, offering the fork to Mandy.

Mandy smirked.

Poink.

"AAAAHH!!"

Poink.

"AAAAHH!!"

Poink.

"AAAAHH!! MY ARSE!!"

Dumbledore sighed and tried to ignore Draco's screams, focusing instead on his gravy soaked Yorkshire pudding. Perhaps if he ignored the spreading chaos and mayhem, it would be kind enough to go away. Or at least exclude him from the inevitable carnage that would surely follow.

"AAAAHH!!"

If not, then it was going to be a very long seven years.

"MY ARSE!!"

-oOo-

It was fast approaching midnight, and five students and one skeleton were creeping through the halls of Hogwarts. Well, they were trying to creep that is, but were having some slight difficulty. This was mostly because Hermione was reading the riot act to the group, expounding at great length about how utterly against the rules this course of action was. Grim, Ron and Neville were desperately trying to shut her up, or at least get her to yell at them a little less loudly. Mandy and Harry, on the other hand, had solved that problem quite easily. They had simply stopped listening.

"You know, Harry," said Mandy casually, "I'm surprised."

"Why's that?" asked Harry.

"Because usually it's Dudley that would do something stupid like this," observed Mandy.

As they had just turned the corner leading up to their destination, the trophy room, Harry did not bother replying. Personally, though, he had to agree with his friend. This was stupid, but Ron had been painfully insistent. The only hope Harry had for getting any sleep tonight was to go along with the redhead.

He's not going to come," said Mandy after they had been left waiting several minutes. "It's a setup."

"Maybe he's chickened out," suggested Ron.

"No," said Harry. "Mandy's right."

"I told you this was a bad idea," said Hermione.

"Only if we get caught," retorted Ron.

Harry and Mandy winced at this statement, even as Grim hung his head in resignation. The skeleton looked up from beneath his robe's cowl and grumbled, "Now you've done it, child."

Ron looked blankly at them and asked, "What?"

"You just jinxed us," explained Mandy.

"Thanks, Ron," said Harry sarcastically.

"But--"

Suddenly a familiar and already greatly disliked voice cut through the quiet of the night. The school's caretaker, Argus Filch, was out and about.

"Sniff around, my sweet," they heard him coo, most likely to Mrs Norris. "They might be lurking in a corner."

"It's a setup," confirmed Mandy.

"Quick," ordered Harry, waving for the others to follow him. "This way!"

The group fled the trophy room at a brisk jog, and would probably have escape detection. Unfortunately, however, Neville was unlucky enough to trip on a suit of armour, which promptly toppled over with a resounding crash. The resulting racket alerted Filch to their location.

"I'm sorry!" sputtered Neville, stumbling over the fallen armour.

"Longbottom, you yutz," accused Mandy tiredly.

"There! Come Mrs Norris! After them!"

"Run!" barked Harry.

And run they did. The students and Grim sprinted wildly down corridors and around corners, not really keeping particular track of where they were going.

"I - told - you," huffed Hermione as they ran, clutching at a stitch in her side. "I - told - you!"

"Shut up and keep running!" insisted Harry.

As fate would have, their luck did not improve. They rounded a corner, leading to one of the staircases, and promptly bumped into Peeves. The resident poltergeist took one look at Grim and descended into a state of panic not unlike that of their own. Fortunately the apparition had enough sense to flee in the opposite direction, which meant there was a chance Filch would be led away from them.

"AAAAAAAEEEEEE!!! THE GRIM REAPER!! PEEVES DON'T WANNA DIE!!"

"Shut up, you idiot!" yelled Mandy over her shoulder as Peeves fled.

"This way!" called Ron.

In too much disarray to consider doing otherwise, everyone followed after the bolting redhead. This proved a mistake, as Ron in due course led them down an unlit corridor that proved to be a dead end, as the only door there was firmly bolted shut.

"It's a dead end!" wailed Neville.

"Way to go, Ron," sniped Mandy, glaring venomously at the poor boy.

They could hear Filch catching up to them, his stomping footsteps echoing loudly behind them. From the sound of it, he would be right on top of them in less than a minute.

"What are we going to do? What are we going to do?" Neville asked Grim, tugging frantically at the nonplussed skeleton's robes.

"This is it!" moaned Ron. "We're done for! This is the end!"

"Oh, move over," snapped Hermione, pushing her way between Ron and Harry. She grabbed Harry's wand from out his hand and took aim at the lock. "*Alohomora!*"

With a click the latch came free. Not wasting a moment, lest Filch round the corner before they could hide, Harry pushed the door open and urged his friends through it. "Quick - inside!"

They piled in, shutting the door behind them and leaning against it, holding their breaths. It was quiet and they could hear Filch's hurried footsteps grow louder and then slow. He was close enough that his laboured breathing seemed to blow against the backs of their necks.

"Where'd they get to?" Filch asked. "Do you still have the trail, my lovely?"

"He thinks this door is locked." said Harry, breathing a sigh of relief as Filch's footsteps began to recede. "I think we'll be okay - get off, Neville!" Neville had been tugging on Harry's sleeve ever since they had entered their hiding place, and it was starting to get on the black-haired boy's nerves. "*What?*"

Harry, Mandy and the others directed their attention to what Neville had already spotted and had been trying to alert them to. The realization suddenly came that they were not in just any room, but a corridor. The forbidden corridor on the third floor. And now they knew why it was forbidden.

It was a dog.

A giant, three-headed dog.

Its massive, hulking form seemed to fill the entirety of the room they were currently in. Six eyes, each one as big as a human head, gleamed in the low light and stared intently at them. And who could fail to notice the three sets of steak-knife sized fangs?

"Ai-Chihuahua!" exclaimed Grim, understandably horrified. "Somebody call de dog catcher!"

This only served to draw the beast's attention to the unfortunate skeleton. Grim's history with the canine species was liberally populated with bad experiences. In fact, the only dog he got along with to any reasonable degree was Saliva, Mandy's pet and partly the reason he had been trapped as Harry and Mandy's friend.

Unfortunately, the three-headed monster in front of them had more in common with Grim's own dog, Cerberus, than Mandy's perpetually drooling cowardly dog. It took only one good look at Grim, who was pressing back against the stone wall behind him with such force that he was surely going to leave an impression. After that, Grim's fate was more or less sealed. With surprising speed for so large a creature, the hound's left head snapped forward and plucked Grim from where he was cowering.

"Aaaaaaahh!"

The left head tossed Grim into the air, where he was snatched by the middle head. The hound shook the protesting skeleton back and forth with great vigour before the left and right heads joined in. In a matter of moments Grim's robes had been shredded and his limbs separated from each other.

"No! I need dat! Oh, de agony! My legs! I can't feel my - GAK!!"

Grim's tortured wails cut off abruptly as the right head clamped its jaws over the Reaper's skull and deftly worried it free from its place on Grim's spine. With the irritating noise gone, the giant dog settled down and its individual heads began to gnaw on the bones they had liberated.

"We're going to die. We're going to die. Oh God, we're going to die," chanted Hermione in terror.

"How?" asked Harry. "Grim's not exactly in any condition to reap us." He was not really worried about either Grim's safety or his own. After all, a giant three-headed dog was rather tame compared to some of the things he and Mandy had encountered over the years.

Hermione, Ron and Neville stared at him as if he had completely lost his marbles. Hermione's eyes were so wide that they seemed in danger of popping out of her head. Ron was in much the same condition, though he was so pale that his freckles stood out in stark contrast against the rest of his skin. Neville, for his part, had not only wet himself but was also on the verge of passing out from fright.

Mandy, on the other hand, stomped fearlessly up to where the reclining dog was chewing Grim. Harry let her go, as he had some idea of what she had planned, and instead tried to calm Ron and Hermione as they panicked and started hissing for her to come back.

"Okay, dog, you've got three seconds to return Grim," commanded Mandy sternly.

"What's she doing?!" Ron asked Harry in an alarmed whisper.

"Shh!" replied Harry.

"One... two..."

Annoyed at the interruption, the dog's left head turned and lowered itself until it was level with Mandy. It then gave a deafening roar - so furiously loud that it actually managed to muss the blonde girl's normally meticulous hair.

"Fine," said Mandy calmly. "We do this my way then."

Mandy promptly slapped an open hand firmly across the offending head's nose. The animal was understandably startled that such a relatively small creature could hurt it and scabbled up onto its feet. The injured head whined softly and pawed at its nose with one massive paw.

“Okay, now you’ll do as I tell you and heel.”

The two unharmed heads leaned in and snarled at her, but Mandy did not even flinch. Instead, she repeated her earlier response and slapped the middle head in identical fashion. The entire dog reared back this time and all three heads exchanged nervous looks between themselves.

“HEEL!” bellowed Mandy, for that instant sounding more like a high-pitched drill-sergeant than a pretty little girl. To nobody’s surprise, the hound immediately dropped to the floor. Neville, Ron and Hermione did the same. Harry looked down on them with some amusement. Mandy regarded the dog for a moment and nodded with satisfaction. “Good dog,” she said, before commanding, “now spit out the skeleton.”

Exchanging another look, the hound began to reluctantly spit out the bulk of Grim’s skeleton. The arms and legs seemed mostly intact, if a bit disconnected from each other. The ribcage and spine were in even worse condition, resembling an unfinished puzzle, and Grim’s skull was notably missing.

“But - but how?” asked Hermione, staring from the now compliant dog to Mandy in shock.

“Mandy’s good with animals,” shrugged Harry. “Probably because she’s at the top of the food chain.”

Having examined the body parts strewn on the floor before her, Mandy glared ominously up at the waiting dog and ordered in a voice that demanded full obedience, “All of him.”

With a hacking cough, the left head deposited Grim’s skull at Mandy’s feet. Nobody bothered to comment that it had been the right head which had originally devoured this particularly body part.

“Well,” sputtered Grim. “At least he doesn’t need to be dewormed.”

“Ew,” grimaced Mandy.

-oOo-

It was soon Halloween, several weeks since the attempted duel with Malfoy and the subsequent incident with the giant, three-headed dog. The aftermath of the Gryffindor groups’ little adventure had been more subdued than most would expect.

Neville, for instance, was treating the entire episode as if it were a bad dream, one that he fully intended to forget upon waking up. Harry and Ron thought it had been a great deal of fun and spent most of their free time speculating as to what the dog was guarding. Mandy was more-or-less apathetic to the incident, as was Grim. Hermione, on the other hand, seemed very put out with Harry and Ron, refusing to speak with them unless forced to do so. She was perfectly willing to converse to Mandy, oddly enough, as well as Grim, which was perhaps even stranger.

Things finally came to a head that very morning, when Professor Flitwick tried his best to test the first-years how to properly cast a Levitation Charm. He met with limited success, particularly in the case of Seamus Finnegan; who quickly developed the odd habit of causing his feathers to explode in miniature fireballs. The only student to properly master the charm was Hermione, who demonstrated her ability while lecturing Ron on the proper pronunciation of ‘Wingardium Leviosa’.

“It’s no wonder no one can stand her,” complained Ron for all to hear. The lesson had just ended and they were filing out of the classroom. “She’s a nightmare, honestly.”

It was shortly after this pronouncement that Hermione rushed past, head ducked down and tears in her eyes.

“I think she heard you,” commented Harry as they watched her flee the scene.

“So?” asked Ron, looking only slightly guilty. “She must’ve noticed she’s got no friends.”

“What’re we; chopped liver?” demanded Mandy.

Ron grimaced at the thought and said, “Urh, liver - yuck!”

Classes continued for the day, though Hermione did not attend any more of them. It was obvious that Ron’s harsh words were the cause of her disappearance. It was only at the end of the day, while on their way to the Great Hall for the annual Halloween feast, that the small group of Gryffindors learned what had happened to her.

“Don’t you feel even the least bit guilty?” asked Harry, after they heard Parvati telling Lavender about how Hermione was crying in the girls’ toilet.

“No,” asserted Ron as firmly as he could, though anyone could tell his heart really wasn’t in it.

“Do you know what a Philistine is, Ron?” asked Mandy sarcastically.

“Of course I do,” Ron confirmed with a confident nod. Seeing that Mandy seemed surprised by his answer, he explained, “My Aunt Aggie takes it in her tea when she’s constipated.”

Mandy groaned and pinched the bridge of her nose while muttering, “Hermione’s not a know-it-all; you’re an idiot.”

“Come on,” insisted Harry as he grabbed Ron by the elbow. “Let’s get this over and done with.”

“Eh? What? Hey! Where’re you taking me?” asked Ron as Mandy took hold of his other arm.

"To the girls' toilet," Mandy told him.

"Whatever for?"

"So dat you can apologise, boy, like you should."

"You don't have to come with, Grim," said Harry, suddenly remembering that the Reaper was accompanying them.

"Why not?" asked Grim, surprised. The children usually expected him to follow them everywhere, regardless of whether he thought it a good idea or not.

"I don't think Hermione'll appreciate a skeleton looming in the background right now," explained Harry.

"I suppose not," agreed Grim, stroking a bony finger along his pronounced jawbone.

"Get going," commanded Mandy, still dragging Ron along. She glanced over her shoulder at him and ordered, "And save our regular places at the table."

"All right," Grim acquiesced. "I can tell when I'm not wanted."

Grim promptly dropped out of the small group and made his way to the Great Hall, while the three children proceeded down one of the side corridors that lead to the appropriate girls' toilet. After only a short walk, they arrived at Hermione's refuge, though Ron was understandably reluctant to proceed.

"I don't know," Ron muttered, "We should leave - I'm only going to make things worse."

"Get on with it, you coward," insisted Mandy.

"But... What should I do? What should I say?"

"That you're sorry, of course," Harry suggested.

"You should tell her that you're a 'prat' and she's not really a nightmare," explained Mandy in slightly more detail than her friend. "Then get down on your knees and beg her to forgive you."

"On my knees? Beg?"

"Would you rather I punish you instead?"

"NO!" Ron loudly exclaimed, clamping both hands over his groin, doubtless recalling Mandy's preferred means of dealing with Malfoy.

"Don't worry," Harry assured him. "I'm sure Hermione'll understand."

"And if she doesn't?"

Harry paused to consider before answering, "Well, then I'm glad I'm not you."

It was then that Mandy unexpectedly asked, "Say, do you smell that?"

The trio turned around to find that a massive creature of some sort was lumbering towards them, having somehow managed to sneak up on them undetected. It stood a good twelve feet tall, was covered in dull grey skin and had a build not unlike a boulder. It was also carrying a gnarled wooden club that was almost longer than the children were tall.

It took several moments before they recognised what this imposing beast actually was. Hoss's classes in Defence tended to focus on the more eclectic monsters and dark creatures, such as Dancing Dinosaur Skeletons, but there had been a short section on the various species of trolls in chapter five of the prescribed book.

"Ron?" asked Mandy with amazing calm.

"Yes?" asked Ron in a petrified squeak, his wide blue eyes not leaving the troll for a second.

"When we get out of this, I'm going to hurt you."

The troll decided to properly announce its presence with a loud snort of, "GLORFT!!"

Ron, naturally, reacted as expected.

"AAAAAHH!!!"

"Get inside! Now!" urged Harry, grabbing Mandy by the shoulder and shoving her towards the door.

The three children ducked frantically into the bathroom, Mandy first, Harry second and Ron trailing in the rear. It was a close thing as the troll made a lumbering swing with its massive club and almost flattened the boy before he could clear the threshold.

Pushing on the door, Mandy yelled, "Shut it! Lock it!"

"What's going on? Mandy?" asked Hermione, exiting one of the stalls to see what all the commotion was about. She paused to take in the sight as Harry helped Mandy to push the thick oak door shut. "Harry? Ron? What are you doing in here? This is a girls' bathroom!"

Neither boy had a chance to offer any explanation, as the troll promptly burst through the door, literally tearing the thick oak off its hinges. Harry, Mandy and Ron jumped out of the way as the huge creature squeezed its way into the room.

Hermione promptly let out a shriek of terror; a sound loud and piercing enough to match the Hogwarts Express. This had the unfortunate effect of drawing the troll's limited attention away from the others and to her instead. Hefting its massive club, it lumbered further into the bathroom - directly towards the now panicking Hermione.

"Look out!" cried Harry. "Duck!"

With a wild swing of its club, the troll shattered the sink closest to it. Fragments of porcelain and plumbing were sent flying through the air. Hermione recovered enough to flee to the far corner of the room and cower under the last sink in the row, but the troll continued to advance, destroying the sinks one by one.

"It's going to kill her!" yelled Ron. "We have to do something!"

"Where's Grim when we need him?" grumbled Mandy, climbing back on to her feet.

Looking about for something, anything, that might help, Harry finally picked up a fallen tap and tossed it at the troll. His aim was true and it struck the back of the troll's head, bouncing off and clattering to the floor. Sadly, however, the troll did not even notice the impact.

"Confuse it," Harry told the others.

"Oi, pea-brain!" called Ron, hefting a length of pipe to throw.

"Well, I don't have a better idea," Mandy relented, flinging a sizable chunk of shattered porcelain.

"Come on, Hermione, move! *Move!*" shouted Harry, waving for the bushy-haired witch to duck past the troll and join them on the other side. Hermione, however, was petrified with fear and didn't budge an inch, pressed up against the wall. Seeing that the troll was almost upon her, Harry made a running jump onto its back. Naturally the troll was a tad agitated by this and began to twist and turn in an attempt to buck the annoying little human off.

Harry, not really able to cast a spell from that position, ended up jabbing his wand into the troll's right nostril. This only succeeded in angering the troll further, causing it to drop its massive club and attempt to grab hold of him with both hands. Luckily its arms were too thick and muscular to allow it to reach behind it like that.

"Now Mandy! While it's distracted!"

Mandy dashed forward, ducking in close to the troll as it was distracted by Harry's actions, leaving it to Ron to grab Hermione. She headed straight to the dropped wooden club and hefted it up with both arms. It was a remarkable display of strength, considering her relatively small size and petite figure.

"Uhn, heavier than it looks," she grunted.

"Mandy!" yelled Harry, still clinging desperately to the troll's back. It had nearly snagged him on three occasions already, its stubby fingers just brushing over his robes. "Hurry!"

Positioning herself in front of the troll as it twisted about in its attempts to reach Harry, Mandy spread her legs in a credible approximation of a golfer's stance. Using all her strength, she swung the massive club back and then round in a perfect stroke. The club buried itself in the troll's privates with a meaty thunk.

Unsurprisingly the troll continued to grab for Harry, taking several seconds for the impact to register in its dull mind. It promptly froze in place, with an oddly puzzled expression on its face. Then its eyes crossed and rolled up into its head. With a thunderous crash the troll collapsed forward onto the bathroom floor.

Quiet descended as the four students remained in place, the dust settling slowly around them as they stared at the now comatose troll. Hermione and Ron stepped in for a closer look as Harry climbed off his perch, pulling his wand from the creature's nose once back on his feet.

"Is it - dead?" asked Hermione timidly.

"Dunno," replied Harry, using the hem of his robes to clean his wand of the greyish goop it had acquired during its stay inside the troll's nasal cavity. He nudged the fallen creature with a toe. "I don't think so."

"I think we should let Grim be the judge of that," said Mandy, leaning casually against the troll's club.

It was into this interesting situation that Professor McGonagall, Professor Snape and Hoss Delgado intruded. They stood riveted to the doorway, drinking in the scene with disbelieving eyes. Well, Professor McGonagall did. Hoss graced the four students with a proud grin and a thumbs-up with his cybernetic hand. Snape took one look at them and, spotting Mandy, turned on a heel and fled in the direction he had come from.

"What on earth were you thinking?" asked McGonagall, clutching a hand over her heart. "That's a mountain troll! You're all lucky to still be alive - you could've been killed! Why aren't you in your dormitory with the rest of Gryffindor?"

Faced with a livid head of house, the four children could not immediately think of anything to say. Hermione took a step forward from her place in the corner, drawing the professor's attention to her. It was obvious, just looking at her, that she was about to lie through her somewhat oversized front teeth and divert the blame away from her three saviours.

Unfortunately, Mandy beat her to the punch.

"It's all Ron's fault."

-oOo-

November arrived and time flew by with unusual speediness. Before anyone knew it, Quidditch season was upon the school and Harry found himself in need of a broom. He had been practicing diligently on an aging Cumulon Six, which Lee Jordan was kind enough to loan for his use. He did not yet have a broom of his own, thanks to Grim's assurances that he would be able to supply Harry with a customised broom before the big event.

The Reaper's exact words were, "It'll be out of dis world, mon."

That, however, had been a month ago and Harry had yet to see a single bristle of his promised broomstick. Considering it was now the morning of Gryffindor's match against Slytherin, this was causing something of a commotion. Especially for Oliver Wood, the Quidditch team's captain and Keeper.

He had cornered Harry at breakfast and demanded to know where the promised broom was. Upon hearing that Grim had yet to actually produce the broom, he had grabbed Harry by the arm and dragged the younger boy out of the Great Hall. Mandy, Ron and Hermione had followed in their wake.

"Bloody hell, Potter," bellowed Wood, "We've got less than an hour!"

"Don't worry," Harry assured his captain. "It'll be ready before then."

"How d'you reckon that?" demanded Wood, as they rushed up to the first-year boy's dormitory. "Even if you went down to Hogsmeade, which you're not allowed to do, it'd take *more than an hour* to go, buy the broom and get back."

"Bonehead's fast when he needs to be," said Mandy.

Reaching the top of the stairs, Wood did not delay and immediately tried to enter. To his displeasure the dormitory door was locked, something that was supposedly not possible. He began to pound a fist against the wood in hopes of gaining Grim's attention.

"Open up in there!" he yelled, hammering the door hard enough to rattle its frame.

"I'm coming, I'm coming! Hold yer thestrals!" called Grim. The door swung inwards and Grim's tall and imposing figure appeared in the doorway. "**Who dares to disturb de Grim Reaper?**" he demanded ominously.

It would have been a daunting sight... were the skeleton not wearing a cream-coloured dressing gown, with fuzzy pink bunny slippers. Wood was too worked up about Harry's broom to take much notice of Grim's clothes, but Ron and Hermione did blink at the Reaper in disbelief. This was despite the fact that, as Harry's "pet", the Reaper was nominally the sixth occupant of that particular room and thus spent a fair amount of time around Ron and the other boys.

Wood leaned in close to Grim, coming off as being quite intimidating despite the fact that he was a full head shorter than the skeleton. "Potter's broom - the one you were supposed to be getting," he began sweetly, before roaring like an angry lion, "WHERE IS IT?!"

"Is it dat time already?" asked Grim, scarcely bothered by Wood's belligerence. He reaching into his dressing-gown and pulled out an hourglass shaped pocket watch.

"YES!!" thundered Wood.

"The match against Slytherin *is* this morning, Grim," Harry reminded.

"Fifty-two minutes from now," confirmed Mandy, having checked her own wristwatch.

"Oh, I hope that's enough time," said Hermione fretfully.

"More dan enough, child," Grim assured her.

"Can we watch?" asked Ron.

"Forget watching - *the broom!*" insisted Wood, waving his hands about.

"Let me change first," Grim relented.

"We don't..."

Grim summoned his mystical energies, which swirled around him in a wild vortex of purple, green and black light. Once the magic faded away, it revealed that Grim's dressing-gown had been transformed into his black 'work' robes.

"...have the time?" Wood trailed off in surprise. He blinked. "That was quick."

"Told you," nodded Mandy.

"Let's first go down to the common room," suggested Harry.

"Why?" asked Hermione, as the group turned to follow the Boy-Who-Lived, who had already begun to climb down the narrow staircase.

"I like my dormitory the way it is."

"I'm not dat bad!" protested Grim.

"Oh, yes, you are," said Mandy flatly.

"You make it sound as if something bad's going to happen," noted Hermione warily.

"Something probably will," Mandy confirmed.

"I knew I should have just had McGonagall get a broom for you," grumbled Wood, angrily stuffing his clenched fists into his trouser pockets. "You could've had a Nimbus Two Thousand, but noooooo... wants his pet skeleton to make the broom!"

"Oi, what's this?" asked Fred, who was waiting in the common room with his twin.

"A gathering in the common room?" asked George.

"And we weren't invited?"

"Shut up, you two!" snapped Wood. "We're getting Potter's broom!"

"Oh, this we..."

"...have to see!"

The group of Gryffindors moved away from the stairs and towards the centre of the common room; where there was the most space to work with. Joined by the twins, they arranged themselves to one side of Grim, who took centre stage.

"Well? Come on!" prompted Wood impatiently.

Grim reached out a hand and his scythe materialized with a flash of black light and a crackle of dark energy. "Just don't interrupt me once I've started and make sure dat nobody interferes," he said seriously. "Bad tings happen when people do dat."

Hermione, ever inquisitive, immediately asked, "Such as?"

"De extinction of de dinosaurs, for one," supplied Grim blandly.

"We'll be quiet," promised Ron.

"Silent as..."

"...the grave," said the twins.

Ron turned to his older brothers and scowled. "Did you have to say 'grave'?"

Fred nodded solemnly and said, "Yes, otherwise there..."

"...would've been *grave* consequences," finished George.

This pun was so terrible that everyone groaned out loud, even Grim. Mandy went so far as to slap a hand over her face, which twisted in a pained grimace. After taking a short while to shake the moment off, Grim began to swing his scythe about. Everyone took a few steps back, not wanting to risk accidentally being nicked by the weapon.

"Boom shakalakalaka," chanted Grim. "Room chakalakalaka! Voom whakalakalaka!"

"Get on with it!" yelled Mandy unexpectedly.

This slight interruption succeeded in nearly scaring the others out of their skins. Especially as a bolt of energy burst from the top of scythe's haft and blasted a smoking hole in the common room ceiling. Fortunately nothing else happened, save for everyone staring in disbelief at Mandy for doing such a thing despite Grim's warning.

"Just getting me mojo flowing," said Grim after a beat.

That settled, Grim stood in a more stately posture and raised the scythe up high. His empty eye sockets burst into otherworldly flames and his deep voice began to reverberate unnaturally, as if from a great distance.

"By de powers of de cold, dark netherworld," he intoned, **"I summon thee; Zarathos, steed of Mephisto. Come, take form and ride once more!"**

With this proclamation, Grim slammed the scythe against the floor, unleashing a flash of swirling energy that quickly enveloped the common room and those waiting therein. A shrieking sound, not unlike an approaching jet engine, filled the air and caused those present to slap hands over their ears. The noise reached a crescendo and abruptly cut off with a brilliant burst of light.

Blinking away the spots that filled their vision, everyone found themselves staring in wonder at the broom now hovering at waist height just in front of a smug-looking Grim.

"What the flipping heck is that?" demanded Wood after a moment.

"Dis be de best broom you'll ever find, mon," declared Grim proudly. "A genuine underworld original."

"It's not haunted or possessed by an evil force, is it?" asked Mandy suspiciously.

"Of course not... well... I don't tink so."

"What's it called?" asked Harry, stepping forward.

"De Ghost-Rider."

It was most certainly an otherworldly creation, unlike any broom to come before it. Its shaft was made from a glistening black and sinewy-looking metal, polished to a gleaming mirror finish. A small silver skull, with long vampiric fangs, sat at the tip of the shaft, its sockets filled with a flickering fire. The tail was made from gnarled and twisted ebony bristles that burned with perpetual but silent flames, giving the impression that the broom was moving even as it hovered in place.

"Cor," breathed an awe-filled Ron. "What I wouldn't give for another one of those."

"If you're willing to part wit your soul, I can arrange one for you," Grim informed.

"You can?" asked Ron eagerly.

"I don't see what all the fuss is about. It's just a broom," said Mandy.

"Are you off your rocker?" asked Ron. He jabbed a finger at the broom and declared, "Anyone in their right mind would sell their soul for a broom like that!"

Mandy merely raised an eyebrow and asked, "What makes you think I have one?"

Wood, in the meantime, had been closely scrutinizing and evaluating the demonic broom. He circled round it, scratching his chin thoughtfully as he moved. "I dunno," he said, some doubt evident in his voice. "Is it any good?"

"Look dere," said Grim, points at the broom's handle. "See dat? It's de mark of de beast."

The spot the Reaper was indicating was just before the broom's tail, where a small bronze plaque was attached to the shaft. Everyone leaned in to have a closer look and found that the plaque had the words **'Beastmaster © - Original'** engraved on it in a bold and vaguely sinister gothic script.

"Well, can't be worse than any of the school brooms, can it?" said Harry with a shrug. He reached out and plucked the Ghost-Rider from where it was floating. "Let's go."

"I only wish you had time to give it a test flight first," muttered Wood as he followed Harry to the portrait hole.

"No time like the present, eh?" asked Fred.

"First time's the charm and all that rot," agreed George.

"In dis case, it's more an issue of trial by fire," observed Grim.

"Considering that broom's tail," said Mandy, "that's a distinct possibility."

-oOo-

After Harry, the twins and their maniacal captain left to join up with the rest of the Quidditch team, Mandy lead the remainder of the group to the pitch. The Gryffindor section of the stands was not all that hard to find, what with the brilliant red and gold banners, flags, rosettes, scarves and other paraphernalia that was being waved about.

Looking at the rest of the stands, they could see that Hufflepuff seem to be supporting Gryffindor with almost as much enthusiasm as the Gryffindors themselves. There were even a couple of banners urging Harry and his team-mates to victory, doubtless a result of Junior's presence in that house. The boy in question had corralled his fellow first-years, by means of his tentacles, into cheering loudly and frequently for his favourite cousin.

By contrast the Ravensclaws seemed somewhat neutral on the matter, whereas the Slytherins were very vocal in support of their own team. To avoid any chance of rioting breaking out between the rival houses, Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw had made a point of settling down between them, thus leaving the two seated on opposite sides of the oval pitch.

Climbing the steps up to a respectable altitude to watch the upcoming match, they found the other Gryffindor first-years waiting for them. Dean, Neville and Seamus had only minutes before finished setting up a large banner proclaiming '*Potter for President*' with a large Gryffindor lion underneath.

This was something they had spent whatever free time they could find over the previous week working on, as a surprise for Harry's first game of Quidditch. Dean had done the artwork, quite willingly at first, but with a frightening enthusiasm after Mandy commanded him to do a good job. Hermione had applied the finishing touch, a charm that made their banner flash different colours - but principally red and gold.

Only Lavender and Parvati greeted the group's arrival, as the three boys were in the midst of a lively conversation. From what could be heard, it appeared that they were discussing Dean's thus far failed attempts to 'woo' Mandy.

"You really should stay out of her way," cautioned Neville.

"I'm telling you, she likes me, yo!" Dean insisted passionately.

"Not even a little," disagreed Seamus.

Neville weighed in on the matter. "Well, maybe a *little*, Seamus," he offered. "After all, she hasn't tossed him off the Astronomy Tower yet."

Seamus shrugged and noted, "We're only a couple of months into the school year."

"So, honeybunch," cooed Dean as Mandy settled into her seat. "What d'you say we--"

Mandy cut off whatever smarmy comment Dean had planned by grabbing his head and slamming him face-first into the railing in front of them. He promptly collapsed, barely conscious, but with a disturbingly happy grin.

"Honestly, he never learns," sighed Hermione, surprisingly unconcerned by Mandy's actions.

"Boy's a masochist," concluded Grim.

After several minutes of impatient waiting, the teams finally walked out of the changing rooms. They were greeted to loud applause from their respective houses and strode proudly to the centre of the pitch, where Madam Hooch was waiting. The Gryffindors were quickly able to find Harry amongst his scarlet and gold robed team-mates. He was, after all, the shortest player on the field.

After the captains, Wood and Flint, made a credible attempt to crush each other's hands into pulp, the flight instructor released the balls and blew the starting whistle.

Lee Jordan, a close friend of the Weasley twins, immediately began his commentary.

"And the Quaffle is taken immediately by Angelina Johnson of Gryffindor - what an excellent Chaser that girl is, and rather attractive too--"

His censor, Professor McGonagall, immediately began her censure.

"JORDAN!"

"Sorry, Professor," apologised Lee, not sounding the least bit earnest.

The game had barely started, with Gryffindor making a deep stab at the Slytherin goals, when a familiar voice called out not far from where they were watching.

"Scuse me, 'scuse me, pardon, coming through," Eris rattled off, pushing her way through the throngs of Gryffindors that stood between her and Harry's friends. She glanced up into the air, where Harry was circling on his new broom and happily exclaimed, "Oh, I say, just in time. Marvellous."

Everyone was honestly surprised to see that Eris obviously intended on setting up camp in the Gryffindor portion of the stands, rather than with her fellow Slytherins. Oddly enough nobody seemed to be surprised that the blonde-haired goddess was accompanied by Crabbe and Goyle, who appeared to have abandoned Malfoy and were now keeping company with Eris instead, though more in the capacity of pack mules than bodyguards.

"Come on you two," urged Eris, cheering loudly for Harry and encouraging her thickly built companions to do the same. "Cheer!"

"But--" Goyle tried to protest.

He was cut off as Eris leaned over him and bellowed like an enraged demon, "*CHEER!*"

The two former-bodyguards turned to the game and began frantically yelling, "Go Potter go! Go Gryffindor! Yay!"

"What's that all about?" asked Ron.

"Looks like Eris has some new 'bodyguards'," said Mandy.

"You mean Crabbe and Goyle are now Eris' toadies? Ah-hahahaha!" Grim said, breaking into laughter. A few seconds later he paused. "Wait. Dat's bad. For dem. Ah-hahahaha!"

Meanwhile, Lee was continuing his lively commentary. If he was a bit distracted and concentrating more on certain players than others, well, nobody was complaining too loudly.

"And Johnson back in possession of the Quaffle, a clear field ahead and off she goes--"

Everyone watched intently as Angelina skilfully ducked and weaved her way through the opposition and scored the first goal of the game, putting Gryffindor on the board. Ten - zero.

"Budge up there, move along."

"Hagrid," greeted Hermione with a nervous smile. None of the students knew the groundskeeper that well, but he had spoken to them several times since the start of term and had struck up a quick friendship with Harry.

Hagrid squeezed his way across the stands, trying his best not to squash any of the children in his way, with marginal success. Reaching the spot where the Gryffindor first-years, Grim and Eris were camped, he dropped into place next to them, pausing briefly to give Grim a curious stare. Though he was friends with Harry, and by association Mandy, he had never had a chance to speak to the skeletal Reaper before.

"Bin watchin' from me hut," he commented as he made himself comfortable. "But it isn't the same as bein' in the crowd. No sign of the Snitch yet, eh?"

"Nope," replied Ron with a shake of his head. "Harry hasn't had much to do yet."

As if prompted by Ron's words, Harry broke into a blindingly fast dive.

"Wait a moment - was that the Snitch?" cried Lee, perking up excitedly. "It is! And Potter's already in pursuit! Look at him dive!"

Harry was moving so quickly that the Slytherin Seeker, Terence Higgs, was not even in contention. In fact, he came to a complete halt as the blazing streak of hellfire that trailed behind the Ghost-Rider almost set the green-clad boy's Quidditch robes afire.

"Sweet Merlin, Potter's setting the pitch on fire! Literally!"

"Grim, I must admit," allowed Mandy, obviously impressed despite herself. "You outdid yourself with that broom of yours. It's the fastest thing out there."

"I'm de Grim Reaper," said Grim, puffing out his ribcage. "I always deliver on my promises."

WHAM!

The Slytherin captain, Marcus Flint, unexpectedly rammed into Harry to prevent him from catching the Snitch, sending him spinning out of control. He recovered with a preternatural quickness, thanks to both his own skills and his demonic broom, but his target had disappeared in the few seconds it took to right himself.

The Gryffindors were all on their feet, booing and crying foul at Flint's actions. Even Eris seemed put out by it, as she admittedly had something of a soft spot for Harry. Dean was insistently calling for a red card and Hagrid was muttering something about cheating Slytherins.

It was Mandy's reaction, however, that gave her fellows pause. Unlike the rest of the house, she remained impassively in her seat. The only indication of her displeasure was that her dark blue eyes narrowed the barest of fractions and tracked after the Slytherin Captain for several seconds. Some of the nearby seventh-years edged away slightly, as her normal aura of foreboding darkness became tinged with a hint of cold displeasure.

"So - after that obvious and disgusting bit of cheating--"

"Jordan!"

"I mean, after that open and revolting foul--"

"Jordan, I'm warning you--"

"All right, all right," a disgruntled Lee acquiesced. "Flint almost kills the Gryffindor Seeker, which could happen to anyone, I suppose..."

The game resumed not much later, when Alicia Spinnet took the penalty shot Madam Hooch had awarded them. It was then that Harry caught sight of the Snitch again. Higgs was almost literally on the other side of the pitch, wary of getting too close to his opponent for fear of the Ghost-Rider's flaming tail. With both luck and the advantage on his side, Harry immediately tore after the tiny golden ball.

"Potter's spotted the Snitch again!" yelled Lee, bouncing eagerly in his seat as he watched the spectacle. "And it hasn't been even five minutes since he was fouled by that over-grown thug Flint!"

"For the last time, Jordan!"

Harry was moving so fast that the spectators were left watching little more than a scarlet blur with a trail of unholy fire following behind it. The Snitch

seemed aware that it was in danger of being caught, and was darting about in a frenzy. Play across the field ground to a near halt as the other players paused to watch the chase, the sole exception being Flint, who began yelling and swearing at Higgs for being out of position.

Ducking under a wandering Bludger and then corkscrewing round Adrian Pucey, Harry was slowly but steadily gaining ground on his elusive prey. After another minute of daring aerobatics, the Snitch was almost within reach. He stretched out with one hand, the other hand keeping a firm grip on the Ghost-Rider's shaft. He strained forward, leaning low over the broom, and could feel the flutter of the Snitch's wings against his fingertips. It was so close.

The unexpected impact of several small objects against his body almost knocked him off his broom. At first he thought it was a Bludger, but quickly realized that he was being assaulted by things too small and too soft. Also, Bludgers did not tend to stick around and repeatedly beat upon their victims. They were certainly not a bright yellow in colour and did not chitter frantically while they flocked around him.

"Bloody hell," bellowed Lee, jumping to his feet. "Potter's under attack by a flock of canaries!"

"Now dat's someting you don't see every day," commented Grim, arching an eyebrow.

"Where th' devil did they come from?" Hagrid wondered as they all stared incredulously at the sight of Harry being driven away from the Snitch by a dozen or so canaries. Even Mandy reacted in surprise to this unexpected assault, though her eyes quickly narrowed and glared across the pitch to where the homicidal birds had first appeared.

"That was near the Slytherin section of the stands," she noted icily.

"So?" asked Neville, cringing at her tone of voice.

"I don't believe in coincidence."

Mandy immediately grabbed Hagrid's oversized binoculars out of his massive hands and handed them to Hermione. The bushy-haired girl already knew what was being commanded of her and began using them to search through the stands.

"Er, what are you doing?" asked Ron.

"Looking for Malfoy," answered Mandy, allowing Hermione to continue searching without interruption.

"Found him," Hermione exclaimed, locking onto a spot more-or-less directly opposite from where they were sitting.

"Does he have his wand?" Mandy quickly asked.

"I can't see... no, wait... there it is," Hermione nodded before lowering the binoculars. She turned to Mandy and reported, "He's looking unbearably smug and the students around him seem to be congratulating him. He must have conjured the birds and sent them into Harry's flight path." She paused and grudgingly admitted, "Very impressive for a first-year. I don't think I could've done that."

"That's illegal! What should we do?" asked Ron.

"Leave it to me," said Mandy. She held out her hand and commanded, "Grim, scythe."

"Here," said Grim, handing it over without pause or thought.

Mandy calmly accepted the scythe, levelled it at the Slytherin portion of the stands and took aim.

Hermione looked on with mounting alarm and began to ask, "Um, Mandy? What are you--"

Words cannot sufficiently describe the blast of eldritch energy that streaked across the pitch. The only thing anyone would ever agree on was that it had been an impossibly luminescent shade of black. Something of a contradiction in terms, to be sure, but perfectly understandable when taking into account the source of the blast.

"HOLY SHIT!"

"PROFESSOR McGONAGALL!"

Once the glare of the explosion faded, pieces of debris began to rain down over the Quidditch pitch and stadium. Harry, having by now escaped his feathery attackers, looked on curiously. He then turned to where he had seen his friends cheering him on and graced Mandy with a thankful grin and a thumbs-up. He was the only one to react though, as all of the other players, Slytherin and Gryffindor alike, were frozen in shock. So was almost everybody else, with only a few notable exceptions.

"Full on friendship!" cheered Junior, crushing Ernie and Justin to him with his tentacles.

"AH-HAHAHA! CHAOS!" cackled Eris madly, utterly unconcerned by her fellow Slytherins' fates.

"I tink you just hideously maimed several dozen of yer schoolmates," observed Grim dispassionately.

"So what?" said Ron blithely. "They're only Slytherins."

"Oh, Mandy, you're going to be in so much trouble," moaned Hermione fretfully, but with a hint of resignation. "What are you going to do?"

"Finish watching the game," replied Mandy, returning the scythe to Grim.

"Fine by me," said Grim.

"Yeah," agreed Hagrid.

"Me too," nodded Ron.

"CHAOS!"

-oOo-

The remainder of the Quidditch match was not nearly as exciting. Mandy's near total annihilation of the Slytherin section of the stands was a very hard act to follow. With both the Gryffindor and, especially, the Slytherin teams in a state of stunned disbelief, there was not much in the way of game play. Even Oliver Wood, obsessive-compulsive that he was, could barely manage to do more than follow the motions.

Eventually, after several minutes of searching, Harry located the Snitch and chased it down once again - this time without interruption. Lee Jordan, who was inordinately smug over Professor McGonagall's earlier outburst, counted the final score as being one hundred and ninety points to ten. The Gryffindors were understandably delighted, though their enthusiasm over such a resounding victory was tempered by the sight of the smouldering Slytherin stands.

Eris was the first to depart, but only after wrapping Harry up in a rib-cracking hug and planting several dozen overly dramatised kisses on both cheeks. Ignoring the furious glare Mandy was directing at her, she left for the Hospital Wing to get a better look at the devastation wrought upon the rest of her house. Crabbe and Goyle, having been forced to also congratulate Harry (though fortunately without the hugs and kisses) followed dutifully behind her.

"Barmy that one," commented Ron, as Eris flounced away.

"Chaotic," corrected a slightly flushed Harry.

"Friendly though," said Junior, as he walked up to them. Justin and Ernie were following dutifully behind him, fully aware that if they tried to depart, Junior's black tentacles were never far away. "She would have made a wonderful Hufflepuff... if she weren't completely insane."

"She's a clingy tramp," muttered Mandy.

"Good game, cousin," Junior congratulated, giving Harry a firm and enthusiastic handshake. A wave of his hand prompted Justin and Ernie to extend their own appreciation of the day's Quidditch spectacle.

"Yeah, you completely destroyed the Slytherins," said Ernie.

"Literally," added Justin, making sure to keep his companions positioned between him and Mandy. Apparently he was now more afraid of her than he was of Junior.

The Hufflepuff trio departed shortly after that, giving one final round of congratulations, as Junior dragged his two reluctant friends back to the Hufflepuff dormitories. Apparently he had a small batch of scones prepared for afternoon tea and intended to share them with his housemates, whether they wanted to or not.

"Y'know," said Ron as they watched Junior lead a despairing Ernie and Justin away, "I always thought I'd die of embarrassment if I was ever sorted into Hufflepuff."

"Now you don't think it would've been that bad?" asked Harry.

"Hell no!" exclaimed Ron. He shook his head vigorously and said, "Now I *know* I'd die... just not from embarrassment. That cousin of yours is scary, mate. A duffer through and through, but still; scary."

"He *is* part demon," said Hermione, the closest she would come to agreeing.

"Junior may be a yutz," observed Mandy, "but I'd rather be in Hufflepuff with him, than in Slytherin with Eris."

"Here here," agreed Grim.

"They're *not* that bad," said Harry.

"Did dose canaries knock someting loose in your head, boy?" asked Grim, looking at him incredulously. "Of course dey're dat bad!"

"Well... maybe they are a little..."

"Bloody bonkers," asserted Ron.

Hagrid, who had been watching in silent bemusement, clapped his hands together and asked, "Who's up fer a spot o' tea to celebrate?"

Grim instantly raised a bony finger and proclaimed, "Just what I need, my good man!"

Once everyone had affirmed their desire for a quick cuppa, the group began to depart the Quidditch pitch and wind their way to Hagrid's hut. They were just passing by the stairs leading up to the teacher's box, when loud voices caught their attention. It seemed that the professors were arguing over the events leading to Gryffindor's victory, in particular Mandy's assault against the Slytherin stands.

"She was only acting out of defence for her friend," defended McGonagall.

"She's a raving, power-hungry sociopath," Snape interjected hotly.

Dumbledore paused to consider this and then shook his head. "Miss Maxwell does not 'rave'."

Snape glared furiously at the headmaster and actually began to wave his arms about in agitation. "This isn't a joke, Albus! The girl blew up almost every student in my house! Over a flock of birds! We're damn lucky nobody was killed!"

"Luck had nothing to do with it," said Mandy flatly as they walked by

The teachers and professors paused in their discussion as the group of the first-year Gryffindors, including Grim and Hagrid, passed them. Mandy, aside from her initial observation, ignored them entirely. The others, somewhat intimidated by the blistering glare Snape was directing towards them, did much the same. Harry gave them an apologetic but unrepentant shrug, coupled with a somewhat embarrassed smile.

Snape's face rapidly coloured to a shade of red that could match an embarrassed Weasley and he took a threatening step forward. He stumbled for a moment, his right leg buckling for the barest of instants, before standing straight and glowering hatefully at the group. His advance, likely with the intention to commit murder, was halted when Mandy glanced briefly in his direction. For just a fraction of a second, they locked eyes and matched each other's gaze.

"AAAAEEEE!!!!" the Potions Master squealed, falling to the ground by Dumbledore's feet in a quivering heap and sucking desperately on a thumb.

"Never learns," mumbled Grim as they continued to walk by.

"Severus! Severus!" exclaimed Dumbledore, kneeling beside his friend and trying to shake him out of his stupor.

Ron and Hermione exchanged glances. This was the second time now that Mandy had completely debilitated Snape with nothing more than a glare.

After they had passed well out of earshot of the professors, who were all crowded round their downed colleague, Harry turned to Mandy and, making sure to keep his voice low, asked, "Did you see Snape's leg?"

"What about it?" asked Hermione, blinking at this apparent non sequitor.

"It's wrapped in bandages," said Mandy. "*Bloody* bandages."

"You don't think..." Ron trailed off.

"Snape let the troll into the castle as a diversion," said Harry.

"To get at whatever the dog's guarding," finished Mandy.

"But, he's a teacher," Hermione protested, though not as strongly as she would have for any other member of staff.

"And Grim's Death," Harry shrugged. "Who would you rather meet in a dark alleyway?"

"Either, as long as it wasn't Mandy," was Hermione's candid reply.

Smirking by way of response, Mandy looped an arm around Harry's elbow and continued to lead the group on to Hagrid's hut. They arrived in short order and quickly settled inside, Harry and Mandy taking seats next to each other in one of the gamekeeper's oversized armchairs. The others settled down wherever they could find a spot and their conversation continued to focus on Snape, rife with speculation as to the nature and cause of his injury.

"Snape's hurt, yeh say?" asked Hagrid, hefting the steaming teapot in one hand. "Wonder how that happened? Musta been a potions accident."

"But it was his *leg* that was bleeding, Hagrid. I can't imagine how a potions accident would do that," observed Hermione.

"I say it was that three-headed dog on the third-floor," said Harry as he absently prodded the rockcake Hagrid had served up before setting the kettle to boil. "He must've been trying to get at whatever it's guarding and got bitten for it."

Upon hearing this, Hagrid dropped his teapot, but it was so large and sturdy that nary a drop spilled out. The large man looked at the children in pure surprise and asked, "How do yeh know about Fluffy?"

"*Fluffy?*" repeated Ron disbelievingly.

"Yeah - he's mine," nodded Hagrid.

There was a moment of absolute quiet as the children, and Grim as well, stared at Hagrid in sheer disbelief. It was Harry that broke the silence, asking, "You named a giant, three-headed monster dog *Fluffy*?"

"Well, yeah."

"You're not exactly right in de head, are you?" asked Grim simply.

Before Hagrid could defend himself, Mandy cut in and asked, "Where'd you get him? And why?"

"Bought him off a Greek chappie I met in the pub las' year," Hagrid readily explained. He stooped down a bit to reclaim the teapot. "I lent him to Dumbledore to guard the--" He trailed off abruptly, realizing that he had inadvertently revealed something he shouldn't have.

"Yes?" urged Harry eagerly.

"Now, don't ask me any more," said Hagrid staunchly. "That's top secret, that is."

"Come on, Hagrid! Snape's trying to steal it!" Harry implored.

"Rubbish," Hagrid scoffed. "Snape's a Hogwarts teacher - he's one o' the people guarding it!"

There was a brief pause in the conversation as Hagrid went round to pour everyone their tea - the sole exception being Mandy, who considered coffee to be a far superior drink. Harry would have argued the point with her, but as he knew Grim also preferred coffee over tea he kept his peace on the matter.

"It must be something very valuable," mused Mandy, "considering Dumbledore isn't willing to trust Gringotts with it."

"Some mystical artefact, I'll bet," put in Grim.

"I wonder what, though," said Hermione.

"And who are they guarding it from?" asked Harry. "Can't be any ordinary thief, that's for certain."

Mandy nodded in agreement. "Hoss chased off Voldemort--"

At the mention of this Hagrid dropped his teapot again and Ron dropped his teacup in his lap. This was not a good thing, as the freshly poured drink was scalding hot and quickly soaked through his trousers. Ron promptly squealed in pain and jumped out of his chair, hopping round Hagrid's cabin and patting frantically at his soaked groin.

"Gah! Hot! Hot!"

"Ere now! Don't be saying tha' name!"

"What? Voldemort?" asked Grim, causing Hagrid to flinch and Ron to stumble over his own feet. The skeleton seemed to enjoy their reactions to the dark lord's name.

"Makes sense, I guess," said Mandy thoughtfully.

"Now, listen to me, you lot," said Hagrid, sounding surprisingly stern. He wagged a finger the size of a pork banger at them. "Yer meddling' in things that don' concern yeh. You forget about Fluffy, an' you forget what he's guardin', that's between Professor Dumbledore an' Nicolas Flamel--" Yet again Hagrid cut off abruptly.

"Aha!" exclaimed Harry triumphantly.

"Nicolas Flamel, whoever he is, has something to do with this," concluded Hermione.

"De name does sound familiar," admitted Grim, stroking his chin.

"He must own whatever it is that Dumbledore's keeping hidden here at the school," concluded Mandy.

"I don' suppose yeh'd be willing to forget I said that?"

"Not likely," said Harry. He turned to his friend and prompted, "Grim?"

"Let me see now," said Grim.

The Reaper lifted up an arm and reached his opposite hand down the sleeve of his flowing black robes. He rooted about for several minutes, during which time he managed to produce; a rubber chicken, a Horadric staff, some well aged Brie - that promptly began to crawl across the tabletop, a plain gold ring that had an air of incredible heaviness about it and a pair of saucy pink lace knickers that caused Ron to once again drop his refilled teacup in his lap.

"Gaouwch! Hot hot hot hot!"

"Ah! Here it is," Grim finally declared. With a flourish, he pulled a large and mouldy tome from out of his sleeve and deposited it on the table before them with a thud. It was a very large book, so much so that even Hagrid looked impressed by its bulk.

"Important Dudes of the Wizarding World, 1138th Edition," read Hermione, leaning in to look at the front cover. She then turned to give Grim an incredulous look.

"A book that thick, there better be an index," said Mandy, eyeing the tome and ignoring the title.

Grim licked a finger in preparation and started flipping pages at the book's front. "A... B... C, D... here we are; F," he paused expectantly and asked, "Now, we're looking for... who was it?"

Hermione immediately answered, "Flamel, Nicolas."

"Right," Grim nodded and ran his bony finger down the list. "Frankenstein, Victor... Fredburger, Fred... Fronkonsteen, Froderick... a page or two back, I tink."

"Ere now," protested Hagrid weakly. "This really is none o' yer business."

"AHA! Flamel! Page 10191."

Everyone leaned in to have a look as Grim turned to appropriate page. Even Hagrid, though he clearly had some misgivings about their investigation.

"Shouldn't be doin' this."

"Nicolas Flamel," Hermione read over Grim's shoulder. "Born in... that can't be right."

"1325? That would make him... six hundred and..." Harry trailed off.

"Six hundred and sixty-six years old," stated Mandy, having no trouble calculating the dates.

"Whoever he is, he's older than dirt," observed Ron.

Mandy almost immediately found herself focused on a highly detailed diagram drawn alongside the small picture of Flamel himself. Sensing that this was important, she poured over the text and read out loud for all to hear. "Maker of the Philosopher's Stone, an alchemical construct capable of turning any metal into pure gold..."

"So that's what's being guarded in the third-floor corridor; the Philosopher's Stone," said Hermione. She then frowned and asked, "But why would You-Know-Who want it? I mean, what use is gold to a spectre?"

"There must be something..." said Harry.

"Now I remember," said Grim, snapping his fingers. "De Stone can be used to make de Elixir of Life."

"A legendary potion that makes the drinker immortal," Mandy read from the book.

"One of those hard-to-get clients, eh, Grim?" asked Ron teasingly.

Grim glowered and grumbled, "Man's a menace. Worse dan Elvis."

"He's not after the Stone because it can make gold," concluded Harry.

"He wants to use it to bring himself back to life," finished Mandy.

A tense atmosphere settled over Hagrid's hut as the import of this revelation slowly sank in. Ron and Hermione were the most perturbed by it all, as was their host. Harry and Grim both seemed rather impartial, as if it were nothing out of the ordinary. Considering their past adventures, a magical stone was par for the course and scarcely worth such concern. Mandy, on the other hand, had a strange gleam in her dark blue eyes.

Finally the silence was broken.

"So," Hagrid hefted his massive teapot. "Who wants a refill?"

-oOo-

After finishing their tea with Hagrid, and pretending the same with the rockcakes, the four students and Grim returned to the castle. It was still relatively early in the day, only a little past lunch, but their fellow Gryffindors had already arranged an enthusiastic victory celebration in the common room.

On their way back to Gryffindor Tower, Harry waited until they were in one of the less-travelled corridors, where there was little chance of being overheard, before turning to his long-time friend. He gave her a quizzical look and asked, "So, what's the plan?"

"Plan? What plan?" asked Mandy, affecting a puzzled expression.

"Mandy, I might not be a genius like Hermione or an evil genius like you, but I'm not a moron," said Harry dryly.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Mandy reiterated.

"A magical object that can give limitless riches *and* immortality?" asked Harry, raising his eyebrows. He shook his head, chuckling with bemusement, and said, "Of course you're going to steal it before Voldemort does."

Mandy did not exactly grimace, but her frown deepened a fraction and her lips curled down slightly. Harry was correct in his assumption. She sighed softly and, essentially admitting her culpability, asked, "I suppose you want me to leave it alone?"

Harry looked up at the arched stone ceiling as they slowly climbed their way up the staircase leading to the Fat Lady's portrait. After a minute or so of deliberation, Harry shrugged and asked, "You still want to rule the world, don't you?"

"Of course," Mandy nodded curtly.

"Well then," Harry grinned roguishly, "what are we waiting for?"

Mandy did not smile. Ever. But she did occasionally smirk. Receiving carte blanche from Harry to proceed with her plans, however, brought the ghost of a self-satisfied grin to her face.

RIP.

Author's Note: As stated above; here it is. The last part of the year is mostly done and just needs to have a couple of scenes fleshed out. Anyways, I hope you enjoyed reading this little drabble and hope to someday add a few more to the list. Be seeing you.

-oOo-

A Little Extra

-oOo-

Eris was reclining lazily upon the divan she had conjured up inside the Slytherin common room. Greg Goyle and Vincent Crabbe stood behind her, one fanning a massive palm leaf and the other peeling grapes and hand feeding them to her.

"I'm bored," she declared, a golden apple appearing in one hand.

Draco Malfoy, who had been making a show of ignoring her and her new retainers, wet his trousers. This was quickly followed by a girly squeal and a frantic sprint to the exit into the dungeons, apparently uncaring that this would reveal to the rest of the castle the large wet spot growing round his crotch.

While the blonde boy's reaction was perhaps the most extreme, everyone else made rather hurried departures as well.

A bored goddess of chaos and discord was never a good thing.

"Come on, boys," she commanded, hopping to her feet. "Let's go visit little Ronny-Wonny."

"Uh, why?" asked Goyle as he set down the palm leaf fan.

"Because," explained Eris patiently, "I want to have another look at his big... hands."

With resigned sighs, the two young wizards trailed after their patron. It was moments like these that had them almost -almost- miss working for Draco instead.

"CHAOS!!"

Unfortunately it was not like they had a choice in the matter.

Something Grim This Way Comes Something Grim Is Getting Stoned

Title: Something Grim This Way Comes

Author: Ruskbyte

Disclaimer: This story is based on characters and situations created and owned by JK Rowling, Maxwell Atoms, and various publishing houses, animation studios and the like. No money is being made (how I wish it were otherwise) and no copyright or trademark infringement is intended.

Summary: Mandy is determined, come hell or high water, to steal the Philosopher's Stone. Of course, declaring her intention to do so is one thing. Actually doing it, especially with Eris and Junior trying to help, is something completely different. And, just to complicate matters further, the infamous Lord Moldybutt enters the scene...

"Money is the root of all evil. I need money." - Mandy's stance on economics.

/oOo\

Chapter Three - Something Grim Is Getting Stoned

\oOo/

Stealing the Philosopher's Stone proved a somewhat more complicated task that they had initially foreseen. This was due to the fact that Fluffy, regardless of however readily he bowed to Mandy's domineering attitude, was not the only challenge that stood between them and their goal. As Hagrid had said, there were other measures in place and neither Harry nor Mandy were willing to act until they had some idea of what they faced.

Grim, Ron and Hermione were more-or-less willing to leave things be, though Mandy was slowly working on convincing them that the Stone was in imminent danger of being stolen. Naturally, in order to secure their help, she neglected to mention that she, herself, was the one with her eyes set upon the prize.

In a bid to gain more allies in this venture Eris and Junior had quickly been brought in on the secret of what Fluffy was guarding, though Eris proved to already be aware of the Stone's presence in Hogwarts.

Indeed, the goddess's only interest in the entire affair was sparked upon her discovery that a giant three-headed dog was part of the Stone's defences. Eris immediately took a worrisome shine to Fluffy and was not averse to spending a great deal of her spare time visiting the beast. For Crabbe and Goyle the experience was all too traumatizing and, during the following weeks, the pair would frequently be spotted with expressions that were even more glazed over than usual.

In the end Mandy came to the conclusion that Eris's non-involvement was more than likely a good thing. Her reasoning behind this was due to a brief conversation she had with Harry.

"Are you sure bringing her into this plan of yours is a good idea?" Harry had asked

"Eris lives for chaos," Mandy had replied. She gave a careless shrug. "But even then, how much chaos could she possibly cause with the Stone?"

"Stock market. Economic collapse."

"Hm. You may have a point."

And that, as they say, was that.

Junior, for his part, found the idea of a closely guarded treasure to be very appealing. His life down in the fiery bowels of the Earth was singularly dull for the most part and so he met any sort of adventure with keen enthusiasm. He quickly offered the use of his shape shifting skills in an attempt to discover what lay beneath the trapdoor, but by now homework was becoming an issue as the professors burdened down their students before the start of the Christmas holidays.

Before the small conspiracy of students knew it, the first half of the school year had drawn to an end and the holidays were upon them. Mandy's options for assistance dropped considerably at this point, as Eris, Junior and Hermione returned home to spend Christmas with their families. Suffice to say, everyone was greatly relieved that Eris was leaving, if only for a while, as it would be a welcome break from the near constant chaos she was causing on a daily basis. The staff and other Slytherin's in particular were looking especially frayed.

The days leading up to Christmas were spent lounging about and quietly speculating over what other possible defences and traps were guarding the Stone. This soon became rather boring, as there was a distinct lack of anything else to do. The only break in this unexpected tedium came from

Ron strangely enough; as the restless redhead took it upon himself to teach Harry how to play wizard chess. Harry, however, wasn't a very good player and Ron soon found himself facing a far more challenging (not to mention unnerving) opponent in the form of Grim, who was a master of the game.

Soon enough it was Christmas morning, and Harry woke to the startling sight of an already awake Ron Weasley.

"Happy Christmas," greeted Ron enthusiastically, rising from his bed.

"You too, Ron," Harry acknowledged with a grin, before also scrambling out of bed and pulling on his dressing-gown. He then greeted the only other person staying in the first-year dormitory with them. "Merry Christmas, Grim."

"Bah humbug," was Grim's immediate retort.

"What's his problem?" asked Ron, inspecting his pile of presents.

"Dunno," shrugged Harry. He turned to Grim and asked, "What's the matter?"

"S too early to be awake," Grim lamented sourly. "I've had a late night, long hours and nobody was happy to see me."

"You're the Grim Reaper," explained Mandy. "Nobody's ever happy to see you."

Harry and Ron turned to see Mandy standing in the doorway to the boys' dorm, dressed in pink satin pyjamas and an equally pink fleece dressing gown. Her hair was somewhat ruffled, not in its usual impeccable neatness, but otherwise she appeared fully awake and ready to face the day.

"Mandy! Merry Christmas," greeted Harry happily.

"Yeah, whatever," Mandy replied, already turning to leave. "Come on, we've got presents to open."

The boys quickly gathered the piles of presents at the foot of their beds, Harry somewhat surprised by the number of gifts in his collection, and then descended to the common room. Mandy was waiting by the largest fireplace, her own bounty of presents arrayed in a neat row beside her.

Ron immediately dove into the process of opening his gifts, something that involved a great deal of animalistic shredding and tearing of wrapping paper. Harry and Mandy were more sedate and took the time to arrange themselves in more comfortable positions before beginning. Starting with those presents from their new school friends, the pair found boxes of Chocolate Frogs from Hermione and Bertie Bott's Every-Flavour Beans from Ron.

"I'm still not sure about eating something that moves," commented Mandy, inspecting a frog.

"At least these don't scream when you bite them," replied Harry.

"Good point."

Harry's next gift proved to be a hand-carved wooden flute, courtesy of Hagrid. Harry tried to play a short tune on it, but proved to have all the musical talent of a tone-deaf owl. A look from Mandy convinced him to put it away and never to try playing it again.

Mandy, for her part, opened several presents from her parents. These were mostly gift-vouchers to various prominent stores in Muggle London. Mr and Mrs Maxwell both felt it to be safer allowing Mandy to choose what she wanted herself, rather than risk getting her something she disapproved of. They had also sent Harry several vouchers to those same stores, though of noticeably lesser value.

Junior had sent them all presents as well, as they were probably the only true friends he had in the school. Most of the other Hufflepuffs were properly terrified of the young godling, despite all his efforts to befriend them. Truth be told it was actually those same efforts that scared them off in the first place. Harry received a small bottle of polish for his broom, through the Ghost-Rider did not really need any maintenance. Mandy's gift was a bright pink barrette, which she actually seemed to appreciate receiving.

Neither of them were naïve enough to even consider opening the brightly wrapped gifts that had Eris' name on the cards. Their suspicions were confirmed when Ron opened his gift and promptly found himself with a mule's head and ears, straight from the pages of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Next in line was a pair of oddly shaped presents that seemed rather lumpy compared to the others. Opening them, Harry and Mandy found themselves to be the recipients of Weasley jumpers, hand-knitted by Ron's mother.

"Every year - HEE HAW - she makes us a jumper," explained Ron, unable to stop himself from braying as he held up the sweater he had also finished unwrapping. His expression, or as much as a mule was capable of, turned into one of distaste as he regarded his present. "And mine's *always* ma- HEE HAW -ron."

"Nice needlework," noted Mandy, examining her sweater with a critical eye. Unlike Ron's, her present was bright and vivid pink in colour, with an equally bright yellow sunflower worked into the front.

"She certainly got you the right colour," said Harry, loosening his dressing-gown and pulling his own emerald green sweater over his head and into place over his pyjamas.

"And you as well. Matches your eyes," agreed Mandy.

Having finished unwrapping the presents from their friends, Harry and Mandy exchanged those presents they had gotten for each other. Being ensconced in the castle it was difficult to find anything more than simple sweets, but both children had managed to convince Grim to do their Christmas shopping for them.

Mandy seemed truly appreciative of the wand holster and care kit that Harry had gotten her. It was an extravagant present compared to those of past Christmases, as the Dursleys were still not at all willing to give him any form of allowance, forcing him to improvise. Mandy never said anything about it, but Harry always felt somewhat inadequate as a result. This Christmas, however, he had dipped a little into his school fund and made a point of making up for his previously less than adequate presents.

Harry in turn opened his present from Mandy to find a book, the title of which he read out loud as, "How to Take Over the World in Ten Easy Steps, by Hector Con Carne."

"Thought you might find it useful," Mandy explained.

"Are you sure you want the competition?" Harry teased.

"Who said you'd be working against me?" replied Mandy.

"Right-hand man?"

"I need somebody that knows what they're doing."

"I'll make a point of studying it thoroughly," grinned Harry.

Harry was absolutely serious about this, as he knew very well Mandy's attitude when it came to giving presents. In all the years he had known her, he had never seen her give anyone a present of any kind. Not to Grim. Not even to her parents. For some reason, he was the only person to ever receive a gift from her - every birthday and Christmas without fail. They may not have been large, or expensive, but Harry felt he understood the significance behind the gesture.

They then moved onto the last present from Mandy's pile. It was a smallish box, wrapped in plain brown paper and tied up with simple twine. It was obviously not an ordinary present. Untying the string and stripping away the paper, Mandy opened the package and revealed the Philosopher's Stone. Or at least a very good facsimile of it. It was a quartz paste replica, built to exact specifications based on the sketches of the real Stone obtained from Grim's book on the subject. The order had been placed by Mandy's parents, who had then forwarded the finished article along to their daughter. While not something that would fool Flamel, Dumbledore or any truly skilled magic user, it would suffice for what they had planned.

"So," Harry glanced over to make sure that Ron was not listening (especially with those ears) and quietly asked, "Any ideas yet for stealing the Stone and making the switch?"

"Of course," answered Mandy.

"Any practical ideas?" he reiterated.

"Not really," she reluctantly admitted. "We need to find out what else there is protecting it."

"You really don't think Fluffy's enough?" asked Harry.

"It's a dumb dog," concluded Mandy.

"A dumb, giant, three-headed dog with a taste for human flesh."

Mandy shrugged and said, "Hagrid said that Snape's also helping to guard it."

"You think the other professors are involved?" asked Harry as he picked up the last of his presents; a shapeless package not unlike the one his Weasley sweater had come in.

"Must be," confirmed Mandy.

"That's a lot of protection," said Harry as he searched for a card. Finding none, he asked, "D'you think we can get through it all?"

"Yeah, but not without help."

Once again Harry glanced at Ron, though this time for a different reason. He shook his head. "Ron and Hermione may be our friends, but I don't think we'd be able to convince them to help us."

"If they won't help us *steal* the Stone," said Mandy, "then we convince them to help us *protect* it."

"Frame Voldemort for the theft?" asked Harry, immediately divining her plan. He began to pull the wrapping off the gift, curious as to who else would bother sending him clothing.

"Yeah," confirmed Mandy.

A large cloak, made of a strange shimmering material, was revealed as the wrapping paper fell away. Both Harry and Mandy stared at it in confusion, not quite sure what to make of it. Ron, however, was quick to recognise what Harry was holding.

"I've he- HEE HAW -ard of those," he said, slightly awed and donkey ears twitching. "If that's what I think it is - HEE HAW - they're really rare and really valuable."

"What is it?" asked Harry.

"It's an Invisibility Cloak, of course," answered Grim, who was finally descending from the dormitories.

Harry wrapped the garment around his shoulders and watched in excited disbelief as the rest of his body vanished from sight. Once the cloak had settled in place there was not even a hint of distortion to betray its presence.

"Now that's a neat trick," Mandy noted, giving Harry a meaningful look. "Could come in handy."

"Grim? Is this..." Harry trailed off, wondering that the Reaper would give him such a thing.

"Don't be daft, mon," Grim chided. "You already get into enough trouble wit-out one."

"Then who – HEE HAW - is it from?" asked Ron.

"Here," said Mandy, spotting what Harry had missed. "There's a note."

Reaching for the slip of paper that his friend held out to him, Harry pushed his glasses up to the bridge of his nose and began to read the willowy handwriting out loud.

Your father left this in my possession before he died.

I imagine your friend, Grim, will know what it is.

Use it well.

A Very Merry Christmas to you.

"Use it well, huh?" repeated Mandy suggestively, eyeing the cloak with interest.

"I'm pretty sure that's not what the author had in mind," said Harry dryly.

"Still..."

"Of course you can borrow it," Harry relented with a sigh.

-oOo-

Harry decided to go exploring that night, to give his new invisibility cloak a test drive as it were. After a close run-in with both Filch and Professor Snape, he sought refuge in an abandoned classroom. There he stumbled upon a strange mirror, as high as the ceiling and bordered with an intricate golden frame. An inscription was carved along the topmost curve, in a bold and flowing script, but the words were foreign to him and Harry doubted that he would be able to even pronounce them correctly.

Slightly less than twenty-four hours later, he was leading Mandy, Grim and Ron into that same room. His discovery the previous night had left him filled with such good spirits and enthusiasm that he simply had to share the experience. His friends, being forced to brave the bitter cold outside the Gryffindor common room, were not quite so eager.

"See?" he asked triumphantly.

His three friends stood around Harry and stared curiously into the mirror for several long moments.

"I can't see anything - PPPPHHT," admitted Ron. His Christmas 'present' from Eris was still in fully effect, much to his displeasure. Fred and George, of course, found the situation utterly hilarious and had sworn to sacrifice a rubber chicken to the crazed blonde goddess in acknowledgement of her devious prank. Their adoration had grown to the point where both boys were considering offering up their firstborn children, especially when the second phase of the 'gift' had manifested itself. Ron had woken up on Boxing Day to find that he no longer had an ass for a head, but rather a literal arse. To his horror, and everyone else's disgust, he now had the misfortune of breaking wind instead of braying whenever he spoke. The twins were merciless in their teasing. Nothing any of the professors tried had any affect on the poor boy's head.

"Me neither," acknowledged Mandy.

"Me too," agreed Grim.

"Look! Look at them all... there are loads of them..."

"Harry," interrupted Mandy. "The only thing that mirror's showing is you."

"Look at it properly then," Harry insisted, moving from his spot and dragging Mandy over by her elbow. "Here, stand where I'm standing."

"Okay," said Mandy dubiously.

After making sure that she was standing in exactly the right spot, Mandy turned her attention to the mirror. Her eyebrows immediately rose straight up to her hairline and her eyes widened enough that the irises were completely surrounded by white.

Seeing her reaction, Harry quickly asked, "Well?"

"Interesting."

"What?"

"I think this mirror of yours shows whatever you want the most," said Mandy thoughtfully, her eyes darting back and forth as she tried to encompass all she was seeing.

"Really?" asked Ron. "PRPRPRFT! Let me have a look."

"But... my family..." Harry trailed off as Ron replaced Mandy at the mirror. The redhead's mouth promptly gaped wide open as he stared, transfixed, at whatever image was revealed to him.

"Cor, that's wicked."

"What is it?"

"I'm Headboy - PPPPPHHT - I'm wearing the badge like Bill used to - BBBRRAP - and I'm holding the House Cup and the Quidditch Cup - PRPRPRFT - I'm Quidditch captain, too!" enthused Ron, a delighted grin splitting his face. His companions studiously avoided looking at him while this happened.

"So Mandy's right," murmured Harry, dropping his head dejectedly. "It only shows what we want it to show."

Feelings of bitterness and disappointment welling up within him, Harry stumbled away from the mirror. While having never been a particularly physical person, at that moment he really wanted to hit something. It was a pity, he decided, that Draco Malfoy had gone home for the holidays.

The gentle touch of a pink mitten-covered hand on his shoulder pulled Harry out of his dark thoughts. He turned to find Mandy standing next to him, a hint of concern in her eyes despite the neutral expression on her face. She did not say anything. She didn't need to.

"I'm okay," he said, taking a deep breath. "Thanks."

"You sure?" asked Mandy.

"Yeah?" returned Harry. Trying to shake off his sudden depression, he asked, "What do you see in the mirror, Mandy?"

Mandy moved back to the mirror to take a second look. Ron was still standing in front of its polished surface, staring in rapt fascination at the splendid image presented to him. Not bothering to say anything, Mandy moved him out of the way by the simple method of giving him a good shove.

"Oi!"

"Out of my way, stooge."

"You could've - PPPPPHHT - just asked," grumbled Ron.

"Well?" asked Harry.

"It's the future," observed Mandy, staring searchingly into the mirror, "and I hold dominion over the entire planet. The commoners call me Mandy the Merciless, and I'm feared by all."

"Well," said Harry after a short but incredulous pause, "so long as you haven't turned into a hideous, disgusting, worm-like creature to do it."

"I'm scary enough as I am," Mandy assured him.

"Good."

"You're my most loyal and trusted retainer, loved by all," she added.

"Wicked," grinned Harry, his earlier dark mood almost entirely forgotten.

"What about me?" asked Grim warily.

"Don't worry, Grim, you're there too," admitted Mandy.

"Damnation."

"After all, someone has to mop the floors."

"Insufferable girl," grumbled Grim.

"What d'you see, Grim?" asked Harry, curious to know what his other best friend might see.

Grim graciously bowed out as Grim moved to replace her in front of the mirror. She huddled next to Harry, the bitterly cold weather prompting her

to stand closer than she normally would. Pulling her dressing-gown tight she leaned against him, just barely touching, and muttered soft imprecations about being forced to live in a building whose internal heating was akin to that of a refrigerator.

"An endless graveyard, wit nuttin' but headstones from horizon to horizon," revealed Grim after a few moments of examining the mirror's contents. He paused and then pointed, "Yours and Mandy's are right dere, in de front."

"That's... morbid," concluded Mandy.

"Just being optimistic."

-oOo-

Before long, school started again. Hermione and Junior's return to Hogwarts was lost in the arrival of Eris, who seemed intent on making up for lost time. To everyone's relief, Ron was granted the boon of having the head he had been born with returned to him. Even so, jokes about how he could talk out of his arse would haunt him for the rest of his days. Mandy's plans to steal Flamel's Philosopher's Stone ground to a halt in the face of a seemingly endless wave of homework and assignments. It seemed that almost every single professor thought this was the way to start off the New Year. Suffice to say, Hermione was delighted, though she was the only one.

After only a few short weeks, it was time for the Gryffindor vs. Hufflepuff Quidditch match to be played. Rumours abounded that Snape would be acting as the referee, much to the alarm of the Gryffindors, but this was quickly debunked. Apparently, Snape had decided to spend the entire match sitting immediately behind Mandy and Grim - in an attempt to prevent a repeat of the match against Slytherin. How he planned to accomplish this without curling into a ball and sucking on his thumb was unknown. Balancing this action from the other end, Hoss Delgado stood watch over the Slytherin section of the stands, his chainsaw held at the ready. Draco Malfoy was especially pale as a result.

Comparatively speaking, it was a quiet and wholly unremarkable match.

"This game was so *boring*, compared to the last one," lamented Eris as the students filed out of the stands and made their way back to the castle. "Why didn't somebody blow something up and make it a little more lively?"

Nobody dared to imagine what that would entail, as the Goddess of Chaos had an entirely different definition of 'lively' than the rest of the school's population.

Time proceeded to pass at a brisk clip, with very little progress being made towards Mandy's plans for acquiring the Stone. Judicious probing of the various teachers, sometimes too subtle to actually acquire any information, hinted that it was the school heads of house that had help lay down the protections for the Stone. On top of that was the realization that the professors had begun making patrols of the forbidden corridor and any paths leading to it. Clearly, some sort of distraction would be needed to gain further entry.

It was in the early days of spring, a few short days after the last snows had melted away, that Harry talked his various friends into stopping by Hagrid's hut for tea. So, after classes were done for the day, the usual Gryffindor suspects, this time accompanied by a very enthusiastic Junior, made their way across the school grounds. Nobody even considered inviting Eris, who was at the moment directing a billowing snowstorm in the school dungeons. It went without saying that her fellow Slytherins were looking terribly harried as they stumbled through the day in thick winter cloaks and other cold-weather gear. The animated snowmen that pounced on any unsuspecting victim were probably the worst aspect of it all, though there were whispered mutterings of a rogue yeti skulking about.

"Ten weeks!"

"Hermione--"

"You realise we need to pass these exams to get into the second year? They've very important!" insisted Hermione, who was the only person present that bothered arguing against their little excursion.

"Put a sock in it, will you?" demanded Mandy. "You need to relax a little."

"Yes, all dis stress isn't good for you," agreed Grim.

"I should have started studying a month ago," Hermione fretted. "I don't know what's gotten into me."

Harry rolled his eyes at the girl's needless worrying and gave the door before him a sound thumping. After a short wait, the door creaked open a fraction and a weary looking Hagrid stuck his head out. He looked almost as frazzled as Hermione did.

"'Ello," said Hagrid, blinking in surprise. "What brings yeh round 'ere?"

"Oh, nothing really," said Harry, trying to act innocent as he and the others filed into Hagrid's hut. "Can't we visit a friend?"

"What's guarding the Philosopher's Stone apart from the dog?" demanded Mandy, having no time for subtlety.

"'Ere now! Tha's none of yer business!" Hagrid protested. He paused and then gruffly admitted, "Besides, I don't rightly know meself."

"How couldn't you?" asked Hermione, clearly surprised by the admission. "You helped set up the protections, didn't you?"

"Nah, each o' th' heads o' house--"

"The heads of the houses? *All* the houses?" interrupted Ron.

"Well, yeah--"

"But *Snape's* the head of Slytherin!"

Hagrid heaved an exasperated sigh, more like a bellow of wind really, and grumbled, "Yer not still on abou' that, are yeh? Look, *Snape* helped *protect* the Stone, he's not about ter steal it."

Harry, playing the part Mandy had assigned earlier, muttered, "I wouldn't be so sure of that," mostly for the benefit of his other friends, who they were still looking to recruit into 'protecting' the Stone.

"Um, Hagrid," Junior spoke up, drawing everyone's attention to him. He pointed at the nearby fireplace and asked, "Why do you have a giant egg in the fire?"

Hagrid's reply was a rather unintelligent, "Er..."

"Blimey! Where did you get it, Hagrid?" asked Ron, immediately crossing the hut. He crouched by the fire and took a closer look at the gleaming black egg that hung suspended over the flickering coals. "It must've cost you a fortune."

"Won it," Hagrid admitted, seeing that there was no point in lying. "Las' month. I was--"

"Won what, exactly," interrupted Mandy impatiently.

"Mandy, dat's a dragon's egg," explained Grim, now standing next to Ron and also examining the egg.

Harry and Hermione immediately turned incredulous eyes to Hagrid and chorused, "Dragon?"

Hagrid sighed wistfully and confessed, "Always wanted a dragon."

"Hagrid, you live in a *wooden house*," protested Hermione.

"Look - look!" called Junior, once again drawing their attention to the fireplace. The normally quiet and awkward Hufflepuff was pointing excitedly at the egg in question. "It's hatching!"

"Out th' way - out th' way!"

Hagrid was immediately in motion and gently pushed Ron, Junior and Grim aside. Using a pair of massively over-sized oven mittens, he lifted the egg from the fire and set it gently down on his dining table.

"E's nearly out," he whispered, leaning over expectantly.

The egg was already laced with dozens of hairline cracks, which rapidly grew thicker and more numerous. Several large pieces of shell fell away and the dragon began to push its way out, emerging in a manner not unlike a baby crocodile - something Harry had once seen on National Geographic, while spending a bored summer's day at Mandy's house the year before.

"Cor, I recognise it," breathed Ron, nearly as excited about the entire matter as Hagrid. "That's a Norwegian Ridgeback, that is."

"Are Norwegian Ridgebacks good to eat?" asked Junior curiously.

Ron paused and looked at nervously at Junior. "Ah..."

Hermione, however, instantly admonished, "Junior!"

"Bless him, look, he knows his mummy!" cried Hagrid as the little beast snapped sharply at his sausage-like fingers.

Mandy watched the affair coolly, her exposure to Grim having long since diminished her wonder at such events. Seeing a baby dragon hatching was almost mundane compared to some of their adventures. Then, quite suddenly, her head fell to one side and her dark blue eyes narrowed a fraction. Her observation of the scene before her intensified.

"I recognise that look," said Harry softly, arching an eyebrow. "What is it?"

"I think we've just found our distraction," said Mandy.

Harry looked at her, confused for a moment before he made the connection. He turned his head to stare at the newly hatched dragon, which had just set fire to a tuft of Hagrid's beard. He turned back to his friend.

"You must be joking."

"You know I don't have a sense of humour."

"Sure you do," asserted Grim, who had no idea exactly what they were discussing, save what little he had just heard. "It's lost somewhere in dat miles-wide sarcastic streak of yours, is all."

"Are you certain about this?" asked Harry, regarding the baby dragon dubiously.

"Yes," Mandy nodded.

"I dunno," said Harry, "We might need help."

"Don't worry," replied Mandy. "I know exactly what we need and who can arrange it for us."

"I tink I'm missing someting here," observed Grim, only now coming to this realization.

-oOo-

Mandy's plans for the baby dragon, which Hagrid inexplicably named Lil' Porkchop, came to fruition a week after its hatching. By this point their number had been decreased by one, as Ron was ensconced in the school hospital wing after having Lil' Porkchop "nibble" on his hand. The injured limb had swollen up to immense proportions, actually rivalling Hagrid's own hand in size. Thus it was down to Hermione, Junior and Grim to act as the stooges in Mandy's manipulations. No-one wanted to tempt fate and ask Eris for assistance.

The first part of the plan had been convincing Hagrid that keeping Lil' Porkchop as a pet was simply unrealistic. The big man reluctantly admitted to knowing this, though was at a loss as to how the hatchling could be relocated. It was here that Ron, or rather his family, came into play. Mandy rarely forgot anything and was quick to remember Ron's older brother Charlie, who was currently studying dragons in Romania. Some quick correspondence via Hedwig soon brought the other Weasley into the scheme. Plans were drawn up to have Charlie and his friends pick up Lil' Porkchop from the top of the Astronomy Tower that Saturday night.

Thus it was that the group of five went down to Hagrid's hut late on Saturday afternoon. Their objective was to take Lil' Porkchop, by now packed away in a sturdy wooden crate, to his rendezvous with Charlie. This was a very important part of Mandy's plan, as they would be sneaking Lil' Porkchop's crate into the Great Hall during dinner - ostensibly as a prelude to smuggling the dragon up to the astronomy tower. Hermione had, of course, pointed out the many, many flaws in this part of the plan, but Mandy could be very convincing with her words. A combination of Silencing Charms and Harry's invisibility cloak would ensure that Lil' Porkchop's presence would remain undetected.

Hagrid met them at the door to his hut, Lil' Porkchop ready and waiting in his crate. The large man, however, was understandably inconsolable over the imminent loss of his self-proclaimed baby.

"Honestly, Hagrid, it's for the best," said Harry, reaching high up to pat his shoulder.

"If you love him, set him free," added Hermione, though the truism rang rather hollow.

"He's got lots o' rats an' some brandy fer the journey," said Hagrid, sniffing back his tears. "An' I've packed his teddy bear in case he gets lonely."

There was a loud ripping noise at this moment and bits of stuffing promptly puffed out of the crate's air holes.

"Mister Bonkers!" wailed Junior suddenly, flashing back to his own teddy bear, which had met a similar fate at the hands of Mandy.

"What is it with you people and teddy bears?" asked Mandy.

"Ere now, Mandy!" protested Grim.

"Don't tell me you also have one, Grim," said Mandy incredulously.

"Er... well... you see..."

"Hnn," Mandy closed her eyes in frustration. "Come on; let's get on with this - before it gets too late."

"Right," agreed Harry. He crossed to stand on one side of the crate. He looked to Junior, who had quickly recovered from his earlier trauma, and asked, "Junior, can you get the other side?"

"Of course, cousin," said Junior willingly.

Junior moved into position opposite Harry, but made no attempt to help the other boy lift it up. Instead, a pair of thick black tentacles emerged from his shoulder blades, which he used to hoist the crate into the air with a casual ease. This left Harry without having to actually do any carrying of his own.

"Uh, that's nice," he said.

"Here's your Invisibility Cloak, Harry," said Hermione, coming over to join them.

Harry took the cloak from Hermione and draped it over the crate, hiding it from view. It was admittedly quite strange to see Junior standing there with his tentacles out and not doing anything, but everyone agreed that most of the school's inhabitants would write it off as one of the strange boy's many quirks - that and they were probably afraid of being electrocuted by those same tentacles, should they say anything about it.

"Bye-bye, Lil' Porkchop!" sobbed Hagrid, waving a handkerchief in farewell. "Mummy will never forget you!"

"Remind me again why you're friends with that lummo," muttered Mandy quietly as she and Harry lead the way back to the school.

"Mandy," Harry chided. "Hagrid's a good man, just..."

"He's crying because we're taking away his pet dragon," Mandy maintained staunchly. "What sort of person does that?"

"And you challenged the Grim Reaper to a game of limbo in exchange for your dog's soul," countered Harry. He made a point of leaving out the fact that Mandy had included his own soul in the deal. "What sort of pretty little girl does that?"

"I hardly see any similarity in the situation," Mandy asserted.

"If it was Grim taking Lil' Porkchop away, I'd bet Hagrid would fight to get it back," said Harry.

"I rather doubt Hagrid's any good at limbo," noted Mandy dryly. "Or chess for that matter."

The small group; Harry and Mandy in the front, Junior in the middle and with Grim and Hermione holding up the rear, were now almost to the doors leading into the school. "Nearly there, Junior," encouraged Hermione as they approached. "We can rest in the Entrance Hall if you're getting tired."

"Don't worry, Hermione," Junior assured her. "The crate's not that heavy. I could do this all day."

Passing through the massive front doors and into the Entrance Hall, they found that their timing was nearly perfect. Dinner had only just begun and the students were haphazardly trickling into the Great Hall. There was some delay as they had to slip by the Weasley twins and Lee Jordan, who for some reason had engaged in a bizarre game of tennis with Peeves. The match was so engrossing for its participants that the poltergeist completely failed to notice Grim, thereby preventing him from yet again screaming in terror and fleeing in a panic. Grim seemed rather disappointed at being ignored like that.

The Great Hall was less than half-full, making it easy for them to smuggle their hidden cargo to the far end of the Gryffindor table. A few eyes were directed at Junior, the only non-Gryffindor of the group, but those quickly moved away upon noticing his exposed tentacles. Grim and Hermione, the tallest of the group, stood between them and the professors' table; shielding Junior from view as he deposited Lil' Porkchop at the foot of the table. Harry quickly made sure that the crate was still fully hidden beneath the invisibility cloak.

"So far, so good," he muttered as they finally took their seats. It was somewhat unusual for Junior to be sitting with them, rather than at the Hufflepuff table, but there was enough intermingling between the houses that it drew only a passing notice from the other students.

"I still say this is a bad idea that's going to go horribly wrong," whispered Hermione.

The trap, such as it was, had been set. All that remained was for them to spring it upon the unsuspecting population of Hogwarts and then use the distraction to make their foray for the Stone. After waiting for everyone to serve up their meals, Mandy lifted her gaze to meet Harry's. Her nod was imperceptible to anyone that was not looking for it.

Knowing better than to give any acknowledgement of Mandy's order, Harry stretched across the table for a pitcher of pumpkin juice. He made a point of using his right arm for this, as his left was surreptitiously drawing his wand from his trouser pocket. It was important that he use his off-hand for the next bit, as nobody was likely to suspect him of anything if his wand hand was in full view.

Slowly pouring the pumpkin juice into his glass, Harry took care to aim his wand at the concealed crate and dragon. Setting the pitcher down, he took up his glass and lifted it to his mouth. As the rim touched his lips, Mandy commanded Grim to pass her a platter of pork chops - a rather fitting request, when considering the name of the dragon. Harry used this opportunity to softly but quickly whisper the string of spells needed to set events in motion.

Spellwork finished, he took a small sip of juice and then turned to Mandy. "What time is it?" he asked. Mandy checked her wristwatch and told him. He then looked to their unwitting accomplices. "Mandy and I'll finish up as quickly as possible, so we can leave in ten minutes. That way nobody will be suspicious of us moving in a group. We'll meet up later at the base of the tower."

As this was something they had already agreed upon, Hermione and Junior simply nodded in concurrence and continued eating. Harry glanced at Mandy and finally gave a miniscule nod of his own. Only the two of them knew that Lil' Porkchop, courtesy of Harry's spells, would be escaping his crate a short two minutes after they had left. A timer-delayed dungbomb, going off at the very same instant, would ensure that the dragon would not be in a good mood. This, they hoped, would provide a sufficient disturbance to mask their stealing away to the third floor corridor.

"Are you sure this'll be enough?" asked Harry quietly after he and Mandy had said their farewells. They left the Great Hall, Grim trailing faithfully behind them, and passed quickly through the Entrance Hall. "How big of a distraction could a *baby* dragon be?"

"More than a troll," said Mandy.

"We were outside the girls' loo at the time," Harry pointed out. "We never actually saw how everyone else reacted to the thing."

"Neville fainted," said Mandy, repeating what Lavender and Parvati had told them.

"That's only because Hoss pulled out his chainsaw again."

"Which I guarantee only helped to increase the panic." Mandy assured him, picking up the pace as they reached the main stairwell. "Add a fire breathing dragon, the Weasley twins and Eris into the mix..."

"We'll be lucky if the castle survives," Harry concluded.

"As long as I get the Stone, that's something I can live with."

They had only made it up the first staircase before a faint and deafening scream reached up to them. It sounded as if it were Hermione, doubtless as she and Junior were the ones closest to Lil' Porkchop at the time of his escape. Harry was somewhat concerned for his friends' safety, but refrained from saying anything as he knew that Mandy would doubtless consider any injuries under the heading of 'acceptable losses'. As they ascended to the second floor, they could hear that the plan was working exactly as they had expected. From the sound of things, it seemed that chaos was reigning supreme in the Great Hall. Eris would no doubt be in rapture.

"Pick up the pace, boys," commanded Mandy. "We probably won't have more than fifteen minutes."

"Er... aren't we going to go back?" asked Grim, clearly confused. "See what's going on?"

"We have somewhere we need to be, Grim," explained Harry, without going into any detail.

"But..."

Grim's weak protestation died on his proverbial lips as they arrived on the third floor... where Argus Filch was waiting for them. The school's caretaker was standing at the entrance to the forbidden corridor, Mrs. Norris prowling round his feet, and clearly expecting their arrival.

"Well, well, well," Filch whispered gleefully, "we *are* in trouble."

Mandy took one look at the man, especially his smug expression, and cursed under her breath. Harry, standing quietly beside her, blinked in surprise. Mandy rarely swore, and never quite as vehemently as the single word she had just let loose. As Filch led them back down the stairs, she sidled close to Harry and whispered in a harsh tone of voice, "We've been ratted out."

"Junior would never do that," he whispered back. "And I doubt Hermione would either."

"Weasley?" asked Mandy.

Harry shook his head. "No, he's still in the hospital wing - and besides; he doesn't know any details."

Mandy grimaced as she acknowledged the point with a curt nod. Her dark blue eyes then narrowed to fine slits. "Then we must've been found out by someone on the outside."

"But what did they rat out?" asked Harry quietly. "That we were smuggling Lil' Porkchop into the school? Or that we were making a play for the Stone?"

"I don't really care right now," growled Mandy, clenching her hands into tight fists. "Whoever's responsible is going to *pay*."

Harry winced and was barely able to resist covering his privates. He had heard Mandy use such a tone on several occasions. Every single time, the poor sod that stirred up her ire was left curled up in a ball of misery, pain and utter humiliation. Turning his attention away from his fuming companion, Harry looked up and wondered where in the school it was that Filch was leading them. The answer came soon enough as Filch prodded them into a room occupied by Professor McGonagall and the person to blame for their being caught.

"Potter!" exclaimed Draco Malfoy upon seeing Filch bring Harry, Mandy and Grim into what was clearly Professor McGonagall's office. His lips turned into a haughty smirk. "You see, Professor? I told you Potter was up to something!"

"Caught this lot running about unsupervised, Professor," reported Filch, pushing passed Harry and Mandy. "On the third floor, no less."

Professor McGonagall stood perfectly still for several moments, doing nothing but regard the pair of students standing before her. Harry noticed that her eyes cut to Grim only the once. After that, she ignored the skeleton entirely.

"If I weren't seeing it with my own eyes..." McGonagall shook her head, in a mixture of disbelief, disappointment and irritation. She stared from Harry to Mandy and back, her lips compressing into a thin line. "Bringing a dragon into the school - and letting it run amok! *Explain yourselves*."

"We were planning to take Lil' Porkchop up to the astronomy tower later tonight, after dinner," said Mandy plainly. Clearly she intended on using Lil' Porkchop to distract from the fact that they had been found on the third floor.

"*Lil' Porkchop?*" blurted Filch incredulously.

"Hagrid," said Harry by way of explanation.

"I should've known," Filch grumbled in resignation. "Still, that doesn't mean you're not in trouble."

"And why would you, Miss Maxwell, Mister Potter," asked McGonagall, continuing to overlook Grim's presence, "be taking a dragon, of all things, up to the astronomy tower?"

"To hand him off to Charlie Weasley, ma'am," said Harry earnestly.

"I see," said the Professor, her voice completely flat.

"Hagrid... well, y'know..."

"I do indeed, Mister Potter," agreed McGonagall, sounding more than slightly resigned to Hagrid's foibles. "Rest assured, I shall be speaking to Hagrid about this."

"Can we go back to the common room then?" asked Mandy.

"Yes, you may," McGonagall nodded, moving to her desk and slipping gently into the rather uncomfortable looking chair behind it. "We will discuss the details of you three's punishment tomorrow."

It took several seconds for her words to register but when they did, Draco leapt forward and planted both hands on her desk. "What?" he cried in disbelief. "Three? *Three?* But... but..."

"Yes, Mister Malfoy, that included you."

"But... but..."

"Malfoy," said Mandy ominously, approaching the fuming boy.

"You!" he rounded on her, his face flushing bright pink with anger. "This is your fault! You - you - urkle!"

Mandy ended Malfoy's growing tirade in much the manner Harry, and everyone else present, expected of her. Professor McGonagall appeared too frazzled to care and seemed more concerned with sending them back to the Gryffindor tower than dispensing any further punishment. Stepping round Malfoy's groaning form; Harry held the office door open for Mandy. He was somewhat relieved, feeling they were getting off rather lightly all things considered. He would have to find out just how much trouble Lil' Porkchop (and no doubt Eris as well) had stirred up in the Great Hall. He had a feeling it had something to do with the deputy headmistress's relatively forgiving attitude.

"Time to move onto Plan B, eh?" he asked as they walked.

"Hmm," was Mandy's only comment.

"Plan B?" asked Grim, by now utterly confused. "Den what was Plan A?"

-oOo-

As it turned out, Lil' Porkchop and Eris had gone on a rampage that left the Great Hall uninhabitable for nearly two whole days. It took the combined efforts of every professor in the school to sort out the mess. This was a somewhat puzzling event, as almost no structural damage had been suffered during the "dragon incident".

Even more surprising was that nobody had been grievously injured, though Madam Pomfrey had been forced to restore the hair of over a dozen students, as well as reattach two fingers on Hoss Delgado's human hand. Apparently the man had tried to wrestle Lil' Porkchop into submission. A further twenty students and Professor Snape had been transformed by Eris's golden apples of discord into a veritable zoo of bizarre and unknown creatures. Snape had been stuck in the form of a beast that bore a frightening resemblance to Barney the Dinosaur, though only the Muggleborn students noticed.

Hermione and Junior, despite their close proximity to Lil' Porkchop upon his escape, had somehow made it out of the disturbance none the worse for wear. As Mandy had planned neither of them suspected that the entire incident had been a set up.

It was something of a relief for Harry that their little scheme didn't lose any points once it was exposed by Malfoy. He attributed this to the fact that Mandy had covered their actions by claiming it was all in aid of helping Hagrid. Apparently that was enough to convince Professor McGonagall that several weeks worth of detentions would serve as sufficient reprimand.

Some part of Harry's mind considered the possibility that their lack punishment was more than likely the fact that Mandy actually scared the professors to the point where they didn't dare risk anything more substantial.

After a seemingly endless progression of evenings filled with floor swabbing, cauldron scrubbing and trophy polishing, notes were delivered to Harry, Mandy and Malfoy at the breakfast table.

Your final detention will take place at eleven o'clock tonight.

Meet Mr Filch in the Entrance Hall.

Prof. M. McGonagall.

Resigned to another night of what seemed very much like hard menial labour, Harry and Mandy made it through the day's classes, bid their friends goodnight, and went down to meet both Malfoy and Filch. Grim, mostly at Mandy's prompting, had accompanied them for all their detentions and thus trailed behind them yet again. Arriving at the Entrance Hall they saw that Malfoy was already there and waiting impatiently for them. He glared sullenly at them as they appeared, but did not bother to say anything. A few minutes later Filch arrived, for once without his ever present cat, and held up a large and antique oil lantern.

"Follow me," he said, motioning out the school's massive front doors. "You've detention with Hagrid tonight - in the Forbidden Forest. I bet you'll think twice about breaking a school rule again, won't you eh?"

Malfoy froze in place, his already pale face growing a sickly white. Filch seemed to take a perverse pleasure in reciting what he expected to happen to them, but was slightly disappointed by Harry and Mandy's lack of reaction. He did, however, find a kindred soul in Grim; who was equally hopeful that something dreadful would happen to the children whilst in the Forest.

Before long, Hagrid emerged from the darkness. He was carrying his massive crossbow at the ready and bore a rare look of serious business. Following at his heels was Fang, whose slobbering jaws held the handle to another flickering oil lantern. Filch wasted no time in handing his

charges over to the large man, sneering nastily at them as he left, but not without giving Grim a respectful nod.

"Right then," said Hagrid, looking over the three students and one skeleton arrayed before him. "Now, listen carefully, 'cause it's dangerous what we're gonna do tonight an' I don't want no one takin' risks. Follow me over here a moment."

The group made their way into the forest, trailing behind Hagrid as he led them down a narrow trail through the sparse underbrush. After a few short minutes they drew to a halt as Hagrid crouched low and motioned for them to crowd round.

"Look there," he said, pointing to the patch of earth at his feet, "see that stuff shinin' on the ground? Silvery stuff? That's unicorn blood."

"Somethin' actually *hurt* a unicorn?" asked Grim, sounding appalled by the idea.

"Aye, this is the second time in a week," Hagrid informed them solemnly. "I found one dead last Wednesday."

"So what do you want *us* to do about it?" asked Mandy. "I'm not a veterinarian."

"Well, we're gonna try an' find the poor thing," explained Hagrid. "We might have ter put it out of its misery."

"I'm good for dat," Grim idly commented.

Both Hagrid and Malfoy looked horrified by that admission. Harry and Mandy simply rolled their eyes, well aware of Grim's occasional enthusiasm towards his job. After some rather loud protests by Malfoy, most of which were threats involving his father, the group finally set off further into the forest.

"This is entirely *your* fault," complained Draco, glaring furiously at Mandy.

"You're the one that ratted us out," she reminded him.

"You set loose a *dragon* in the Great Hall!"

"It was only a baby," said Harry.

Up ahead of them, Hagrid burst into tears and wailed, "Lil' Porkchop!"

Grim, at the big man's side, looked askance at him and said, "Sweet mama. Control yourself man!"

"My baby!"

Turning away from this display, Mandy glowered at Malfoy. "It's your fault I have to put up with this," she told him, dark blue eyes narrowed in acute displeasure. "If you're not careful, it won't be just unicorn blood on the ground."

"A-are you trying to - to scare me?" Draco stuttered nervously while clamping both hands over his crotch.

"She's not trying - she's succeeding," noted Harry.

"Perfect," said Mandy. "That means he understands what I'm going to do to him."

By now Hagrid had recovered from his emotional episode and they resumed their trek deeper into the forest. Draco studiously avoided Mandy, mostly by staying to the rear of the party. Harry hung back for a brief moment to commiserate.

"Don't worry so much, Malfoy," he said. "It's not as if she's going to start terrorizing you."

"She's *already* terrorizing me," grumbled Draco.

"Well, yeah, but at least she likes you more than she likes Dudley," said Harry. He shook his head as he remembered times past. "You should see what she does to him some times."

"Who's Dudley?" asked Malfoy, reluctantly curious.

"He's my other cousin," Harry explained. "If you're lucky, you'll never meet him."

"Is he as bad as that freak Nergal Junior?"

"Worse."

"GET BEHIND THAT TREE!" Hagrid unexpectedly bellowed, sweeping one massive arm out to shove the three children behind a nearby tree-stump.

"What was dat?" asked Grim, pulling out his scythe and holding it at the ready.

"Dunno," admitted Hagrid, slowly lowering his crossbow. He glanced at the children, who were clustered together by the stump. "You three wait here, while me an' Grim take a look. If we find the unicorn, we'll send up green sparks and you can come join us. If anything happens, anything bad, use yer wands an' send up red sparks, an' we'll come back an' find yeh, right?"

Actually, if we had any sense, we'd turn and run back to the castle," suggested Mandy.

"Why's tha'?"

"Because," Mandy explained, "Jack be nimble and Jack be quick... or Jack be dead."

"Hmm, yeh have a point," Hagrid agreed.

"Fang stays with us!" demanded Draco quickly, looking to the large dog.

"All right, but I warn yeh, he's a coward," said Hagrid.

Hagrid and Grim moved off and quickly disappeared into the darkness of the forest, leaving the three children and Fang to await their return. Draco quickly appropriated the spare lantern from Fang's jaws and made a point of standing almost on top of the boar hound.

Mandy leaned back against the tree-stump and muttered, "My, what a fun way to spend the evening."

"At least we're not scrubbing floors or polishing trophies," said Harry, reminding her of Filch's favourite means of detention.

"I'm starting to think this really isn't worth the trouble," Mandy complained.

"How can you two talk at a time like this?" asked Draco, his eyes darting about nervously.

"Why not?" asked Harry in return. "It's not like anything's going to hear us."

At this moment there was a loud crack, followed by a fleshy thump, this time coming from the opposite direction from where Grim and Hagrid were investigating. The three students exchanged glances, suddenly aware that they were more-or-less alone in the dark.

"What was that?" asked Draco, an octave higher than normal.

"It came from over there," said Mandy, pointing.

"Let's have a look then," suggested Harry.

"No!" Draco immediately protested. Ignoring him entirely, Harry and Mandy moved off to investigate. Draco reluctantly followed after them, unwilling to stay behind. "Potter! Maxwell!"

The trio of students, with Fang trailing after them, rounded a bend in the trail and found themselves confronted by a dark shape hovering over a fallen unicorn. A large pool of silvery blood was spreading across the forest floor. The shape leaned in and seemed to latch onto the fallen animal's neck. Soft sucking noises could be heard.

"I think we've found what's been killing the unicorns," whispered Harry.

Malfoy took in the sight and prepared to scream in terror, but Mandy quickly clapped a hand over his mouth. "Be quiet, you fool," she hissed. "It hasn't seen us yet, but it will if you start screaming."

"Red sparks?" asked Harry, never taking his eye off the shape.

"No," Mandy shook her head. "That'll only draw its attention to us."

"What do we do? What d'we do?" asked Draco frantically, but quietly.

"Split up and hope it goes after you," suggested Mandy sarcastically.

"Okay," Draco nodded furiously in agreement. The words then caught up with his consciousness and he paused as Mandy's true meaning sunk in. He turned to her and loudly protested, "Hey!"

The exclamation caught the ears of the cloaked figure and it looked up, spotting them immediately.

"You idiot," growled Mandy.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAARGH!"

Malfoy tried to run away in terror, but promptly caught his foot on an upturned root. The following pratfall was moderately amusing and cumulated in Malfoy bashing his head against a stone outcropping - leaving the boy completely insensate. Fang fled into the darkness, yelping piteously as he went, leaving Harry and Mandy to face unicorn slayer alone. Harry reacted quickly and raised his wand into the air, letting loose a stream of dazzlingly bright red sparks.

"Time to leave, Mandy," he said, grabbing her by the hand in preparation to bolt.

"Leave?" whispered the dark figure, its voice carrying surprisingly well in the night air. It glided forward, as if moving on the air currents. "Leave? But we haven't yet been introduced... Harry Potter."

Harry's intention to flee was abruptly derailed by this and he stood firm, though cautious. Regarding the approaching figure, wand at the ready, he

asked, "How do you know who I am?"

"I know many things, boy," the shadowy figure said.

It reached up with both hands and pulled back its hood. Harry and Mandy both blanched at the sight and took some steps back. Before them stood a man, whose face would normally be somewhat nondescript, but was now horribly burned and disfigured. The entire right side of his head was a mass of ugly scar tissue and that eye was a sightless, milky white.

This in itself would have hardly bothered the pair, used as they were to Grim, but for the fact that the man had a second face rising out of the back of his head. It was only visible to them because of the way he twisted and his head turned to the side, revealing the equally badly burned features of someone else. Someone that Harry instinctively recognised.

"Voldemort."

"Yesss..." the dark lord confirmed, his burning red eyes narrowing as he regarded Harry. He used his host's arms to gesture with. "Do you see what I have become? Mere shadow and vapour... I have form only when I share another's body..."

"You're possessing the previous Defence professor," observed Mandy.

"It was perfect," confirmed Voldemort, turning his red gaze to Mandy. "I was placed exactly where I needed to be... until that overly muscled maniac attacked us with that strange magic."

Neither Harry nor Mandy commented on the fact that Hoss Delgado was actually a Muggle. Clearly Voldemort had mistaken Hoss' proton stream cannon as something magical, rather than technological. Apparently Clarke's Law held true.

"You've been hiding here in the forest all along," realized Harry.

"And I'll bet you're the one that sent the troll into the school on Halloween," added Mandy.

"As a distraction, yes," Voldemort admitted, continuing to slowly draw nearer. He seemed to glide over the ground, rather than walk. "Unfortunately Snape went straight to the third floor to head me off - and not only did the troll fail to beat you to death, that three-headed dog didn't even manage to bite the traitor's leg off properly."

"So what's with the unicorns then, Moldybutt?"

To everyone's surprise, both lenses of Harry's glasses unexpectedly cracked.

"What the...?" asked Harry, taking his glasses off and inspecting the damage.

"What did you call me, girl...?" demanded Voldemort, his attention returning to the one who had just insulted him.

Mandy obligingly repeated herself and said, "Moldybutt."

There was a loud snapping sound and all assembled watched with some consternation as one of the branches overhead inexplicably broke loose and crashed down to the forest floor, not far from where they were standing. Harry considered this for a second and then turned to Mandy.

"I think you're doing that," he said.

"Don't be ridiculous," scoffed Mandy.

"How dare you!" snarled Voldemort, resuming his approach. "The Unicorn blood has strengthened me, these past weeks... I am strong enough to *kill* you for such an insult."

"You consider that insulting?" asked Mandy, arching an eyebrow incredulously. "Being called *Moldybutt*?"

This time it was an entire tree that suffered the strange effect - its trunk tearing out of the ground in a spray of loose earth as it toppled over with a thunderous crash. As a bonus, the falling trunk nearly crushed Voldemort, who was only just able to duck out of the way in time.

Harry glanced at Mandy again and reaffirmed, "Yep, definitely you."

Voldemort leaped up and perched atop the fallen tree trunk, grabbing hold of an upright branch for support. He looked for all the world like a sinister, giant crow preparing to swoop down on them.

"Enough of this!" he spat angrily. "Quirrell - kill them!"

"Yeth, mathtah!" exclaimed the former professor, his words slurred by the scars surrounding his mouth. With his free hand Quirrell drew his wand from within the folds of his robe and took aim at the two children. "*Avada Kedaaaaarrgh!*"

Whatever Quirrell's attack was meant to be, it was literally cut off by the timely arrival of Grim. The Reaper appeared on the scene with an accompanying flash of steel, his scythe sweeping down from above and lopping off Quirrell's wand hand. Both Quirrell and Voldemort shrank back in pain and terror, clutching the gushing stump to their shared chest.

"My hand! Mathtah, my hand!" screeched Quirrell, more concerned with his injury than with the being that had inflicted it.

"So, Tom Riddle, we meet again, at last. I've been looking forward to dis for ten long years," said Grim by way of greeting. He paused and then looked over his shoulder at a relieved Harry and Mandy. "And de last couple of dem have been *very* long."

"My hand!"

"Silence fool!" bellowed Voldemort. He seized temporary control of Quirrell's body and turned to glare at his attacker. "I'll see you dead for this!"

Grim smirked and nodded, "How right you are."

Getting his first proper look at Grim, Voldemort was understandably taken aback, instantly forgetting both his pain and anger. He staggered unsteadily, the rapidly increasing blood loss starting to affect him. "What?"

"De bell doth toll, Tom Riddle," announced Grim.

"No... no... NO!" cried Voldemort as he finally recognised his assailant.

Grim leaned forward in anticipation, cold fires burning in his normally empty sockets. "**Are you prepared to meet your doom?**"

"Run! Run, you fool, run!" Voldemort frantically commanded of Quirrell.

"**Your soul... is mine!**" declared Grim, lifting the scythe high over his head.

Unfortunately, before Grim could swing his scythe and finally finish the job, Hagrid arrived on the scene and fired his crossbow... which missed Quirrell entirely and slammed into Grim. The Reaper's body was flung through the air and pinned to a nearby tree by way of a bolt through his ribcage.

"**Ow!** Hey!"

"Grim!" exclaimed Harry, understandably distraught by this.

Voldemort meanwhile made use of this distraction to flee before Grim could free himself, though Mandy did manage to clip him with several minor hexes as he disappeared into the night.

"Damned fool! Watch where you be shooting dat ting!" sputtered Grim, clutching at the bolt holding him in place.

"Oh, sorry 'bout tha'," apologised Hagrid, shouldering his crossbow.

"It's all right, Hagrid," sighed Harry, looking into the forest after Voldemort. "No harm done."

"Did yah get a look at 'im?" asked Hagrid, while trying to pull Grim free. "Did yah see who's been doin' this?"

"It was Voldemort," said Mandy plainly.

Hagrid twitched violently at this, unintentionally jerking Grim loose and sending him to the floor.

"Ouch!"

"You-Know-Who? Here?" asked Hagrid, paling rapidly.

"Grim was about to reap his soul when you... arrived," Mandy confirmed.

"Oh..." Hagrid trailed off, seeming to realize the consequences of his untimely intervention. "Um, sorry."

"Come on, let's wake up the dweeb and get back to the castle," said Mandy.

"Right," Hagrid nodded. "Dumbledore needs to hear 'bout this. Great man, Dumbledore – he'll know what to do."

The group move to where Malfoy was lying, still out cold, and Hagrid knelt down to shake him awake.

"Ugh... did anyone get the name of that giant?" Draco said groggily, slowly coming to.

"He's called 'stupidity'," Mandy told him dryly. "I think you'll be getting trampled by him a lot in the future."

"Oh... thanks," said Draco. He paused. "Hey, wait a minute..." Draco scowled up at Mandy and sneered, "Why, you little bi--"

Mandy promptly cut Draco off by the simple expedient of stomping her heel down on his crotch and grinding firmly. This action had been repeated, in one form or another, at least once a week since the start of the school year. Thus, it was hardly unexpected by the other males present, though Hagrid paled at the sight and clapped both hands over his own groin.

"Urkle," whimpered Draco.

"Mandy!" protested Hagrid, though only half-heartedly.

"I liked him better when he was knocked out," said Mandy as she glanced at Harry, who was still looking to where Voldemort disappeared.

"Mm-hmm," agreed Grim.

-oOo-

"Enter."

Dumbledore sat sedately behind his desk as the door to his office swung open. The first to enter was Harry, ushered in by Hagrid. Mandy and Grim were next, followed by the school's extra-large Keeper of Keys and Grounds.

Mandy looked incredulously at the headmaster, who was fully dressed in a set of resplendent mauve and cerulean robes. He looked as spry and awake as if it were midday, rather than one in the morning. "Don't you ever sleep?"

"As little as possible," Dumbledore replied with a secret smile.

"Professor Dumbledore, sir, we've summat to tell you," declared Hagrid as they approached.

"So I believe," agreed Dumbledore. He watched the two students and Grim, who were now looking around his office. A pity that Fawkes was not present as it would have been interesting to see how the phoenix would have reacted to the trio. For that matter, it would have been just as interesting to see how they (especially Grim and particularly Mandy) would have reacted to such light-oriented creature. "But where is Mister Malfoy? I had understood that he was also in detention with you tonight."

"Oh, he's in the hospital wing, sir," said Hagrid. "He, er... well..."

"He wouldn't shut up," supplied Mandy, turning her full attention to the headmaster.

"Ah," said Dumbledore, hiding his wince. There was little doubt in his mind as to exactly why the Malfoy heir was in need of Madam Pomfrey's services. Mandy had a habit of brutalizing the poor boy on a regular basis. Focusing on Hagrid, he asked, "What brings you here so late at night, Hagrid? Did you find what has been hiding in the forest and killing the unicorns?"

"Oh, tha' we did, sir," Hagrid nodded solemnly.

"It was Voldemort," announced Harry curtly.

Dumbledore felt his eyebrows arch up at the tone of the young wizard's voice. He gave Harry a more detailed inspection than his first one, taking note of his broken glasses and the unusual tenseness about his shoulders. There was no ignoring the clenched fists either.

"Aye, sir," confirmed Hagrid, recovering from his flinch at the mention of the dark lord's name. "He was still possessing Professor Quirrell, sir."

"Of course, I should have realized," Dumbledore murmured.

"Realized what?" asked Mandy.

"The unicorn blood, my girl, the unicorn blood," explained Dumbledore. "I should have realized that it was Voldemort who was responsible for killing the unicorns. He wanted the blood, you see, and the magical properties that it can provide."

"He said it had made him stronger," said Harry.

"In a manner of speaking," Dumbledore confirmed. "You see, children, unicorn blood is a powerful healing agent - not unlike phoenix tears. The difference is that a phoenix willingly sheds its tears; an act of compassion that gives its magic great strength. But to acquire a unicorn's blood, one must either wound or kill the unicorn in question. It is a vile and abhorrent act, a crime so great that it will leave you cursed for all eternity."

"Sounds about right," Grim concurred, nodding in agreement.

"But why would he do something that stupid?" asked Mandy. "What's the point in living forever if you're going to be cursed for it?"

"You will find, Miss Maxwell, that fear is a powerful driving force," explained Dumbledore, rising from his seat and coming out from behind his desk. "It can compel even the most ordinary of people into committing acts of unimaginable wickedness and stupidity."

"So is Voldemort alive again?" asked Harry.

"No, at this point he is still little more than a shade, an undead parasite sustaining himself on Professor Quirrell's life-force," said Dumbledore as he walked to where Harry was standing. He tapped his finger against the boy's broken glasses, causing the fractured lenses to repair themselves into pristine condition.

"I always hated de living undead," commented Grim. "Wandering around, all dead but alive. Makes a mockery of me job."

"Not for long, once I get my hands on him," Harry grumbled.

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow at this. His observations of Harry thus far had not indicated that the boy could be so emotional. For the most part, he went through his daily business with the laidback moderation of someone who never got upset or angry or excited or anything else for that matter. He had chalked it up to both Mandy and Grim's influence. Probably more Mandy's than Grim. Now, however, he began to wonder if perhaps he should re-evaluate that opinion.

"Perhaps," he allowed, returning to his chair. "I shall see about adding some additional wards along the forest edge. Possibly the centaurs would be of some assistance as well. In the meanwhile, I think it would be best if you were to return to your dormitories and have some well deserved sleep. Breakfast is only a few hours away, after all, and classes after that."

"Aye, sir," acknowledged Hagrid. He placed a massive hand on Harry's shoulder and considered doing the same to Mandy, but thought better of it, before escorting the children out of the office. "I'll take them right back to Gryffindor tower before turning in m'self."

"Rest well, children."

"Headmaster."

"Sir."

-oOo-

True to his word, Hagrid duly delivered the two children and their skeleton to Gryffindor tower. Grim retired immediately to the first-year boys' dormitory, while Harry and Mandy settled down on a couch in front of the common room fireplace. Neither said anything, both too wrapped up in their thoughts. Harry glared into the few remaining flames and flickering embers, his expression black with barely suppressed emotion. Mandy, not given to emotional displays of any sort, did nothing to comfort him, at least not with words or actions. She remained by his side, lending her support with her silent presence.

"He killed my parents," Harry finally said, after nearly an hour of brooding.

"I know," replied Mandy.

"He's going to regret coming back from the dead, once I get through with him," Harry stated mildly. He spoke in the same tone of voice most people would use to discuss the weather. It was this that gave the words a chilled edge that left even Mandy feeling a miniscule shiver run down her spine.

"Just don't do anything stupid," cautioned Mandy. "It's impossible to enjoy a victory if you died achieving it."

Harry pulled his glasses off and rubbed tiredly at his eyes. He swivelled about and collapsed in a heap, plopping his head into Mandy's lap. "Don't worry, I'm not that suicidal," he assured her. He stared up at her and muttered, "But damned if I'll let anything stop me."

Mandy looked down at Harry, exceptionally surprised by his actions. The pair had grown very familiar with each other over the years, to the point that they would share her bed, in a purely innocent manner, whenever he slept over at her house. There was always some measure of polite space between them, however. This was the first time that he or anyone had touched her in such a casual fashion. It was not something she had expected, especially from the normally reserved Harry.

Had anyone else been present, they would have backed away in fear of the slight frown that furrowed her brow. It was a look that most would have interpreted as a sign of Harry's imminent death. Or emasculation at the very least. Reaching up, she laid one hand on his chest and the other on the crown of his head.

"We'll see what happens," she finally said.

"You realize, this means that Snape's more than likely innocent," observed Harry as she began to play with his hair. "He was probably trying to stop Voldemort from getting the Stone when he was injured."

"You know that. I know that," replied Mandy. "No need to tell anyone else."

"Still going to frame him for the theft then?"

"We need a decent scapegoat."

"And the fact that nobody outside of Slytherin likes him..."

"...will make it that much easier."

-oOo-

The news that Voldemort was hiding out in the Forbidden Forest was met with varying reactions from Harry and Mandy's friends.

Ron almost went into hysterics at the thought that the dark lord was nearby. After calming down, he then decided that the entire situation was great; a potential adventure his brothers could not hope to copy. He even expressed some disappointment that he had not shared their encounter with the aptly named Lord Moldybutt. Harry was proven correct, as well, as whenever Mandy spoke that moniker something would break. In this case a desk, Hermione's book bag and one of the wall-mounted torch sconces.

Hermione, in contrast, was far more subdued. Well, once she calmed down and stopped admonishing them for actually confronting the dark lord instead of leaving to summon a professor. After that she began to fret with such impressive determination that it hard to tell what worried her more; Voldemort or the upcoming exams.

Grim sulked at having, once again, missed a chance to reap Riddle's soul. He also spent a good bit of time grumbling about Elms.

Junior was most distressed at his favourite cousin's apparent close call. He stuck very close to Harry for the next couple of days. Nobody was

entirely sure if he was acting as some sort of tentacled bodyguard and was simply hoping to get involved in the next attempt on Harry's life. The Hufflepuffs were pathetically grateful for this brief respite. This stopped after a sobbing Ernie Macmillan actually dared to hug Mandy in thanks. After seeing what she did to him the other 'Puffs were almost glad to have Junior in their house instead.

Eris, not surprisingly, was delighted by this turn of events. Especially after she discovered the so-called Moldybutt Effect. She made a habit of working the dark lord's newest moniker into almost every sentence she spoke. Potions was now a truly hazardous class and the Slytherin vs. Hufflepuff Quidditch match ended with both teams having to spend a week in the hospital wing. Eris declared it the most exciting game of the season yet.

"I'm telling you, Moldybutt is going to go after the Stone," declared Mandy. She ignored how one of the nearby paintings abruptly fell off its mount on the wall.

"But we can't just rush into this, Mandy," insisted Hermione. "We need evidence."

"Yeah! The smoking glove!" agreed Ron.

Mandy palmed her face with one hand and quietly muttered unhappy thoughts as to Ron's ancestry.

It was on the last day of their end of year exams that Mandy came up with a plan to spur her posse of unwitting accomplices into action. It was simple plan, a rational plan, a practical plan, a plan that involved bribery, cunning, deception and a certain degree of violence. All-in-all, it was the kind of plan that only Mandy could have thought up. Following breakfast, the group was lead off to one of the castle's many unused classrooms, deliberately following a route she knew would lead them towards the encounter she desired.

Reaching the relevant classroom she opened the door and entered with the command, "Follow me."

"Now what," a drawling voice unexpectedly interrupted before they could do as instructed, "is a group of delinquent Gryffindors and their pet skeleton doing indoors on such a fine spring day? One might almost think you were up to something."

The group of students turned to find themselves faced with the foreboding features of Professor Snape. The potions master had managed to sneak up on them unannounced and now loomed over them with a hint of vindictive pleasure. Indeed, Snape was honestly delighted by the situation - a first for the year. This was an opportunity to be grasped in both hands and cherished for however long it lasted.

Harry Potter... without the ever-present Mandy Maxwell.

"Yes, very suspicious," he murmured, relishing the chance to deduct points and assign detentions without fear.

This was when Mandy leaned her head out of the doorway and back into the corridor.

Snape's pallor immediately grew even paler. "Maxwell," he gasped in surprise.

Mandy turned her head to regard him fully as she exited the classroom to stand in the hallway proper.

"I didn't see you there," Snape said, swallowing deeply but making an admirable show of masking his sudden nervousness. Almost every encounter he had with the blonde girl outside of class ended in his utter humiliation. Though she had never physically harmed him, he unconsciously clamped both hands over his groin. Most of the wizards in the school had developed that reaction.

"Good afternoon, Professor," she blandly greeted him.

"Yes! Good afternoon!" the professor squeaked fearfully, beads of sweat forming across his forehead.

Mandy matched his gaze and frowned minutely.

Snape's response was not unexpected.

"AAAAEEEE!!!!!"

-oOo-

"Well, it's official... Dumbledore has left the building."

This pronouncement of Mandy's was met with grim determination by her friends. Well, they were not *really* her friends so much as they were pawns to be used and discarded and it was only Ron and Hermione that were grimly determined. Harry was fully aware of her plans and was merely acting his part in them. His willingness to go along with whatever she said was probably the main reason why she liked him as much as she did. Then there was Grim, who did not actually care one way or the other.

"Are you sure?" asked Hermione anxiously.

"Yes," confirmed Mandy.

"He's been called to the Ministry of Magic, in London, on important business," elaborated Harry.

"But that means the Stone's unprotected!" exclaimed Ron.

Mandy, who barely tolerated Ron's presence, due to his usefulness in her plans, gave him a hooded stare. "Yes," she said, "it's unprotected. And Professor McGonagall won't believe us about it being in danger of getting stolen by Snape."

Ron's eyes were wide with excitement. "So we'll have to protect it ourselves!"

"But how?" asked Hermione, just as wide-eyed as Ron, but for different reasons. "We're only students."

"Students that are friends with a goddess of chaos and the son of an eldritch abomination," declared Mandy.

"And don't forget Grim," added Harry.

"Please do," quipped the animated skeleton, engrossed in a crossword.

"We really should go to a teacher," insisted Hermione.

"Tried that already, remember?" Mandy reminded her. "Now, come on," she commanded. "We need to get back to the tower and pick up Harry's cloak. It'd be better if nobody saw us."

"Yes, dat way I won't have to deal wit any witnesses," agreed Grim.

"What about Junior and Eris?" asked Hermione as they began to hurry back to the Gryffindor commons. "Shouldn't we let them know?"

"Junior's busy hosting another 'tea party'," explained Harry.

Hermione winced. Junior's tea parties were fast approaching legendary status. And not in good way. It was only luck so far that no-one outside of Hufflepuff had been forced into attending one yet. As it was, the rest of the school pitied the 'Puffs almost as much as they pitied the Slytherins. Almost, as Junior was not nearly as bad as Eris.

And speaking of...

"What about Eris?" she reluctantly asked. The entire group stopped walking and stared at her. "Right, stupid question."

They resumed their trek to the tower.

-oOo-

Sneaking into the forbidden corridor proved surprisingly easy, despite it being the middle of the day. In fact, they didn't even need the Invisibility Cloak - a good thing, as fitting four children and one skeleton under it would have been next to impossible.

"Rawoarw!"

Fluffy was understandably surprised, but pleased to see them.

"Sit!"

"I still don't understand how you can control that monster," grumbled Ron as they entered the room.

"It knows who its mistress is, that's all," answered Mandy. She turned her attention back to the dog. "Get off the trapdoor. Now."

Fluffy whimpered in protest, but reluctantly obeyed.

"Well, this is it," commented Harry, moving to the revealed door and pulling it open.

"It's, um, rather dark," noted Hermione, peering down the exposed hole in the floor.

"I can't see the bottom," said Ron.

"You just need to get a little closer," said Mandy, stepping up behind him.

"What do yoo-hooooooaaaaaaaawwwww!"

Mandy's shove to the back was completely unexpected and Ron had next to no chance to catch himself before toppling through the opening.

"Mandy!" exclaimed Hermione, though she did not seem particularly surprised.

Mandy ignored her in favour of listening carefully. A soft thump and muttered curses reached her ears.

"It's safe to jump," she concluded. She turned to Hermione, who instantly held up her hands.

"I can jump without a push, thank you," she hurriedly stated, before turning back to the trapdoor to do just that.

A moment later a soft thump indicated her safe landing, though the sound was almost lost amidst the noise Ron was making.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Harry asked of Mandy as he prepared to jump.

"Since when has dat ever stopped you two?" asked Grim, peering into the darkness of the open trapdoor. He let out a startled cry as Mandy jabbed him with her elbow, sending him toppling in after Ron and Hermione.

"Well?" asked Harry after Grim's scream had faded out.

"Who would you rather have the Stone?" countered Mandy. "Me or Voldemort?"

"Voldemort would probably do less damage than you will," muttered Harry before making his jump.

Mandy arched an eyebrow and admitted, "True."

-oOo-

FLUMP.

"Help! Harry! Mandy! Help!"

"I - can't - breathe!"

"Now dis be a fine kettle of fish."

Harry took a moment to look around before he was almost crushed when Mandy landed on top of him. Luckily the plant that had cushioned their falls had enough give to allow him to sink under her, instead of being squished.

"It's Devil's Snare! We're trapped in Devil's Snare!" exclaimed Hermione in a panic.

"And how is this a problem?" asked Mandy calmly.

Her question received something of an answer when one of the many vines currently encircling them wrapped itself around Grim's arm and casually pulled it loose.

"Ack! 'Ere now!" protested the Reaper.

"That could be a problem," admitted Mandy.

"Mmph!" mumbled Ron, whose mouth was currently gagged by a couple of thick vines. His wide eyes were able to convey his growing panic.

"What are we going to do? What are we going to do?"

"Oh no, you don't! Leave me legs alone!"

"Calm down!"

"What are we going to do?!"

Hermione's frantic question was answered by Harry. Still trapped under Mandy he was not able to supply much in the way of a verbal response, but he did manage to raise his wand arm and conjure up a small ball of blue fire.

"Fire! Yes, that's it!" exclaimed Hermione. "Devil's Snare doesn't like light or heat!"

"Well, what are you waiting for!" demanded Mandy.

Within short order the Devil's Snare had retreated and allowed them to drop down into the room below it. As luck would have it, Mandy once again landed on top of Harry. It took a few minutes to the group to get back on their feet, most of this being spent waiting for Grim to reattach his arm.

"Pull yourself together, Grim. We don't have time to dawdle," commanded Mandy as she led the group into the next chamber.

Grim looked after her retreating back and succinctly summed up his feelings on the matter.

"You're despicable."

-oOo-

The next room in the oncoming gauntlet of traps and protections was almost innocuous by comparison. Other than a very high ceiling and a trio of aging Cleansweeps, it seemed empty. It was several seconds before they noticed that there was more to it than that.

"What's that noise?" asked Ron as they entered.

"Look!" exclaimed Hermione, pointing up. "It's a flock of birds."

"Dose don't look like any birds I've ever seen," commented Grim.

"They're keys," revealed Harry after a moment of observation. "Keys with wings."

"So, what are we supposed to do?" asked Ron.

"Obviously the key to the door must be up there," deduced Hermione, indicating the swarming mass of winged keys. "We'll have to use the brooms to catch the right key."

"But that's going to take forever!" protested Ron.

"We don't have the time to go flying," announced Mandy. She reached out and grabbed Grim's scythe away from him. "Besides, I have a key that'll open any lock."

Mandy had already proven her facility with the scythe, as the Slytherin Quidditch stands would attest. She took casual aim at the locked door barring their way forward and opened with a short burst of eldritch energy.

The door was promptly reduced to splinters of wood, most no larger than the average toothpick. For that matter, a goodly portion of the surrounding wall was also completely destroyed, shattered into so much gravel.

"Normally I'd object to dis sort of misuse of me powers," muttered Grim as he brushed a layer of dust from his robes, "but since you're more dan likely to be killed along de way... I'm game."

-oOo-

The next chamber was dark, almost completely black. Hermione had just raised her wand to conjure up a ball of light, to illuminate their way, when streams of light suddenly flooded into the room. The group paused and took in the sight that was revealed in front of them.

"A chessboard?" asked Harry, looking at the life-sized pieces that were arranged in familiar ranks on the tiled floor.

"We're going to have to play our way across the room," surmised Ron, sounding rather pleased by the idea.

"What a waste of time," grumbled Mandy.

"Let me handle dis," said Grim, stepping forward and examining the waiting board.

"I hope you're better at chess than you are at limbo," said Mandy.

"De only reason I lost dat limbo match," accused Grim, poking a finger at her, "is because you cheated and had yer stupid dog bite on me bony butt!"

"Excuses, excuses."

Grim tapped a finger against his chin and muttered, "If we're black, dat means we'll be playing second."

As if in response to Grim's statement, a white pawn moved forward two squares.

"Our move," observed Ron.

"You dere - pawn to D5!" commanded Grim, pointing at the piece he wanted to move. They waited a bit, but nothing happened. "Pawn to D5!" repeated Grim, this time more sternly. The wait this time was slightly longer before Grim pondered, "Now why isn't it moving?"

"Uh, Grim?" said Ron, suddenly nervous. "I think we're supposed to play as well - as pieces."

The nearest piece, one of the black knights, nodded its head in confirmation.

"Hmm. Dat complicates tings."

"We could just blast our way through," suggested Mandy, eyeing Grim impatiently.

"I don't think that will work, Mandy," said Hermione, shaking her head. She pointed at the pristine chessboard and pieces. "I mean, it doesn't look like Snape or You-Know-Who did that."

"But they don't have Death's scythe," Mandy countered.

"Perhaps we should play through," Harry whispered to Mandy.

"Why?"

"Don't want to rely too much on the scythe, do you?"

"Fine," Mandy finally accepted. She turned to Grim and commanded, "Okay, bonehead, show us what you've got."

"Preferably without any of us getting killed in the process," added Harry.

"Rats," grumbled Grim. He considered the chessboard for a moment before barking out orders. "Fine. Ron and Hermione; replace de knights. Harry and Mandy; de bishops. I'll be de king."

Harry will be the king," corrected Mandy. "And I'll be the queen."

"But--"

"You can be a bishop."

"But--"

"Now get on with it, bonehead, I'm in a hurry."

"... Fine."

-oOo-

McGonagall's game of chess barely delayed their advance. The match was handily won by Grim in a blitzkrieg of only seven moves (including the white side), something that impressed Ron into a state of near speechless awe. Passing between the defeated white pieces, the group opened the door to the next challenge and immediately froze in place. On the other side of the door was a room. A room filled every which way with spinning steel blades. Lots and lots of spinning steel blades.

Looking through the mass of whirling steel, an old-style brass clutch lever to deactivate the trap could just barely been seen on the opposite side of the room.

"What madman came up with this?" asked Hermione in horror.

"Isn't it obvious?" asked Harry, somewhat surprised the young genius hadn't worked it out for herself.

"Oh no," groaned Grim.

"Hoss," said Mandy.

"Who else?" Grim lamented.

"But, how the bloody hell are we supposed to get passed all these things?" asked Ron incredulously.

"If Snape could do it, then so can we!" declared Harry firmly, though his conviction was mostly for show. Inwardly, he too was wondering exactly how Mandy intended to get them through this latest obstacle.

Hermione shook her head in disbelief and began to protest, "But--"

It was now that Mandy calmly walked up behind Grim and gave him a hard shove - right into the swirling maelstrom of razor-edged saws and blades. The skeleton barely had time to scream before his robe was shredding into black confetti and his bones scattered to all corners of the room.

"NOOOOAAAAAAAAAAAAARRRRRRGGGLLLLRRRRUJKKK!!"

"GRIM! NO!" screamed Hermione in terror.

"Sweet Merlin!" gasped Ron.

As Grim's bones were tossed about by the various blades, like debris in a blender, the four students stood back and watched with morbid fascination. Hermione looked appropriately horrified by what was happening, Ron was turning green around the edges and looked ready to throw up, while Harry and Mandy were completely implacable.

"Shouldn't have done that," Harry softly chided.

"It's not like it'll kill him," retorted Mandy, equally softly.

"No," Harry agreed, "but you know he won't stop complaining about it for the next week."

"If he does, I'll cut off his coffee privileges."

Everyone knew that Grim was a complete and unrepentant caffeine addict. He was barely able to move in the morning until after he had finished his first cup of coffee. Apparently the task of Grim Reaping comprised of a lot of late hours. The threat to limit his coffee intake was one that could easily convince the skeleton to do just about anything.

It took several minutes, mostly due to the random nature in which the saws tossed the Reaper's bones about, but finally one of Grim's arms reached the other side of the room. The disembodied arm, which was really only a hand with two fingers missing, scrabbled about for a few seconds before finding the level. Climbing up its length, it took hold and pulled with surprising strength. A loud grinding sound reverberated from behind the walls and, much to everyone's relief; the blades began to spin to a halt before slowly retracting into various hidden panels that finally sealed closed.

"See?" Mandy asked of Ron and Hermione. "Nothing to it."

-oOo-

He'll be all right. Really," said Harry, trying to reassure Ron and Hermione about Grim's wellbeing. That the skeleton was still little more than a disconnected pile of bones was making it a somewhat difficult task. He glanced at Mandy as they approached the door. "What do you reckon's next?"

"Snape's the only one left," said Mandy.

"I'm sure the headmaster would have done something as well," corrected Hermione.

"That's probably the last one and where the Stone's being kept," agreed Mandy.

They reach the door leading to what they hoped was the Stone's final protection; the challenge set by Hogwarts' potions master. The thick wooden door swung open with a horribly loud creak and revealed a room that was utterly devoid of ornamentation, save for a single table set in the middle. The four students paused and looked through the doorway, wondering why nothing had unexpectedly sprung out at them.

"Eh? Bottles?" asked Ron.

"Potions," corrected Mandy, making the obvious connection to Snape's vocation.

"But what do we have to do with them? Drink one?" asked Hermione.

"Only one way to find out," said Harry.

The group cautiously stepped into the room, Harry taking the lead. The instant the last of them stepped over the door's threshold a rippling wave of burning purple flames erupted behind them. The fire stretched up from the floor to the ceiling, completely blocking the doorway and any passage through it. At the same time a similar wall of fire, this time with black flames, shot up in front of them.

"It's a trap!" exclaimed Mandy.

"Yah tink?" asked Grim's skull sarcastically. This, as well as his right hand and accompanying left foot and shin, were the only parts of his skeleton to make it through before the room was sealed off.

"Well, we knew there'd be a catch," Harry reminded them all.

Hermione, in the meanwhile, was examining the table and the seven glass bottles laid out on it. She immediately noticed a roll of parchment and opened it, quickly reading the contents. Holding the scroll up for the others to see, she happily declared, "It's a riddle."

"A riddle? What for?" asked Ron, glancing nervously back and forth between the two walls of fire.

"Probably instructions of how to get through the fire," deduced Mandy.

"Mandy's right," Hermione confirmed. "It's *brilliant*. This isn't magic - it's logic - a puzzle. A lot of the greatest wizards haven't got an ounce of logic; they'd be stuck in here forever."

"I don't intend to wait that long," Mandy informed her, looking distinctly displeased at the prospect.

"Oh, don't worry," Hermione reassured her. "This won't take a minute."

"Yeah, this sounds like a perfect trap for Hermione to work on," agreed Ron.

Mandy rolled her eyes and took proper hold of Grim's scythe, which she had been holding propped over her shoulder.

"Got it!" exclaimed Hermione. "The smallest bottle will get us through the black fire - towards the Stone."

Harry stepped over to the table and picked up the bottle in question. He gave it a rather dubious look and then directed his gaze to his friends. "There's barely enough for one person, let alone all four of us."

"You'll have to go through alone, mate," said Ron determinedly. "If anyone can stop You-Know-Who, it's you."

"I don't know about that," demurred Harry.

"Of course you can, Harry - you're a great wizard," insisted Hermione, giving the boy a quick but fierce hug.

A flash of light, accompanied by a gust of frigidly cold air, drew the trio's attention away from the potions and to the far side of the room. There Mandy was standing by the edge of the doorway blocked by the black flames, which had all seemingly been put out quite thoroughly by the judicious application of the scythe's powers. The way through to the next chamber was clear for all of them.

"Sometimes, it's easier to just use the scythe," she said sardonically.

The three students at the potions table exchanged sheepish looks. Hermione seemed somewhat irked that Mandy had found a way through Snape's task without needing to solve the puzzle.

"So, can we move along now?" prompted Mandy, once again shouldering the scythe.

The last chamber was a surprisingly large and circular room, rimmed by impressive looking stone columns. Set in the centre of this, illuminated by the torchlight, was a very familiar enchanted mirror.

"This is the only way in or out," said Mandy as they stood in the doorway. "The Stone must be hidden somewhere in this room,"

"The mirror," prompted Harry.

"It's the same one you found during Christmas break," agreed Mandy.

"Yeah," said Harry as they made their way to the object in question. "It must somehow be the last piece of protection."

Mandy stepped in front of the mirror and regarded it with a calm expression. After a few moments she turned away and shrugged. "Nothing new here," she said. "It's showing the same thing it did the last time we saw it."

Harry moved beside her and took a look for himself. He too saw the same illusion that he had previously seen in the mirror's face; his family and friends gathered around him. "I don't understand," he muttered. "D'you think the Stone's *inside* the mirror?"

"Or perhaps this is some kind of diversion," suggested Mandy. "To distract us from where the Stone really is."

"De Stone could be anywhere in de room," moaned Grim, bouncing his skull round and round in an effort to view the entire room.

"But... where's Snape?" asked Ron, sounding a peculiar mixture of surprised and disappointed as he looked about the room. He seemed to think that the missing professor was hiding somewhere in the shadows, or behind one of the many columns encircling the area.

"Forget him, it's You-Know-Who that we need to be worried about," said Hermione, standing close to the redhead.

"You have a point," Ron promptly agreed. He then started an even more anxious examination of the room's more shadowy areas. "Where could he be hiding?"

"Behind you," a voice unexpectedly announced.

Ron and Hermione weren't even able to turn around before a flash of red swept over them, knocking them unconscious and to the floor, where thick ropes sprang up and wrapped around them. Harry and Mandy managed to turn and face their attacker, neither being all that surprised to see the dark cloaked figure of Quirrell, his scarred face glaring smugly at them. Quirrell twisted his head sideways, almost to the point of looking over his shoulder and allowing the back of his head a clear view of the two remaining children.

Voldemort bared his teeth in a thin and dangerous smile. Quirrell threw back the cloak he was wearing, revealing his robed body as he stepped over the two bodies at his feet. He made a show of lifting his right arm and flexing that hand into a fist. This was the limb that Grim had cut off during their earlier encounter in the Forbidden Forest, yet it seemed that Voldemort had somehow been able to give Quirrell a new hand to replace his lost one. It was a disturbing sight, a hand seemingly comprised of nothing but exposed bone and sinew, fashioned from a dark and badly tarnished copper.

"Well, well," hissed Voldemort. "What an unexpected boon. I had planned to take advantage of this opportunity; Dumbledore being away from the school, but I had not anticipated that my way would be paved by the very people seeking to stop me."

Harry and Mandy shared a look.

"This is a monkey-wrench in the works," concluded Mandy.

"Filthy little mudblood," Voldemort sneered. "The arrogance of your kind is without limits. Did you really think that I was so unsubtle? That I would demean myself by participating in one of Dumbledore's little games? That I was incapable of getting someone else to do the dirty work for me?"

"Shut your yap, Tom Riddle! **I have come for you!**"

Voldemort's rant ground to a halt as Quirrell was jumped by Grim, who seemed intent on finishing what he had started in the forest. Sadly, however, the Reaper was down to only his skull, one hand (that was missing two fingers) and his lower left leg. Not much to assault a dark lord with, but that did nothing to deter him. His hand wrapped itself in a death grip around Quirrell's ankle, while his leg proceeded to kick the man in the shin. Not to be left out, Grim bounced his skull into the air and latched onto Quirrell's nose.

"Gaowtch! By dose!" screamed Quirrell, batting frantically at Grim's skull with both hands.

"Damnable oaf!" roared Voldemort, possibly addressing both Grim and Quirrell.

While their foe was otherwise engaged, Harry leaned close to Mandy and whispered, "Change of plan?"

Mandy gave a small nod and reluctantly agreed, "We can't take him by ourselves."

Quirrell was soon able to pry Grim off his nose and tossed the skull away. With a sweep of his arm, he cast a Banishing Charm on Grim's leg and sent the limb careening into a stone column. The leg fell limply to the floor and remained motionless. Bending down Quirrell twisted and tugged furiously before finally pulling Grim's hand away from his ankle. This, like the leg before it, was hurled across the room. Finally the man turned back to Grim's skull, which was bouncing its way back to him, doubtless planning another assault. Quirrell drew his leg back and let loose a powerful kick.

"Yaahh-hoo-hoo-hoo-hooey!!" hollered Grim as he disappeared into the shadows.

"So, once again Death flies before me," declared Voldemort pompously, as Quirrell stood panting from exertion. "This will indeed be a night long remembered in the annuals of history."

Harry caught Mandy's gaze and then directed his eyes to the scythe she held. Again she gave just the barest of nods, along with a barely audible whisper of, "Give me an opening."

Recovered from his scuffle with Grim, Quirrell turned to the mirror and began to examine it closely. Harry carefully sneaked closer, hoping to find an opportunity to distract the man long enough for Mandy to deal with him. As he approached, he could hear him muttering to himself and Voldemort, "I thee the Thtone... I'm pwethenting it to you, mathtah... but whewe ith it?"

"Quirrell!" Voldemort demanded, "Use the boy... have him look in the mirror."

"Yeth, mathtah," Quirrell obeyed instantly. He turned and spotted Harry. "Come here, Pohtah,"

Quirrell waved his magical hand and Harry was pulled across the room, almost bumping into Ron and Hermione. Quirrell grabbed him by the arm and dragged him in front of the mirror. Looking into the mirror, Harry was surprised to see that the image reflected at him had changed from what it had been only minutes earlier. Now, instead of himself surrounded by his friends and family, he stood alone. His surprise grew even greater as his reflection revealed itself to be holding a bright red stone in one hand. With a sly wink and a smirk, the reflection put the Stone in his trouser pocket. Harry struggled not to react as he felt a sudden weight against his leg.

"Well?" demanded Quirrell impatiently. "What do you thee?"

"An endless graveyard, with nothing but headstones from horizon to horizon," Harry lied, repeating what Grim had claimed to see when they had first found the mirror during the Christmas holidays. He then pointed to one side of the mirror and added, "Yours and Voldemort's are over there, in the front."

"If you're going to lie, Potter," scoffed Voldemort, "try to at least use a convincing one."

"You don't know me that well, do you?" asked Harry in return. He lifted a knee up high and then slammed his heel down on Quirrell's foot with all of his strength, causing the scarred man to howl in pain and release him.

"Ah! Mathtah, my foot!"

"Useless idiot! Control yourself! He has the Stone! Get him!"

Harry took this moment to run back to Mandy and quickly handed the Stone to her, while at the same time pretending to shove her away - as if he were trying to get her out of the room. Mandy quietly palmed the Stone as she joined in the charade.

"Go back; find Dumbledore or one of the other professors!" Harry told her, continuing to push her towards the exit.

"Running away, Potter?" called Voldemort. "No, we can't have that, can we?"

Quirrell snapped the fingers of his magical hand, causing the black flames by the doorway to burst back to life. The pair stopped their flight, skidding to a halt just before the wall of fire. Harry promptly pushed Mandy behind him, so that he was standing between her and their enemy.

"Yes, you may be able to cut through the flames with Death's scythe," observed Voldemort as Quirrell stepped closer, "but only if I give you the time to do so."

"Go, Mandy, I'll hold him off," urged Harry. As he spoke, he felt Mandy pressing something into his hand. From the shape and feel of it, he recognised it as the fake geode they had planned to leave in place of the real Philosopher's Stone.

"Don't be a fool, Harry," Voldemort silkily proposed. "Better save your own life and join me... or die as your parents did - begging for their lives!"

"LIAR!"

Furious over Voldemort's words, Harry angrily jabbed his wand at Quirrell, sending a stream of bright fire-engine red paint into the man's face. Quirrell staggered back screaming and wiping at his face with both hands. Blinded by the paint, he did not see Ron and Hermione behind him and promptly tripped over them, falling to the floor in a heap.

"Gah! My eyeth! Mathtah, help me!"

"Shut up, you imbecile!" snapped Voldemort. The dark lord's eyes were free of paint, allowing him to see what was going on. He quickly forced control over Quirrell's body, causing dark blue and black veins to grow wildly beneath the man's pale grey flesh. He turned to glare coldly at Harry. "You are brave, boy, but that courage will not save you."

Harry kept his wand aimed at Voldemort as the dark lord struggled to push Quirrell's body to its feet. He made sure that Voldemort could see the fake stone he was holding in his left hand.

"We'll see about that."

Voldemort's eye lit upon the geode and his reached out for it. "The Stone! Give it to me!"

Harry stood firm and defiantly challenged, "If you want it, come and get it!"

"I tire of this game, you insolent brat!" Voldemort snarled. Sickly green magical energy began to swirl around Quirrell's discoloured copper hand. "Give me the Stone while you still have the option of dying quickly!"

"It's not if I die quickly that matters, it's whether or not I take you with me," Harry told him with unwavering conviction. "And if you get to check into Hell alongside me, then I'll be dying a happy man."

"SEIZE HIM! KILL HIM!" Voldemort bellowed at Quirrell, who was beginning to resume control.

"You want the Stone?" asked Harry. He drew his left arm back in preparation. "Then go fetch it!"

Harry hurled the geode into the air, up and over Voldemort's head and towards the far side of the room.

"NO! NOOOO!"

As Voldemort watched the fake stone flying through the air, on a collision course with the far wall, his attention was totally removed from Harry and Mandy. Harry promptly dropped his wand and charged across the space separating them, slamming into Quirrell's side in a shoulder tackle backed with all his weight behind it. The impact sent Quirrell and Voldemort staggering back and into the enchanted mirror at the centre of the room.

"Mandy!"

"Here!" yelled Mandy as she tossed the scythe to Harry, who snatched it out of the air with both hands. He spun around and in a single movement swung the weapon as though it were a cricket bat.

"NOOOO!!" screeched Quirrell, seeing the scythe's blade coming at him.

Grim's scythe tore into Quirrell's chest, slicing through flesh and bone without slowing. The long blade pierced straight through its victim, actually stabbing out his back and into the face of the mirror, which was suddenly strewn with a spider's web of cracks.

"**AAAARGH!!**" both Voldemort and Quirrell let loose a dual shriek of agony.

Harry saw a black and wispy shadow begin to separate from Quirrell's body, which he immediately realized to be Voldemort's spirit. He began to pull the scythe free, intending to take a swipe at the now liberated shade, but the mirror suddenly exploded in a storm of raw magic and razor-sharp glass fragments. The force of the explosion ripped Quirrell to shreds, spraying blood and flesh over Harry while knocking him through the air, almost back to where Mandy was watching. He hit the floor hard and quickly succumbed to unconsciousness.

"Damn!" cursed Mandy, crouching low and shielding her face from the flying glass. Looking up, she saw the ghostly form of Voldemort fleeing the room, the black flames having extinguished themselves with Quirrell's death. "Damn!"

Realizing that it was all over, she knelt down next to Harry to see how badly he had been hurt. At a glance she could tell that he was alive, but suffering a number of lacerations, some of them quite deep. He was also slightly singed about the edges.

"Mandy? Harry? Are you two okay?"

"We're fine, Grim," she answered.

Grim bounced his head around Ron and Hermione's prone bodies so that he could see her and Harry. "Ah," he muttered upon confirming their health. "I knew it was too good to be true."

"Miss Maxwell? Harry?" called an elderly voice.

Dumbledore rushed into the room, wand at the ready and magic swirling around him. He took in the scene with a glance; the stunned and rope-bound Ron and Hermione, Grim's skull, the destroyed mirror, and Mandy kneeling over the motionless and blood covered form of Harry Potter. Mandy looked up and stared at him, clearly disgruntled by his late arrival.

"Wonderful. Now you get back."

-oOo-

The world was incredibly blurry when Harry woke up. Of course, without his glasses this was normal. Lifting his head up to blearily look around, Harry found himself confronted by a bright purple and orange shape, with the odd blob of silver, filling his vision.

"Ah, good morning, Harry, my boy."

"Hwah?" asked Harry intelligently, vaguely recognising the voice even if he could not make out the person's face. He felt the familiar frame of his glasses being pressed into his hands and he promptly settled them into place. He blinked the sleep from his eyes and realized that the blurry figure was in fact Hogwarts' headmaster, Professor Dumbledore and his outlandishly coloured robes and beard. "Headmaster?"

"Indeed," said Dumbledore with a smile. "I must confess to being somewhat surprised. Madam Pomfrey did not expect you to wake up until later this afternoon."

Harry looked around and found himself to be lying in one of the beds that occupied the hospital wing. He swallowed, suddenly aware of how dry his

mouth was, and asked, "How long was I out of it?"

"Two days. This morning is the start of the third," said Dumbledore. "Your friends will no doubt be greatly relieved that you have regained consciousness."

Propping himself up, Harry discovered a small mountain of sweets and other gifts piled up next to his bed. He looked at this with some degree of confusion, not entirely certain what was going on.

"Er..."

"Tokens from your friends and admirers," explained Dumbledore, seeing his expression.

"For what?" asked Harry, now even more surprised.

"For safeguarding the peace and prosperity of the wizarding world," said Dumbledore. "You and your friends' adventure in the dungeons has made the rounds of the Hogwarts rumour mill. The whole school knows of your efforts to keep the Stone out of unscrupulous hands."

Harry wondered briefly if Dumbledore would consider Mandy's hands scrupulous or not. His thoughts then turned to Voldemort and their confrontation in the mirror room.

"Did I get him?" he asked hopefully.

"Quirinus Quirrell, I'm sad to say, is dead," Dumbledore informed him solemnly. "So, yes, you did indeed 'get him'."

"Not Quirrell - Voldemort!" Harry corrected sharply.

"Ah," Dumbledore nodded in understanding. He then dashed Harry's hopes by shaking his head. "Unfortunately he managed to escape us. Once it was obvious that you had defeated him, he fled; leaving Quirrell to die. So long as he was in that insubstantial form, little more than a wraith, there exists no means known to any wizard that could succeed in destroying him."

"Grim's scythe can kill anything."

"Perhaps," Dumbledore allowed, "but can it kill something that is not truly alive? That remains to be seen."

"What about the Stone?" asked Harry.

"Miss Maxwell has told me what happened," said Dumbledore. "Sadly, it had shattered against the far wall, where you threw it."

Harry took this to mean that their deception had been successful and that the remains of the fake had been taken for the real Philosopher's Stone, which was now safely in Mandy's possession. Well, perhaps 'safely' was not the best way to describe it.

"Oh bugger," he swore, playing up his part of trying to rescue the Stone rather than steal it. He bowed his head, worrying slightly that his acting was a trifle over the top. He mumbled an apologetic, "I'm sorry, sir."

"No need to apologise, dear boy," Dumbledore assured him. "Even had the Stone survived unscathed; I would have destroyed it."

"I suppose that's for the best," mused Harry, scratching his chin thoughtfully. "Limitless wealth and practical immortality. A dangerous combination."

"You are wise beyond your years, Harry. Wise beyond your years." Dumbledore angled his head and regarded Harry from over the rims of his half-moon spectacles. "I find it very curious, indeed, that you should hide your intelligence. None of the staff, not even Professor Snape, who is by nature a very suspicious man, suspected that you and your friends knew about the Stone and Voldemort's interest in it."

Harry gave the old wizard a wry smirk. "Consider the nature of my friends, sir," Harry reminded him.

"Yes," said Dumbledore, sounding distinctly disgruntled. He quickly recovered, however, and said, "At first it was Grim that cause me the most apprehension. I soon realized that Miss Maxwell's presence was of far greater concern."

"She means well."

"As Professor Snape said; she's a raving, power-hungry sociopath."

"As you said; Mandy does not rave," countered Harry.

"Perhaps not, but I note that you do not deny the rest," observed the headmaster.

"We all have our hobbies," Harry shrugged.

"I will not lie and say that her presence here does not worry me greatly," Dumbledore admitted.

"Maybe, but she's hasn't really hurt anyone," said Harry, trying to allay the headmaster's worries.

"Doubtless young Draco Malfoy would disagree," said Dumbledore dryly, though a hint of a twinkle reappeared in his eyes.

"Mandy's day simply isn't complete until she's had a chance to beat somebody up," said Harry by way of explanation. He shrugged helplessly.

Usually it's Dudley, but Malfoy seems to fill a similar role here at Hogwarts. Dean as well, I suppose, though he seems to actually enjoy it."

Dumbledore leaned back in his chair and stroked his beard thoughtfully, his gaze losing focus as he reminisced. "Many years ago, before I became headmaster, I made a dreadful and costly mistake by ignoring the actions of one of my students," he said. He then gave Harry a piercing look, one that actually left him feeling slightly threatened. "I have no desire to see your young lady friend replace Lord Voldemort as the wizarding world's bogeyman."

Harry ignored the warning and instead latched onto the earlier statement. "You taught Tom Riddle?"

"You know his real name?" asked Dumbledore, clearly surprised.

"Grim tends to rant about him every so often; how he keeps escaping," said Harry with another shrug. "Him and Elvis."

"Yes, most vexing, isn't it," Dumbledore agreed.

"We'll get him," said Harry with absolute confidence. He narrowed his eyes, thinking about how close he had come this time. "Sooner or later."

Dumbledore, sensing the ominous intent behind Harry's words, could do nothing but nod in silent agreement.

-oOo-

Several other people stopped by to visit Harry, but the only ones that stayed for more than a few minutes were his close friends. Mandy and Grim were the first to arrive, just as Dumbledore was leaving. Grim was obviously worried over Harry's condition, though would doubtless deny that fact if anyone asked. Mandy's expression was more difficult to read, as always, but Harry could tell that she was relieved to see that he was awake.

"You all right?" she asked, pulling up a chair next to his bed.

"A little tired," Harry admitted, "but yeah, I'm okay."

"Sorry for not reaping Riddle when I had de chance," apologised Grim gruffly. He was not pleased that the Dark Lord had managed to give him the slip yet again. He viewed Voldemort's escape as a personal affront to his reaping skills, despite the fact that he had been reduced to little more than an ambulatory skull at the time.

"Next time then," said Harry.

They spoke quietly for several minutes, mostly confirming that Harry was now well on the road to recovery, when Ron and Hermione came barging in. The pair had barely reached Harry's bed when Junior entered. The odd boy looked about nervously before he caught sight of Harry and scuttled over.

"Oh, Harry!" exclaimed Hermione, looking ready to fling herself at him. "We were sure you were going to - Dumbledore was so worried--"

"The whole school's talking about it," said Ron as Hermione became incoherent. "What happened?"

"Mandy and I've already told you," complained Grim. "Twice."

"Well, I don't know what happened," insisted Junior, quietly defending Ron. His friendships with the other Hufflepuff boys always had an air of tension about them. Ron and Hermione were about the only two people in Hogwarts, aside from Harry and Mandy, that didn't always look as if they were expecting him to suddenly turn psychotic.

Harry was happy to relate their adventure to his cousin, his friends adding their own two knuts now and then. He had just finished telling how Grim had masterfully worked to get them past McGonagall's chess set, when Eris came waltzing into the Hospital Wing; both Crabbe and Goyle trailing faithfully behind her. The poor lugs were burdened by massive bouquets of sweet-smelling flowers.

"Harry, darling!" she proclaimed. "How are you, dearie?"

"I'm fine, Eris," answered Harry.

"Wonderful!" gasped the goddess, leaning down to grace Harry's cheeks with exaggerated kisses. "You wouldn't believe the chaos you and your little friends--" she glanced at Mandy, who was gnashing her teeth, "--have stirred up throughout the school with this stunt."

"You must be enjoying yourself den," observed Grim.

"I've been getting so jiggy with the chaos," Eris admitted, "that it leaves me breathless."

"Pity it doesn't leave you speechless," growled Mandy.

"D'you know what happened, or can I carry on from where I was?" asked Harry for Eris.

Eris waved Harry's concerns aside and plopped down on the bed next to his, reclining in all her glory as a deity. Crabbe and Goyle, having set the flowers they had been carrying down, took up stations by her side. Crabbe pulled out a large bunch of grapes which he began to feed to her one at a time. Goyle somehow acquired a massive palm leaf and started waving it up and down like a fan.

"I'm a goddess, Harry luv," Eris reminded them all. "Of course I know what happened - so please, continue as if I'd been here for the entire story."

Wondering, not for the first time, what Eris had done to Malfoy's former bodyguards, Harry resumed his tale. Junior had a good audience, as were Ron and Hermione once Harry progressed to the part after Quirrell had rendered them unconscious. Reactions to Voldemort's involvement were mixed, but everyone agreed that the evil wizard had been lucky to escape Harry's use of Grim's scythe to run him through.

"Aunt Petunia's going to be furious when she hears about this," said Junior once all was said and done.

"Probably," agreed Harry tiredly. He had long ago given up trying to please his relatives. It said a lot about his family that the only members of it that he actually got along with were Junior and his father, Nergal.

"I'm sure that Dad'll be happy for you though," Junior commiserated.

"Nergal *is* rather fond of Harry," agreed Grim.

"And who is this... Nergal?" demanded a gruff voice from the doors. "Another foul and evil creature, no doubt; ready and willing to do anything to further his own ends."

"That's a pretty good description of him," confirmed Mandy, twisting in her seat to watch as Hoss Delgado entered the hospital wing.

The scruffy spectral-exterminator-cum-professor ambled over to join the group clustered around Harry's bed. "How're you doing there, lil' pardner?"

"Pretty good," said Harry.

"Excellent, we'll have you up and kicking evil butt before you can say 'Sasquatch'," Hoss rasped happily, absentmindedly slapping Ron on the back. He seemed rather puzzled when Ron was literally knocked off his feet.

"I'll be ready in time for your lessons next year," said Harry.

"Fraid not, lil' pardner," Hoss shook his head. "I'm here to say goodbye, y'see. You lot'll be having a different Defence teacher next year. Hopefully that old codger'll hire someone decent for the job and not another example of wretched scum and villainy."

"You're leaving?" asked Junior as the others exchanged glances.

"Hallelujah," muttered Grim.

"But why?" demanded Ron. Defence was his favourite class, despite the airborne chainsaws and other paraphernalia that was want to fly about during lessons. In fact most of the students enjoyed Hoss's quirky brand of teaching. Even Crabbe and Goyle seemed to find it more interesting than their other classes. Besides which, Hoss was a fellow redhead and thus Ron felt a certain degree of kinship with the odd man.

"I've heard rumours about vampire koala bears down in Australia," revealed Hoss, his eye gleaming with excitement at the prospect of it. "Dangerous little critters - stupid, but clever."

"Stupid..." repeated Mandy.

"...but clever?" finished Hermione. "That doesn't make any sense."

"Nuttin' new dere," chirped Grim.

"You watch out for this Lord Moldybutt character, y'hear?" said Hoss, ruffling Harry's hair into a state of even worse disarray than it usually was. Nobody took much notice of the vase on the nightstand that inexplicably shattered. He gave the others a lopsided grin, save for Grim whom he glared distrustfully at. "I'll be keeping an eye on you," he threatened, making a show of pointing to his eye patch, and then strode purposefully out of the Hospital Wing.

"There goes our best teacher," summed up Ron.

"The best looking one, as well," Hermione sighed, earning incredulous looks from Grim and Ron. "Well, he is," she said defensively, but with a faint blush. "That scruffy image just makes him so... so... mysterious."

"De man's a whole park short of a picnic," insisted Grim.

-oOo-

The remainder of the school year was exceptionally dull by comparison. Final exams came and went, though it was only Hermione that actually seemed to really care about it. The last Quidditch match of the year, Gryffindor against Ravenclaw, was played the day after Harry had been released from the infirmary. Sadly, even his presence did little to prevent the Ravenclaws from steamrolling over the rest of the Gryffindor team. In the end, while he did catch the Snitch, they still lost the game by twenty points. As the Ravenclaw Seeker had been shoulder-to-shoulder with Harry at the time, nobody could fault him for ending the match and sparing them the embarrassment of losing by a much greater margin.

"Curse you, Fate! Why do you torment me so?!"

Well, almost nobody. Oliver Wood was, understandably, completely distraught.

Before too long, school was over and it was time for the Hogwarts students to depart for their summer holidays.

The final points tally ended with Ravenclaw winning the House Cup by a mere two points, just edging out Slytherin. The house of Snakes had not done as well as previous years, mostly due to Eris's disrupting influence. While none of the professors were brave enough to deduct points from her, they made up for it by not awarding points to anyone else in the house. Something similar happened to both Gryffindor and Hufflepuff, thanks to Mandy and Nergal Junior's presences respectively. The result was that the one house without one of the "odd" students ended up winning.

There was, however, a very pregnant and worried pause after Dumbledore had announced the results at the Leaving Feast. All eyes, from all houses, nervously turned to those responsible for this outcome. The sigh of relief when no retribution appeared was almost palpable.

Once the word was given, the Slytherins practically sprinted out of the castle and down towards the train station and the Hogwarts Express. They were in such a hurry to finally escape Eris that they did not even bother using the Thestral-drawn carriages, instead making the journey on foot, while dragging their trunks behind them. It was reported that Draco Malfoy was crying tears of joy upon reaching Hogsmeade.

In retrospect, the Slytherins had the right idea, as Eris was determined to end the school year off with a bang. Literally. Nobody knew exactly all of what she did; it was too chaotic to keep track of everything. The only thing that everyone agreed on was that Professor Snape had finally had enough and had collapsed into Professor Dumbledore's arms, sobbing brokenly like a man whose nerves had been shattered beyond repair. In the end, it was a bedraggled Gryffindor, Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw that finally reached the waiting train.

"How many more hours till we reach London?" asked Mandy, for once looking a little ruffled.

"Too many," Harry replied, still trying to get the chicken feathers out of his hair.

"At least she isn't in dis compartment," commented Grim, using a bone-needle and thread to patch up his tattered black robes.

"I never thought I'd say this, but I actually feel kind of sorry for Crabbe and Goyle," mused Ron.

"If dey be Eris' toadies den dere's not anyting we can do about it."

"I know, but, Merlin, I'm glad I not in their shoes. Poor buggers."

Surprisingly enough the bulk of the journey down to London was a quiet one; though the occasional explosion and bout of maniacal laughter from elsewhere on the train did disturb the peace somewhat. It was after several hours of this, shortly before the snack cart lady was due to make her rounds, that their compartment was visited by Ron's older brothers. Fred and George had enjoyed, as you might imagine, a very entertaining year at Hogwarts, though they were slightly put out at having been so completely outperformed by Eris.

"Harry!" exclaimed Fred as they entered.

"And Mandy!" added George, pushing in beside his twin.

"And Grim!"

"And Hermione!"

"And our favourite ickle brother..."

"Ronniekins!"

"What are you two lunatics doing here?" asked Ron grumpily, even as the rest of the compartment ignored the twins' exuberant arrival.

"Actually..." began George.

"...we wanted a quick word with Harry," continued Fred.

"If you don't mind that is."

Before the boy in question could answer, however, the pair found themselves pinned down by Mandy's formidable gaze. Nobody commented on how they both promptly clapped their hands over their groins. By this point such an act was merely common sense when encountering the blonde girl. She stared at them ominously and warned, "Just be quick about it."

"Right!" squeaked Fred. He cleared his throat and tried again, this time sounding much calmer. "Right."

"What we're here for--"

"--in point of fact--"

"--is this thing to do with the Philosopher's Stone," explained George.

"What about it?" asked Harry blankly, not really seeing what that had to do with anything.

"Well, there are a lot of rumours about what really happened," said George.

"All sorts of crazy stuff," elaborated Fred.

"It's actually becoming a tad confusing--"

--which is saying a lot considering Eris's presence--"

"--so we'd like to set the record straight," concluded George.

"You mean," asked Harry slowly, just to be sure, "you want to know what really happened?"

"Yes! That's it exactly," Fred beamed, pleased to know that they had managed to get their point across. His enthusiasm dimmed slightly as he noticed that Mandy was frowning towards them. Not that she wasn't always frowning - but her intolerance for interruption seemed to be growing more pronounced the longer they spoke.

"How'd you do it, Harry?" asked George earnestly.

"Yeah, we'd really like to know," insisted Fred, trying to ignore Mandy's stare.

"We're rather hoping to win the pool."

"There's a pool?" asked Mandy in surprise, her glower disappearing in her surprise.

"Nearly sixty Galleons worth," nodded Fred in confirmation and some relief.

"So, will you tell us?"

Harry stared at the two for a long moment, mulling over their request. He did not find it too strange that people were betting on what had really happened; there were so many rumours going round that getting an answer from the source was the only way to set everything straight. He glanced at Mandy to see what she thought about it. She responded with an unconcerned shrug. He turned back to the twins and gave them the answer they were looking for.

"Sea turtles."

Of course, there was no guarantee that it was a truthful answer. He *was* friends with Eris, after all.

The twins stared blankly for a second before chorusing, "Sea turtles?"

"Right useful little buggers they are," Harry nodded sagely.

"You can escape practically anything wit a sea turtle," agreed Grim.

"Sea turtles?" repeated Fred, looking to George.

George shrugged and reiterated, "Sea turtles."

The pair departed shortly after that, Fred grumbling over a list of the various bets and George bemoaning the fact that Eris was the one to claim the pot. After all, who could have expected the goddess of chaos's completely off-the-wall bet to actually be the correct one?

After the twins had gone there was a long silence that was finally broken when Hermione cleared her throat and asked, "So... sea turtles?"

"A wizard never reveals his tricks, Hermione," grinned Harry.

"Yes, but... *sea turtles*?"

"At least he didn't blame it on the spoon," muttered Mandy.

"What?" asked Hermione.

"Never mind," Harry hurriedly cut that line of enquiry off before it could progress too far.

The compartment had barely settled down from the twins' departure when they received their second batch of visitors.

"Hello, everyone," greeted Junior.

"Hello," chorused the various Hufflepuffs accompanying him.

"Hey, Junior," acknowledged Harry. "What brings you by?"

Junior grimaced unhappily. "Eris's little going away present ruined my scones and curdled the tea."

Nobody mentioned the expressions of relief on the Hufflepuff's faces. Nobody mentioned how Hannah Abbott was trying to sneak away either.

"What a pity," commented Mandy.

"Yeah," sighed Junior. He then perked up a bit. "But then I remembered how peckish I was on the train ride at the start of school."

No-one was entirely sure of the relevance of this comment and so exchanged confused looks.

"Oh my, what's that?" exclaimed Junior, pointing out the compartment window.

For just a second all eyes turned to look for whatever had caught their visitor's attention. The odd slurping sound and muffled eep drew their gazes back.

Junior remained unmoved from where he had been standing. His arms were folded behind his back, his tentacles were nowhere in evidence and he was affecting the most innocent expression he could muster.

The only thing out of the ordinary was the way his cheeks were puffed out, as if his mouth had been stuffed full with... something.

Another minor detail was that Scabbers was gone.

"Hmm, that's funny..." mused Junior, licking his lips. "Tastes like chicken."

"Scabbers!!" shrieked Ron, finally springing into action.

"Junior," moaned Harry in exasperation.

"Give him back! Give back Scabbers!" yelled Ron as he grabbed Junior by his shirt and began shaking him, back and forth.

"But I'm so hungry," protested Junior weakly.

"I don't care how hungry you are! I don't care! Give me back my rat! I want my rat!"

"Calm down, Ron," advised Harry, getting up and grabbing the other boy by the shoulder.

"Calm down? Calm down?!" Ron shouted. "He ate Scabbers!"

"Why are you complaining?" asked Grim. "You're always complaining about de rat anyway."

"It's the principle of the thing," explained Hermione calmly, though she was looking a little green.

"I want my rat!"

"Junior, give back the rat."

"But Harry..."

Harry fixed his cousin with a firm look. "We've discussed this, Junior. You just can't eat people's pets or familiars."

"But--"

"Cough it up. Now."

Junior's protests died upon Mandy's quiet command. The annoyed look on her face was also quite convincing.

"Oh, all right," Junior sighed dejectedly.

It took a minute or so and involved a great deal of hacking, coughing and several disturbing sounds that defy description, but eventually Scabbers was returned to his owner. Ron's concern for his pet was briefly overwhelmed by disgust as the slimy ball of fur impacted his front and fell to the floor with a wet splat.

"Scabbers! Bloody hell!"

"Sorry," apologised Junior sheepishly.

"Well... don't do it again!" Ron eventually managed to sally as he bent down to pick up the traumatised animal with a hanky.

Junior did not stay long after that, but departed with his fellow Hufflepuffs, apologising all the way. The look of certain doom on their faces, mixed with a longing to remain just a moment longer, was the last anyone saw of them.

The Express was not far from the outskirts of London when their last visitor of the train ride made himself known.

"And look who we have here," drawled Draco as he pulled open the compartment door and stepped inside with a pronounced swagger. Apparently the lack of Eris's presence in the immediate vicinity had somewhat restored his confidence.

Ron, who had been busily petting Scabbers in an attempt to calm and reassure the rat, froze in place. He immediately set Scabbers aside and began to watch closely what was about to happen. His eager anticipation was almost palpable.

"He never learns," muttered Hermione, also sitting back to watch.

"What do you want this time, Malfoy?" asked Harry.

"Oh, I don't *want* anything, Potter," Draco replied haughtily.

"Then why are you bothering us?"

A razor edged smile crossed Draco's face as he leaned in towards them. "I'm here to give you and the m-mudblood a warning," he announced, stumbling over the words when it came to mentioning Mandy.

The compartment, already quiet, grew absolutely silent as all eyes turned to the blonde girl their visitor had just insulted.

"What warning?" asked Harry, apparently keeping his cool, though his hand had strayed to where his wand was stored.

"Just this; watch your backs this summer," threatened Draco. "That maniac Discordia won't be there to stop me. I've been writing to my father and he'll make sure the two of you get what you deserve... And your pet skeleton too!"

"Ere now, don't be getting me involved in dis," muttered Grim.

"You really are too stupid to live," commented Mandy as she stood up.

Malfoy clapped both hands over his groin and seemed to finally realise the inadvisability of his actions.

"Don't you dare!" he warned, though his voice broke with fear on the last word. "Dumbledore and the rest of the teachers might let you get away with it, but my father..."

Draco trailed off as he noticed that Mandy was not assaulting him. Instead she had taken the time to open the compartment window. After confirming that it was firmly in place, only then did she turn to regard the blonde wizard.

"What are you doing?" asked Draco, his curiosity overriding his caution.

Mandy's gaze dropped down for a second before rising to meet his. "You moved your hands," she noted matter-of-factly.

Draco blinked in confusion before his eyes grew wide with panic. As Mandy said, he had unintentionally allowed his hands to drop away from their protective spot over his crotch. He tried to throw them back into place, but it was too late. With two quick steps Mandy had crossed the compartment and slammed her knee into her target.

"Meep," squeaked Draco as he folded over.

Ordinarily he would have collapsed to the floor, crying and gasping for breath, but Mandy did not give him the chance. Instead she grabbed him by the back of his robes, pulled hard as she spun on a heel and almost casually tossed Draco out the compartment window.

"Oh my god! Oh my god!" screamed Hermione, clutching both hands to her face in horror.

"Bloody hell!" exclaimed Ron, backing away from window even as Mandy slid it closed.

"What?" she asked, noticing their expressions.

"YOU KILLED DRACO!" shrieked Hermione in complete panic.

Harry snorted. "He's not dead."

Hermione whirled to face him and pointed accusingly at Mandy. "She threw him out the window!"

"And your point is?" asked Mandy, arching an eyebrow.

"You threw him out the *window*! Of a speeding *train*!"

"Do you want to be next?"

Hermione's eyes widened and her mouth snapped shut with a click.

"I don't see what all the fuss is about - he's not dead," repeated Harry calmly.

"How can you be sure?" asked Hermione, now suspicious of how readily he accepted Mandy's actions.

"Contractual immortality," Harry explained matter-of-factly. He shrugged as if it were obvious. "If he died for good then we'd have a hard time getting him ready for the next chapter."

Hermione stared at him in complete bewilderment, blinking repeatedly. "What?"

Grim, who had not paused in his task of polishing his scythe, finally spoke up. "Don't worry your bushy little head over it, girl," he advised.

"But--"

"If you absolutely must have an explanation, den blame it on de spoon," the skeleton continued.

"Spoon? What spoon?" repeated Hermione, now completely confused.

Ignore him; there is no spoon," asserted Mandy, reclaiming her seat next to Harry.

"Will your parents be picking us up?" he asked, shifting the conversation to something a little less worrisome. At least for the other occupants of the compartment.

Mandy gave him a flat look and sarcastically asked, "Who else are you expecting? The Dursleys?"

Harry shrugged, "Grim hasn't complained about Hell freezing over."

It was not much longer before the Express had reached London and was drawing into the hidden platform at King's Cross. Gathering their trunks the group stepped out of the carriage and began their farewells. Handshakes and hugs were exchanged all round, well, mostly. Nobody was crazy enough to dare think of hugging Mandy and not even Hermione (who usually thought the best of people) would consider embracing the Grim Reaper. Everyone did make a point of shaking hands with Junior, though. This was because he still had every single Hufflepuff in their year wrapped up tight in his tentacles and nobody wanted to risk joining them. One look at the somewhat charred Hannah would convince anyone of that.

"Full on friendship!" exclaimed the young godling as he strode down the platform in search of his parents.

With their goodbyes said, promises made to write or to call; the children were treated to the sight of Grim once again having his head blown off by Molly Weasley.

"Dash and damnation, woman! Stop dat!"

Ignoring the brewing confrontation and the faint cry of "Chaos!" that came from several carriages down, Harry and Mandy busied themselves with loading their trunks onto the nearby trolleys. They waited a short bit for Grim to pull himself back together after the Weasleys finally departed, before exiting to the Muggle section of the station.

"So, are we going back?" asked Harry as they passed through the barrier. He was referring to Hogwarts. They had agreed at the start of term that their first year at the school would be nothing but a trial run; to see if the magical world had anything to offer them.

By way of reply, Mandy reached into a pocket and withdrew a familiar red crystal.

"Oh yeah," she said with a satisfied grin, holding the Philosopher's Stone up to catch the late afternoon sunlight. "We're going back."

RIP.

Author's Note: Before anyone asks; yes, I do indeed already have plans for another chapter (sometime in the very distant future), detailing the Grim Adventures of Harry and Mandy's second year at Hogwarts. Dobby, Lucius, Lockhart, giant spiders (one of which will be named Jeff), basilisks and diaries will all have their shot at spreading the chaos in new and hopefully unexpected ways.

Also, there will be Pain.

Appropriately the title will be; *Something Grim Is In The Basement*.

-oOo-

A Little Extra

-oOo-

It was good to be back home.

Standing on the front step of Mandy's house, Harry had to admit that very little had changed whilst he, Mandy and Grim had been at Hogwarts for their first year of magical study. Well, there *was* a rather larger than normal smoking crater just outside the town, several actually, but the residents of Little Whinging were used to things like that by now.

On the other hand...

"I don't remember anyone in the neighbourhood owning a super-sized blue robot with a car for a head," he commented. "D'you?"

"I'm more concerned about de giant cheese-whiz monster dat's stompin' up 'n down Magnolia Crescent," admitted Grim, leaning comfortable against his scythe and watching as the aforementioned robot marched over to challenge the rampaging dairy product.

"This is boring," stated Mandy. "Let's go inside and watch some TV."

"Can we order a pizza?" asked Harry eagerly.

"Sure."