

Masters of Death

Title: Masters of Death

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Summary: Harry Potter and Amanda Maxwell, his girlfriend and lover, are starting their first-year at Hogwarts. And so is their best friend and indentured servant; Death Incarnate. A very different take on what happens when Something Grim This Way Comes.

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The hustle and bustle of Kings Cross Station was rarely anything less than utterly frenetic. But today, the first of September, the actuality of the platforms was something akin to an anthill that had been poked by a stick one time too many. This near mindless press of humanity was packed together so tightly in some places that it was barely possible to move at more than a snail's pace.

Yet, a break in the crowd was present in a single spot. This was not too unusual, as such anomalies were wont to occur under the correct circumstances. What made this instance different, however, was the shifting crowd's ignorance to its existence. People were simply parting round this space, skirting a circle five metres across without conscious thought. The only indication that anyone was even aware of this was the nervous shivers that ran up the spines of those who strayed too close to the clearing's edge. Even then, they dismissed it as nothing more than a chill in the air.

The two people responsible for this were fully aware of the effect their presence was causing, yet paid it no mind. Their concerns were far beyond the fact that scores of people were parting before them, even as they themselves seemed to hover just outside the edge of those same people's perception. They moved through the train station in a small pocket of isolation, undisturbed and unnoticed by those around them.

"I hate crowds," muttered the taller of the pair.

Harry Potter paused in his journey to Platform Nine and Three-Quarters and leaned against the luggage trolley he had been pushing. The famed Boy-Who-Lived was very different from the image most people held of him. Physically he was, at first glance, almost exactly how the average witch and wizard imagined him as being. Yet at the same time almost none of them would have recognised him.

He was tall for an eleven-year old, but not to the point where anyone would remark upon it. His hair was an untamed mess of black, above the pale oval of his face. There, half hidden under his bangs was the lightning bolt scar that he was famous for. His clothes, a simple navy-blue pullover and black jeans were not of excellent quality, nor were they from the thrift shop. All-in-all, he appeared to be nothing more than your average preteen boy.

It was in his face and eyes, however, that people first noticed something unusual. His features were set in a calm passiveness quite out of place in one so young. Some might have mistaken it for an aloof arrogance or perhaps some sort of careless disdain. He *was* famous after all. Others might have interpreted the set of his face as indifference; a simple lack of interest in the world around him. All would have noticed the faint tinge of cruel amusement that twisted his lips in a smile that only truly became visible when his face fell under shadow. None could have comprehended the tangled threads of thought and purpose that existed behind this impersonal mask, both less and more than all their opinions combined.

It was his eyes, however, that would most affect those who met him. Those who did not know Lily Evans, later Lily Potter, would have felt little more than various degrees of unease and disquiet. They would have a difficult time matching his gaze. Those that did know Lily, however, would be shocked beyond all means by how her son's brilliant green eyes could be so utterly unlike her own.

Harry's eyes were cold, implacable and entirely devoid of anything that could be called warm. They took in all that they saw with terrible dispassion, while letting next to nothing escape. Only a single emotion was present in his eyes to hint at the thoughts of the mind behind them. It was a glint, a glimmer that could only be discerned by close scrutiny, which spoke of a dark humour. The kind of humour present in a person that knew of a hidden secret and was waiting gleefully for someone to experience gross misfortune at that secret's hands.

"This had better be worth it," he continued, his cool gaze shifting to his companion.

"Only one way to find out," replied the girl in question.

Harry turned to fully and properly regard the only person he considered an equal. Amanda Grey Maxwell, otherwise known as the girl from number seven Privet Drive. Anyone watching would have been struck by the contrast in appearance as she stood beside Harry, hands resting on her own luggage cart.

Where Harry's hair was raven black, Amanda's pixie-like cut was the colour spun gold. Where his flesh was pale, hers was a warm tan quite uncommon for someone living in the British Isles. While his clothes were shades of cool blue, hers were warm and earthy; burnt orange slacks, a rose pink blouse and a deep burgundy jacket. They could hardly have seemed more disparate if they had tried.

Yet one glance at Amanda's face would have left nobody in doubt that she and Harry were cut from the same cloth.

There was that same look of casual disdain, tempered by chilling indifference. The only significant difference in their expressions was a barely there smirk of smug superiority, which oddly enough gave the blonde girl a strange allure that only added to her budding beauty. It was in the eyes, however, where the similarity was unnaturally close. Where Harry's eyes were frosted emerald, tinted by an unidentifiable black humour, Amanda's were chips of frozen sapphire that gleamed with a wicked cruelty, made worse by the casualness with which it was wielded.

"Platform Nine and Three-Quarters," mused Amanda as they resumed walking. "If that name is any indication then these wizards are childish idiots. We shouldn't have too much trouble influencing them for our benefit."

"Perhaps," Harry allowed. "Just remember not to do anything overt until after we've had a chance to properly study them."

Amanda refrained from rolling her eyes and instead glanced at a platform guard, who was standing off to one side, enjoying a quick smoke break. She considered him for a moment before returning her attention to the platform in front of them. She ignored the unintelligible and nigh imperceptible whisper that drifted over her shoulder. Harry, however, allowed the ghost of a contemptuous smirk to flit across his lips.

"I hate smokers," was his only comment.

The pair continued on their way, ignoring the bedlam that erupted behind them as the guard began to hack and cough with increasing violence. Within less than a minute he collapsed breathless and lifeless on the station floor.

"Here we are," said Amanda when they arrived at the platform between tracks nine and ten.

"I suppose it's well hidden," said Harry doubtfully, eyeing the specially charmed barrier.

"After you," said Amanda, indicating that he should be the one to cross the barrier first.

"Ladies first," Harry rejoined.

"I enjoy sex too much to be a 'lady'," countered Mandy.

"Which is one of the things I love about you."

"Typical boy - only interested in me for my body."

"You're not the only one that enjoys a good shag."

Amanda smirked and suggested, "Together then?"

Harry looked at the barrier, judging sizes. "It'll be a tight squeeze."

"You say *that* every time you bugger me."

Harry had glint of mischief in his eye and was about to retort when a disgruntled whisper played across their ears and the air about them stirred just barely enough to be felt. Instead of continuing the banter he arched an eyebrow up high and observed, "Someone's feeling impatient."

A loud groan shuddered through the air as a steel support beam above them seemed to protest against the weight resting on it. A good pair of eyes would have detected a slight sway along its length.

Amanda dropped her gaze from the station roof and agreed, "Very impatient. We should go."

Harry nodded and, without preamble, led them through the platform barrier. They emerged a moment later to the sight of an old fashioned steam engine, with dozens of children scurrying about, their somewhat harried parents trying to ride herd on them all. A goodly number of those present, young and old, were dressed in traditional wizarding attire, which, for some strange reason, included the equally traditional pointy hat.

"And who says stereotypes are inaccurate?" mused Harry, taking in the view.

"It's a good thing some of them are," said Amanda.

"I don't know. I think the reactions would have been hilarious if he really was a scythe wielding skeleton. Can you imagine the looks on their faces when we introduced them to our good friend the Grim Reaper?"

It was only the faint sense of amusement and the light breeze that caressed their scalps that gave any indication that the third member of their party,

forever unseen and unheard, agreed with Harry's conjectured scenario.

Amanda rolled her eyes and stated, "As amusing as that might be, it would not constitute the concept of keeping a low profile. We might as well have showed up with a baby demon and a mad goddess."

"Oh, you're not mad," said Harry with a dismissive wave. "Just a little obsessive sometimes."

Amanda gave him a lidded look as they made their way to the train. "Are you saying I'm a goddess?"

Harry nodded, "An evil goddess, but yeah."

"Saying things like that are gonna get you laid."

"That's the general idea."

Neither Harry nor Amanda paid any mind to the various witches and wizards who were hurriedly moving out of their way. The witches and wizards, however, being somewhat more in tune with reality than your average Muggle, found themselves wondering just who exactly this unnerving pair of children were. That there was a faint chill to the air as they walked passed was generally dismissed as a flight of fancy. The Dementors were under Ministry control, after all.

Having reached one of the seemingly less crowded carriages, Harry and Amanda proceeded to unload their trunks from the luggage trolleys they had been pushing. Several people watched and wondered how two seeming first-year children could so easily shift the bulky trunks. Choosing the more obvious, if incorrect in this case, conclusion, they dismissed it as the trunks having been charmed lighter.

Harry had just stepped on to the carriage, dragging his trunk behind him, when a loud crash, followed by some colourful language, drew most of the platform's attention to the barrier entrance. A pair of red-haired boys, twins apparently, had emerged from the barrier with excessive speed and had crashed into a rather effeminate man with platinum blonde hair. The man's wife and son had quickly gotten involved, only to be bowled over by another pair of redheads, also boys but not twins, though clearly related to the earlier two.

"Look at that," scoffed Amanda, "Bickering like children."

Harry refrained from pointing out that most of the participants *were* children. Instead he hefted his trunk onto the carriage and waited for Amanda to follow him. While he waited, he looked down the carriage corridor in the hope of seeing which, if any, of the compartments were available.

"Let's hurry up and find a compartment. All this walking's made my legs tired," said Amanda as she ignored the arrival of the redheads' mother and baby sister in favour of squeezing her way into the carriage corridor next to Harry.

"I think that one, fourth down, is empty," Harry pointed.

The pair quickly found and entered the vacant compartment. Having stored their trunks in the overhead racks, they settled down on the available seats. They sat in silence for a minute, considering the window to one side and the glass panelled sliding door on the other. Harry folded his arms in displeasure.

"We're not going to have a lot of privacy," he grumbled.

Looking unhappy herself at the idea, Amanda nodded in agreement. "We're not going to be able to sleep together, let alone anything more... physical. Sneaking off into broom closets is not very appealing."

"Maybe we'll have private rooms," speculated Harry wistfully.

"It's a boarding school," Amanda reminded him.

"Right," Harry sighed. "Dormitories and roommates."

The compartment's wooden panelling creaked suggestively, as if reacting to a subtle pressure. Amanda's lips twitched in a brief smile before she shook her head. "As nice as it would be to have an entire dormitory to ourselves, I think the untimely demise of all our roommates would only draw unwanted attention to the survivors; namely us."

"But we'll consider it for anyone that's really annoying," qualified Harry.

The window frame rattled in a way that could almost be called a chuckle. Or perhaps insane cackling. As with everything, the details were in the interpretation. Harry and Amanda did not delve for a meaning deeper than that of general amusement from their companion. The rattling came to an abrupt halt. The sudden silence alerted the pair to the imminent arrival of an uninvited visitor. Both had barely enough time to set their faces into neutral expressions before the compartment door slid open.

"Er... hullo."

Harry and Amanda stared forebodingly at the two girls that had intruded upon them. One was a blonde in pigtails and the other a redhead, though of a much lighter shade than the family from earlier. The newcomers quickly grew uneasy from the scrutiny they were under.

"Hi!" exclaimed the blonde, trying to be enthusiastic in her greeting. "I'm Hannah Abbot and this is Susan Bones."

Seeing how the pair was shifting on their feet and fidgeting with their hands, Harry offered them a predatory grin and introduced, "Please to me you,

I'm sure. I'm Harry and this is Amanda."

Amanda grimaced. She would have preferred to remain silent and scare the other girls away with the power of her glare alone. Still, she had to admit that Harry's smile was proving just as effective. Deciding to join in on the fun, she added a grin of her own to the mix. Seeing the girls twitch in reaction, she parted her lips to bare a thin sliver of teeth as she purred, "Charmed."

"Um, yeah, well... um..." Hannah stammered uncertainly.

"Anyway," declared Susan suddenly, startling her friend. "We just dropped in to say hello and meet some of our fellow first-years. Sorry we can't stay, but we really need to get back to our own compartment."

Having managed to get that all out in a single, uninterrupted breath, Susan grabbed Hannah by the arm and pulled her out of the compartment. The pair promptly tripped over their trunks. Despite Susan's assertion, they had obviously not yet found a place to sit. Fumbling their way back to their feet, they fled down the train carriage in search of a less unsettling place spend the journey to Hogwarts.

"Fearless Gryffindors in the making, those two," observed Amanda, leaning over to slide the door shut.

"They're only firsties," said Harry, "but it was fun scaring them."

Amanda laughed softly and crossed the compartment to straddle Harry's lap. "It was fun," she agreed, leaning in close to brush her lips against his, "but I can think of more exciting things to do than scare a bunch of kids."

Harry smiled and returned the kiss, bringing his hands up; one to cup his girlfriend's bum and the other reaching out to rap against the compartment door. The door's glass panel instantly turned black and a faint shimmer along the door's edges told of a Sealing Ward coming into being. Until that was dispersed, Hannah and Susan would be their last unexpected guests. Harry's free hand returned to join its partner, which in turn lifted away to briefly wave at the compartment window, which promptly changed to match the now opaque door panel.

"Y'know," he muttered, nibbling on Amanda's neck, "this would be a lot easier if you were wearing a skirt or dress."

Amanda wiggled her butt against his groping hands. "In this weather? Not likely."

Harry replied by raising his hands up to slip down the back of her slacks, thereby removing them as a blockage. Amanda purred as his fingers played over her flesh and he leaned up to capture her lips in a fierce kiss. Before long they were progressing to more energetic activities, all the while ignoring the occasional knock at the compartment door.

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Draco Malfoy was well on his way to becoming truly angry. As it was, he was already upset and very frustrated. The cause of his trouble was the compartment door he was currently pounding with his fist. More accurately, he had been pounding on this particular door, with steadily increasing force, at regular intervals for the past several hours. Practically the entire train ride, if you wanted to be exact.

Ordinarily he would not have bothered and, after the second time, would have abandoned his attempts to gain entry. But this was the compartment where Harry Potter was sitting. Draco knew this mostly through the process of elimination. He had checked every single other compartment on the train and found no sign of the Boy-Who-Lived. This was the only place he had been unable to access. For that matter, he had not even been able to make a visual inspection, thanks to the blacked out windows. He had even called in some seventh-year Slytherin associates to try and force their way in, but had met with no success. The compartment was sealed as thoroughly as a Gringotts vault.

This made Draco's task, assigned to him by his father, somewhat impossible to complete. After all, it was rather difficult to befriend someone when you could not even see them, let alone talk to them. Gaining Potter's trust, as well as some measure of influence over him, would be a masterstroke for whoever accomplished it. Having friends in high places was something every Slytherin desired. And, though he had not yet been Sorted, Draco already knew which house he would be in.

Unfortunately the Boy-Who-Lived had sequestered himself away for almost the entire train ride. Hannah Abbot and Susan Bones were the only students to have met him, though neither had much to say. Someone might almost think that they were afraid of the boy. But that was preposterous.

"We will be reaching Hogwarts in five minutes time," announced the voice of the train conductor. "Please leave your luggage on the train; it will be taken to the school separately."

And now, with only a few short minutes before the Express pulled into the Hogsmeade Station, it appeared that Draco would be forced to report failure to his father. Oh, he would certainly see and meet the other boy during the Sorting, and afterwards in class, but the Sorting was important. His father had explained how he had to make friends with Potter *before* they were dispatched into separate houses. Certainly it would be not impossible to form a friendship later on, but doing so earlier would greatly simplify things. It would also prevent Potter from being unduly influenced by his house-mates' opinions about the green and silver house.

"Come on, Draco, stop wasting our time," complained Greg Goyle. "They didn't answer before and they won't answer now."

"Shut up!" Draco snapped. "My father told me to speak with Potter and I won't stop until I do."

"Fine, but do you have to drag us along?" asked Vincent Crabbe.

Draco did not bother to reply, beyond a sneer. All three boys knew exactly what the situation was; and that was for Crabbe and Goyle to do whatever Draco told them to. Within reason. Instead of continuing the conversation, Draco returned his attention to the compartment door, ready to

resume his insistent knocking.

He had just raised his hand in preparation when the door unexpectedly slid open. Framed in the doorway, dressed in Hogwarts robes and bearing an annoyed scowl on her face, was a very pretty young witch. She was slender, with short rich blonde hair and just enough height for her ice-blue eyes to match Draco's gaze. Even if her displeased expression had not given him pause, one look in those forbidding eyes certainly would have. As it was, the combined frown and stare had a cumulative effect that caused Draco to back away a step, very nearly bumping into Crabbe.

"What do you want?" the girl demanded in a clipped tone.

Draco took another half-step back in the face of such barely restrained ire. But he was quick to remind himself that he was a Malfoy. He gathered all the arrogance and smug superiority he could muster and stepped up, reclaiming the ground he had lost. It was difficult, but he managed to ignore the girl as she was not the person he was there for. More importantly, looking passed her he could see his intended target. Sitting down and in the process of putting his shoes on, was a black-haired boy that could only be Harry Potter.

"Well?" snapped the girl impatiently.

Draco sneered and shouldered his way passed her, ignoring the slight grunt as the air was forced from her lungs when she impacted the door frame. While he did not claim to know every pureblooded witch and wizard their age, he recognised that the girl had Muggle clothing on under her school robes. Clearly a mudblood and therefore unworthy of any consideration or courtesy.

"They say Harry Potter's in this compartment," he said, stopping directly in front of the seated boy. "You're him, I take it."

The boy looked up at him, seeming vaguely curious, but mostly disinterested. It was an expression that nearly set Draco's teeth on edge. It stopped, however, as his dark green eyes flickered to the girl and back. The feeling that he had suddenly become the sole focus of the other boy's attention was almost as unnerving as the girl's earlier expression of displeasure. He would have backed up again, but there wasn't enough space for it. A ghost of a smile spread across the boy's lips. Draco felt a shiver run up his spine.

"I am," confirmed Potter with a seemingly gracious nod.

"Well, I'm Malfoy, Draco Malfoy," he introduced himself.

"Delighted," acknowledged Potter. His gaze slid beyond Draco and back to the open doorway. "Your companions?"

"Oh, this is Crabbe and this is Goyle," said Malfoy indicating each boy in turn.

"Ah," Potter nodded. His smile deepened a fraction as he waved at the girl, who was standing to one side and watching the proceedings. "You have, of course, met my girlfriend, Amanda Maxwell. You did almost knock her over whilst entering."

Draco glanced at the girl and saw that she was no longer glaring at him. Instead, her expression was set in something of cool consideration, as if she were deciding what to make of him. Instead of offering an apology, which is what Potter seemed to desire, he curled his lips into a sneer. The girl barely reacted, other than the slight narrowing of her eyes. She hid it well, but Draco's wordless declaration of superiority had obviously angered her. His sneer transformed into a smug smirk, knowing that he had gotten the better of her. And by extension, the better of Potter.

"She was in my way," he said, turning back to the waiting Boy-Who-Lived.

"Still no reason to be rude," chided Potter.

Draco waved the admonishment aside and settled down on the seat opposite him. "She's only a girl," he declared with authority, "And a mudblood at that. She should know better than to get in the way of her superiors."

"And how do you know I'm a... mudblood, as you put it?" asked the girl, sitting next to Potter.

Draco sneered at her, "I know all the old pureblood families. Maxwell isn't one of them."

Potter placed a hand on the girl's knee, restraining her. Draco had to admit that he was a little impressed by how well the other boy controlled her. Not many eleven year olds could claim to have a girlfriend. Even fewer could control them with a simple touch.

"You obviously wanted to speak to me," said Potter. "What about?"

"About helping you to find your place in our world, of course," replied Draco, putting on a winning smile. This was it, the moment his father had made him spend hours practicing for. The moment he would begin the task of attaching strings to the Malfoy family's newest puppet. "It's no secret that you were raised by Muggle relatives. I want to make sure you learn what you need to know about your wizarding heritage."

"And what makes you qualified to do so? Why not one of the Hogwarts professors?" asked Potter.

"You'll find, Potter, that some wizarding families are much better than others," said Draco.

Potter arched his eyebrows in interest and asked, "And the Malfoy family would be one of those, I presume?"

"Exactly," Draco agreed. He held out his hand. "You don't want to go making friends with the wrong sort. I can help you there."

Potter regarded the outstretched hand for a long moment. Draco's smile was beginning to slip before he finally reached out and gripped it in a firm hold. Giving a firm shake, one that almost made Draco wince, Potter grinned and said, "Pleased to make your acquaintance, Draco."

Elation filled him as Draco ignored the throbbing of his hand. Potter had a monstrous grip, but that meant nothing next to the fact that he had succeeded in what his father had asked of him. "You're welcome, Harry. You won't regret this decision."

Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived, grinned rakishly. It was an expression entirely at odds with his previously cool demeanour. "Oh, I'm sure I won't," he agreed. He leaned back in the seat and draped an arm round his girlfriend's shoulders. "In fact," he added, "I'm positive this is the start of a friendship that will last the rest of your life."

Draco smiled happily at the other boy's naivety. This was just too easy.

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Harry Potter watched with a smile as Draco, Crabbe and Goyle left the compartment. The Express had just pulled into the Hogsmeade station and everyone was preparing to disembark. Once the three were out of sight, his amiable smile transformed into the grin of a cat that was about to dine upon canary. He found it amusing at how painfully overconfident the Malfoy scion was. Apparently, by some quirk of nature and birth, the boy was completely lacking that ever so important instinct that alerted prey to the presence of a predator.

He glanced to Amanda, who was regarding him coolly. She obviously did not like having been so readily dismissed during his and Malfoy's conversation. Still, it had been necessary to cater to the other boy's prejudices, if only for a little while. Harry knew that she understood this, even if she did not like it. He reached out to cup her cheek, staring deeply into her eyes as he caressed the soft skin beneath his fingers.

"Remember when I said we'd consider it for anyone that's really annoying?" he asked idly.

Mandy did not reply, as she knew that the question was not directed at her. There was a soft creak of leather from the seat on the other side of the compartment, a sound of curious inquiry. And anticipation.

Harry's smile parted to bare his teeth. It was a wicked, vicious expression. Amanda felt herself reacting to it almost immediately, despite their having enjoyed more than a few highly satisfying couplings over the course of the train ride.

"Do your stuff," Harry commanded.

Nothing else needed to be said. A sense of eager expectation bubbled through the small compartment, ruffling both youngsters' clothes in the process. Amanda took the opportunity to lean in and kiss her lover with all due thoroughness. It went without saying that he would never allow the slights that Malfoy had directed at her to go unpunished, but she could not help respond to seeing it put into motion.

"For that, I think you've earned something special," she murmured as their lips parted.

Harry grinned. His girlfriend could filthily kinky sometimes.

Securing the silver fastenings of their robes against the chilly night air, Harry and Amanda emerged from their compartment. Having delayed their departure in favour of a quick snog, they were amongst the last of the students to disembark from the train. Standing on the arrival platform, they took a moment to examine their surroundings.

A light touch on his forearm was enough to direct Harry's gaze to where Amanda was looking. His eyes narrowed to slits as he spied an unmistakable head of platinum blonde, standing a short distance away from the main mass of Hogwarts students. Obviously Malfoy disliked the press of the crowd about as much as they did. Not that this minor kinship would be enough to save him.

Evaluating both Malfoy and his surroundings, Harry was drawn to the looming mass of wood and tile that hung twelve feet above all their heads. The platform roof. His gaze rose up from his target to the roof and then along it until he was looking directly overhead. A dark smirk twisted his lips as he glanced to the side. He then glanced to Amanda, who was watching him intently.

"Do you want to do the honours?" he asked.

"Nah," she declined. "This one's all yours."

Taking her hand in his, Harry shifted them several steps to the right, so that they were standing next to one of the station platform's wooden support columns. He reached out with his free hand and, pausing briefly to confirm that Draco had not moved, he gently tapped the upright pillar with a single finger. He turned to face Malfoy, pulling Amanda close to him and wrapping his arms around her slim waist.

"That should do it," he decided, smiling darkly.

Together the pair watched and waited. Though there was no immediate reaction to Harry's nudge, they were patient and confident. Death's design had now been laid out and, for Malfoy, there was no escape from it.

"Firs' years! Firs' years!" called a deep and booming voice as a truly massive man lumbered into view, holding an old oil lantern up high like a guiding beacon.

The first years, now given some direction, began to gravitate towards the half-giant. The older students were more intent on reaching the carriages that were waiting to take them up to the castle. Only Harry and Amanda were paying any particular attention to what was happening around them. As such, they were the only ones to witness the entire chain of events that followed from start to grisly end.

It began with a gust of unnaturally cold air that swept across the small station. Along the edge of the crowd of students, a red-haired boy absently dropped what appeared to be an empty sandwich wrapping. This was promptly caught by the brisk wind and lifted up into the air. It travelled only a

short distance before slapping onto the face of a podgy looking boy in the company of a very bushy-haired girl.

"Gak! I can't see!" he cried, thrashing his arms out to the sides.

"Look out, Neville - oof!" exclaimed the girl as he accidentally pushed against her. She stumbled and tripped on the hem of her school robes, sending her tumbling into a group of older students that had been walking by.

One of them, a black boy with dreadlocks, let out a startled yelp as he dropped the cardboard box he had been carrying. Screams promptly cut through the air as a large, hairy spider of some sort, easily the size of a dinner plate, was set loose. Naturally the insect, surrounded by too many shrieking humans, scurried away down the station in search of a place to hide.

Instead it found an older boy who, for some reason, was carrying a broomstick with him. The boy cursed luridly in a thick brogue and back-pedalled quickly, trying to put some distance between himself and the advancing spider. The spider, however, continued towards him until, growing desperate, the boy hefted his broom and swung it like a golf club. With a stroke that would not have been out of place at St. Andrews, the spider was sent sailing through the air and from one end of the station platform to the other.

Another set of shrieks rent the air as the spider crashed down into a group of witches. The rather spotty faced girl it had actually landed on entered a state of pure panic. By now most of the student body, as well as the half-giant, had paused to see what was going on. It was thus no surprise that, when the wildly thrashing girl ran into the watching crowd, pandemonium erupted.

A rather thuggish looking boy was sent staggered by a well-placed elbow to the gut. Badly winded, he half collapsed against a nearby pillar, similar to the one Harry and Amanda were standing next to. His attempt to find support as he caught his breath met with failure as a sharp snap resounded from one of his robe pockets. He barely had the time to understand that his wand had just been broken, when a pulse of wild magic, powered by the exposed dragon heartstring core of his wand, exploded throughout his robes. The resulting burst of flame promptly set his clothes on fire.

Screams of somewhat enjoyable fright gave way to screams of panicked terror and pain. These grew in intensity as the flaming boy jerked wildly about in an attempt to remove his burning robes while at the same time trying to smother the flames engulfing his shirt and trousers. This only facilitated the spread of the flames onto the robes of several of those students unlucky enough to be standing too close to him.

"Ere now! Let me though! Let me though!" boomed the massive man, trying to wade through the fleeing students.

Luckily several of the more level-headed students managed to remember that they were magical and began to spray jets of water from their wands. This caused some of the panic to ease off, but students continued to flee the Hogsmeade train station whichever way they could. As chance would have it, Draco Malfoy fled not outside, but back towards the now empty Hogwarts Express. He was not alone, but accompanied by several dozen other students of all ages and years.

Harry and Amanda watched keenly as he moved closer to where they were standing, unmoved since the beginning.

"Out of my way, Weasley," they heard him yell at the redhead whose piece of litter had started the ball rolling. Draco gave the gangly boy a hard shove to the side. Harry and Amanda obligingly stepped aside and let the boy slam into the support column with impressive force. The sound of breaking bone hid the sound of wooden beams beginning to crack and splinter.

"Malfoy - you bastard!" grunted the Weasley boy as he collapsed in agony, clutching an arm to his chest.

"Ron! Ron!" called two of the boy's older brothers, the twins that had crashed into the Malfoy family back at Kings Cross. The pair rushed to where their fallen brother lay, but just as they reached him the combination of a fleeing witch and floor made slippery from too much water caused them to completely lose their balance and stumble off their feet. The one fell on top of the aforementioned Ron, causing him to yell out in renewed pain. The other twin, however, followed in his younger sibling's footsteps and crashed headlong into the pillar. This time the pop of a dislocating shoulder was not enough to cover the resounding crack and following groan of straining wood.

The fleeing students paused, in confusion and a sense of ominous foreboding. A second, louder groan of protest rang out, causing some to clutch their friends in search of comfort. The pillar that the now moaning twin had crashed into gave a sudden twist. Its length splintered almost explosively and a chunk of wood the size and general shape of a steak knife was launched through the air. It passed close enough to Harry to brush through his hair, without injuring him, before crashing into and shattering a window on the steam train behind him.

Perhaps it was out of some morbid fascination, perhaps they were simply immobilized with fear, but nobody moved as the section of roof above the shattered pillar swayed unsteadily. Nobody moved as the next column in line shuddered, then twisted and the splintered in much the same way as the first. Nobody moved even as the next pillar, the third in line, also twisted and buckled in place. The roof above it developed a noticeable dip, even as the whole structure shifted back and forth in search of stability and support.

At the end of the receiving platform, the fourth and final pillar in that direction snapped clear through with a crack like thunder. It did not break in half, but nearly a foot from the top, where it joined with the now crumbling roof. Bereft of support the roof dropped heavily on top of it, all of its great weight pressing down at a slight angle. A second crack sounded as the column snapped off at the base, unable to support the excess weight. It immediately began to topple over with the solemn majesty of a great oak being felled.

Not ten feet away, Draco Malfoy stared up at its falling bulk with dull incomprehension.

He turned away from his impending doom and found himself staring down the length of the railway platform. Between the panicked students and the growing rain of debris, he caught sight of Harry and Amanda. They had barely moved since the start of this comedy of errors turned Greek tragedy. Harry still had his arms wrapped around her waist and Amanda still leaned back comfortably against his chest. They wore identical expressions of dark amusement and even enjoyment.

As he watched, Draco saw Harry lift up Amanda's hand to press a gentlemanly kiss against its back. During the entire exchange, their chilling green and blue stares never wavered. For a single, brief yet timeless moment, a glimmer of horrified understanding entered Draco's eyes. A moment later that understanding was replaced by the blank emptiness of the dead, as the support beam fell upon his head and crushed his skull like a pumpkin.

Amidst the shrieks and screams of panicking students, Amanda leaned in close to Harry and whispered, "I just had my best orgasm of the day."

Harry smiled smugly and quipped, "And I didn't even have to touch you this time."

-oOo-

Lucius Malfoy fell back into the lushly appointed visitor's chair with a thump, his knees having given out beneath him. His gaze lost all focus and he no longer saw the wrinkled face of Albus Dumbledore watching him. Only two thoughts were going through his head at this point. The first was a mantra that repeated what the old headmaster had just told him. His son, Draco, was dead. The second, related to the first, was the pained question of how he was going to tell Narcissa the news.

Both he and his wife loved their only child. Sure, wealth and status and purity were important, but family was something to be held above them all.

He had expected many things, being summoned to Hogwarts in the dead of the night. Many, many things. Some good, some bad. This news, however, this dreadful news was so completely unanticipated that he almost dismissed it as a joke of truly bad taste. But he knew Dumbledore and, as much as he disliked the man, he also knew that the headmaster would never joke about the lives and safety of his students.

He dearly wanted something to drink right then, something to burn away the clenching pain that filled his chest. He was pleasantly surprised when a tumbler full of brandy entered his narrowed field of vision. His attention focused on the liquor, but he was vaguely aware of the fact that it was Severus Snape that was handing it to him. He downed the entire glass, three fingers worth, in a single gulp. As the drink scorched its way down his throat, he almost forgot the reason he had accepted without question.

"Thank you, Severus," he muttered, passing the empty glass back.

"More?" asked Snape.

Lucius briefly considered refusing, but found himself nodding regardless.

"I'm truly sorry, Lucius," said Dumbledore, diverting the man's attention briefly back to the headmaster. "It's a terrible thing for any parent to outlive their child."

His hands clenched convulsively on his chair's armrests, driving all the blood from his knuckles until they were bleached bone white. He glanced to where Snape was pouring out another desperate measure of brandy.

"Are you sure this was an accident?" he asked harshly, his voice threatening to break toward the end.

"Yes," Dumbledore nodded.

"Are you *sure*?" demanded Lucius, lurching to his feet.

Dumbledore met his furious gaze with implacable calm. "Yes, Lucius, I'm sure," he stated firmly. "The accounts from all the other students confirm it was nothing more than an accident. I'm sorry, but Draco was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time."

A scream of pure despair was bubbling up in his throat, but was aborted when Snape stepped up and forced the tumbler into his hand. "Drink," he commanded, "You need to regain your composure."

"To hell and back with my composure!" Lucius roared, hurling the tumbler across the headmaster's office, sending brandy flying everywhere. The glass itself shattered again the portrait of Aldus Appleton, a fourteenth century headmaster known, ironically, for his talent in brewing apple brandy. As the painting sputtered indignantly, Lucius raged in furious grief. "We're talking about my son! My son, Draco! My *son*!"

His voice cracked on his last cry and rose into something akin to a wail.

"I understand," said Snape, as Lucius collapsed back into his chair, "but getting angry will not help. Nor will it change anything."

"Why not?" asked Lucius wearily, the fight having suddenly gone out of him. "I have nothing else left."

"Not even your wife?" asked Snape silkily.

Lucius dropped his head into his hands. "Narcissa," he moaned, "This is going to destroy her."

"Which is why you have to remain strong, Lucius, so that she may lean upon you," said Dumbledore gravely.

"Yes, yes, you're right, of course," Lucius agreed, pulling himself together and stumbling to his feet. "I need to... I need to go home and... and tell her what's happened... to Draco."

"You can floo from here," offered Dumbledore, indicating his fireplace.

"No, thank you, headmaster," Lucius declined. "I'll walk down to the gates and Apparate from there. I need to clear my head and gather my thoughts."

The night air will be good for that.”

“Very well,” Dumbledore agreed. “Do not hesitate to ask, should you need anything.”

Lucius nodded and quickly exited the office. It was only upon reaching the bottom of the revolving stairs that he realized that he had forgotten his cloak, or that Snape had gathered it up and brought it down for him. Wordlessly accepting the garment, Lucius threw it over his shoulders. “Thank you, Severus,” he murmured. “You don’t need to accompany me; I’d prefer to be alone.”

Snape nodded in understanding and turned to ascend back up to the headmaster’s office.

He was entirely unaware of his surroundings as he made his way through the school. It was only his years as a student there that allowed Lucius to navigate the corridors and stairs without conscious thought. He was vaguely aware of crossing paths with the four house ghosts, who seemed engrossed in a heated, if whispered argument, but he paid them no mind. The only spirit he cared about was his son, who had passed beyond instead of remaining to haunt the living.

Then, surprising him slightly, he found himself standing in the Entrance Hall. He absently noted the presence of two professors; Flitwick and Sinistra, keeping watch over the doors to the Great Hall. A wise precaution on Dumbledore’s part. He guessed that more of the staff were inside, tending to the students, who would be spending the night together on conjured cots and conjured sleeping bags. He was shaken from his thoughts by the realization that two children were not inside the Great Hall with the others, but were actually standing in front of him, apparently trying to speak with him.

Neither were the children of any of his friends, colleagues or associates and he did not recognise them as belonging to anyone else he knew. He was about to dismiss them entirely, having no use for the platitudes of unknown children, when he finally took proper notice of the boy’s appearance. Despite having never met or seen him before, there could be no doubt. The black hair. The well remarked upon green eyes, almost the exact same shade as the Killing Curse. The same nose, cheekbones and jaw line of his father. Yes, there was no mistake.

Harry Potter.

“Forgive me,” Lucius apologised, “but my mind was wandering. Could you repeat that?”

The boy nodded, the motion shifting his bangs enough to allow a glimpse of his famous scar. “Of course, sir,” he said politely. “I’m Harry Potter and this,” he indicated his female companion, “is my best friend, Amanda Maxwell.”

Lucius offered the girl a wan smile, the best any parent that has lost a child could manage. He still did not recognise her and suspected that she must be Muggleborn. But now, after what had happened, he simply could not bring himself to care. What difference did it make? She was alive, where Draco was not.

“It is good to meet you both,” he acknowledged, “though I wish the circumstances were more pleasant.”

“Yes,” Potter agreed solemnly. “We’re so sorry about what happened.”

“Thank you,” Lucius choked out, accepting the pro-forma condolences.

“We met Draco on the train,” elaborated Potter awkwardly. “He spent some time in our compartment, telling us about the wizarding world. He mentioned you a few times. He must have admired you a lot.”

Lucius had to blink back tears at this reminder of how hard Draco had tried to emulate him. “Thank you,” he repeated thickly. “I always tried to be a good father to him.”

Maxwell finally spoke up. Her voice was soft, but underlain with something that reminded Lucius of his former master. “He was very excited about coming to Hogwarts,” she said. “He told us many helpful things about the school.”

“We really liked him,” added Potter. “He was going to be a great friend.”

He had to close his eyes at that, unexpectedly overwhelmed with surging emotional pain. He should have taken some comfort from the fact that Draco had accomplished his assigned task; that he had died with the satisfaction of having done a good job.

“That’s good to hear,” he murmured, opening his eyes and staring down at Potter. “I’m glad to know Draco had a chance to meet you, Harry. Friends are very important.”

Potter nodded seriously and stepped closer.

“Don’t *fall apart* on us, Mr. Malfoy,” insisted the boy, grabbing his hand and holding it in a surprisingly firm grip. “You have to stay *together* through all this.”

Slightly surprised at how he was almost repeating Dumbledore’s platitudes word for word, Lucius did nothing but nod in acquiescence. “Very sound advice, Mr. Potter,” he said with as much grace as he could muster in the situation. “Your thoughtfulness is much appreciated.”

“Lucius,” interrupted a familiar voice, “My condolences to you and your wife on your lose.”

Lucius broken gazes with Potter and found that Professor Flitwick had moved to join them. Processing what the diminutive wizard had said, Lucius nodded politely. “Thank you, Filius. I shall tell Narcissa that your thoughts are with us.”

Flitwick nodded and then turned his attention to Potter and Maxwell. "Children, it's very late and you should be getting back to your cots in the Great Hall. I know that many of you are having trouble sleeping, but you must try to get some rest."

"Yes Professor," the pair chorused. They turned back to Lucius.

Managing another pained smile, Lucius once again shook hands with Potter and then with Maxwell. "Thank you again for your kind words, Harry, Amanda," he said. "I hope we will have a chance to speak again, hopefully in a more pleasant setting."

"Goodbye, Mr. Malfoy," acknowledged Maxwell.

"Goodbye, sir," said Potter gravely; as though this were the last time they would speak.

After exchanging farewells with Flitwick, Lucius watched as the two children were led back to the Great Hall. Once they had slipped through the doors, he turned and made his exit from the castle. While he strode down the path to the main gates, and the edge of the school's anti-apparition wards, he considered the strange encounter he had just experienced. It was odd that both children had been out and about just as he was passing.

Reaching the gates he stepped through them and off of Hogwarts' grounds. He turned to stare back at the castle. He could remember in vivid details his days as a student there. Something Draco would not have a chance to experience. Biting his lip, he glanced over his shoulder at the scattered lights of distant Hogsmeade. The thought of a nightcap or two at the Three Broomsticks, or even the Hog's Head, was truly tempting. But he knew he could not indulge like that. He needed to return home and break the news to Narcissa.

Focusing on his destination, as he had done thousands of times before, Lucius drew his cloak close as he prepared to Disapparate. A frigid gust of air seemed to have been following him ever since the Entrance Hall, making him unaccountably cold for a late summer night. Once everything was set, he allowed his magic to take over, trusting it to do what was needed as he gave himself into the process of near instantaneous travel.

There was a moment of impossible pain, worse than the Cruciatus, and then nothing but eternal black.

-oOo-

Albus Dumbledore had never before felt so utterly old. It had been a good many years since he had last been confronted by events as trying as what had transpired this September first. If the truth be told, for the last decade the greatest difficulty he had faced was the task of keeping Minister Fudge from flooring him in a tizzy every time something happened at the Ministry.

Now, in a matter of a few hours, the bloodline of a prominent magical family had been extinguished.

At the Hogsmeade train station, early yesterday evening, Draco Malfoy had been killed in a freak accident. And it was an accident, despite Lucius' suspicions. The chain of events that led up to Draco's death was too random and chaotic to have been planned for. Sometimes bad things just happened.

Quite a few of them had happened that day.

Just over a third of the school's student population had required time with Madam Pomfrey and the Healers that were brought in from St. Mungo's. It was the largest number of injuries brought on by a single event since the Ravenclaw section of the stands collapsed during a Quidditch match in 1799.

It was certainly going to be a black spot on Dumbledore's record as headmaster, despite the fact that he had nothing to do with it. Still, blame had to be passed around. The morning edition of the *Daily Prophet* had reported not only on the tragedy, but also that Giles Pinkerton, the stationmaster, had been arrested on the charge of gross negligence.

Not that any of the students, even the uninjured ones, particularly cared.

Still, all things considered, they had been lucky, extremely lucky, that Draco had been the only fatality. The list of injuries had been dreadfully long, but was comprised of mostly minor things. There was a plethora of scrapes, cuts and bruises, as well as several dozen sprained wrists and twisted ankles. One Gryffindor seventh-year had actually managed to slip a vertebra. All of these were minor grievances and had been quickly dealt with.

Then came a rather wide assortment of broken bones. Arms and legs mostly, but with a few ribs added into the mix. Nobody cared to count the various broken fingers and toes in the final tally. These were all more severe injuries, but generally still nothing to worry about. Most of the afflicted students had been up and about when morning came.

Three students, on the other hand, would need more time to recover.

First and the least injured, physically, was Marietta Edgecomb. The second-year Ravenclaw witch had been admitted to the healers for treatment of numerous spider bites to her face, head and neck. As the spider had not been of a poisonous variety, these were readily treated. But during their examination of her, the healers noticed that Marietta was almost totally unresponsive. The strain of what had happened had left her in a state of comatose shock. Not even her mother, who had immediately flocked in, could garner more than a dull-eyed blink. Various mind healers would be coming to have a look at her, but most likely time would be the only cure.

Next was Marcus Flint, who had this year ascended to the spot of Slytherin Quidditch Captain. The young man had suffered severe burns when his wand had snapped and ignited. Burns were always difficult to deal with, even for magical healing, but magically induced burns were especially problematic. The damage to his skin was relatively easy to repair, though there would be extensive scarring. It was the deep tissue burns that were upsetting the healers. Re-growing the melted and charred muscles, ligaments and tendons was possible, but would be both time consuming and less than perfect. While he would certainly be able to walk and retain most of his freedom of movement, Marcus' Quidditch days were over.

Last and most serious of the three was fifth-year Ravenclaw prefect, Penelope Clearwater. At some point during the incident she had either fallen or been knocked to the ground. As a result, she had been trampled underfoot by dozens of panicked and fleeing students. Matters were only compounded when part of the collapsed platform roof fell on top of her.

According to the healer's report, ignoring the nineteen fractured bones, her back had been broken in four places. Her spine was still intact, mercifully, but there was likely some degree of nerve damage. Add to that a ruptured spleen, a punctured lung and a cracked skull; it was a minor miracle that she had survived long enough to be helped. The healers were cautiously optimistic about her condition. She would almost certainly live, but would likely need to spend many months undergoing treatment. Her parents had already cancelled her fifth-year at Hogwarts. She would return next year, once fully healed.

To sum things up; not the most admirable start to the new school year.

The true tragedy of the event, however, was undoubtedly the death of Draco. If it had been a Muggleborn or even a half-blood, then no great fuss would have arisen. But to lose the sole heir and scion of a pureblood family? A rich and influential family like the Malfoys? Disastrous!

In a way, Dumbledore had been slightly relieved when he learned, early this morning, that Lucius Malfoy had mis-Apparated so badly that, not only had he splinched himself to death, but there had not even been much of a body left to identify. Having almost literally exploded midway between Hogwarts and Malfoy Manor, it had only been through examination of the residual magical signature that the Ministry could confirm to whom the scattered red goo belonged.

To have accomplished such a messy end with only a single glass of brandy in him was quite impressive. No doubt his mental state at the time, having just learned of his son's death, only served to disrupt things even more.

Of course, Cornelius had immediately begun jumping at shadows, suspecting hidden plots and foul play from just about everyone. It had taken Dumbledore over an hour to calm the man down enough to see some small amount of sense. As with Draco, the circumstances surrounding Lucius' death were nothing more than a horrible accident. It would have been next to impossible for anyone to deliberately cause just a thing to happen. Besides which, the only people to speak to him before he left the school were Professor Flitwick and two first-years; one a Muggleborn witch and the other the Boy-Who-Lived, both of whom had known of magic's existence for only a couple of months.

What also bothered Dumbledore was that, without Draco, he now needed another young Slytherin to use as a foil for Harry Potter. Unfortunately there were not a great many options to choose from. Crabbe and Goyle were out, lacking the natural vindictiveness of their former employer. Zabini would more than likely remain neutral, as always. Nott was a possibility, as was Parkinson, but the headmaster would prefer a wizard in that role.

Resisting the urge to massage his throbbing temples, Dumbledore observed his staff as unobtrusively as possible. They were all, to the last, looking a little haggard. Understandable, as they had all been awake and on watch throughout the entire night.

They were sitting at the staff table in the Great Hall, absently watching as the assembled second- through seventh-year students sat at the house tables, waiting for the first-years to arrive. The normal excited chatter and talk was conspicuously subdued, if not entirely absent. So much for the hope of easily endearing the school and its students to an impressionable young hero.

In any case, it was time to begin the Sorting. Dumbledore rose from his chair and clapped his hands to gain the students' attention.

-oOo-

Harry and Amanda, along with the rest of the first-years, dutifully followed Professor McGonagall into the Great Hall. It was a room designed and built to awe and inspire, yet this evening it evoked very little of either from the arriving first-years. Though to be fair, most of them were still a little dazed and shocked by what had happened the night before. Such trauma could not be erased by a single day of rest, especially when that rest was being interrupted every hour by concerned adults asking how the students were feeling.

Harry and Amanda, on the other hand, were feeling fine.

They quickly found a spot near the front and settled down to wait. While they stood close together, shoulders just touching, their future classmates were keeping a good distance between themselves. Clearly they all remembered the crushing press of the stampede they had been caught in.

Seeing that the first-years were not going to group themselves in a tidy bunch, Professor McGonagall decided against waiting for them to settle. It would take too long. Clearing her throat, to catch their attention, she held up the roll of parchment listing all of the incoming students by name.

"Please come forward when I call your name," she said, before beginning.

"Abbot, Hannah."

Harry and Amanda watched closely as their fellow first-years were Sorted, taking careful note of each name and face. They were also interested in identifying those who had played a part in the setup for Draco's demise.

Hannah and Susan were both despatched to Hufflepuff, as were a number of other students. Terry Boot was the first Ravenclaw and Millicent Bulstrode the first Slytherin, followed by Draco's former bodyguard, Vincent Crabbe. The Gryffindor table was looking worried until finally Seamus Finnegan was sent to join their ranks. Still, the Irish boy's welcome was muted, as were all the others.

Hermione Granger, the bushy-haired girl whose stumbling had unleashed the spider, was Sorted into Ravenclaw after a relatively long wait. By contrast, Neville Longbottom, the podgy boy who had been struck by Ron Weasley's litter, was sent to Hufflepuff almost before the Sorting Hat touched his head.

There was a noticeable pause when Professor McGonagall reached the Ms. The first name in that portion of the list would, obviously, have been Draco Malfoy. Clearly the records had yet to be updated to account for his passing. The deputy-headmistress moved on to the next name with only a faint hitch in her voice to betray her feelings on the matter.

"Maxwell, Amanda."

Harry exchanged a brief look with the girl in question. As she stepped up to where the professor was waiting, she briefly brushed her hand against his own. A small gesture, but with many different meanings layered into it. Goodbye for now. Don't worry. I'll be fine. See you later.

Reaching the sorting stool, Amanda sat down in an example of perfect posture. She regarded the professor for a short moment before nodding and then turned to look towards Harry. She met his gaze with her own and proceeded to ignore everything else.

Professor McGonagall was surprised. The way Amanda held herself was unusual, but not something the old witch had not encountered before. Being formally granted permission to be Sorted, however, was a first. Putting this odd behaviour from her mind, she raised the Sorting Hat over the young girl's head and lowered it into place.

Amanda sat in darkness for a moment before an incredibly surprised voice spoke up.

"Merlin's bleeding blue balls!"

"Tut tut, Mr. Hat," thought Amanda in reply as her lips quirked. *"Such language is hardly appropriate for virgin ears."*

"Hah!" exclaimed the Hat. *"Virgin my non-existent arse! It's been a couple of centuries since I've Sorted a child as educated in the ways of the flesh as you. And so willingly educated as well!"*

"Be ready for another," replied Amanda, thinking of the boy with whom she had been exploring the pleasures of sex for the past year.

"Ah, yes, Mr. Potter," mused the Hat. *"I have already seen him in your memories. The boy whom many would consider a saviour, yet he shares in your terrible power."*

"Power?"

"The mastery of death in all of its forms."

Amanda actually chuckled out loud, surprising those close enough to hear. *"I'll bet that's something you've never seen before,"* she continued silently.

The Hat shifted as if in agreement and said, *"Indeed not. I had never believed such a thing was possible, not even for a person wielding all three Hallows."*

A gust of furiously cold air burst into the Great Hall, slamming the doors open and leaving many startled and exclaiming students in its wake. It passed round those first-years remaining to be Sorted, briefly brushing against Harry as it did, before swirling round the seated Amanda. There was enough force behind its motion that it nearly pulled the Sorting Hat from her head. Then, stillness fell upon the room, the wind vanishing as suddenly as it had appeared.

"What was that?" asked the Hat in a hushed tone.

"It seems someone's interest was piqued by what you said," Amanda answered, her amusement plain in the tone of her thoughts.

Immediately in front and above where Amanda was sitting one of the hall's floating candles was abruptly snuffed out. It fell from the air to clatter softly against the stone floor. It began to roll away, down a slight slope, before being stopped by Harry's shoed foot.

While the rest of the people present had no idea what to make of this, Amanda did. *"I'd take that as a 'yes,'"* she announced to the Hat. *"Perhaps you should explain what you meant when speaking of these... hallows."*

The Sorting Hat stammered and sputtered for a minute before a deep growl of irritated impatience echoed through the Great Hall. The students stirred nervously, looking about in fear of the sound's source. Realizing that the girl's hidden companion was expecting an answer, the Hat blurted out all it knew.

"Dumbledore has two - the wand and the cloak. Well, actually the cloak is Potter's; it belonged to his father, James, you see, but the headmaster has it in his office."

A second chill wind blew through the Great Hall, punctuated by the doors slamming shut with enough force to rattle every window in the castle. Several of the more impressionable students screamed in fright and a couple, both Gryffindors oddly enough, actually fainted from fear. The harsh howl of the wind was perfectly clear to Amanda and Harry, if no-one else. The young witch dutifully translated for the shivering Sorting Hat.

"And what of the ring?" she asked.

"I don't know," the Hat frantically confessed, *"but Dumbledore probably knows where it can be found."*

"Really?"

A contemplative silence fell, almost as unsettling as the earlier furore. By this point Amanda had been, by far the longest of all the Sortings, something that was making both the students and staff mutter curiously. Harry, from his vantage point amongst the unsorted firsties, took note of how intently the headmaster, Dumbledore, was watching the proceedings. He was closely followed in intensity by a greasy-haired man with a hooked nose and a rather plain looking man wearing a turban.

This last caught the famed Boy-Who-Lived's attention when a trail of smoke from the fallen candle by his shoe wafted past his ear, whispering softly as it did. So, this was the man that had caused so much of the strife that had followed Harry during his early childhood. Well, maybe not the man, so much as the essence that *possessed* the man, but at this point the two were so intermingled that it was difficult to tell where the one ended and the other began.

"Well, that's enough of that," concluded Amanda after a bit. *"I think it's time I was Sorted."*

"Yes, yes, we've certainly kept them waiting long enough," muttered the Hat, eager for the change in conversation. *"After all this, Sorting you will be an easy thing... so I'll be sending you to SLYTHERIN!"*

Acute silence greeted Amanda as she removed the Hat from her head. Everyone made a point of ignoring the Sorting Hat's soft sigh of relief once it was clear. The blonde witch, whom most of those present had already unconsciously labelled as "scary", rose from the wooden stool and handed the Hat to a worried Professor McGonagall. She gave another polite nod and then turned to stride across the hall and seat herself at the Slytherin table. Even her new housemates were unsure how to greet her arrival.

It took the deputy-headmistress several moments to gather her wits and resume calling out names. Theodore Nott was promptly, and reluctantly, Sorted into Slytherin. The boy made a point of taking a seat as far from Amanda as was possible. Pansy Parkinson, her cheeks still stained with tear tracks, followed almost exactly in his footsteps. The Patil twins, Padma and Parvati, were Sorted into Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff respectively. Then, before anyone realized it, the most anticipated name on the list was announced.

"Potter, Harry."

Another silence descended over the Great Hall, albeit much less tense than the one which had followed Amanda's Sorting. All eyes turned to him as Harry finally moved from where he had been standing as still as a statue. No thoughts were given to comment, gossip or speculation. By this point most of the spectators were more interested in finally getting started with their dinners.

Still, Harry noticed the headmaster's calculating and expectant gaze. He forced himself not to smirk.

Making himself comfortable on the stool, Harry offered Professor McGonagall a pleasant, if politely distant smile. He then nodded, just as Amanda had done, giving her leave to put the Sorting Hat into position. The last thing he saw before the Hat's brim eclipsed his vision was the old witch's startled expression.

There was a moment of silence, then a little voice whispered in the back of his mind.

"Ah, the second half of the pair."

"You're in rather good spirits for someone that had a close encounter with Amanda not so long ago," observed Harry, slightly impressed by the Sorting Hat's resilience.

"Hah, it is not your lover that frightens me, Potter," announced the Hat bravely. *"Rather, it is her and your... acquaintance... that scares the metaphorical crap out of me."*

"I suppose I can understand that reaction."

"Hmm, now, let us take a look through your head and see where we shall be putting you."

"You honestly need to do that?" asked Harry sceptically.

"No, not really. I sawall I needed to see from Ms. Maxwell's thoughts and memories of you," the Hat admitted candidly. *"But, despite that, I do have a job to do and that entails rooting about in your mind to see which house would best suit you."*

Harry considered this and then asked the obvious question, *"You knowabout Malfoy, then?"*

"Both of them," confirmed the Hat. *"And all the others that came before them."*

"And?"

*"And nothing, Harry Potter. I was created to **Sort** students, not **judge** them,"* declared the Hat firmly. It paused and then added, *"But I will admit that your actions have had, and will have, long reaching effects. Many of your classmates have found themselves in houses different from what they would have originally been destined for."*

"Did you tell them that?" asked Harry.

"No, I have not. Nor shall I do so."

Harry nodded in satisfaction. His and Amanda's greatest secret was secure. Everything else they could deal with on their own. With a little help, of course, from their ever eager companion. Death, after all, had a way of solving a great many problems with impressive finality.

"Well then, there's only one place where you'll fit in, best you be a... SLYTHERIN!"

-oOo-

Severus Snape tried not to look at Potter. It was damnably difficult not to. Almost everyone in the Great Hall, student and staff alike, were continuing to shoot looks at the boy who was sitting at the end of the Slytherin table and quietly eating his dinner.

A Potter in Slytherin.

If that wasn't a sign of the coming apocalypse, then nothing was.

Even if it was not, then it certainly was the proverbial monkey wrench (whatever that was) in the works for a great many people. Not least of all the headmaster. Snape cast a bemused peek at Dumbledore, who was doing a masterful job of hiding his feelings and happily tucking in to his meal. But Snape could see through the deception. He knew the old wizard better than anyone else alive. He could see just how off-balance and worried Dumbledore was. Of course, it was hardly unexpected that the man be thrown for a loop.

Everyone had been.

The idea that Potter could be a Slytherin was so completely alien that nobody had even imagined the possibility of it. It had never even entered their minds to consider. Yet that was exactly what had happened. The clamour that exploded once the Sorting Hat's announcement had sunk in was loud and furious enough to make up for the lukewarm reactions to the earlier Sortings.

No doubt the morning edition of the *Daily Prophet* would make a great fuss over it all.

Snape glanced at Potter. No doubt the boy would lap it all up like a true glory hound. Although, he and his companion were very relaxed in how they ignored the scrutiny being directed at them. You would almost think they were dining alone, given how little they interacted with the other Slytherins.

Returning to his meal, Snape hid a tired sigh. It was going to be a trial, having to deal with the brat in the capacity as his head of house, instead of just one more of his professors. The only bright spot in the whole mess was that the boy's father, and his damnable friends, would have been utterly horrified. Lily would have spoken about school unity, equality, unfounded stereotypes and a host of other things that most of her audience would have ignored, supporting her son even as she hid her own disappointment.

The potions master grumbled under his breath, cursing Potter for needlessly complicating matters.

If he found even a hint that the boy had done this deliberately...

Despite the budding scandal of Potter's Sorting, dinner proceeded quickly and without incident. Once everyone had eaten their fill, the gluttonous Ron Weasley begin the last, Dumbledore delivered the start-of-term announcements. Snape was slightly disappointed when the headmaster remembered not to mention the horrible and painful death that awaited anyone foolish enough to investigate the third-floor corridor. It had been thought that such a statement would only serve to remind the children of the previous evening's excitement. A pity, as he had been secretly hoping that the old wizard would slip up and maybe cause some Hufflepuffs to wet themselves in distress.

Thinking of the badger's house, Snape ran an appraising eye over that table. Over half of this year's firsties had been welcomed into Hufflepuff. By contrast, it was certainly the smallest group that Gryffindor had received in centuries; only three new students. The remainder had been split almost evenly between Ravenclaw and Slytherin. That was odd, as the Hat usually managed to divide them up in roughly equal numbers. He supposed that it likely had something to do with the events surrounding Draco's death.

Unbidden, Snape's eyes returned to Potter and Maxwell. Of all the students, in all years, those two seemed the least affected by the trauma of it. Watching them listen with polite disinterest to the headmaster's speech, Snape could easily believe that they did not care, one way or the other, about what had happened to Draco and his father. It was unnatural for children that age to be so detached, especially given the fact, as told by Professor Flitwick, that they had apparently befriended Draco during the train ride.

Both would bear watching; the girl nearly as much as Potter, if the events surrounding her Sorting were any indication.

Snape waited as the students filed out of the Great Hall, the prefects leading the first-years. He wondered if Dumbledore would have the heads of the houses meet in his office. The plan had been for them to retire early and catch up on the sleep they had missed the previous night. Then again, the plan had called for Harry Potter to be sorted into Gryffindor. A meeting to discuss this development seemed very likely.

He was pleasantly surprised when the old man bade them all goodnight and departed with a thoughtful expression on his wizened face.

Briefly considering the option of just going to bed, Snape rejected that in favour of following the stragglers of his house down into the dungeons. Reaching the hidden entrance to the common room he gave the pass phrase, "Strength through purity," and stepped inside. He wondered what Potter and his ever-present tagalong, Maxwell, had made of the short phrase.

All motion in the Slytherin common room ceased as the milling students noticed his arrival. Spying the two he had come for, by one of the prefects, with the rest of their year-mates, the head of house made a point of walking towards them in a smooth, almost gliding motion. Appearances were important, after all, especially here, in the Snake Pit.

"Potter! Maxwell!" he snapped upon reaching where they were standing.

The pair did not quail as he loomed over them. Even as the nearby students discretely moved, to a less perilous distance, the boy and girl stood firm.

"Yes, Professor?" they asked politely in an odd chorus.

He narrowed his eyes and glared at them, half suspecting that they had planned to greet him that way. He would never admit it, but he was grudgingly impressed by how calmly they met his gaze. There was no sense at all that they found it intimidating. In fact, the girl seemed vaguely amused that he would even try.

"You are Slytherins now," he said, stating the obvious to them, as if they were too stupid to realize it on their own. He folded his arms by the small of his back and continued, "While a certain degree of arrogance is expected from you, such displays as what happened during your Sorting will not be tolerated. You are the face of pureblood society and must thus be sure to show only the appropriate amount dignity and grace to the rest of the rabble. Deliberately snubbing a professor again in such a manner will earn you a great many detentions. Am I understood?"

"Yes sir," nodded Potter.

"Crystal," agreed Maxwell with a curt nod.

Snape considered them both for a long moment. Their words were nothing but lip service, he could tell. Whatever their true feelings on the matter, they hid them with consummate skill. He was almost tempted to use Legilimency on them, but knew that it was too soon to try. Deciding to deal with Potter last, he rounded on the blonde witch.

"Maxwell, you're a *Muggleborn*, aren't you?" he demanded to know.

"I am," she confirmed calmly.

"You'd be the first in over two centuries," observed Snape meaningfully. "Even half-bloods, like your boyfriend, are rarely Sorted into Slytherin."

"I suppose the Hat felt my cunning was more important than my blood," Maxwell countered smoothly. The slight rebuke in her words was not missed.

Snape had to admit that the girl had potential to be an admirable Slytherin, despite her lack of a proper heritage. That could be remedied by marrying into the right family. If it weren't for her obvious and unfortunately association with Potter, he might have considered taking her under his wing. As it currently stood, however, she would have to learn and survive on her own. Maybe a few months with only Potter as her support would convince her to cut him loose.

"I suggest you visit the library as soon as you can and begin familiarizing yourself with all the many, many things you need to know," he told her smoothly.

"I'll do that," she acknowledged.

Leaving it at that, for now, he then rounded on Potter. He was going to beat, figuratively, every last ounce of attitude out of the boy. It was petty and vindictive, yes, but his hatred of James Potter was enough to overwhelm anything else. So long as the boy did not die, Snape did not care what it would do to him. Nor would Dumbledore.

"As for you, Potter..." he deliberately trailed off ominously.

"Yes sir?"

"You will find that your fame as a celebrity will not help you here," Snape declared with authority, pitching his voice to carry to all corners of the common room. A message to all those listening that there would be no reprisals should anything untoward happen to the Boy-Who-Lived.

To his surprise, Potter seemed to detect and understand the subtle message as well. He eyes narrowed as his face cleared of all expression, save a minuscule furrow just above the bridge of his spectacles. He took a moment to adjust his glasses, causing the lenses to flash as they caught the light just right. There was something about the look in his eyes that made the professor experience a faint disquiet. That penetrating emerald gaze seemed to bore through Snape's defences as if they were not there, observing and knowing every thought revealed to them. Nothing at all like Lily.

"I understand," he said softly, his voice somehow projecting almost as well as Snape's. A hint of something twitched in his lips as he added, "Rest assured that I am fully capable of making my way through life *and death* on purely my own merits."

Snape had the disconcerted feeling that he had just received a warning of some sort.

Or a threat.

"Then you'd best be prepared for class tomorrow, Potter," Snape threatened, leaning over the boy. "I will not have one of my Slytherins be anything less than a perfectly professional potion brewer."

"Of course," Potter readily agreed. "Improper preparation of a potion could *kill* you."

The boy's words were punctuated by the sharp crackle of a log popping in the main fireplace. A strangely source-less draft blew by, sending a spray of fiery sparks into the air as the flames briefly flared higher than normal. The extra light provided resulted in deeper shadows being cast about for a moment, something which gave both Potter and Maxwell's expressions a sinister tinge. It only lasted a second.

Somewhat unsure as to whether or not he had come out ahead in the exchange; Snape left the Slytherin common room in favour of his private quarters. Once secure behind the sealed door, well away from any chance of being seen, he let out a heavy sigh of near exhaustion. Like most of his co-workers, he had not slept the previous night. Add to that the death of the boy he had been hoping to mentor, and the subsequent demise of

Lucius, and it was hardly a surprise that he felt dead on his feet.

Crossing the room, he pulled off his robe and tossed it over the back of his favourite lounge chair. He considered kicking off his shoes, but decided against it. It would be too much of an effort. He stopped by the bookcase reserved for those books dedicated to light reading and relaxation. Stooping down, he opened the accompanying cabinet drawer and withdrew a bottle of firewhiskey. Purely for medicinal purposes, it was still three-quarters full.

Fumbling around for the shotglass he knew was there, he muttered imprecations about Potter, both alive and dead, as well as several choice potions he would like to make the brat consume. Despite his foul mood, he knew better than to overindulge and thus poured out only a single finger of the shimmering liquor. Sealing the bottle and returning it to its place, he moved to the chair closest to the fireplace and all but fell into it.

"Bloody Potter," he grumbled, sipping from his glass.

Though his mind rebelled against it, the memories of his experiences with James Potter bubbled up from the dark hole in which he had thrown them. The other man's face, almost always bearing that smug grin, seemed to taunt him. The resemblance between father and son was truly remarkable. No doubt that was what had prompted his subconscious to stir up this ghost of the past.

Still, at least the boy had Lily's eyes, however void of honest emotion they might have been.

There was something dark in those eyes, like what he had seen that time when Black had sent him chasing after Lupin...

That actually made it easier to put the boy down. What little of Lily was in him had been overwhelmed and buried beneath an insufferable sense of superiority, not unlike some of the older pureblood families. Bursting Potter's bubble and forcibly dragging him back down to earth would be a satisfying experience. Still, having to interact with the boy on a regular basis would no doubt bring on some terrible headaches. Finishing his drink in a gulp, he cursed at the realization that this was exactly what was happening.

Checking his private stores, he cursed under his breath. He was out of stock and out of luck. Still, it was hardly that great a hardship. A headache potion was one of the simpler brews to be made. Even an only halfway competent first-year could manage it. For a potions master of Snape's talent, it would take less than five minutes to produce something far superior to the more common versions that Madam Pomfrey kept on hand.

Closing the cabinet, the professor crossed to the door leading to the small workroom where he brewed all his personal potions. Right now, having to deal with Potter in his house for the next seven years, he had a feeling that he would be needing a great many headache potions. He'd better get started.

-oOo-

Harry and Amanda were sitting side by side on a couch in the Slytherin common room. Only a few other students were still present, the rest having retired to their dormitories for the night.

Eyes not leaving the crackling fire before them, Harry asked, "Think it's done yet?"

"No, not yet," Amanda shook her head, "but soon."

"Then what shall we do until we receive confirmation, I wonder," asked Harry suggestively, trailing a hand along her thigh.

Amanda smiled and placed her hand over his, stilling his motion. A soft pressure prompted him to turn his hand over, allowing them to entwine their fingers.

"So, all boys *do* only think about sex," she gently teased.

Harry laughed softly, careful not to draw any attention from the few students that had not yet gone to bed. "Hello Pot," he rejoined, "My name's Kettle."

"Ass."

"I know I'm very fond of yours."

"Very fond of tapping it, you mean."

"True," Harry agreed, not denying it. "And so are you, as I recall."

Amanda gave a small humph of bemused agreement. She leaned to the side, pressing her body against his as she rested her head on his shoulder. "We really shouldn't talk about stuff like that here," she cautioned. "People will think we're perverted deviants if they found out."

Harry snorted at the thought. After a quick glance to confirm their privacy, he asked in a whisper, "And what would they think if they knew we were responsible for two, soon to be three deaths at this school?"

"I'm sure they'd try to burn us at the stake," answered Amanda, not the least bit concerned.

"Rather hypocritical of them," mused Harry, reaching up to trace the line of her jaw.

"What do you want to do about What's-His-Name?" Amanda asked suddenly.

"Well," Harry scratched his chin thoughtfully, "I suppose that Professor Quirrell is going to join Snape as a *late* professor."

"We can't really kill him, you know," Amanda reminded him. "Not while his soul is anchored down like it is. All we'd accomplish is to kill his host."

"Unfortunately," agreed Harry, "But we've already got rid of the one in me and have a general idea where the others are."

"Then why tip our hand?"

"He's here for a reason."

"The soul fragment he left the school?"

"Maybe. Best we prevent him from accomplishing whatever it is he's interest in."

Amanda considered the logic of this approach and gave a nod. "Can't argue with that," she said. "And what about Dumbledore? He could become a problem, especially if he finds the third talisman."

Harry let his head fall back and stared up at the ceiling. He found he usually thought better when presented with a large, flat and distraction-free surface. "Well, we certainly can't arrange for him to have an *accident* like we normally would," he finally said. "He has two of the three items that can potentially give their user nearly as much control over death as we already have. It would be too risky to try anything, since he might somehow survive it."

"That complicates matters," muttered Amanda. She then posed an interesting question, one she had been pondering since learning of the 'Deathly Hallows' during her Sorting. "The Hat said that one of them, the cloak, originally belonged to your dad. Maybe we can take it away from Dumbledore using that as an excuse."

"Doable, I suppose, but not something we can rush," Harry decided after mulling it over.

"That would make him vulnerable," Amanda pressed. "With only the wand to protect himself..."

Her words were left hanging as a soft tremor shook the castle, accompanied by a barely audible rumble, like that of distant thunder. Only someone skilled at reading the signs would have even noticed such a tiny disturbance. It was followed up by a small smattering of dust that was loosed from the stones comprising the common room ceiling.

"So, he's dead then?" asked Harry quietly.

The fireplace flickered, almost snuffing out completely, before resurging.

Both children grinned in satisfaction and said, "Perfect."

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RIP.
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Author's Note: A little something that popped into my head while watching a re-run of Final Destination. A somewhat more sinister examination of what would occur should Harry and Mandy find themselves in command of Death Incarnate.

In this case Grim does not have an actual physical form. No black robed skeleton. No scythe and hourglass. Just subtle, almost unnoticeable signs that speak to those few with the ability to understand them. After all, Death is far too vast and all encompassing to have any use for such a limited thing as a body.

As for the children; they are much more "mature" than what is seen in *Something Grim This Way Comes*. Mandy insists on being called by her full name, Amanda, rather than the diminutive. Both are much more... well, not really angst-ridden, but not exactly examples of happy smiles and good cheer. This new maturity is also reflected in their physical relationship.

If you need an explanation for it, well, consider it to be some sort of reaffirmation of life in the face of death. That's my story and I'm sticking to it.

And don't go saying it's unrealistic for ten/eleven year olds to have sex. My mother (the poor woman) is a form-seven teacher and has regularly managed to catch her twelve/thirteen year olds having quickies during the lunch break. I usually get all the gruesome details when I drop in for dinner. Starting a year or so earlier than that seems not beyond the realms of possibility.