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Psychomachia

Chapter 1 — Child's Play

The grin was still plastered all over Harry Potter's face as he wriggled back through the window of the train compartment he had gatecrashed. He had just solved a prophecy that tormented his guardian and his godmother for ten long years and he was feeling on top of the world.

"Here you go, Ha-Harry," said a plump girl with curly brown hair and a rather regrettable case of acne. Gingerly, she held out Frank's saggy basket.

A sixteenth birthday gift from Hagrid, Frank was Harry's pet Diamond Python, a long and rather insouciant singing python who (in Harry's opinion) took a great deal too much pleasure in startling the unwary and sticking his wedge-shaped nose in Harry's love life. Harry gave the pimply girl his biggest smile.

"Thanks very much, Eloise," he said happily. The girl's mouth fell open; she seemed stunned he knew her name. "Cheers," he added, nodding to the group at large. He collected Hedwig from a young boy (who, unfortunately, looked to be the spitting image of his big sister) and was at the door when the boy gamely piped up.

"What was all that about, sir?"

Elizabeth and Remus Lupin had last been seen (by the entire Hogwarts student body) in a flagrantly passionate embrace on platform nine and three-quarters back at Kings Cross Station.

Smiling, Harry said, "Oh, they were just *really* happy to get rid of me. And don't call me sir."

"Yes, sir. I mean no, sir. I mean ..." The little boy's voice trailed off in awe.

"What's your name?" asked Harry.

"Brutus, Brutus from Basingstoke."

Valiantly, Harry did not laugh; Frank was less gracious and snickered softly from inside his basket.

"First year?" Harry guessed, squishing his python firmly under his armpit. The boy nodded. His liquid brown eyes were full of fear and excitement. "Good luck in the Sorting. Piece of advice: don't be afraid to let the hat know what you want."

Harry's happily glittering green moodstone lasted well into the Midlands. After locating half the DA in a string of compartments three carriages along, he spent the journey to his sixth year at Hogwarts catching up with friends, eating too many pumpkin pasties, and playing a messy game of Gobstones on the floor of his compartment with Neville Longbottom and Justin Finch-Fletchley. Frank quickly abandoned Harry for Susan Bones (to whom the serpent had taken quite a shine over the summer) and spent the whole trip coiled languidly in her lap. He just lay there, dreamily hissing songs to her, while she read from a novel with one hand and idly stroked his long, silvery body with the other, her fingertips tracing his body all the way to the tip of his quivering tail.

"Ow!" Harry yelped, and Justin crowed in victory, having just delivered a generous spray of violet goo into Harry's ear.

"Nice one," Susan said, chuckling behind *The Lady and the Wraith*.

Throughout the trip, Harry's friends drifted in and out of the compartment, full of questions about the Lupins, but they did not find Harry very forthcoming. In the manner of teenage boys from all around the world, Harry merely shrugged and said, "Yeah, they're back together now."

Unsurprisingly, the girls (in company with Ravenclaw's worst gossip, Terry Boot) found this singularly unsatisfying, but Harry couldn't tell them the true story; he promised his guardian, and his guardian's trust meant more to him than impressing his friends with a bit of juicy gossip. He was just determinedly smashing another of Justin's golden Gobstones out of the game when Ron, Hermione, and the rest of the DA prefects arrived. Ron extracted Harry for a quiet word.

"You haven't told her about the island, have you?" he whispered worriedly.

"Who?"

"Hermione."

Harry blinked. "Haven't really had a chance to —"

"Don't," cut in Ron. His ears were very red.

The existence of Black Island was a tightly held secret, even from the Order of the Phoenix, but Harry suspected it wasn't Death Eaters that were troubling Ron's ears. He dragged his mate to the end of the carriage and crossed his arms, waiting. Ron busied himself toying with the apparently fascinating vacant-sign on the toilet door.

"She doesn't know, does she?" Harry said shrewdly. "About Natalie."

Ron shrugged eloquently.

“Ginny’s never —” started Harry.

“Ginny doesn’t know about the island or Natalie or anything,” Ron countered. “She just thinks we were at your house. Didn’t want her tagging along.”

Harry chewed at his lip; it occurred to him that Hermione *not* finding out about his Black Island house-elves, Lovey and Dovey, would save a lot of melodrama. In any case, he doubted Ron’s summer romance with Elizabeth’s Canadian niece would last much longer, not with them living on opposite sides of the pond.

“I won’t bring it up,” he said finally. “But just don’t get me stuck in the middle of anything.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Ron agreed with relief. “Not a problem. Hey, did you hear about Cho?”

“What?”

“She got Head Girl.”

“Yeah? Cool.”

“Not bad having a girlfriend who’s Head Girl,” Ron noted. “Gotta be worth a few perks.”

Harry was just about to tell Ron that he and Cho had broken up (hopefully for the last time) when he sensed someone coming up from behind.

“Are you protecting the toilet from the Japanese Toilet God?” prompted a familiar dreamy voice. “Hanako-san died in a school bathroom, you know. He can really scare the you-know-what out of you.”

Ron and Harry snorted delighted laughs. Who else but Luna Lovegood would know about Toilet Gods?

“You can laugh,” she warned them knowingly, “but you don’t want to say his name three times in a row when you’re sitting on the loo; that’d flush him out for sure.”

“Good holiday, Luna?” Harry asked over Ron’s helpless giggling.

“Oh yes, we had a wonderful time!” declared Luna, looking surprised and very pleased that Harry would ask. “I’m so glad you survived another summer. We didn’t find out you were in hospital until yesterday or I would have sent you some pomegranates. Don’t worry, though,” she assured him very seriously, “my father’s going to write a special editorial demanding a Ministry task force hunt down the herd of Heliopaths that attacked you.”

Harry stared. Then he beamed at her and said, “That sounds absolutely *brilliant*, Luna.”

A surprise awaited the students at lantern-lit Hogsmeade Station; numerous Ministry security guards ushered them from the carriages. Hermione said they were Hogwarts’ new ‘Castle Guard’, assigned by the new Minister for Magic, Madam Amelia Bones, in response to the demands of fearful parents. Hermione said they were only supposed to guard the school gate and perimeters, not the castle itself.

“They’ve been lobbying for more responsibilities,” she panted as she tried to hold onto Crookshanks and two huge books for the journey up the drive, “oh, thanks,” she said as Ron relieved her of the ginger feline, “but Dumbledore refused. Politely,” she added as an afterthought as Ron helped her into a carriage with Dean and Ginny.

In Harry’s opinion, the guards looked bored and self-important; the only thing they had in common with Peacock Knights, an elite order of international peacekeepers who guarded Harry in hospital, was the colour of their ill-fitting robes. Having dismissed the Prefects, they were now trying to make Hagrid step aside and ‘let them do their job’. Hagrid accidentally-on-purpose gave one of them a sharp poke with his umbrella and bellowed at the first years to follow him. The guards raced to catch up. Then Hagrid spotted Harry and let loose a mighty howl of joy. He whipped out a paisley handkerchief the size of a small tablecloth and waved it madly, sending security guards and first years flying. Harry grinned and waved back and grabbed a seat in the next carriage with Neville and Susan (and Hedwig, Frank, and the ever-elusive Trevor). He was just getting comfortable when Justin leapt into the carriage with his caged barn owl.

“Made it!” he panted happily.

One of the Thestrals twisted its skeletal head around to eyeball them, making everyone flinch — except Justin, who was oblivious. Typical, thought Harry, feeling oddly satisfied. Once they got going, he tried to sort out a routine with Susan for his python. The one-pet rule meant Frank would be living with her during term.

“Didn’t you use to have a toad?” Neville asked Susan. Both Harry and Justin snorted laughs. Neville winced sympathetically. “Did he run away?”

“Ah, no,” Susan said wryly as she tied a card with her name onto Frank’s basket, “Gilderoy’s quite happy in the duck pond this year. Oh, look! There’s the castle — I love it when it’s all lit up.”

Harry twisted in his seat to see the castle far above them. Every year he relished the journey up the long drive, knowing that good friends, good food, and a warm bed awaited him. One way or another, he’d seen more of the dark underbelly of Hogwarts and its occupants than most, but it had

been his true friend for the last five years and she loved it still. On arrival, he tried to leave Frank with the other pets just inside the entrance hall, but Frank was not to be put off so easily, not with such delicious aromas wafting from the kitchens.

“Frank — please!” Harry pleaded in Parseltongue, pulling the snake from around his legs; he’d just spotted Professor McGonagall emerging from the Great Hall.

“You promised me a treat!” Frank reminded Harry; his forked tongue was quivering with excitement.

“I know, I know,” said Harry. “I’ll save you something really good — but please — please — just get back — back in your basket for me — come on, come on.” Frank slithered higher up Harry’s body. Things were getting desperate; McGonagall was coming straight towards them. Harry slyly hissed, “You know, there’s a good chance we’ll sing the school song.”

Frank dived for his basket.

“Mr Potter, a word?” called Professor McGonagall. Harry jumped guiltily. Sharp blue eyes narrowed behind square glasses as Frank’s tail disappeared down Harry’s legs — and did not miss the snowy owl at Harry’s feet. “Potter, I thought I made it clear you could only bring one pet —”

“He’s mine, Professor,” Susan cut in.

“Yours, Miss Bones?”

Susan scooped up the lid of Frank’s basket and pointed out her name. “Harry was just helping me with him. Him being a Parselmouth and all ... um ...”

Professor McGonagall didn’t look convinced, but the noisy melee of students distracted her. “Longbottom, would you kindly control that toad! Mr Malfoy, you’re holding up traffic! Move along, move along!”

Malfoy slumped away after exchanging a nasty smile with Harry.

“Right,” said McGonagall, turning back to Harry and his friends, “off you go. Not you, Potter. Follow me — quickly, now!”

She headed up the stairs and Harry trailed after her, trying to remember he hadn’t actually done anything wrong yet. Standing in the Deputy Headmistress’s office, he discovered that far from being chastised for some unknown indiscretion, he was to receive a most welcome surprise.

“... And I shall expect you to exert greater discipline and diligence this year, Potter,” said McGonagall. “As captain of the Gryffindor Quidditch Team you are a role model not only for your team but your entire house. Do not make me regret this appointment.”

“Yes, Professor.” Harry completely failed to hide a smile as he caressed the silver captain’s badge now pinned on his robes. He wondered if this day could possibly get any better. “I won’t let you down.”

“I’m counting on it,” said McGonagall.

Harry continued staring dopyly at his badge. He’d need to owl Remus — guardians needed to be kept up to date with this sort of thing.

“Potter? I said that’s all. Now, get along. I need to collect the first years for the Sorting. Apparently, our new Castle Guard saw fit to dismiss Hagrid. Goodness only knows where they’ve landed.”

Harry noticed the Sorting Hat limp on a stool by McGonagall’s desk.

“I can carry those for you,” he offered amiably.

McGonagall nodded and together they made their way back down to the Entrance Hall, by which time the elderly witch was panting for breath and leaning more heavily than ever on her walking cane. Harry was more than a little apprehensive about her making it all the way down the slippery path to the harbour beneath the castle.

“I can fetch the first years for you, Professor,” he offered magnanimously (though his generosity was at least partially related to knowing he wouldn’t be eating until the job was done — and McGonagall would likely take forever on her bung legs).

The offer surprised McGonagall and earned Harry a rare smile. “Thank you, Potter. I shall await you here.”

“They’ll be ages yet,” reasoned Harry. “I can bring them in for you.”

McGonagall hesitated a moment, as if Harry must surely have some ulterior motive for such an offer. Then her eyes fell on his new captain’s badge.

“Very well, Potter,” she decided briskly. “You will need to explain about the Sorting of students into houses, and the House Cup, and the system of merit and *demerit* points. I daresay you have more experience than most on that subject,” she said dryly. “And you must be fair and positive about all the houses — yes, Potter, all of the houses,” she added archly.

“Yes, Professor,” Harry agreed dutifully (but he privately remembered how valuable Ron’s warning about Slytherin had been all those years ago).

“And you must wait until everyone is seated before bringing them in,” finished McGonagall, peering out the huge oak doors towards a lengthy procession of carriages slowly snaking up the drive. Turning back to Harry, she eyed him up and down and said, “You might do to smarten yourself

up a bit. Straighten your hat. And do clean your ears. Right, off you go then.”

Professor McGonagall took the Sorting Hat and stool and disappeared with them into the already noisy Great Hall. Full of energy, Harry bounded down the castle steps, along a twisted rocky path, and down a tunnel that led to the harbour. At the top of the cavern, he inhaled chill, moist air. Far below on the pebble-strewn landing, children were already being manhandled out of their boats, three and four at a time, by a flustered-looking Hagrid. There were no guards in sight. Hagrid must have set a Hogwarts record for getting the boats across the lake. The kids certainly seemed more excited and windswept than usual — and quite a number of them had lost their hats.

Picking his way through stalactites and stalagmites, Harry amused himself noting how familiar the children looked: an excitable ‘Colin Creevey’ was jumping up and down and asking lots of questions; a black-skinned boy was giving Hagrid a hard time and acting like he owned the place; a few ‘Crabbes’ and ‘Goyle’s were pushing and shoving people around; a ‘Hannah Abbott’ with long blonde plaits, who looked far too small for her shabby robes, was tightly clutching the neck of what Harry hoped was not a real rabbit. A smile twisted Harry’s lips; there was even one boy scrambling after a croaking toad. Leaning casually against an ancient stone balustrade, Harry surveyed the noisy children. Torches flickered on either side of him and he knew the lighting would make a spooky play of firelight across his face. An evil ‘mwah ha ha ha ha!’ seemed in order, but he wouldn’t want to scare Hagrid.

“Good evening!” he called out, but no one heard him over the croaks and squeals of laughter. Disinclined to yell himself hoarse, he cast a Sonorus Charm on his throat. “Good evening!” he repeated loudly. The charm sent his voice echoing impressively throughout the cavern, making the children jump and Hagrid clutch a great ham fist to his heart.

“Oh, it’s yeh, Harry! Give a bloke a — yeh all righ’?”

“Never better, Hagrid.” Harry was pleased to find he didn’t need to raise his voice at all. It wasn’t that his voice was now incredibly loud, more that it echoed effortlessly to every corner of the cavern. He wondered why they didn’t do this in Quidditch practice; it was much easier than yelling. “Professor McGonagall sent me for the first years.”

Excited whispers erupted amongst the children as word spread as to just who was standing above them chatting with the giant man as if it were the most normal thing in the world.

“Yeh righ’ then?” Hagrid called hopefully. “Jus’, I got a couple o’ blighters ter fish outta the lake.”

“Students?”

“Guards. Don’ want ter be giv’n poor ol’ squid injestion. Come down fer a cuppa when yeh get a mo’,” he called over his shoulder, as he climbed back into one of the boats.

“Cheers, Hagrid.”

Dozens of smiling faces turned to Harry expectantly, which greatly relieved him. Last year, when he last tried to be nice to first years, he only succeeded in scaring them to death; this was all very much more to his liking.

“Welcome to Hogwarts. My name is Harry Potter. I’ll be taking you up to the welcome feast, which I know you’re going to love because our house-elves are *fantastic* cooks. But before we get to eat, we need to get you sorted into your houses. Professor McGonagall, she’s our Deputy Head, she sent me down here to fill you in on everything. Have to say she’s usually a lot smarter than that, but here goes. There are four houses at Hogwarts, one for each —”

“Are you the *real* Harry Potter?” blurted a boy excitedly.

“Yes, I’m the *real* Harry Potter. No sane person would want two of me.”

The children giggled happily.

“Bit of hush, thanks,” Harry said mildly. “Right, there are four houses at Hogwarts, one for — no, sorry, there’ll be plenty of time for questions later, I promise,” he said, for the children were doing excellent imitations of Hermione in Potions. “... Sorry? ... Well, I expect if you got your thumb out of Trixie’s ear ...” An appreciative croak sounded. “There you go. Right,” Harry said more firmly, determined to get all the way through his spiel, “there are four houses for the four founders of the school. When we go upstairs, each of you will be sorted into a house and you’ll stay with that house for the next seven years, so you’ll want to know a little bit about them.

“Now, Hufflepuff’s a great house for people who are hard working and fair minded. There have only been two Champions of Hogwarts in the last hundred years and one of them was a Hufflepuff. Excellent bloke. Hard to hate — believe me, I tried — smart, generous, despicably good looking.”

The little girls giggled; Harry grinned down at them.

“Gryffindor’s a good house for people who aren’t afraid to take chances; sometimes they pay off, sometimes they don’t, but life’s never dull for a Gryffindor. Excellent house for sports and parties. Not too shabby in the brains department either — best student in my year is a Gryffindor girl. Gryffindors will fight to the death for what they believe in, and you really don’t want to cross them. Just between you and me,” he confided, dropping his voice for effect, “they can get just a little bit testy.”

There were more giggles at this.

“Right, Slytherin ...” said Harry, forcing himself to honour his promise to Professor McGonagall to be fair and positive, “Slytherins are good at ... um ...” Harry racked his brains, “they’re clever, but they do tend to keep to themselves a bit. You know, sit back — take it all in. Um ... what else ...”

Harry idly wondered if there was a polite way of saying 'scheming, back-stabbing thieves, plunderers, and murderers', "... erm, they're good at making complicated plans."

"Ravenclaw: Ravenclaw attracts people who love learning new things. They've got quick minds, Ravenclaws, very good at analysing and remembering things. Our new Head Girl is a Ravenclaw and, if I may say, a rather *dishy* one at that."

There were yet more giggles. Harry shook his head ruefully. He knew it had been a huge mistake to hook up with Cho Chang again over the summer. Still, you live and learn. And getting to snog a pretty girl silly for a few weeks was hardly the worst thing that had ever happened to him.

"But Gryffindor's the best!" called out Brutus Midgen.

"Well, I certainly think so," said Harry. "Course, I may be a little biased. You'll have to judge that for yourself. Now, all of the houses have strong points, but I wouldn't say any of them are perfect. Gryffindors tend to shoot first, ask questions later. Ravenclaws analyse the thing to death, then shoot the messenger. Slytherins hide, then shoot when you're not looking. Hufflepuffs try not to shoot, but if they do, they'll be sure to make you a nice hot cup of tea afterwards."

Harry thought that pretty well covered it.

"I don't want to shoot anyone," fretted a curly-haired girl.

Harry stared. "Er, you don't have to shoot anyone if you don't want to. Right, any questions?"

A mass of hands shot up along with voices squealing, "Sir! Sir!"

"Easy — one at a time," pleaded Harry. "Excitable little things, aren't you," he observed dryly. He nodded to a boy who looked like he might just hyperventilate if he didn't get out what he wanted to say.

"Brutus said you can tell the Sorting Hat which house you want! I'm going to ask for Gryffindor, too!"

Many oohs sounded and Harry grew worried; that'd be all he needed: forty little rug-rats filling up his common room.

"You can certainly let the hat know what you want," he said carefully, "but it'll put you wherever it thinks you'll do your best — wherever you've got the best chance to play to your strengths."

"Sir! Sir!" cried the children. The questions came thick and fast, but none were about the Sorting process. A small, resigned sigh echoed around the limestone cavern.

"Yes, I have a scar. ... Why? Why do you think? ... Does the Killing Curse hurt? You mean apart from killing you?" Harry said dryly. "Yeah, it hurt. ... Who? Sorry, I'm not answering questions about Voldemort unless you can call him by his name." A large number of hands went down. Harry regarded the rest of the fluttering fingertips suspiciously. "Any questions about *Hogwarts*?" All but one hand went down. He nodded to a boy with thick black glasses. "... The teachers?" checked Harry. "Ah. Well, half of them have tried to kill me, but, you know, maybe that's just me."

The kids laughed, but Harry had only been half-joking.

"We're due a new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher again this year; I'm hoping for a vampire, myself. Mix it up a bit. Professor McGonagall takes Transfiguration; she's pretty strict, but she's fair. Then there's Potions — you take that in the dungeons. Have to say it's not too much fun unless you happen to be in Slytherin. Best way to get on the teacher's good side is to rubbish me, so be my guest. You'll like Charms, though; Professor Flitwick's cool. You get to make things float about." Harry grinned and wiggled his fingers. "Professor Flitwick, if you're lucky," he added and the children laughed. "What else do you do ... Oh! Flying! How could I forget Flying? Well wicked. Madam Hooch is —"

"People *really* fly?" squealed the bunny girl, earning sniggers from the other children at her ignorance.

Harry smiled down at the elfin-like little girl, standing there in threadbare robes, clutching an even more threadbare old bunny. Her pale blue eyes were wide with wonder and excitement; Harry got the feeling she hadn't had a lot of treats in her life.

"They do indeed! You're gonna love it!" he declared confidently. "Course, you do need a broomstick, but the school provides those."

A mass of quivering hands shot up again. Harry chuckled throatily at the next question.

"No, I do not have a Hungarian Horntail tattooed across my chest — who told you that? ... Yeah, well, your sister should stay out of the boys' showers. ... Sorry? You don't need to know that. ... Do I have a girlfriend? You don't need to know that either. ... Am I a what?" Bemused, Harry shook his head. "Sadly, no, I am not a dragon Animagus. ... Yes, I'm sure. ... Mmm, well, I expect I might have noticed by now if I had blazing red eyes and a tail. Be cool, though. Wouldn't mind setting fire to a few people."

A familiar snort sounded and Harry's smile broadened.

"You on the left — the redhead. You're not related to the Weasleys, are you? ... Ah. ... Prewett. Cool." Harry nodded approvingly to Molly Weasley's nephew. The boy definitely had the look of a Charlie Weasley about him. "Welcome. Some great Quidditch players in your family. Hope I see you at the Gryffindor table."

Young Hector Prewett positively glowed (and earned deeply envious looks from the other first years). Harry nodded affably to another question.

"... Ah, that one's true, actually. I am a Parselmouth. ... It means I can chat to snakes. ... What do they say?" Harry shook his head ruefully. "So,

so much. They're brilliant! Very unique point of view — very wise. And manners are important. Bit like Hippogriffs; they'll bite your head off if you're rude." Harry's smile stiffened at the next question. "... Saint Mungo's? Nothing much to tell. I'm all better now. ... You don't need to know that. ... Seriously, I'm fine. Right," he said firmly, "I think that's more than enough about me. ... Brutus, I promise, if I start growing horns and breathing fire, you'll be the first to know."

Before the first years could ask any more questions, Harry explained about the House Cup and the points system.

"Can *you* take points off people?" asked a black-skinned boy with long, slanting eyes; it was the smarmy git who'd been giving Hagrid a hard time.

"Only teachers and Prefects can deduct points."

"Aren't *you* a Prefect?"

"Me? Nah, I'm just an ordinary student."

"So you're *nobody*," snickered the boy disparagingly. "We don't have to listen to you at all!"

"That's very true," Harry agreed mildly. "I *am* nobody. You can ignore anything I tell you to do and you won't lose a single point. I can't guarantee you won't lose anything else, but your points are quite safe from me."

The boy either didn't understand the veiled threat or didn't care. He persisted in asking increasingly irritating questions, which Harry (who had coped with far worse in his life) swatted away like so many blowflies. There was one, though, that he took exception to.

"No, I am not gay," he said coolly. "What kind of question is that? Do you even know what that means?" Harry listened to an answer that included some very unlikely Magical Creatures. "That's *not* what it means!" he said testily.

"What is it then?" asked the boy curiously.

"Ask a teacher," Harry replied indifferently. Then a truly inspired idea occurred to him. He smiled beatifically at the rotten little snot, and said in his most blandly innocent voice, "I'd recommend Professor Snape. He's the youngest of the unmarried, male teachers. I'm sure he'd be ever so helpful in sorting you out."

Rounding out his lecture, Harry described how each house was like a family and how the students looked out for one another. The kids were growing restless now. Harry was just finishing when some nasty remarks floated up to his ears. The bunny girl looked close to tears.

"*Accio Smarmy Git!*" roared Harry.

The children screamed as the black-skinned boy went hurtling through the air and was caught by the scruff of the neck. Harry dangled the petrified child over the balustrade and growled low and menacingly with his Sonorus-Charmed voice, "*What* did you call that little girl?"

The boy shook his head fearfully beneath Harry's spookily lit face.

"Nothing — nothing — I —" he stammered.

"Funny," Harry said icily, not at all amused, "thought I heard you call her a Mudblood. Guess I must be hearing things. I would be *very* disappointed to hear that word coming out of the mouth of a fellow Hogwarts student. Do I make myself clear?"

The boy nodded as vigorously as he could manage with someone half-strangling him.

"Name?" Harry demanded coolly.

"Za-Zabini," panted the terrified boy. "Ne-Nero Zabini."

Harry's lips curled with distaste. No doubt, the little git was related to Blaise Zabini, one of Draco Malfoy's gang.

"I would strongly suggest," Harry said softly and dangerously, "that you do not test my hearing again. Or my eyes — you'd be surprised what they see."

Nero looked ready to wet himself by this stage and Harry dropped him with disgust to the ground below. The boy rolled away and scrambled across the pebbles like a crab to hide at the back of the group. Amongst the fidgeting, muttering children, there was clear indignation that the boy had been chastised. Now, more than ever, he could see how *exactly* they were like his own year: a handful of brats, a handful of hopefuls, and a bunch of fence-sitters. A kind of fire began to burn in his chest. Who was to say there wasn't another Bellatrix Lestrange lurking down there — another Tom Riddle — another Barty Crouch Junior? All sorted into Slytherin where they'd feed off each other's bigotries. Prudence told Harry it wasn't his place to get mixed up in what parents taught their kids. That it wasn't up to him to save every little kid who came to Hogwarts from being bullied. Harry never had much time for prudence.

"We are not all the same," he declared bluntly and all whispering ceased. "Some of you are going to be cleverer than others. Some will be braver or funnier or better at sports. Some of you are going to find it easier to cast spells or fly a broomstick. If your parents were really gifted, chances are you could be, too, but Muggle-born blood is not *weaker* than 'pure' blood and it is most definitely not *dirty* in *any* way whatsoever!" And here Harry cast a contemptuous look towards Nero Zabini. "Being pure-blooded means *nothing!* One of my best friends is Muggle-born and she's this *amazing*, *scathingly* brilliant witch — and my pure-blood best mate is completely clueless!"

The students shifted restlessly and there were isolated grumbles of dissent. Harry's jaw set stubbornly. Well, if they weren't going to listen to reason.

"As you wish," he said briskly. "First I need you to break into three groups: pure-bloods on the left; Muggle-borns on the right; half-bloods in the middle."

Pebbles crunched underfoot as the children obediently shuffled themselves around (though some were a little unsure at first where they belonged). Snickers started again as they checked out who was in each group.

"Draw your wands!" Harry commanded.

That got their attention. There was much commotion as nervous little hands fumbled for brand new wands, sending green, gold, and red wand-sparks shooting hither and thither. Silence fell — then thickened. Harry let them stew a little. Someone sniffed.

"Pure-bloods seem a little outnumbered, don't they," Harry observed coolly. The pure-bloods looked around nervously; they were certainly in the minority. "You just might want to think about that before opening your gobs and spouting rubbish about bloodlines. Then again you could just battle it out right here, right now. I won't stop you."

All of the children were looking alarmed now — and Nero Zabini was attracting looks of considerable loathing from the other pure-bloods for getting them into trouble (especially from the Prewett boy).

"That's not fair!" blurted a pure-blooded girl. "We didn't do anything wrong!"

"We don't even know any magic yet!" cried another.

"That's very true," Harry said fairly, as if giving the matter careful consideration. "Quite a dilemma, really. All of you can do magic, but none of you know any really nasty spells yet. Tricky. Course, there's plenty of rocks down there, plenty of fists; I imagine you could still put up a pretty good fight if you wanted to."

"But we don't want to fight!" declared a boy from the half-blood group, a sentiment quickly echoed around all three groups.

"*Oh*, you don't *want* to fight?" Harry repeated, feigning surprise. "I'm very glad to hear it. Professor McGonagall would've had me in detention till Christmas if I brought up forty slugs to be Sorted."

The children looked around at each other warily; nervous laughter started — then died out the longer Harry continued staring silently at them from his spooky pulpit. For Harry's part, he was growing quite frustrated. There was still a good deal of resentment and superiority scattered amongst the children. Clearly, 'subtle' was not going to cut it.

"Pure-bloods, raise your wands to the roof and repeat loudly after me — Lumos!"

The pure-bloods knew what the spell would do and immediately complied. "*LUMOS!*"

The effect was magnificent. Even though only a few of the students managed to make anything happen, the cavern was so darkly lit that even their feeble efforts made a remarkable difference. Excited gasps sounded as the students looked up to see the gleaming stalactites far above them.

"Half-bloods," declared Harry, "raise your wands. Lumos!"

Again, three or four students managed to light their wands, adding to the radiance of the pure-blood group.

"Muggle-borns!" called Harry. He breathed an inward sigh of relief when another few wands lit up. The successful Muggle-borns, the bunny girl among them, were ecstatic and all of the children gazed around in awe at the beautifully illuminated cavern.

"Doesn't look half so scary when it's all lit up, does it," Harry observed. "Now everyone repeat after me — Nox!"

"*NOX!*" cried the children as one.

As the cavern plunged into darkness, Harry withdrew into the shadows and surreptitiously sent a few Parseltongue hisses echoing eerily through the cavern. The children's excited tittering quelled instantly. The three blood-groups dissolved as they huddled together, clutching at their wands, their eyes darting nervously around the cavern. They didn't notice as Harry, still reciting his chicken-casserole recipe, crept down the last few steps to join them on the pebble-strewn landing area.

"Where you came from," he declared sternly in English, his voice setting little hearts hammering, "and who your parents are, means *nothing* when you're standing alone and defenceless in the dark, and the sooner you get that through your thick heads the better. And the best way to find yourself alone and defenceless is to piss off the people who *might* be inclined to help you!"

The children quailed and Harry stopped himself; he didn't need to scare them to death. He started pacing, kicking at the pebbles, trying to work out how to get through to them. Somehow, he just knew that if you could only get to kids early enough, then you could make them believe anything. Why couldn't it be something good for a change? He finally turned back to address them, scanning the frightened faces one by one. A small sigh escaped his lips and echoed around the cavern.

"Look, you can all do magic. All of you. *That's* what you have in common. You *all* belong here, and the only people you can *really* count on to

watch your back are standing right next to you. Not the Prefects, not the Prefects, not your families, *you*. Now don't get me wrong, you *should* be careful about choosing your friends but *never* because of their blood status. It's stupid and cruel and it *should* be beneath you."

Harry smiled inwardly as the children sneaked glances at each other. He may not have converted all of them, but it was a start.

"Wands away, you rotten little sods," he said, but he was smiling and the children giggled with relief and pocketed their wands. "You did pretty well with those spells," he conceded, causing the children's faces to light up. "Probably best we keep that to ourselves," he added delicately and the children laughed. "Come on, then, they should be just about ready for us by now; time to try on the old Sorting Hat."

The hair on the back of Harry's neck prickled. A girl was hiding in the shadows, clearly terrified of something. Harry hoped it wasn't him.

"You okay?" he asked kindly. The girl's heart-shaped face paled. "I promise I won't bite your head off. What's your name?"

The girl sniffed tragically. "Will — Willow Ma — Mallory. Do — do you really ha — have to wear a ha — ha — hat?"

Harry laughed before he could stop himself — of all things to be worried about.

"Sorry, sorry. Um, yeah, you'll each go up and put on the Sorting Hat, and it'll pick a house for you."

This news only further terrified the girl.

"It doesn't hurt or anything," Harry assured her.

Willow's dark eyes darted around nervously. With a trembling hand, she removed her pointed hat. The rest of the children gasped and laughed as a bounty of bright-blue hair spilled around her shoulders. Mortified, Willow's hair turned hot pink.

"Cool," said Harry appreciatively, but the girl didn't seem to think it was cool at all. "Er, are you a Metamorphmagus?" he guessed; she did seem to resemble Tonks.

Willow shook her head and glared resentfully towards a handsome, black-haired boy. The boy was the smaller of the two children, but he had the same pale, delicately chiselled face — and he was looking rather smug.

"And you are?"

"Marcus."

It did not escape Harry's notice that the boy could easily have been Sirius Black at eleven, but the pure-blooded gene pool was pretty shallow; by looks alone, he could just as easily be a Tom Riddle, or a black-haired Malfoy, or a Potter, or any number of pure-blood look-alikes. Still, there was something about him that was jogging a memory — then Harry remembered: the Weasley twins' joke shop. He hadn't got too good a look at the girl back then (she'd been crying and running down Diagon Alley holding her tongue at the time), but he recognised the boy by the self-satisfied smirk on his face.

"You her brother?" The boy shrugged, which Harry took for a yes. "Hand it over," he ordered in a bored voice. "Now, you little maggot, or I'll turn you into one."

Harry was bluffing, but Marcus Mallory didn't know that. Under the light of his wand, Harry silently read the label on a potion bottle; it was, indeed, one of Fred and George's joke-shop products: '*Hair-With-Flair — A rainbow in a bottle! Two drops to a more fabulous you!*'

Willow looked up at Harry hopefully, but Harry hadn't studied human transfiguration yet.

"Look," he said frankly, "I could take a shot at fixing it but, seriously, I'm really the *last* person you want messing with your hair."

Willow burst into tears, which Harry thought was deeply unfair.

"Hang on, there's no need to cry ... er ... I know this Auror who wears her hair like that. She does pig snouts and everything. No, no, I mean she's cool," Harry added quickly, for Willow was weeping even harder. "She does fall down a lot, but other than that ..."

Harry fumbled for a handkerchief, surprised when he actually found one in his robes; it even had his initials on it. Elizabeth must have put it there. He passed it to Willow and she noisily blew her nose. Her hair had gone green by now. She had the defeated air of someone who just knew they were always going to lose. Harry didn't know what to say. The way the twins booby-trapped their products, he knew there would be no quick fix by McGonagall in the antechamber. And she certainly wasn't going to let funny hair be an excuse to avoid the Sorting ceremony. Harry regarded Willow sadly; he knew they'd fix it eventually but not before she'd been ridiculed by the whole school. An older student might laugh it off, or even do it on purpose, but not a little kid who was just trying to fit in. Harry knew just how she felt. His Aunt Petunia sheared off his own hair horribly one time, and he'd barely slept that night in his cupboard for worrying about how he was going to face the other kids at school the next day.

"We'll work something out," he said, putting a protective arm around her shoulders. "It'll be okay."

Willow snuffled miserably into his stomach; Harry had a feeling she knew a little too much about Weasley products to believe him.

"Maybe no one'll even notice," he offered lamely. The rest of the children sniggered their opinion of that. "You lot can just shut your traps! I suppose you think it's funny, do you? Singling someone out on their very first day? Right when they have to go up all alone in front of the Headmaster and the whole school? Nice. And here's me thinking you little maggots might be worth something."

The Mallory boy rolled his eyes, but the rest of the kids stopped laughing and watched guiltily as Willow's hair turned tomato red and she snorted down a good deal of phlegm.

"Er, that's okay, you keep it," Harry muttered when offered his handkerchief back.

His voice was still echoing, which was just annoying him now, so he terminated the charm. He was just trying to work out how many detentions he'd have to serve if he gave the brother a good case of pus-spewing tentacles when he felt someone tugging on his robes.

"Please, sir?" It was the bunny girl. "Is there enough in that bottle for two?"

Harry swung open the doors to the Great Hall and strode purposefully down the centre aisle to raucous laughter and applause. Scurrying along in his wake were thirty-nine colourfully coiffed children in every hue of the rainbow — and one handsome, black-haired boy.

Every head turned to look and laugh as Harry passed by, but Harry was quite accustomed to this and ignored them all. Instead, he fixed his eyes on Professor McGonagall, who was waiting at the top of the aisle with her scroll, succeeding in looking amused, exasperated, and sternly disapproving all at once.

"Thank you, Potter," she said archly. "You may be seated."

By the time Harry walked around the edge of the hall and slipped into a seat between Ron and Seamus, the Sorting Hat had begun its song. Harry grinned at his friends (who he expected to be at least a little impressed with his vibrant entourage) but their reactions flummoxed him. Rule-upholding Hermione was beaming at him, whilst Ron looked ropeable.

"What?" whispered Harry. "What'd I miss?"

"*Clueless*, am I," sniped Ron, nodding in an *if-you-don't-know-then-I'm-not-going-to-tell-you* kind of way. "Nice."

"Hush," Hermione chided in a whisper, "I want to hear what the Hat has to say."

"Whatever you say, Miss *Scathingly Brilliant*," muttered Ron.

Harry looked around helplessly, but every familiar face in the vicinity was struggling not to laugh.

"Show *you* testy!" grunted Ron to no one in particular. Harry was beginning to wonder if his robes were on backwards when the horrible truth washed over him.

Nudging Seamus, he said, "You didn't hear me, did you?"

"Every word, mate," Seamus whispered gleefully. "Come up through the floor somehow. Old McGonagall wanted ta send someone ta shut you up, but Dumbledore wouldn't let her. Better than Wizard Radio. Course, we only got *your* voice. You should'a seen Snape's face when you told that kid ta ask him about being gay."

Lady Alchymia
FanficAuthors.net

Psychomachia

Chapter 2 — Payback

Cube chicken and lightly coat with flour. Sauté in a little oil, then set aside before ...

Drowsily, Frank peeked over the edge of the bed to where his pet's voice was mysteriously hissing through the cellar floor. Stretching languorously across Susan's bed, the python smacked his jaws in anticipation. Harry's treat for him sounded rather tasty. As he listened to his boy browning his onions, Frank wondered just how long it was going to take to get his two humans to breed. With so few Parselmouths in the world, he certainly couldn't afford to leave matters of such import to the boy. Harry was a dear little thing, but he really was an idiot when it came to the females of his species; the swan proved that.

Deciding another nap before supper would be just the ticket, Frank coiled contentedly beneath Susan's quilt and fell asleep dreaming of snuggling into her stomach; she was always so deliciously soft and warm.

The Great Hall was feeling horribly warm. Harry paled thinking of all the stupid questions the first years had asked him. He racked his brains trying to remember if he said anything offensive about anyone.

"*We have to follow the spiders,*" Ron muttered in a mocking voice. "Talk about ruddy *clueless!*"

"Sorry?" Harry couldn't remember saying anything about spiders.

"Quiet!" Hermione hissed across the table; the Sorting Hat was cheerfully extolling the virtues of 'a Magical World for all Magical Creatures'. Behind the Hat, bright-coloured lollipops grinned madly at each other whilst the rest of the students craned their necks to see Harry and hiss whispers to each other. If Harry didn't know better, he'd swear the hall was full of Parselmouths. His moodstone was going decidedly pink. It went even pinker as the last lines of the Sorting Hat's song trilled through the hall:

So doff this hat, and we shall see

If Mr Potter, young though he be

Did hit the mark — and better than me!

The Hat bowed politely to rousing cheers.

"Guess you can add the Sorting Hat ta ya fan club," snickered Seamus.

Groaning, Harry sank lower into his seat. Professor McGonagall started calling names for the sorting, and the houses started cheering for each new member. They were up to K when Ron grabbed at Harry's robes.

"You got captain!" he hissed incredulously.

Harry held his breath; he knew Ron had long coveted the captaincy. Ron said nothing more; he just crossed his arms and glowered across the hall to where 'Kingston, Stephanie' was eagerly jamming the Sorting Hat onto her lurid purple curls.

"Gryffindor!" cried the Hat.

Harry applauded reflexively. Seamus and Dean were thumping him on the back and hissing excitedly. Ginny was grinning from ear to ear and whispering something across the table. Hermione was telling them all to hush and pay attention. Ron wouldn't even look at him. Dazedly, Harry shook his head. He'd been having such a good day.

"Lawrence, Amanda!" called McGonagall.

Harry watched the now blue-haired bunny-girl stumble over her robes and climb onto the stool. The Hat swiftly declared her a Hufflepuff. Harry glanced towards the Hufflepuff table, where Susan and the other Hufflepuffs were cheering heartily for Amanda. Seated beside Susan, Justin Finch-Fletchley caught Harry's eye and sent him an appreciative smile and nod, causing sparks to fire inside Harry's moodstone for some reason. Feeling he had enough to worry about, Harry shoved his sleeve over his wrist. He glanced back towards Susan, not really sure what he was hoping for, but her curious hazel eyes were fixed upon a different black-haired boy. Marcus Mallory was the only child who declined the hair potion.

"Mallory, Marcus!"

A low rumble sped round the hall. No one was looking at Harry anymore (not that Harry was complaining); instead, people were lifting out of their seats to get a good look at the hair culprit. Mallory didn't look the least perturbed or embarrassed; Harry suspected he even *wanted* people to know he was responsible. The castle ghosts zoomed low over the tables, gossiping and adding to the general air of anticipation.

Seamus nudged Harry in the ribs. "That the maggot?"

"What? Yeah."

"That was just *brilliant*, Harry," Ginny whispered approvingly, "making them all the same."

Harry shook his head. "Wasn't my idea; they did it all on their own."

And this was quite true. Hector Prewett had come forward straight away, then Brutus Midgen, and the rest quickly followed once they saw how very pleased it made Harry Potter. Even Nero Zabini had volunteered, perhaps realising that to be the odd man out in such circumstances was unwise. Tiny Amanda Lawrence had been the first, though, and Harry was surprised she had not been sorted into —

"Gryffindor!" cried the Hat.

The Gryffindor table groaned (and the rest of the houses applauded wildly) as Marcus Mallory joined the scarlet and gold.

Willow Mallory was sorted into Ravenclaw, then it was Brutus Midgen's turn. The Sorting Hat deliberated for several long minutes before declaring, "Slytherin!"

Brutus didn't move. He looked dolefully towards the Gryffindor table on his far left — then to the Slytherin table on his far right. Professor McGonagall had to nudge him off the stool to make way for 'Newland, Patrick'. Harry's view of the staff table cleared as the lollipops thinned. As expected, Snape's black eyes were full of venom for him. Smugly, Harry smiled back, safe in the knowledge that Snape couldn't touch him. At the inquest into his accident, Snape was found innocent of treason but guilty of prejudice when it came to Harry Potter. Dumbledore promised if his behaviour did not improve by Halloween, then his very position at Hogwarts could be in jeopardy. Ignoring Snape, whose face was now tight with suppressed rage, Harry looked to Dumbledore's left and did a double-take. Could it really be her? Rousing cheers erupted as 'Zabini, Nero' became a Slytherin. Harry tugged eagerly at Ron's robes, but Ron ignored him, which just infuriated Harry. *He* was the one who had a right to be ticked off! Ron might have come down and — oh — let his best mate *know* that he was making a prat of himself in front of the whole school. And now Ron was sulking because he'd missed the captaincy? What did he expect? He'd only been on the team for one year!

"Welcome, welcome!" Professor Dumbledore declared from his podium. He opened his arms wide, as if embracing the whole hall. "To old hands, welcome back, and to the colourful new heads I see before me, allow me to extend the very warmest of welcomes! I cannot remember when I have seen such a magnificent example of unity and friendship amongst a group of new students. An example, I feel, that *older* heads would do well to emulate." Laughter and cheers met this pronouncement. Each beaming first years' hairdo morphed through the rainbow as the Headmaster's twinkling eyes fell upon them. "Five points a piece, I think, for each participant in this lavish display of camaraderie!"

Loud cheers erupted, though the cheers were a little more subdued on the Gryffindor table since they were now already five points short courtesy of Marcus Mallory. An unhappy grunt sounded from the far end of the high table.

"Ah, yes," Dumbledore continued blithely, "Mr Filch has been so good as to remind me that all products from a shop by the name of *Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes*, as well as a number of other provisioners of magical mayhem, are banned from school grounds." Dumbledore looked down his crooked nose to the Gryffindor table and added serenely, "I would be much obliged if Mr Harry Potter would be so good as to report to my office after the feast."

Commiserating titters sounded from around the hall (combined with hearty snickers from the Slytherins). Harry sank even lower into his seat. By now, his feet were stretched so far under the table they were tangled up with Hermione's. She tilted her head sympathetically and managed to give his feet a kind of hug with her own. Harry decided that his letter to Remus didn't need to include *every* little thing that happened to him.

In more subdued tones the Headmaster went on to announce increased security measures at Hogwarts as well as a plea for greater cooperation and vigilance by students in these 'most uncertain times'. There were mixed reactions to Dumbledore's words of caution. The summer had come and gone and Voldemort and his Dark Order had yet to make their presence felt.

"On a happier note," Dumbledore declared, "I am delighted to announce the addition of two excellent new professors to the Hogwarts faculty! Professor Perenelle Flamel will be teaching Defence Against the Dark Arts this year, and I can say with the utmost confidence that you would be hard pressed to find a superior or more experienced practitioner of the Art."

Dumbledore nodded respectfully to the witch, who inclined her head to a smattering of weak applause. Hogwarts students had learned the hard way to be suspicious of new Defence teachers. Harry smirked at Hermione's dropped jaw; she clearly spent too much time reading books and not enough time sorting through Chocolate Frog photos. He knew the Flamels had put enough Elixir of Life aside to set their affairs in order, but that was four years ago. He kind of thought they would have dropped off the perch by now, but then again, six-hundred-plus years was bound to create a lot of affairs to tidy up. He wondered if her husband would be teaching as well. Nicolas Flamel was a world-class alchemist. Who better to replace Snape?

"Our second new appointment," Dumbledore continued cheerfully, "is for the subject of Light Arts. A personal favourite of my own but one we have had considerable difficulty staffing over the years. This year we are in luck, for Professor Oribel has kindly consented to relocate her workshop to Hogwarts."

Harry craned his neck to see where Dumbledore was smiling and nodding. The empty chair next to Hagrid was not empty after all. Dark skinned with slanting eyes, pointed ears, and a mane of wispy white-gold hair that shone under the floating candles, dressed in robes of shimmering gold and silver, Professor Oribel surveyed the students curiously, as if unaccustomed to seeing human children. She certainly inspired a great deal more muttering than Professor Flamel did. Dumbledore's smile stiffened.

"I entrust you will all strive to extend your very warmest welcomes to both Professor Flamel and Professor Oribel, or Oribel the Whimsical as she is known amongst her fellow goblins."

Ron snorted derisively under his breath. "'Oribel the *Orrible*' more like ..."

Harry shot him a sharp glance; Ron was lucky *Hermione* didn't hear him say that! Harry wondered, yet again, what on earth had gotten into his

best mate.

“Ugly as, goblins are,” Seamus agreed in a low aside. “Who’s she think she’s foolin’, tartin’ up in dress robes?”

Ron snickered in agreement. Frowning sternly, Harry was about to say something when Dumbledore spoke up again.

“And now stomachs are rumbling and we have dallied enough.” At a clap of his hands the tables were overflowing with delicious fare. “Dig in!”

Harry gave Ron up as a lost cause once the food appeared. Instead, he filled his own golden plate with succulent roast-lamb and mint jelly, and sneaked more looks towards the staff table. Although surprised Professor Oribel was a goblin, Harry had no problem with it. Didn’t everyone always go on about how exceptionally fine goblin-workmanship was? The only thing he found curious was that she seemed rather young. Professor Flamel, unsurprisingly, did not. But she didn’t look six-centuries old. If Harry hadn’t known who she was, he might have guessed her to be about seventy, though her misty white eyes betrayed her much greater age. In peacock-blue robes that glimmered sea-green when she moved, wearing a matching headdress and pearl-studded diadem, her serene countenance and attire gave the impression of a rather refined old nun. Dumbledore was certainly very attentive to her, talking and smiling and refilling her goblet the moment she took the slightest sip. Flamel seemed slightly oblivious to the Headmaster’s solicitous behaviour; she smiled, she nodded, but she said little. She seemed more interested in the colourful first years, who (for some reason known only to eleven-year-olds) couldn’t seem to sit still and kept sneaking between the tables to whisper to each other.

Dinner conversation around the Gryffindor table that night was rather fractured: Hermione wanted to talk about Professor Flamel; Harry wanted to figure out just how much trouble he was going to be in thanks to his ramblings beneath the castle; and Ginny and the boys wanted to talk Quidditch. From Ron there was nothing but the sound of lamb shanks being angrily gnawed to the marrow.

“It’ll be fine, Harry,” Hermione said consolingly over her strawberry trifle. “You didn’t say anything untoward, really.”

Ron snorted loudly. Harry had had quite enough.

“Look,” he hissed into his mate’s ear, “I can’t help it if McGonagall picked me. Get over it!”

Ron stared. “And *I’m* clueless.”

“What’s Hector doing?” Ginny said wonderingly.

Fed up with Ron, Harry followed Ginny’s gaze to where Amanda Lawrence, Willow Mallory, Brutus Midgen, and Hector Prewett, the newest little Gryffindor, were besieging Headmaster Dumbledore. Dumbledore’s face gave nothing away; he listened politely then gently dismissed them. Downcast, the children returned to their four respective tables. Dumbledore rose again and declared it time for bed but not, he hoped, before a rousing rendition of the school song.

“On your feet and altogether now!” he declared, his arms lifting reluctant behinds.

Lyrics ribboned from his wand and the Great Hall exploded in a hodge-podge of melodies. The teachers’ smiles were firmly fixed, but Professor Oribel did not seem inclined to feign pleasure and quickly plugged her pointy ears. Harry lustily joined in with his own cheerfully horrible rendition of *Hoggy Warty Hogwarts* to the woeful tune of the Dixie Chicks’ *Goodbye Earl*, a song Harry had been tortured with over and over by Natalie Ramsay on Black Island. Natalie was a very nice girl and all, but hers and Harry’s tastes in music could not have been further apart.

“*Dead flies and bits of fluff ...*” sang Harry. “Ow!” He rubbed the back of his head and glared at Ron. “What was that for?”

Ron just glowered at him.

The song finished and Professor Dumbledore clapped his hands with delight. “Ah, music,” he sighed fondly, dabbing at his eyes, “truly a magic to set our hearts to flight! And now to bed! Sleep tight!”

Noisily, the students started leaving. Ron waited until Hermione dashed off to beat the other prefects to the first years then hissed at Harry, “Thought you weren’t gonna bring up Natalie!”

“I didn’t!” Harry said crossly, still rubbing his head.

“That was our song!”

Harry made the fatal error of laughing. He tried to cover but far too late.

“Oh, come on, you great git. How on earth could Hermione know anything about that song?”

Ron gave Harry his filthiest look and stormed off.

“Hang on! What’s the password?”

But Ron was already being swept up in the crowd. Mentally cursing the crotchety Keeper, Harry grabbed the napkin full of treats he saved for Frank and slid across the Gryffindor then the Hufflepuff table to reach Susan, but he found his path blocked by a mass of giggling Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws.

“I wouldn’t worry,” said a dreamy voice, “Ron’ll come around.”

"Huh? Oh, hi, Luna. Sorry, I just have to ..." Harry craned his neck, but Susan was gone.

"Cho left already," Luna offered helpfully. "But she was very pleased with what you said. We all were."

The Great Hall was rapidly emptying, and Harry needed to report to the Headmaster, but he wasn't inclined to do so completely unprepared.

"Can you tell me: what did I say exactly?" he begged Luna.

It seemed that nothing would please Luna more. She hopped up onto the Ravenclaw table with her feet on the bench, and Harry perched beside her.

"Well, you said Cho was rather 'dishy', and I think she liked that a lot."

Harry nodded distractedly. "Right, but did I say anything to offend anyone? I mean apart from Snape."

Luna squinted in thought. "I shouldn't have thought so. You only told the truth, after all. People are always saying that's what they want, but lies do seem to make them a lot happier ..." Luna's eyes misted over thoughtfully. "Odd, really."

"Yeah, odd," Harry agreed and tried to get her back on track. "But did you hear everything I said?"

"Oh yes! It was wonderful. I usually just sit here with no one to talk to, so it was quite entertaining. Everyone was fascinated. And then you summoned that 'smarmy person', and we were all trying to guess who it was. Though the Slytherins didn't seem to enjoy that very much."

Harry smirked; no, they wouldn't have been too impressed with him going off at the pure-bloods.

"But it was just lovely to see all of the houses laughing," Luna continued happily. "Even the Slytherins at one point; they just laughed and laughed. Though I expect it wasn't so much fun for Ron."

"Sorry? What's Ron got to do with it?"

Luna tilted her head a little. "You know, when you were talking about your best friends, and you were saying how brilliant Hermione was and how Ron was completely — Harry? Are you okay? You've gone all pale."

If asked, Harry could not have explained how he got from the Great Hall to the Fat Lady's portrait. He only knew he had to find Ron and somehow make things right. How could he have ever said such a thing? He knew it wasn't even the public nature of the insult that would've hurt the most; it was that deep down Ron believed he *was* the inferior of the three friends. And to make it worse, Harry knew it was probably true. But for his supposed best mate to come right out and say so ...

Harry begged the Fat Lady to let him in but, without the password, he was summarily dismissed and left with no option but to report as instructed to the Headmaster's office.

"Cockroach cluster?" Harry ventured listlessly. No luck. "Lemon sherbet ... sherbet lemon ... lemon drop ... lemon butter ... lemon cream ... canary cream ..."

The gargoyle stepped aside and Harry ascended the moving stone staircase without even the heart to smile at Dumbledore's choice of a joke sweet to protect his inner sanctum.

"Come," he called at Harry's knock. "Ah, good evening, Harry. Come in — come in. I do hope you enjoyed your dinner. I partook of the honey-baked ham, myself — most delicious. I trust you had an eloquent sufficiency?"

Harry had no idea what that meant, but an apology seemed in order. "Sir, I'm sorry about the — I mean the thing — I wasn't ... um, you know ..."

"My, my," Dumbledore said dryly, "and you were so erudite earlier." He waved Harry to sit down. "Calm yourself, dear boy. I was most impressed with your speech. And even your lack of, shall we say, *volume* control served a purpose. You said many things that older heads — and hats —" he added with a deferential nod to the Sorting Hat, which bowed back politely, "have long been trying to hammer into small skulls with considerably less success. I presume you have a bottle for me?"

Harry handed over the nearly empty bottle of *Hair-With-Flair*. Dumbledore held it at arms length to read the label.

"I do hope it lasts," he remarked. "Now if we can just get your punishment out of the way — though I suspect your true torment lies smouldering in your dormitory right about now."

"Yes, sir," Harry said mournfully. "I didn't mean for it to come out that way about Ron — I was just trying to ..." His voice trailed off uselessly. Dumbledore waved his explanation away.

"One demerit point, I think, for colourful — hmmm — language. And ten points *to* Gryffindor for a most *vivid* lesson in Hogwarts solidarity." Harry was still thinking about Ron. Regarding him shrewdly, Dumbledore added, "I received a most interesting deputation over dinner from our multi-coloured newcomers: one from each house. They were most concerned I not punish you for something they swear was their own idea."

Harry smiled reluctantly at that. Relaxing back into his chair, Dumbledore made polite inquiries as to Harry's health and whether he enjoyed the remainder of his summer. Harry suspected Dumbledore had bigger things on his mind, and he was right. After the niceties had been observed,

the elderly wizard leaned forward, his hands loosely clasped across his desk, a more intense look in his eyes.

“Harry, there is something I should like to ask you.” He waited for Harry’s nod before continuing. “This evening, you were asked about the Killing Curse — about whether it hurt. You replied that it did. Harry, do you remember the attack? Do you remember the night your parents fell?”

Harry nodded dispiritedly; it was something he would dearly love to forget.

“The curse itself,” Dumbledore pressed, “you remember being struck?”

Looking down at his hands, Harry didn’t know why it was suddenly so hard to talk about the details. He’d talked about it before, hadn’t he? Just the once, admittedly, when he was learning to fight Dementors. That terrible night was burned into his memory. Voldemort’s cruel laughter; his mother begging for mercy — her screams.

A comforting coo sounded. It was Fawkes, stirring on his perch.

Raising his eyes to his Headmaster, Harry said, “It’s not that I don’t want to tell you about it, sir, it’s just ... just ...”

“Hard,” Dumbledore finished softly. “Another time then.”

Harry didn’t like the sound of that. “I don’t mean to be ... I mean if it’s all the same, I’d rather not. Sir,” he added to show no disrespect was intended.

Dumbledore frowned deeply. “Harry, I know how difficult it must be to talk about, but you need to —”

“I do,” Harry cut in, keen to get off the subject. “It’s just I prefer talking to Remus about stuff like that.”

A flash of annoyance flickered in Dumbledore’s eyes, but it was gone as quickly and he was nodding sagely and saying, “Of course, you do.”

Harry breathed an inward sigh of relief to have dodged a blow-by-blow interrogation of his parents’ deaths. Without missing a beat, Dumbledore’s blue eyes were twinkling once more.

“You know,” he said conspiratorially, “my gossips tell me a certain *estranged* couple made quite a scene in London this morning.”

Harry smiled ruefully; did nothing slip past Albus Dumbledore’s long nose.

“That they did,” he agreed proudly. “They’re back together for good now.”

“Marvellous news! Now, back to your punishment,” Dumbledore continued breezily. “I must say this little episode has created a most convenient opportunity. You see, I should like you to take some private tuition with me this year and the odd detention could prove most useful in masking our endeavours.”

“For Occlumency,” Harry guessed.

Dumbledore inclined his head and said cryptically, “For that — and for other matters of import.” Harry’s relief at evading Occlumency lessons with Severus Snape was short-lived, for Dumbledore started talking about ‘trials and challenges’. He said, “Mind Magic comprises several of the most dangerous and challenging branches of magic known to our kind and should not be enterprised lightly. You may wish to consult your guardians before proceeding — if you are uncertain of your strength ...”

Harry was not fooled by Dumbledore’s polite tone. It was a challenge.

“I do — I mean I am. I don’t need to ask anyone.”

“Excellent!” Dumbledore said, and Harry basked once more in the warmth of his approval. “I shall let you know when. Now, there is just one more matter to which we must attend: Professor Severus Snape.”

Harry’s heart stopped then started again. The Headmaster only wanted to remind him he agreed to spread a rumour that his accident over the summer was *not* an accident, something Dumbledore hoped would aid Snape in regaining Lord Voldemort’s trust. Helping Snape become a better Death Eater was not something Harry, personally, was in favour of, but he promised Dumbledore he would try; he could only hope the old man knew what he was doing.

“To accuse Professor Snape directly would be too obvious,” Dumbledore advised Harry. “I would suggest merely implying foul play.”

“Will that be enough?” Harry asked dubiously.

Dumbledore smiled dreamily. “I believe so; I have learned never to underestimate the imaginations of Hogwarts students.”

An anxious Hermione awaited Harry in the common room. A look from Harry sent her sinking back into her chair. No one else was game to stop him — not until he found himself blocked halfway up the spiral steps to his room by a clutch of pyjama-clad maggots.

“Move!” Harry ordered sternly. The maggots wouldn’t budge. “Why are you still up?” Harry groaned with exasperation.

The children launched into a torrent of questions and apologies, their mouse-like voices clamouring over each other.

“Are you okay?”

“What did he make you do?”

“Does he want us to fix our hair?”

“Did he use a cane?”

“Did he make you cut yourself?” breathed a little girl with big brown eyes. “Was it very bad?”

That stopped Harry dead; he couldn't have them thinking Dumbledore would deliberately hurt him.

“Listen, er — Stephanie, isn't it?” Stephanie nodded vigorously, making her green Shirley-Temple curls quiver and shake. “Look, I don't know what you've heard, but Professor Dumbledore is *nothing* like that evil troll we had here last year. I'm perfectly fine and there is *nothing* for you to worry about.”

“You don't look fine!” challenged Hector. “Sir,” he added hastily.

Harry just stared at the children; it occurred to him that first years were a lot easier to get rid of when they were frightened of him.

“It's nothing,” he assured them. “I just have to do lines — *normal* lines,” he added quickly, for Stephanie had gasped painfully, “you know — I must not dangle you little maggots over balconies — that sort of thing.” The children were unconvinced. Harry struggled to think of something good. “And, you know, get lectured on responsibility and stuff. Seriously, I'm fine.”

“Ginny says you always say that,” Hector argued mulishly.

“Just go to bed,” Harry pleaded, waving them up the steps. “Come on, *bed*! Don't make me hex you.”

The morning after the welcome feast, Seamus, Dean, and Neville made themselves scarce, leaving Harry and Ron very alone. Ron's pet blowfly buzzed indignantly from his shoulder. Whilst Ron (and Bruce) accepted Frank's napkin full of treats (Frank would just have to understand), Harry's offer to go in front of the whole school and say how wrong he was wasn't quite what the redhead had in mind.

“So, is that it?” asked Harry.

“For now,” replied Ron. Harry stared at the old SPEW badge that Ron had transfigured. Two words stared back at him in throbbing, hot-pink letters: *MORE CLUELESS*.

With a small, resigned sigh, Harry said, “Fair enough.”

Ron helpfully pinned it on for him and stood back a moment to admire his handiwork. Satisfied, he regally waved Harry towards the dormitory door. The boys found an anxious Hermione waiting outside.

“Is everything — oh!” Hermione slapped a hand across her mouth on seeing the badge. Then she flung her arms around both boys' necks, dragging them into a head-clunking hug.

“Blimey, Hermione!” complained Ron, though Harry noticed Ron wasn't the first to let go.

On releasing her boys, Hermione pounced again, wanting to know exactly what Dumbledore said the night before. After checking they were alone, Harry explained about his fake detentions.

“Whoa,” breathed Ron. “Private lessons with Dumbledore. How cool is that?”

Harry told them Dumbledore would need to keep finding things to punish him for throughout the year. Sheepishly, he said, “He reckons it won't be too hard.” Ron snickered appreciatively; Hermione just rolled her eyes.

The common room that morning was full (of course it was) and Harry's throbbing, hot-pink badge drew a good deal more attention than his new silver one. The Gryffindor captain endured the good-natured ribbing with as much dignity as he could manage. Ginny did not.

“I think it's daft!” she declared, rounding angrily on her brother. “Harry only told the truth; you *are* a moron!”

Harry dragged Ron away before he could engage his tongue. “Come on; I'm starving.”

Harry, Ron, and Hermione had the misfortune of arriving in the entrance hall just as a group of Slytherins emerged from the dungeons. Both Ron and Harry drew vocal and derisive taunts about the ‘mentally challenged’.

“Potter more clueless than Weasley?” Malfoy crowed on spotting Harry's badge. “Is that even possible?”

Pansy Parkinson tittered gleefully at Malfoy's amazing wit.

“Ignore them,” bit Hermione, trying to pull her scowling boys away. She didn't count on one purple-haired Brutus Midgen.

"He's not clueless!" declared the furious little Slytherin. "He's bloody brilliant!"

There was a moment of stunned silence from the older Slytherins — then they just laughed harder.

"OW!" cried Malfoy. Brutus had given Malfoy a mighty kick in the shins. "*Why you little!*" Malfoy whipped out his wand, but Harry and Ron were more than ready.

"Put it away, Malfoy!" Harry demanded, his wand tip denting Malfoy's neck. Brutus's eyes shone as Malfoy grudgingly backed down. Crabbe and Goyle were nowhere in sight.

"Get off on threatening pure-bloods, do you, Potter?" drawled Blaise Zabini. Harry glanced past Zabini to where Nero, his green-haired little brother, was looking abashed. And further behind Nero, unnoticed by a growing crowd, stood a silver-haired wizard who gave a minute nod to Harry.

"Blood's got nothing to do with it," Harry countered coolly, not lowering his wand. "A git's a git no matter what flavour his blood."

"Thank you for that insight, Mr Potter." Silence fell as Professor Dumbledore strolled forward. "But I think you already conveyed that message last night."

Ron was quick to drop his wand, but Harry knew Dumbledore wouldn't want to pass up an excuse to give him more detentions.

The Headmaster's voice hardened slightly as he said, "Mr Potter, I thought I made it quite clear I cannot condone students threatening each other. You will lower your wand, or I shall be obliged to extend your already considerable detentions."

Harry played along and did not lower his wand.

"Harry, *please!*" Hermione begged with remarkable sincerity (Harry really thought she should give acting a go). Ron wasn't quite so quick on the uptake, but his standard mulish expression was serving him well enough. Harry surreptitiously lightened his wand grip. A flicker of movement from Dumbledore and Harry's wand went flying.

"Detentions it is," Dumbledore said grimly, and deftly snatched the wand from the air.

"Yes, sir," Harry muttered with what he thought was just the right combination of resentment and respect.

Dumbledore's brow creased. "I think we need another word, Mr Potter." The Headmaster regarded the milling crowd. "I'm sure the rest of you are eager to benefit from a hearty breakfast."

The crowd dutifully dispersed, the older Slytherins looking gleeful, Hermione and Ron looking impressively indignant, and Brutus and Nero looking miserable. Alone for a few moments, Dumbledore returned Harry's wand.

"I must say, I like the badge," he offered mildly.

"Yes, sir," said Harry.

Dumbledore's blue eyes were sympathetic over his half-moon glasses. "I imagine you'll be getting more of the same from your fellows over the next few days."

Harry shrugged and tried to say it didn't matter, but Dumbledore wasn't fooled.

"You know better than anyone, Harry," he observed, "that no good deed goes unpunished. And regrettably, the greater the deed, the greater the punishment."

Harry did not find this thought particularly comforting and his downcast expression was genuine on rejoining his friends.

Over breakfast, he endured yet more digs and laughter, but the more embarrassed he was, the happier Ron seemed to be, which was just the price Harry knew he had to pay. He was dearly hoping the whole speech thing would soon be forgotten, but the likelihood of this happening was not helped by the fact that each long table was currently infested by a nest of colourful maggots.

"Sir?" prompted a small voice.

"Huh?" One of the maggots was tapping Harry's shoulder. "Oh, Hector, mornin'. You don't need to call me sir, all right?"

"Yes, sir," Hector agreed at once, inspiring snickers from Seamus and Ron.

"Save it for the teachers," Harry muttered, turning back to his breakfast. "Potter's fine."

"Yes, sir," agreed Hector. "Sir, it's just —"

"*Potter!*" Harry despaired through a mouthful of toast. Hermione smiled into her pumpkin juice; Seamus muttered something mischievous about fan clubs.

"Is everything okay, sir?" fretted Hector. "About last night, we didn't mean to —"

"Everything's *fine*!" Harry cut in testily, thinking that everything *would* have been fine if he hadn't gotten himself mixed up with all those rotten little maggots in the first place. He jabbed a fork into his fried egg, causing yolk to squirt all over his toast. Harry swore under his breath; he hated soggy toast.

"Sir, honestly," Hector blurted in a rush, "we never meant to get you into trouble. Did the Headmaster —"

"Drop it!" snapped Harry.

Hermione stopped smiling. Wincing, Harry twisted around to find a crestfallen little boy who even with green hair looked far too much like a Weasley to stay mad at for long.

"Sorry, Hector," Harry apologised, giving the child a pat on the shoulder. "Look, it's fine, truly. I just got a bunch of detentions; it's nothing for you to worry about."

But Hector wasn't about to drop it, and as the morning's Owl Post screeched overhead, dropping books and chastisements on forgetful students (everyone near Neville ducked), Hector breathlessly offered to write to Fred and George for an antidote.

"Hector, it's *fine*," repeated Harry. "The Headmaster actually likes your hair. It's just that I shouldn't have been messing about and I got a bunch of detentions — it's no big deal."

Hector was miserable. "But it's not fair ..."

Bemused, Harry shook his head at the moppet and said, "Seriously, this is nothing. I spend half my life in detention."

"Well, that's true," agreed Ron. Twisting around, he idly waved a forkful of sausage at his cousin. "You can't leave him alone for one minute, you know. You would not *believe* what it takes to keep him out of trouble." Ron looked Harry up and down and shook his head in mock sadness. "Clueless. Completely clueless."

"A finely matched pair, then," said an archly knowing Scottish voice. Ron and Harry exchanged sheepish looks as Professor McGonagall towered over them, checking through a stack of timetables. "Potter, Potter," McGonagall murmured.

"Erm, sorry about last night, Professor," Harry offered.

"I've no one to blame but myself, Potter," McGonagall returned crisply, flicking through her timetables. "I should be grateful, I suppose, that you didn't feed the children to the Giant Squid — or send them flying into the Whomping Willow." There were appreciative snickers at this from the sixth years. "Here you are," she said, handing Harry his timetable.

"Thanks, Professor."

"Right," murmured McGonagall, "where was I ... Finnigan, here you are ... and Miss Granger ..." Hermione excitedly claimed her timetable. "... And Miss Brown. ... Yes, Professor Firenze is still teaching. ... I'm afraid I've not the slightest idea if he likes apples." McGonagall turned her steely gaze on Ron. "Weasley, yes ... I'm afraid your marks were insufficient for your ambition to carry on with Potions, but I spoke with Professor Snape at some length this morning and he has agreed to accept you into his NEWT class on a probationary basis."

Hermione gasped with delight. Ron's gasp conveyed anything but.

McGonagall frowned and said, "That is if you *do* still wish to proceed."

"I do — I mean ..." Ron looked helplessly towards Harry, who nodded encouragingly; he didn't want to lose Ron's company in Potions — or beyond; they both had ambitions to become Aurors, and Potions was a requisite NEWT. Ron turned back to McGonagall and nodded glumly. "Put me down," he said, defeated.

"OH!" Hermione cried in a sudden panic. "Double-Potions in fifteen minutes!"

Loitering at the back of the Potions queue, Harry eyed the small group with satisfaction; DA members outnumbered the Slytherins two to one.

Before Snape arrived, Ron surprised Harry by quietly telling him to take off his *MORE CLUELESS* badge.

"You sure?" checked Harry.

"You kidding?" countered Ron.

The minute Snape opened the dungeon door, three Ravenclaws: Michael Corner, Terry Boot, and Anthony Goldstein, raced three Slytherins: Draco Malfoy, Blaise Zabini, and Theodore Nott, for the front bench. Harry had never *seen* Ravenclaws move so fast, but their rare burst of athleticism was to no avail. Even though they'd gotten there first, Snape relegated them to the second row. Having spent five years with Hufflepuffs, the Ravenclaws were clearly unaccustomed to coming second and took their displacement with less than good humour. Ernie Macmillan, Susan Bones, and Daphne Greengrass claimed the third bench, and the three Gryffindors were quite content with the fourth. When Snape took the roll, he lingered pointedly over Ron's name. The Slytherins snickered derisively, leaving Harry in no doubt that Snape had blabbed about having made an exception for Ron.

"Ignore him," intoned Hermione under her breath.

“Sir?” drawled Malfoy, raising a lazy hand. “I thought you only took *Outstanding* students at NEWT level.”

Snape gave Malfoy an oily smile, not the least put out by the interruption.

“Draco, Draco,” he murmured sleekly, “we must all make *allowances* for those who are ...” Snape paused as if searching for the right word. Malfoy found it for him.

“Completely clueless, sir?”

Ron’s quill snapped in two.

“At least *some* people didn’t need to repeat!” Harry shot heatedly. Crabbe and Goyle had managed to fail all their OWLs.

“Five points from Gryffindor for denigrating the intellectual capacity of fellow students,” Snape declared swiftly.

Score one for the Great Bat, Harry thought sourly. He knew Professor Dumbledore wouldn’t think it wrong for Snape to take points when he actually *did* give cheek. As the students set up their cauldrons, their Potions Master prowled the workbenches, looking for things to criticise. Ron, naturally enough, was without his potions things, which Snape was quick to point out to the whole class.

“I’ll owl Mum for my textbook and stuff,” Ron said stiffly, still smarting from the roll.

“Sir ...” said Snape.

“*Sir*,” muttered Ron.

Snape summoned a spare textbook from a stack inside the bottom of the ingredients cupboard. He caught the book in one hand, checked something inside, then handed it to Ron.

“You may wish to bely that order,” he drawled, “until after you’ve passed your *probation*. Surely, you wouldn’t want your mother to buy an *expensive* textbook that you’ll only need for a few — days.”

The Slytherins snickered appreciatively. Ron reddened; Hermione quivered with indignation; Harry fumed impotently; he had wondered why Snape ever let McGonagall convince him to make an exception for Ron Weasley, and now he knew, for it was evident that Snape was having a wonderful day. When he wasn’t droning on about Draughts of Peace, or setting them miles of homework, he was exploiting every opportunity to patronise Ron Weasley, savouring every mistake he made and making a show of noting them all down on a special chart he titled *The Weasley Improvement Testimonial* (T.W.I.T.), or *twit*, as he called it, which he hung on the dungeon wall for all to see.

Ron said not one word against Harry during all this, which just made Harry feel even worse, and the minute they were clear of the dungeons, Harry voluntarily pinned his *MORE CLUELESS* badge back on. Ron made an admirable show of not noticing.

After the morning break, Professor Sprout hurried the sixth years into Greenhouse Five and sealed the door. The students did their best to avoid waking anything up; Greenhouse Five was home to some of the most vindictive, flesh-eating plants known to the Wizarding World. Professor Sprout beckoned them towards a man-sized, obelisk-like flower.

“Regulus Amorphophallus Titanum,” she whispered proudly, “or ‘little king with very big shapeless phallus’.” There were juvenile sniggers at this. “Yes, yes, very amusing,” she agreed, patting down her hands to quiet the group. “Our prince is asleep right now, and we want to keep him that way a good while longer. At six feet, he’s still a baby and needs his rest.”

Professor Sprout went on to explain (over yet more helpless giggles and snickers) that the flower’s bloom would stay erect for about a week, and then it would collapse and a new one would emerge in its place. As the plant matured, each flowering cycle would see the bloom growing taller until its full height of twelve feet. Ron and Harry shared a look that agreed that calling twelve feet little hardly seemed fair.

“The *Rex Amorphophallus Gigas* is bigger again,” advised Professor Sprout, “but the Regulus is considerably easier to handle. The flower attracts pollinators by emitting powerful waves of pheromones. The resulting odour of carrion is intoxicating to flies and carries for miles.”

An excited buzz sounded from inside Ron’s robes; it seemed Bruce had found a friend.

“Of course,” Sprout said in a cheerful whisper, “that does make it smell like there’s a dead body inside — though, naturally, sometimes there *is* a dead body inside. At this stage, our little prince is just learning to feed on small animals — rats, ferrets, Niffers, and such — but at full maturity, it can digest much larger prey, including humans, which gives rise to its more common name, the *Corpse Flower*. The Corpse Flower makes an excellent guard plant, very sensitive to both noise and ill intent. Can anyone tell me about its defensive strategies?”

Neville’s hand shot up. Excitedly, he whispered, “When it’s under attack, the Corpse Flower paralyzes its attacker with noxious gases.”

“Excellent, Longbottom!” whispered the professor. “Five points to Gryffindor!”

The Ravenclaws and Slytherins stared in disbelief, stunned that Neville had answered a question — and got it right! The Gryffindors exchanged smug looks, pleased to see Neville get one up on the brainy Ravenclaws and smarmy Slytherins.

“And can anyone tell me how the plant attracts its prey?” Professor Sprout prompted hopefully.

Hermione's hand just beat Neville's. "When the plant is hungry, it emits pheromones to appeal to its victim's —" Hermione hesitated, which was most unlike her, and her cheeks were oddly pink, "— erm, to appeal to its victim's more *lustful* urges."

"Very good! Another five points to Gryffindor!" Professor Sprout folded her arms over her ample bosom and gazed fondly at the singular, pointy bloom. "The flesh inside the phallus has powerfully euphoric properties, making it extremely useful for pain-killing potions. I'm pleased to advise that we shall be donating this year's harvest to Saint Mungo's for their pain-management programme. I know you'll all want to do your best for the war effort." Harry eyed the flower with new respect; he doubted he would have made it through his hospital ordeal without such potions. "With the right care and attention," Professor Sprout whispered encouragingly, "you should each be able to bring your little princes to their largest possible blooms by the end of the year!"

Ron drew closer to Harry and whispered in his ear, "Yeah, let's grow two dozen plants that need to eat people to survive, have paralysing farts, and make you want to hump something."

Harry laughed out loud, which was a grave mistake because the noise awoke the young plant, and, before you could say Bubble-Headed Charm, The Little Prince let rip with a frightened fart that knocked out the entire class.

Lady Alchymia
FanficAuthors.net

Psychomachia

Chapter 3 — Purgo Puteo

There had been a time at Hogwarts when people wore badges saying 'POTTER STINKS'. Harry would blame no one if they wore one now. Turning on the shower for the third time, he lathered up with Goat's Milk Soap to no avail. Nothing he'd tried so far was up to the task of defeating the Corpse Flower's defensive stench of rancid meat and goodness knows what else. He banged his head pitifully against the shower tiles, tormented by more than stink. He was painfully aware that he was responsible for paralysing and putrefying most of the girls in his year — no thanks to a certain idiot redhead. To put it mildly, Harry's first day back at Hogwarts was not going well.

"Come on, Harry!" Ron called out, impatient to get to lunch. "I'm *starving*! Professor Sprout said it'd wear off eventually!"

"You go on!" Harry sputtered through the water. Then he poked his head through the curtain to shout, "Save me something good!"

Back in his dorm, he collapsed on his bed and decided he smelled even worse than when he was a baby with a filthy nappy. Despite the malevolent odours wafting about him, Harry found a smile thinking of all the happy memories of his mum and dad he'd been given courtesy of possessing Frank Longbottom in Saint Mungo's. Just simple things like bath time, feeding time, nappy time. Harry's smile deepened. Lily taught Frank and James a brilliant purification charm when she was teaching them to change nappies. Harry supposed it was one of those 'housewifely' spells that crusty old academics never thought to teach you at Hogwarts. Leaping to his feet, he jabbed his wand to his chest and said loudly and clearly, "*Purgo Puteo*!"

Nothing. Well, nothing except even *more* rancid meat. He tried again — and again. He tried to recall exactly what his mum told Frank — something about needing pure thoughts to cast a successful purification charm. It was actually a rather tricky spell, he realised now, but he kept at it (he was highly motivated to succeed). Replaying Frank's memories in his mind's eye, Harry savoured the sound of his mother's tinkling laughter as James and Frank practiced the charm on their sons. And he lingered longer than necessary on the bittersweet sight of his mum kissing and cuddling him.

"*Purgo Puteo*!" he cried, for about the twentieth time. He sniffed then grinned; he couldn't smell a thing!

Bounding down the stairs to lunch, Harry's happy green moodstone dulled with each gaggle of giggling airheads he passed by. Ron hadn't said how long he had to wear his *MORE CLUELESS* badge, and Harry knew he was really in no position to argue the point, but, seriously, enough was enough. Joining his stinky mate at the Gryffindor table, Harry offered up his new charm as a peace offering. Ron accepted at once.

"*Purgo Puteo*!" said Harry.

"*Pwah*!" cried Ron.

Wincing, Harry figured he must not have been thinking pure enough thoughts because the odour of rotten meat about Ron only intensified — coupled with a whiff of something like burnt honey. Whatever it was, it was enough to clear the lunchtime stragglers from the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff tables. He wanted to try again, but Ron flatly refused.

Rising from the table he added darkly, "I expect you'll be needing that badge a while longer."

The Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom was full of nervous chatter (and a great many unfortunate smells). The whole class had arrived on time for their first lesson with Professor Flamel, but it was ten past the hour and there was still no sign of her. Rumours ran rife about her story. The DA members, who made up more than half the class, clustered together to compare notes; everyone was unusually interested in what Hermione had to say.

"She can't be *that* old!" Zacharias Smith snorted disbelievingly.

"Six hundred and sixty-four this year," Hermione repeated briskly. "She and her husband, Nicolas, who is seven years older, use a Philosopher's Stone to stay alive. After Harry —"

Lavender Brown cut in, saying, "I wonder what moisturising potion she uses? Seriously, for an old duck, she could look a *lot* worse!"

"It's catching up with her, though," Hannah Abbott said wisely. "You should see her Frog photo from just a few years ago. She looks so much older now."

"*Anyway*," Hermione said, sparing barely a withering glance towards Hannah and Lavender. "After Harry saved the Philosopher's Stone from Lord Voldemort," and here Hermione ignored several sharp gasps, "the Flamels decided to destroy it, lest it fall into the wrong hands again. Harry said they kept enough in reserve to put their affairs in order and then they'd die."

Harry (who by now had taken a voluntary vow of silence) glanced around uneasily; he had a most unsettling feeling he was being watched.

"They must have a fair bit in reserve then," observed Anthony Goldstein. "They might live on for years and years yet."

Musing on the idea, Hermione said, "Very true. You only need a minute dose — taken regularly, of course."

Susan stopped holding her nose long enough to say, "She can't have that much left. I mean he's dead, isn't he. My auntie went to his funeral

ages ago. It was this big thing in Paris.”

Hermione was startled into silence by this new information.

“Very true, Susan,” Ernie said importantly, holding up a trading card, “got her Frog right here.”

Everyone abandoned Hermione and clustered around Ernie as he read aloud from the card.

“Perenelle Flamel: French Alchemist and inventor of the Lunascope. Sublime Sultana (retired) and Benefactress of the Order of the Peacock. Thrice widowed. Together with her late husband, Nicolas, founded numerous Muggle and Wizarding hospitals, hospices, and orphanages. Lady Flamel enjoys the opera, cryptic crosswords, jousting, and petit point.”

“Jousting’s cool,” noted Ron, nodding approvingly. “But what’s this petite pointy thing?”

“That’s not how you say it,” Hermione said with a superior kind of look towards Ernie, who merely blinked. “It’s *French* .”

“Maybe it’s like fencing,” guessed Neville, “but for little people?”

Seamus brightened. “For Leprechauns?”

Michael Corner rolled his eyes. “It’s needlepoint, you prats. My mum does it,” he added defensively when the boys eyed him askance and the girls hid smiles.

“How’s she still alive, then,” pondered Padma Patil, getting back to the subject at hand, “if her husband’s dead?”

Anthony had an idea. “If Nicolas Flamel was seven years older when he died, maybe she’s just got a couple of extra years left in her?”

“She’d better have enough life in her to last out the year,” Ernie said huffily. “I mean, *really* , we can’t be expected to put up with any more nonsense now that we’re NEWT students!” He looked around forbiddingly, as if daring anyone to contradict him.

“Very true, dear,” agreed Hannah, absently patting his arm.

“Well, I heard,” Terry Boot started, but whatever Terry heard was forgotten, for the room plunged into a darkness so dense, so complete, that Harry could not see his own hand in front of his face. Nervous chatter erupted again, then yelps of surprise. Captured inside enormous, glowing bubbles, the students were sent bouncing crazily around the room. Harry succeeded in steadying his blue-tinged bubble only to have a very green Neville crash into him, sending him tumbling through a cluster of Slytherins, scattering them like billiard balls only to see them collect again on the ceiling like so many bright-coloured helium balloons. Grinning wickedly, Harry pushed off a wall and rammed an orange Ron. Ron went spinning into a baby-pink Pansy Parkinson, who shrieked and collided with an upside-down lilac Hermione (who Harry thought would really find it much easier to get upright if she wasn’t so busy holding down her robes). He peered around the blackened room for their teacher, but all he could see were two dozen human billiard balls. He half-expected to see a giant pool cue appear any minute. The laughter and noise in the room escalated as people started ramming each other with considerable abandon (all the while with a very purple Hermione shrieking for people to ‘stop right this minute!’).

“SHOT!” roared Ron when Neville sent Draco Malfoy reeling, though the look of surprise on Neville’s face perhaps indicated that the move had not been deliberate. “The incredible bouncing ferret bounces again!” crowed Ron.

Malfoy wasn’t down long. A wild pool game ensued and went full throttle for a good ten minutes. The DA had a numbers advantage, but the Slytherins put up a good fight. It was a difficult game, however, if you wished to sustain any anger. Cushioned by their bubbles, there didn’t appear to be any way to get hurt, which the Gryffindor and Slytherin boys found a bit disappointing, really.

No one noticed her at first. She drifted quietly among them, seated on a one-person flying carpet (something Harry was quite certain was illegal in Britain). She gave no sign at all that she wanted the game to stop; she just floated past with a kind of mild curiosity, as if watching monkeys at the zoo. Seen only by reflected light of the bubbles, Professor Flamel proved to be a smallish woman in delicately embroidered, pale-blue robes, her white hair scooped in an elegant French knot. There was an amused and dreamy quality about her that reminded Harry of Professor Dumbledore. After watching them play for a while, Professor Flamel landed on her desk — and waited.

By tacit agreement, the students stopped messing about, and their bubbles collected again on the ceiling. Kneeling on all fours like so many puppy dogs, they stared down at Flamel, who lifted her misty white eyes to the light of her colourful ‘moons’.

“Good afternoon, children,” she said softly. Her voice betrayed only the very slightest of French accents and carried effortlessly to every corner of the room. “You may take your seats.”

The students pushed off the ceiling in an effort to dive downwards, but they simply bounced off the floor and landed back up on the ceiling. Harry poked at the rubbery skin of his bubble — maybe if he burst it, like a balloon — but it was a long fall to the ground. He attempted to puncture it during a downward dive, so that he wouldn’t have so far to fall, but his bubble refused to burst. This went on for several minutes before Hermione ventured the inevitable question.

“Excuse me, Professor, what are we allowed to do to break free?”

Professor Flamel appeared delighted with the question.

“A conundrum for all the ages,” she observed, nodding approvingly, “and one worthy of much pondering.”

Harry and Hermione exchanged a look that agreed that this answer was hardly helpful.

Waving madly, Pansy Parkinson screamed, "Professor! Professor! Can we use our wands?"

Professor Flamel took flight once more, one silk-slipped foot dangling demurely from her Persian carpet. The students' faces pressed against their bubbles, following her tour of the room.

Serenely, she advised them, "To achieve your goal, everything you need you can find within yourself." Her students were frankly dubious of that. She smiled slightly and added, "You do not need your wands, but you may use them if you so desire."

Maybe it was the Flamels' connection to Albus Dumbledore, but Harry couldn't get the Mirror of Erised out of his head. He'd been able to retrieve the Philosopher's Stone by desiring it more than anything else but only in order to keep it safe from Voldemort. He felt certain that there would be a similar trick for escaping the bubble and he would rather find it than just blast his way out. Others were not so patient. All around the ceiling, people were experimenting with different spells. Reductor Curses were popular, though it seemed to take an awful lot of them to —

WHOOSH!!

Draco Malfoy went whizzing around the room, finally coming to rest in a dark corner. Panting for breath, he wriggled free of his limp bubble like a grub escaping its cocoon before it had a chance to turn into a butterfly. Insufferably pleased with himself, the grub dusted off his smouldering robes and swaggered over to a seat in the front row, where his lazy taunting of Harry somehow failed to attract any chastisement from their teacher.

Come on, think, Harry berated himself. There must be a trick!

I want more than anything in the world to get free ... but ... er ... not for myself?

Harry's bubble belched belligerently. Right, so a lie wasn't going to work, he thought sourly. Well, that was hardly fair.

The Ravenclaws thought there was a trick, too, and were having an impromptu bubble-bursting brainstorming session in a corner of the room. Hermione eyed them longingly. Meanwhile, spells were firing madly all around them. Ernie's beige bubble was steadily inflating, growing bigger and bigger, until it filled half the room. Harry thought Ernie might actually be onto something; the skin of his bubble stretched thinner and thinner, and then it popped. Some kind of Engorgement Charm, Harry thought with grudging approval. Justin quickly followed Ernie's example.

Susan wasn't doing quite so well. She had one long, bare leg dangling outside her green bubble, but had somehow failed to puncture it. She was thoroughly stuck, half-in, half-out. Harry found it difficult to regret the girl's plight; he was rather enjoying the view. Justin, now free and standing on his desk, tried to talk her down. Flustered, Susan did her best to ignore him. Harry concealed a superior smirk; he had a shrewd idea Susan fancied Justin; Harry knew she fancied *someone*; she'd revealed that much under the influence of a Soothsayer Mint at his birthday party. Sadly, Susan and her lovely leg blasted free. Meanwhile, Pansy Parkinson had given up on curses and was trying to puncture her bubble using her prefects' pin (Harry figured it was the only useful thing she'd ever done with it). The pin failed to pierce the skin, but Malfoy and Zabini sneaked Reductor Curses at her bubble, and down she went.

Not wanting to be last, Hermione and the Ravenclaws were now resorting to force, too, but Harry persisted in trying to think of a wand-free solution, running endless options through his mind without success. Things were getting desperate. Only he and Neville were still bobbing around like idiots. The thought of coming absolute last in his first DADA lesson was mortifying to Harry; Defence was his very best subject, and yet he *still* resisted the temptation of drawing his wand. The Slytherins were having a field day, making smart remarks that Professor Flamel seemed to have no intention of quelling. Harry got the feeling he and the other students were lab rats in some experiment — an experiment in which Harry Potter was failing miserably.

"Just use *Reducto*, Harry!" Ron bellowed from below.

WHOOSH!

Neville went zooming around the room, leaving a trail of black smoke in his wake. Harry's blue bubble was now the only source of illumination in the classroom.

"Come on, Harry!" cried Hermione. "It's easy; just use your wand!"

Reluctantly, Harry drew his wand.

Malfoy crowed, "Told you Potter can't perform without an audience!"

"Shut it, Ferret!" snapped Ron.

"Silence," said Flamel.

The word was whispered yet caused all chatter to cease instantly. As Flamel floated towards him, Harry willed himself to think of something — *anything*! He was sure she would shake her head with disappointment and release him herself, but she didn't.

"Open your mind, little one, not your soul," she suggested. Harry stared. Right, he thought, really helpful. Professor Flamel smiled slightly as she circled his bubble. "Brute force can break the shield, but it is not the only way. Think beyond yourself. Think — bigger."

Flamel retreated into the dark, leaving Harry even more confused. Pocketing his wand, he clambered to his feet, steadying himself with his limbs outstretched. The class, tinged blue under the light of his lone bubble, stared back at him, their upturned faces displaying a mixture of

curiosity, boredom, pity. Harry closed his eyes and tried to everything else out, just as Elizabeth taught him over the summer. Sharp gasps sounded and his eyes shot open in alarm, but all that had happened was that he dropped a few feet.

Open your mind, Harry thought fitfully as his bubble started rising again. What did that even mean? Everyone was always trying to get him to close his mind. Open your mind — not your soul. If he could just calm down and think! Abruptly, his bubble dropped again.

“Okay, okay, I get it,” he muttered under his breath. “Quit feeling and think.”

This was easier said than done with the entire class watching him. He squeezed shut his eyes again and set about jettisoning troubling emotions (there were plenty to pick from today). Drawing deep steadying breaths, he recited in his mind his most familiar mantras, filling his mind with images of a spiralling galaxy; how the stars were home to every living thing; how even the tiniest living things were made up of millions of individual cells. He could feel his heartbeat slowing and an inkling of an idea tickling at the edge of his mind. He was convinced the trick would be in *not* trying to escape, for it was clear that anyone could do that with violence.

Everything you need, you can find within yourself, Professor Flamel said, but then she also said to think beyond that, to think bigger. The DADA classroom faded completely from Harry’s mind and he set about thinking of the biggest, most untouchable, most awe-inspiring thing in his memory. His mind turned to Black Island, when Remus was reading *Captains Courageous* to him on the beach, and all around them, glittering like diamonds, were stars, an eternity of stars, too distant to touch, yet close enough to feel.

Spinning slowly now in his bubble, he felt oddly at peace. In the darkness of his mind’s eye, the stars were a comforting blanket. Sirius was there, watching over him; and down below, on solid ground, was Remus — and Remus wasn’t going anywhere anytime soon. And inside Harry were his parents. Always. It wasn’t a happy thought, exactly, having three of his four protectors being only spirit guardians, but it was comforting to know he was never alone — not really. But Harry also knew he was past looking for other people to protect him. He was ready to learn everything he could in order to fight his own battles against the Dark Arts, against every kind of darkness, to make himself ready for the day when he would face Voldemort and —

Harry jumped, startled by a ringing bell. His bubble was gone and he was sitting at his desk in bright sunshine. Professor Flamel was flipping through a textbook.

“... And if you would be so good as to read Chapter One before our next lesson, we can begin our study of Entrapment Curses. Good afternoon, children.”

“Good afternoon, Professor,” recited the class obediently, and then there followed the usual sounds of chairs scraping and noisy chatter.

“What?” Harry said stupidly.

“Didn’t you hear?” said Ron, thumping him on the back. “She gave you *twenty* points!”

“How did you do it, Harry?” Hermione demanded, succeeding in looking both impressed and put out. The rest of his friends huddled around, also curious.

“Seriously cool bit of wandless magic,” Michael said enviously.

“Oh, it really was!” gushed Hannah. She held her arms out and pivoted gracefully on the spot, her eyes closed and a dreamy smile on her face. “The way you just floated back to earth and then *pop*!” Hannah stopped spinning and clapped her hands. “The bubble was gone and you’re just sitting there, peaceful as can be. I had to do *thirty*-six Reductor Curses to break free! I’m going to be smelling of burnt rubber for days!”

Harry winced; burnt rubber wasn’t the only thing she smelled of. His friends peppered him with questions and wanted to know when they were going to resume DA meetings. Harry hushed them and glanced guiltily towards Flamel, who was smiling softly into a Grindylow tank she had just placed on her desk. He wasn’t quite sure what to make of their new teacher just yet. She seemed okay, but how would she react to them going behind her back?

“Dunno,” he muttered vaguely. “There’s Quidditch to sort out — and I’ve got already got a ton of detentions — just check your Galleons.” He snatched up his satchel and left. Ron and Hermione raced to catch up. The corridor was crowded with students heading outside for their mid-afternoon break. It seemed like every single one of them took the time to stop, point, and squeal as Harry and his *MORE CLUELESS* badge dashed past. Desperate for a breath of fresh air away from the lot of them, he sought higher ground.

“Do we have to?” Ron moaned when he saw where Harry was heading. “Why can’t we go the long way?”

“Shut up; he’ll hear you.”

Halfway down the Forbidden Corridor, Ethelred the Ever-Ready hid a very useful staircase that somehow went straight from the third floor to the sixth in only twelve steps (Harry had given up trying to rationalise that, Wizarding space just didn’t work by Muggle rules). During his life, Ethelred would curse passers-by for merely glancing at his turnips the wrong way. As a marble statue, put upon by centuries of students, he was even more cantankerous. Fortunately, he was in a good mood today, and Hermione’s winning smile, and a very polite ‘please’, was enough to appease the medieval warrior. His long marble legs split apart and Harry, Ron, and Hermione crawled through. Moments later, they emerged on the sixth floor behind a tapestry of six proudly prancing Hippogriffs. Then it was through a small door and out onto a castle balcony with commanding views over the lake and the long castle drive.

Harry didn’t use the terrace much (too cold in winter), but Ron liked it a lot, and Harry was still trying to make amends for the whole my-best-mate-is-an-idiot thing. For some reason, you couldn’t actually see the terrace from the exterior of the castle unless you knew it was there — not until you were practically on top of it anyway. Ron had sniffed it out whilst flying around the castle in their second year. South-facing, the terrace boasted

a drinking fountain spouting cool water from the mouths of playful bronze nymphs, and a potted Katsura tree, the very tree that had betrayed the terrace's existence to Ron. The Katsura's heart-shaped leaves turned pink in autumn and smelled of fairy-floss. When ready to fall, they'd exhale a delicate sigh and turn into little balls of real fairy-floss. If quick, you could nab a delicious sugary treat before the floss hit the ground. Unfortunately, the bench beneath the Katsura was currently occupied by a pair of Ravenclaw girls, but a glare from Ron sent them scurrying, leaving the trio quite alone.

"I love being in the Sixth," Ron said. Collapsing onto the seat, he lazily crossed his arms and stretched out his legs. Harry dallied at the font to play with the nymphs and escape the lingering stench of his two best friends.

"I can't wait for our next Defence lesson!" Hermione declared happily. "Entrapment Curses are fascinating!"

"Fascinating," Ron agreed, staring up at the Katsura longingly, but the tree's leaves had not yet turned, and he had to content himself with inhaling its sugary aroma.

Hermione tried without success to hand around some muesli bars. Undeterred, she grabbed Harry's hand and pulled him down to sit between her and Ron.

"So, how did you do it, Harry?" she demanded, but Harry wasn't about to admit he'd done nothing but calm down and want to learn.

He adopted his most earnest puppy dog eyes and said, "I'd be happy to tell you, but don't you want to figure it out for yourself?"

Hermione mumbled something about the importance of teamwork in problem-solving then disappeared back into her school bag. Ron snickered appreciatively.

He leaned close to whisper in Harry's ear, "But you'll tell *me*, right?"

Harry just grinned and looked out over the sun-drenched lake; he knew it wouldn't be long before the warm days were just a memory.

"Wanna go for a fly?" Ron prompted cheerfully, reading Harry's mind. "We've got the whole afternoon off!"

"*You* might," Hermione said, emerging from her bag with her timetable. "I've got double-Arithmancy."

Harry glanced at her timetable. Something looked wrong. He checked Ron's and found the same mistake.

"You haven't got Care of Magical Creatures marked in," he observed helpfully, pulling out his own timetable to show them. Ron and Hermione exchanged a look. Harry said, "You are doing it, aren't you?"

"I'd really like to," Hermione said carefully, "but my timetable is so full, I had to give something up — I just couldn't ... well, I..." Her voice trailed off uncomfortably.

Hermione's timetable *was* pretty full but Ron's wasn't. Harry just stared at his best mate, not wanting to believe he would let Hagrid down. The silence thickened. Ron caved in first.

"Look, I hated the stupid subject, all right? I mean Hagrid's great and all, but come on, *seriously*! And I'm gonna need all the spare time I can get just to make it through Potions!"

"You were ready to go for a fly two minutes ago," Harry pointed out.

Ron looked to be thinking fast. "Well, yeah, but you want me to practice for Quidditch, don't you?"

Harry pursed his lips in annoyance and took a closer look at Ron's timetable. "You're still doing Divination," he noted.

"Mum wants me to kick on with it. Reckons I should keep my options open."

By some weird fluke, Ron had achieved an Outstanding in Divination — his *only* Outstanding — which only proved to Harry that the marking system (if not the whole subject) was completely meaningless. But having last night announced to the whole school that he thought Ron Weasley was 'completely clueless', Harry was not of a mind to deride Ron's best OWL right now. As for dropping Care of Magical Creatures, the trouble was he could quite easily understand Ron's point of view; he didn't actually like the subject either.

"Fair enough," he conceded with a sigh.

Ron perked up again. "So, come for a fly?"

"Nah, I've got Light Arts."

"What are you doing that for?"

"They do painting and stuff. Thought it might be fun."

"Bit *girlie*, isn't it?"

Stung, Harry muttered, "It's not *girlie*. They do music and statues and stuff."

Genuinely perplexed, Hermione ventured, "But it won't be a *NEWT* if you only start in the Sixth."

Harry wasn't going to argue the point. "I'm doing Light Arts," he said flatly and that was that.

Hermione looked peeved — or maybe it was just the smell getting to her.

"Well," she muttered under her breath, as usual needing to have the last word, "if you want to use up valuable lesson time for hobbies."

She drew her wand and started blowing air over herself, trying in vain to evict the evil gases of *eau de little prince* still hanging about from Herbology; she had not yet noticed that Harry smelled perfectly fine. Harry had a fleeting, unworthy, urge not to tell her about the Purgo Charm. Even though it hadn't worked when he first tried it on Ron, Harry was confident he could do better if they gave him a chance (and she really did stink). He nudged her shoulder with his own and invited her to smell him. She gave him a look that was easily as foul as The Little Prince.

"There's no need to be rude, Harry. I was just giving you my honest opinion."

"I wasn't trying to be — oh, forget it."

Harry returned to staring at the lake, watching the Giant Squid propel itself across the sunlit surface. Stuck between his smelly best friends, Harry rather envied the squid. Not for the first time, he wondered if he was making the right choice about Light Arts. It had been Susan Bones who planted the idea in his head about the subject, but Harry was honest enough with himself to know she wasn't the only reason. Elizabeth was all for it when Harry asked for her advice, and *she* was an Auror. She said they were always looking for candidates with creative minds — people who could think 'outside the box', not just memorise a lot of spells.

"Look," he said, trying again, "I just wanted to try a subject that's a bit of fun — I can always drop it if it gets too much. Now, are you going to smell me or not?"

"I am *not* smelling you!"

"Just one sniff."

"No way!"

"C'mon, Hermione, I'm *not* being rude; I've got this charm. It's really good!"

Ron snorted disparagingly. "*Skunk* Charm: doubles the stink on you."

"No, it doesn't," Harry said at once. Ron raised an eyebrow, supremely disinterested; the charm had not worked well on him at lunch. "Look," Harry said irritably, "if you'd just let me take another shot —"

"Do it on yourself if it's so good," challenged Ron.

"No problem!" Harry pointed his wand at himself and conjured the purest, happiest thoughts he could think of; it was easy; he just thought about his mum. "*Purgo Puteo*!"

Hermione's nose wrinkled suspiciously, though she refused to bring it any closer to him.

"I don't smell anything bad ..." she conceded. "Where did you learn this charm?"

"In hospital," replied Harry, which was true enough, for that was where he possessed Frank Longbottom. Hermione shifted gears faster than a Viktor Krum feint.

"A healing charm! Why didn't you say so?" She leaned in closer and sniffed deeply at Harry's neck. "Oh, you smell lovely! Like fresh-baked bread — or a pie, maybe."

"No, I don't," said Harry. Frowning, he sniffed himself; he smelled nothing of the sort. Then Ron was sniffing him too.

"Short crust pastry," advised the expert. "Fresh out of the oven. Sugar baked into the crust." Ron inhaled more deeply, his brow creased in thought. "Peaches!" he declared confidently.

"I do *not* smell of peaches!" Harry declared firmly, sliding further away from Ron. "And quit sniffing me!"

"It's more of a baking smell to me," said Hermione, inhaling contentedly at Harry's neck. "It's really nice, actually."

"Do me!" Ron ordered at once.

Determined not to skunk Ron again, Harry was careful to perform the spell perfectly. Ron sniffed at his arm then smiled uncertainly.

"Smell me."

Harry sniffed briefly at Ron's shoulder. The bad smells were gone, leaving a whiff of something else.

"Honey," breathed Hermione vacantly from Harry's other side. Surprised she could smell it over her own stink, Harry nodded. Eagerly, she said, "Me next!"

Harry gladly obliged. Curious, he sniffed at her ear, catching a strangely familiar fragrance — a kind of Christmassy spice. Ron was smiling dopily. Harry thought it was lucky his mate had the afternoon off because the heady combination of candyfloss Katsura leaves, honey, peach pie (Harry still didn't buy that), and now fruitcake was bound to make him useless for the rest of the day. Hermione sniffed suspiciously at her elbow.

"I don't smell anything," she said, oddly disappointed for someone who had just stopped smelling like a dead Doxy. Ron pulled her hand across Harry's lap and sniffed deeply at her wrist.

"Yeah, you do," he assured her, his eyes glazing. "You smell like — what are those sharp little things that make other stuff smell good?"

Hermione was still frowning. "Cloves?"

"You smell very nice," Harry assured her.

"*Really* nice!" Ron agreed earnestly. He inhaled deeply at her wrist again. "Seriously, you smell *really, really* good."

Pinking, Hermione murmured, "They use cloves in fighting gum disease ... and toothaches."

Ron's fingers slid into Hermione's sleeve and pushed it right up to her elbow, revealing a long expanse of milky skin to inhale, which he did with great enthusiasm. Harry, stuck in the middle, looked to the sky and silently begged for the bell to ring. It didn't.

Blissfully deep in her elbow, Ron said, "You smell like — like a really nice piece of pork —"

"Like a *what*?" Highly affronted, Hermione whipped her arm away. "Are you saying I smell like a *pig*? Is *that* what you're saying?"

Bewilderment filled Ron's freckled face. "Who said anything about a pig?"

Hermione's bushy hair crackled ominously. "What was the *Miss Piggy* perfume about, then?"

Harry choked a laugh. He knew Ron had given Hermione perfume for Christmas, but he couldn't possibly have been so stupid as to —

"Lavender said you'd love it!" cried Ron. "It's Muggle and everything. Took me ages to find it!"

"I can well imagine," Hermione returned frostily.

"I need to get to Light Arts!" Harry declared.

At serious risk of injuring himself if he stayed a moment longer, he almost tripped over in his haste to escape.

Lady Alchymia
FanficAuthors.net

Psychomachia

Chapter 4 — Oribel the Whimsical

After being told by Ron that Light Arts was for girls, Harry was relieved to see a decent representation of boys outside the classroom. Michael Corner was there, and he was all right — Neville, Dean, and Seamus, too, though Seamus didn't look entirely happy about it.

Right on the bell, the door opened to reveal tiny Professor Oribel, fear in her eyes and a hand clapped tight across her nose. Muttering apologies, the stinky students filed past and into a large, airy classroom. Long windows flooded the room with light and revealed dusty corners full of half-painted portraits, half-carved statues, and boxes that trembled, as if anxious to be opened. One whole wall was lined with pigeonholes stuffed with dusty scrolls tied with faded pink ribbons. Tottering stacks of art supplies were scattered about as well as glass cabinets full of weird instruments. These were to be expected, but one thing was not — a rather large one thing. Embedded in the far wall was an enormous Giant Clam.

Still smelling of death, Susan took the liberty of opening the windows wide. Harry helped. Musical chimes sounded. Startled, they looked up to see an avant-garde chandelier constructed of silver knitting needles high above them (no doubt the major work of some past student). Harry eyed the dangling needles warily but none fell; they seemed to be rather enjoying the breeze.

While her students found seats around a circle of tall, slanting desks, Professor Oribel lingered at the door, peering outside and frowning. Meanwhile, Harry gave Michael a nudge and quietly offered to purify him (Harry knew that a bloke would not be offended by such an offer). Harry was correct and once Michael was done the rest of the students pleaded for the Purgo Charm, too. With Harry concentrating hard on his spell work, the fetid odours filling the room were soon replaced with an intoxicating melange of fragrances. The dreamy scents quickly dissipated on the breeze, but the happily vacant expressions lasted a while longer. It became obvious people were unable to smell their own scent, and Harry was forced to conclude that he probably did, indeed, smell of peach pie. It could be worse; Neville got garlic and Seamus got corned beef. Working his way around the circle, Harry did Susan, seated to his left, last and was just enjoying a most delicious whiff of vanilla — and forgetting why he ever thought giving up on girls was a good idea — when he realised Michael was poking him in the shoulder — hard.

"Greetings, Hogwarts students," said a husky voice. Professor Oribel stood inside the circle of desks on a platform raised for her to meet her student's eye-lines. Today she wore simple brown robes, over which was tied a crisp white work-apron.

"Greetings, Professor Oribel," the class returned politely.

Her elongated fingers trembled slightly as she unfurled a scroll and took the roll, stumbling over some of the more difficult names (and feeling the need to consult prefect Hannah Abbott before calling anyone a Longbottom). There were a number of missing students — all Slytherins. Harry thought the class was well rid of them, but Professor Oribel looked uncertainly towards the open door.

"Should we wait ...?" she asked no one in particular.

"Nah," Harry said lightly, drawing his wand before anyone could object. "Allow me. *Colloportus!*"

The door swung shut and locked with a satisfying squelch.

"Thank you, Mr Potter," said the young professor. She leaned forward a little and added, "May I give you points for getting rid of that smell?"

The class laughed and clapped appreciatively. Professor Oribel smiled shyly back at them.

"Absolutely," Harry said, adding helpfully, "I'm in Gryffindor." Professor Oribel nodded. Uncertain again, she scurried over to Hannah.

"I'd say about twenty points," suggested Hannah in a stage whisper. "We *were* pretty rank."

"Yes, you were," the little goblin agreed guilelessly. "Twenty points to Gryffindor!" She looked around hopefully for a moment, as if to hear the rubies falling in the Gryffindor hourglass, but it was only the tinkling of knitting needles on the breeze.

Finally, the class was ready to begin. Professor Oribel lifted her delicately pointed chin, took a deep breath, and said, "Inside your desks, you will find some of the tools we will be using this year." The students lifted the lids of their desks to find well-worn sets of artists' tools: paintbrushes, chisels, hammers, sculpting knives, and the like. "You are responsible for ensuring that your equipment is kept clean and in good repair at all times. You must treat your tools with respect, or they will —"

"*OW!*" cried Lavender. She jumped off her stool and flung a chisel at a wall, where it stuck, quivering. Harry watched, astonished, as the chisel wiggled free and then disappeared deep into a pigeonhole.

"... Or they will *not* let you use them!" finished the professor, hurrying across the room. Muttering in Gobbledegook, she coaxed the chisel out of its hole, stroked it gently until it calmed down, then somewhat reluctantly returned it to Lavender, who was still sucking her thumb. "It would be wise," Professor Oribel said sternly, not looking quite so whimsical now, "for you to *introduce* yourselves to your tools before you touch them."

Embarrassed laughter travelled around the room as the students held up the lids of their desks once more and started greeting their tools.

"Um, hi," said Harry in a low voice, thinking that this was about the stupidest thing he'd done in a very long time, "my name's Harry. Erm ..."
Harry glanced across to Michael, who was already having a good chat with an excitable little hammer.

"I've got my own sculpting set at home," Michael told Harry. "Took me ages to break them in." Harry could well believe it.

Turning back to his own tools, he blew into his cheeks before whispering into his desk, "Right, well, nice to meet you all. I hope — um — you know — we can do some good work together ... um ..."

A sable paintbrush nudged at Harry's fingertips. Harry risked a gentle touch. The brush growled and quivered contentedly, bringing a rather silly smile to Harry's lips. Susan was also smiling sheepishly into her desk.

She caught Harry's eye and whispered, "Is this the daftest thing you've ever done?"

Harry's mind went blank. He started to smile back, but Susan had already turned away to deal with a pair of duelling putty knives. Harry's eyes narrowed with dislike when Justin, one seat further along, leaned over to help her.

Professor Oribel called them to order. "Tools such as these can help bring your creative visions to life, but they take a great deal of time and effort to master. In fact, it is not so much a question of mastering the tools, as creating a partnership with them."

She jumped, startled, at a knock on the door. Harry resignedly issued an Alohomora Charm, and two Slytherin girls, Daphne Greengrass and Millicent Bulstrode, poked their heads into the room.

"Sorry," Daphne said lightly, "got a bit lost."

Susan rolled her eyes at that and Harry concurred; the Light Arts classroom, located on the sixth floor — not far from the Katsura terrace — had not been *that* difficult to find, not for sixth years. Professor Oribel, however, was sympathetic and waved the girls to a pair of empty stools. A horribly cloying perfume (which failed miserably in masking the stench of Little Prince) wafted across the room and made Professor Oribel's slanted eyes water. Millicent Bulstrode, who Ron and Harry privately rated as being well capable of snapping most sixth year boys in two, pointedly moved away from Daphne to a seat next to Neville.

"It's not me," grunted the heavy-set witch — which was true; she did not take Herbology.

Daphne just rolled her eyes. Slightly built with dark-blond hair and sloe-shaped eyes, Daphne was definitely one of the prettier sixth-year girls (and she knew it), but right now, Harry thought she smelled like something Hagrid would dab on in an effort to attract Thestrals whilst on a date with Madam Maxine. The smell was clearly too much for Professor Oribel.

"Mr Potter? Would you mind ...?"

Ordinarily, there was no way Harry would do a Slytherin a favour, but then again, he didn't fancy spending the afternoon smelling her stink, either. Resignedly, he rose to his feet and walked around the circle to take a good shot at her. Daphne leapt from her stool in alarm when Harry drew his wand. Professor Oribel rushed forward.

"You smell very bad," she assured the girl. "Mr Potter will cleanse you."

"Like hell he will!" Daphne declared over cackles of laughter from the rest of the students (including Millicent Bulstrode).

Harry just smiled sweetly and twirled his wand in his fingers, thoroughly enjoying the Slytherin's discomfort. Daphne looked ready to flee and Harry was of a mind to help her along. He remembered only too well what a hard time she, along with the rest of Pansy Parkinson's gang, had given him when he and Cho tried to go out. He started conjuring evil thoughts so he could skunk her good and proper; it wasn't hard.

"It's all right, Daphne," Justin assured her. "Harry did all of us. He's got this brilliant purification charm."

Harry groaned inwardly. Trust a Hufflepuff to ruin a perfectly good opportunity for some well-deserved payback.

"Oh, well, if *you* say so, Justin," Daphne said coyly, surprising Harry. A Slytherin fancying a Muggle-born? Susan was rolling her eyes again, perhaps annoyed to discover she had competition for Justin's affections. Harry decided he'd always liked Daphne.

"It'll be fine," he promised her. He fully intended keeping his word, but there was just one hitch. Despite his newfound fondness for the girl, Harry just couldn't bring himself to think positively about a Slytherin witch and his mum in the same breath. Instead, he closed his eyes and carefully conjured a warm memory of Frank Longbottom cuddling baby Neville. It then took Harry longer again before he was confident he'd managed to eject all the gratuitous and negative thoughts from his mind.

"Are you just going to *point* that thing at me all day?" Daphne drawled sarcastically, breaking Harry from his positive frame of mind.

"It's harder than it looks for *some* people," he said sourly. Daphne just stood there, cross-armed and bored. Harry shut his eyes tightly and started clearing his mind all over again. He kept reminding himself that the girl hadn't done anything to him lately; she hadn't been in Umbridge's Inquisitorial Squad like the Bulstrode hag; she only stank because of him in the first place; she'd been putting up with the smell all day; she deserved to be clean; she deserved to be ...

Harry's heart just wasn't in it. He tried another tack: She had a point about Cho.

"*Purgo Puteo!*"

The worst of the smells faded away, though not completely, and there was no telltale whiff of something tasty left behind. Daphne, however, was pleased enough and skipped around the circle to claim a vacant seat next to Justin without even thanking Harry. Professor Oribel clapped her hands in relief and gratefully awarded Gryffindor another 1.34 points. Harry blinked, bemused.

Professor Oribel explained. "Twenty points for fifteen students; one point three-four points for one student. I rounded up," she added helpfully.

Harry thanked her but tried to explain that they didn't really do decimals at Hogwarts. Professor Oribel didn't quite seem to believe him.

"Imprecision in gemstones is most unwise," she assured him very seriously. Harry could only agree.

Professor Oribel went on to announce in her low, breathy voice that Light Arts was a vast subject, encompassing Art, Sculpture, Music, Literature, Philosophy, Healing, Communication, Poetry and much more, though she said the best they could hope for in just two years was to create what she called 'a few toys'.

"But if you are adept," she added encouragingly, "we may be able to explore a little. If you will all follow me, please."

The students followed and gathered curiously around the Giant Clam. Professor Oribel gently tickled the underside of the scalloped shell, and the students jumped back as the clam creaked open to reveal a tiered orchestra filled with musical instruments: lyres, guitars, violins, bagpipes and such but also some weird Wizarding ones that Professor Oribel invited them to examine. The girls squealed in fright, and the boys laughed, when they realised that the xylophone Millicent Bulstrode was slamming with a thighbone was actually made of shrunken heads — and the heads weren't looking at all happy about it. Professor Oribel, showing impressive strength in her slender arms, wrestled the thighbone from Millicent and ordered the students back to their desks. After calming the snapping, biting heads, she gave the clam another tickle and it creaked shut. Thoroughly rattled, she dallied by the clam for a moment to calm down, smoothing her shiny apron and shock of white-gold hair.

"You may now take notes," she suggested firmly. Disappointed sighs accompanied the rustling of schoolbags as quills and notebooks came out; Harry wasn't the only one who'd been hoping they'd get to try out their new tools straight away. Heading for the other end of the room, the little professor called out, "We shall now look at some of the materials with which you will be working."

While she gathered some boxes from a far corner, Michael leaned towards Harry and said, "So, how long is Weasley gonna make you wear that thing?"

Harry glanced down at his *MORE CLUELESS* badge and blew out his cheeks. "Well, if I can behave myself, he may let me lose it in time for Potterfest seventeen."

"I like that you're wearing it," decided Susan and Harry smiled at her. "I mean it was pretty rough what you said," she added bluntly, squinting with annoyance as she tried to pick some shrivelled rubber off her sleeve.

Harry's face fell, but he could hardly blame her for thinking him an arrogant bully: frightening little kids, dangling them over balconies, hissing at them in the dark in Parseltongue.

Professor Oribel returned and passed around numerous specimen boxes containing a great many rocks and metals: granite, marble, copper, tin, and crystals of every shape, size, and colour. There were knobbly nuggets of emeralds, hematite, calcite, Labradorite, magnetite, Sunstone, and many more. There was even a Merlinite. As the stones travelled around the Light Arts circle, Professor Oribel encouraged the students to examine them closely.

"Can you feel the vibrations?" she prompted hopefully.

Harry closed his fingers around a piece of polished onyx, straining to feel something other than a small, hard rock. The rest of the students were doing the same with whichever crystals were in front of them. Across the other side of the circle, Harry heard Seamus muttering under his breath, "Why am I here?"

Dean scowled at his best friend, but Professor Oribel was delighted.

"You must be holding Luvulite," she declared happily, and explained to the class that Luvulite prompted the bearer to ask himself such questions. She took the pink and violet-striped stone from Seamus's hand and walked around with it to show to the class. "Luvulite is one of the major loving stones. It focuses spiritual love and wisdom. It can help bring light and love to the very darkest of times. It is also helpful for beings who feel they are misfits and do not find it easy to call the Earth their home. Luvulite can also inspire beings to defeat obstacles to learning." She handed the stone back to Seamus and suggested most gently, "You should keep this."

Seamus went very red and Dean failed spectacularly to hide a toothy grin.

Daphne held a tourmaline wand to the light and observed in a bored voice, "Crystals are a bit old-fashioned aren't they? Professor Snape says they're very unreliable."

Professor Oribel inclined her head thoughtfully. "Crystals possess their own powerful magic, but the magic is not easily bent to the will of the wizard, which can make them seem unreliable to those who crave dominance over their Art."

"Like Snape," Michael whispered to Harry, who smirked his agreement. Harry couldn't see Severus Snape swapping his beloved cauldron for a handful of whimsical rocks anytime soon.

Taking measured steps around her circular platform, Professor Oribel said, "Crystals are imbued with the most ancient of earthly magic."

Harry's ears picked up at that. Lord Voldemort might not have much time for Ancient Magic, but Harry knew its protective power. A question burned unspoken on his lips: was this Ancient Magic the power that he had that Voldemort had not at all? Dumbledore implied the power was love. Crystals that possessed some kind of Love Magic for defeating obstacles didn't seem quite so silly now, but Harry wondered how such magic could be used by him to defeat Voldemort. He, Harry, was hardly some kind of crystal bullet to shoot at the Dark Wizard. Professor Oribel

reached into one of the boxes, looking for something, and pulled out two small stones.

“These are Boji Stones,” she announced huskily, holding up two metallic-brown stones, one in each hand. “Boji Stones are natural aural energisers. In art, we use them to re-energise holes in a subject’s aura when donations are made for portrait animations.” She handed one stone to Neville and the other to Hannah to pass in opposite directions around the circle. “They are as old as the Earth itself and can be used individually or in pairs of male and female stones. You will see that the male crystal has square protrusions and the female is smooth. Your subject should try to carry one or more Bojis to boost their aura prior to sitting for their portrait. The male stone exudes solar energy, which gives a being solidity, the female lunar energy, which enables transfiguration. The stones will know what your subject lacks.”

“They have intelligence?” Mandy Brocklehurst, a Ravenclaw, ventured sceptically.

Professor Oribel considered the question. “Not intelligence — more that the power within the Boji is drawn to holes within a being’s aura. Like water poured over uneven ground, it will find its own level.”

“Why don’t people use them all the time?” Susan asked curiously.

Professor Oribel smiled a little. “There are — side effects. Boji Stones have excellent healing applications in clearing blocked emotions and dealing with painful memories, but this can be — distracting. And since the Boji is so full of earthly forces, it also means that it is a very powerful grounding crystal, which can sometimes be — inconvenient.” The little goblin paused and added confidently, “I suggest you do not carry one in your pocket if you are taking your Apparition Test. You will fail. Badly.”

The class chuckled at that, but everyone was careful to note it down since they would indeed be learning to Apparate this year.

The two stones had made their way all around to Harry and Susan by now. Harry’s was round and smooth — clearly a female Boji. He went to swap stones with Susan, but Professor Oribel stopped him.

“Alone, each Boji exudes a certain primordial power, but when used together ...” and here she placed both stones in Harry’s upturned palm and then closed Susan’s hand over his, “two Boji Stones together, in the right hands, are capable of wondrous things.”

Harry and Susan glanced awkwardly at each other, not sure what they were supposed to do; Professor Oribel was just standing there, watching them expectantly. Then it happened. The stones started vibrating inside their clasped hands. The vibrations merged into a single thumping heartbeat, and a heavy, warm sensation swept over Harry, as if he was being wrapped in a soft embrace. Everything went dim, dark. Then he was falling — no, not falling, sinking — softly, deeply, safely. Lily whipped out her wand; she was furious with James.

“*You’re just an arrogant, bullying toerag, Potter!*”

Harry whipped his hand away. The stones clattered across the desk and onto the floor. Harry dived under the desk to retrieve them.

“Grounding usually takes much longer,” Professor Oribel said approvingly.

Harry wasn’t nearly so pleased. Why did *that* memory have to surface? Why now? Did Susan see it, too? He risked a sideways glance. Susan’s cheeks were flushed and her eyes firmly fixed on her desk.

“Boji Stones are very rare,” Oribel was telling the class, “and very valuable. The stones can be recharged by exposure to the rays of the sun and the moon, but if the energy within is allowed to completely deplete, they will crumble to dust. They are best stored on a windowsill with good light.”

Harry hunched over his desk, taking notes and feeling rattled about what the stones made him see.

“But whilst the *brown* Boji prevents movement through the astral plane,” continued Professor Oribel, “the *blue* Boji actually aids lost souls in finding their way back into their bodies.” Harry looked up with interest. That had been the hardest thing when he was outside his body: getting back in. But Professor Oribel said no more about Boji Stones. She turned, instead, to talking about goblets carved from single crystals for binding ceremonies, such as for weddings and truces, and most of the remainder of the lesson was spent discussing the kinds of metals and stones that were most magically receptive to sculpting, engraving, and animating.

“But the most vital ingredient in art,” she said breathily, as if revealing a great secret, “is the concept and emotion of the work. Do you have your mythology texts?”

Another rustling of bags sounded as the students each dragged out a weighty tome, *Magical World Mythology*, by Sophia Demiurge, a red leather-bound book full of elaborate moving illustrations and fables from all over the world. Professor Oribel encouraged her students to flick through their books.

“You will find tales that have inspired Light Wizards for thousands of years.” The young goblin’s eyes misted over dreamily and she rocked a little on her heels. “Myths of creation, like the Great Sneeze of Nostrilamus. Legends of great travellers, like Lug the Legless. Gods and goddesses, like Zeus and Hera. Folk tales, hearth stories, nymphs and satyrs ... so much to capture the imagination and inspire the soul. And all of these tales carry ancient truths about —”

“Not gods and goddesses,” scoffed Daphne. “I mean they’re not *real* .”

Professor Oribel’s head tilted a little. “The pantheon of the Earth’s gods and goddesses is certainly immense, and it is true that many stories can be — elastic — with the truth and grow even more fanciful with the telling. Take Zeus, for example, who could punish people with bolts of lightning and disguise himself as swans and bulls and golden showers. Some believe he was an Olympian god, others believe he was an avaricious Metamorphmagus with a wandering eye and delusions of grandeur.”

There were chuckles at this from around the circle. Oribel the Whimsical ran an elongated finger lovingly along the edge of Neville's textbook.

"But true or not," she said, dreamy-eyed again, "such tales are rich with intriguing characters. Characters full of courage, revenge, jealousy, rage ... love. And these things are very real for all beings. Without an investment in profound emotions, your works, no matter how finely carved or painted, will be no more than pretty paperweights and wall coverings."

The final bell rang, leaving Harry disappointed. He hoped to do more than just sit around talking about rocks. It had practically been a *Hermione* lesson. The students packed up to leave, but Harry was in no hurry to go downstairs and resume being the laughing stock of the school. Instead, he went to ask Professor Oribel if he could try out the instruments, but Susan beat him to it.

"Oh," said Susan, backing off. "No, you go ahead, Harry — I need to go get my music anyway. I can come back later. If that's okay, Professor?"

Professor Oribel was quite amenable and re-opened the Giant Clam for Harry. He picked out the most normal-looking guitar and sat down at the piano to tune it. Professor Oribel perched on a stool nearby and didn't hesitate for a moment in correcting his mistakes. Harry was quite happy to take her advice, and the better he played, the happier she grew.

"You need more practice, much more," she observed, "but you have grace in your fingers. It is pleasing."

Harry would take her word for that. "Do you play all these instruments, Professor?"

"Oh no," breathed Professor Oribel, "the harp is my pleasure. Other strings from time to time, but I like the harp. It has the most wonderful mathematics. So pure — so articulate. The precision within your fingertips," she said, curling her elongated fingers as if plucking at strings, "is most exhilarating to explore."

"And the piano?" Harry asked, thinking of Susan.

"The piano is but a harp trapped inside a box," she replied. Impishly, and she stretched out her long feet and confided, "And my toes do not reach the pedals." Climbing down from her stool, she said, "I am sorry, Mr Potter, but I must return to my workshop now. My tools will be anxious to continue. I promised I would not be gone long. We are at a most delicate point," she assured him.

Standing at the edge of the clamshell, she lingered a moment to look around her empty classroom. The late summer sun was sending lazy sunbeams creeping across the empty circle of desks, but none reached the cool interior of the clamshell; only Oribel's delicate profile and shock of white-gold hair were illuminated in silhouette.

"You did really well today," Harry offered unthinkingly then bit his tongue; he didn't know why he said that.

"Thank you, Mr Potter," she said shyly. She rocked a little on her heels and confided that it had been her first class ever.

"I would never have guessed," Harry lied gallantly.

"Oh!" she cried. "I forgot to set homework!"

"We hardly ever get homework the first week," Harry lied comfortably and his teacher nodded.

"It is very — new, being here," she admitted hesitantly. "So many beings — all at once. Mealtimes are very ... loud."

Harry nodded sympathetically. "You know, the teachers don't always come down to the Great Hall to eat. I bet the house-elves would be happy to bring you your meals. I can pop by the kitchens on my way to tea. Shall I tell them to take your dinner to your workshop?"

Professor Oribel nodded gratefully. As a thank you, or perhaps just because she wanted him to practice more, she gave him permission to use the Light Arts classroom when it was not otherwise in use.

"You will need the password for the door," she said. She looked around before confiding in a whisper, "*Bacioni* ." Then she spelled it for him, just to be sure. "Oh, and Miss Bones, too. You will pass that on?" Harry nodded. "But you must be very careful — there are many valuables in this classroom."

"We'll be careful," Harry promised her.

Professor Oribel was not gone long when Susan returned. Harry swiftly surrendered the piano seat.

"Thanks," panted Susan, climbing into the shell and dumping a heavy portfolio on the closed lid of the piano. "I was just in the Great Hall," she offered helpfully. "Ron and Hermione are doing prep down there."

Harry didn't imagine that was Ron's idea. In no hurry to referee a row over Muppets, he dallied at an open window, staring down to where a group of first years were tumbling around on the grass. They looked so tiny and happy, not a care in the world. Two of the little girls, Amanda and Willow, were doing handstands and trying to hold up each other's legs and robes. They were making a terrible meal of the job and looked for all the world like a pair of baby bats. Hector and Brutus weren't helping matters. They'd dash forward to tickle the girls and then get caught up in a tangle of legs and robes when the girls collapsed, giggling, on top of them.

"Sorry," Susan called out, noticing Harry loitering, "I'll probably be a while — did you want to keep practicing?"

Harry waved her to sit back down. "No, no. I had my turn. I just didn't really fancy ..." Harry shrugged, "... I dunno ... Great Hall gets a bit noisy when I'm around."

"Ah," said Susan understandingly, making Harry feel like an idiot. Why on earth had he said that? "You're welcome to hang up here," Susan offered, "if you can put up with me being all stop-start on the keyboard."

Harry didn't need a second invitation. He found a sunny spot beneath one of the windows and lay down on his stomach with his copy of *Magical World Mythology*. The Great Sneeze of Nostrilamus was just too tempting not to look up, but the hot sun across Harry's back, and the knitting needles tinkling musically on the breeze, provided stiff competition. He didn't even make it past the first Handkerchief of Doom.

"Wha —" he mumbled.

Someone was nudging him awake. He twisted around and gazed blearily into a pair of clear hazel eyes.

"Teatime, sleepy," Susan said, grinning. Harry hurriedly swiped the drool from his mouth with his sleeve and pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "Come on," she said, offering him a hand up.

They closed up the clam and classroom and headed downstairs through the mad maze of hundreds of stairs and passageways that was Hogwarts Castle. There were plenty of shortcuts Harry could have suggested, but speed was the last thing on the lad's mind. He knew very well just how rare it was to get girls completely on their own and he racked his brains for something clever and witty to say. Clever and witty? Harry would settle for simple and sane but his mind was a complete blank. In an effort to buy more time, he led Susan down several sets of trick stairs that landed them back on the floors above.

"Are you okay, Harry?" prompted Susan quietly as they strolled down the old forbidden corridor on the third floor.

"No, I'm good," he said quickly. "Why?"

"You just seem a bit distracted," she observed mildly. "And this is the third time we've come down this corridor. Evening, Ethelred."

Ethelred the Ever-Ready, looking as vexed as ever, deigned to give Susan a curt nod.

Harry grimaced ruefully and said, "I was kind of hoping you wouldn't notice."

Susan said nothing to that; she just strolled to the end of the corridor and sat down on a short set of steps. Sprung, Harry sat down too and waited resignedly for whatever lecture was coming. Susan fidgeted for a bit, straightening the music in her lap.

"Those Boji Stones were something," she said finally. Thrown, all Harry could manage was a nod. "Harry, I saw something ... a kind of daydream, I guess." Slumped over his knees, Harry toyed unhappily with his frayed shoelaces. "There was a girl with red hair, like me," said Susan, "and you were there, but our features were all mixed up. I was calling you a bully."

Harry's flinched at that, but he could hardly explain that it wasn't him but his father, *James Potter*, being told off by the red-haired, green-eyed Lily Evans.

"Harry, I might be wrong," Susan said delicately, "but I don't think the vision came from me."

Harry's face grew warm. "No, it didn't. Look, it's nothing. It's stupid. Please, just forget it."

Hugging her portfolio to her chest, Susan's eyes clouded over with concern. "Harry, I know you've been getting a hard time about last night, but I'm sure it'll all blow over. And Ron'll come around," she added encouragingly.

Feeling humiliated all over again about the way he'd mouthed off so arrogantly about his best friend, about scaring little kids, about all the other stupid things he said, Harry had nothing to offer in his defence, not a thing, and it was with a strained kind of laugh that he said, "You must think I'm completely mental."

"Well, yeah," Susan said frankly. She smiled at the look on Harry's face. "In a *good* way," she assured him. "Too many people just accept things as they are. I think it was really wonderful how you stepped up and refused to take any of that pure-blood nonsense. I was really proud and impressed with what you did. *More* people should be so mental. And it certainly didn't hurt to have the rest of the school listen in as well. People are finally ready to hear what you have to say, Harry, and it was a really good and powerful message."

Harry was ill-equipped to cope with compliments. She was impressed?

"But," he started uncertainly, "about Ron ... you said how rough it was, what I said about him."

"Well, it was," Susan said unflinchingly. "But did you really mean it?"

"Never!" Harry said vehemently. "I don't even know how it came out like that; it was never what I meant to say."

"Good," Susan said simply, and relief washed over Harry; she understood, she really understood, and it was okay. "I don't think you're a bully, Harry," she added softly.

"No," said Harry. "I mean that's good. I mean ..."

There was an odd little smile on Susan's face as she leaned closer and whispered, "Do you reckon we can go downstairs now?"

Smiling sheepishly, Harry helped the girl to her feet. They walked on in silence, but it was a deliciously comfortable silence this time, and Harry

was obliged to reveal a definite spring in his step. Susan paused to tickle a cherub engraved on a thick oak door; the cherub giggled and the door swung open to reveal another set of stairs.

"You know," she offered conversationally, as they automatically stepped over a trick step, "the kids were so excited about their grand adventure; it's all they could talk about last night. They were so proud of themselves for standing up for that little Mallory girl. You gave them that pride, Harry."

"Nah, it was all their idea; all I did was rouse on them."

"Well, sometimes people *need* a little telling off. Do you reckon they've got a crystal for that?"

"They do indeed," Harry invented. "Disappointite: Guaranteed to defeat your inner idiot."

"Oh, I so need to get one of those. I bet Professor McGonagall's got a few."

"Yep. Got a great boxful of them in her office. She shares them with me all the time, you know."

"Generous."

"Well, I'm special."

They had just reached the entrance hall when Susan turned to Harry and observed, "You know, I don't think I've ever called anyone a *toerag* before; mind if I use that?"

"It's all yours. Just not on me, okay?"

"Spoilsport." Susan headed for the Great Hall, but Harry held back.

"I'm coming in, I just need to run an errand for Professor Oribel," he said and Susan nodded.

"See you later, Harry."

"Yeah, see you. Oh, Susan," Harry rushed forward to whisper a word in her ear. Startled, Susan fell back, confusing Harry no end. "It's the password to the Light Arts classroom," he explained. "Professor Oribel said we could use the clam for practice after hours."

Susan was turning very pink. "Oh, thanks. Bye."

Mystified, Harry watched as the girl practically run away from him.

Harry's quick errand was foiled by Dobby and the other house-elves, who all made a great fuss over him. It seemed that Harry Potter telling the whole school that the Hogwarts house-elves were fantastic cooks went down exceedingly well in the kitchens, and Harry was obliged to smile through gritted teeth as Dobby led his fellow house-elves in rousing rendition of *For He's a Jolly Good Wizard*. The elves were quick to assure Harry that they would take very good care of Professor Oribel, since, as a friend of Harry Potter, she was clearly 'no common goblin'. Harry felt annoyed at that, thinking that they should be treating her well for her own sake, but decided to leave well enough alone. He was, however, forced to have a word when Dobby tried to alter his *MORE CLUELESS* badge to say *MORE WONDERFUL*.

Propped up in bed that night, Harry took up his quill to write to his guardian. Faced with a blank sheet of parchment, Harry pondered just how much he wanted to tell. Remus certainly didn't need to hear about what an idiot his ward had been at the welcome feast, nor how he'd managed to putrefy everyone in Herbology. Nor did Remus need to know how the corridors filled with taunts and giggles every time Harry Potter passed by with his *MORE CLUELESS* badge flashing. And he could hardly tell him about the Purgo Charm, because he might recognise it as a spell of Lily's since James and Frank Longbottom clearly hadn't learned it at Hogwarts. On a more positive note, Harry contemplated telling Remus about his escape from Flamel's bubble trap, but he didn't want to look like he was bragging. The truth of the matter was that there was only *one* thing Harry *really* wanted to tell him.

Dear Moony,

Hope you and Elizabeth are both well and that she wasn't too cross about the last ten years.

First day back was pretty full. Ron got into Potions after all. Snape is being a complete prat as per usual. Nothing we can't handle.

My new teachers aren't bad. Professor Perenelle Flamel is teaching DADA. She's not as good as you, of course, but she's a vast improvement on the troll. I've got Professor Oribel for Light Arts and she gave me a guitar lesson after class, which was really good. Not urgent, but I need to get some Boji Stones. A blue pair and a brown pair (males and females). Do you think the Apothecary would stock them?

Nothing much else to tell. There's one thing I wanted to ask you, though. You're good at languages, right? Do you know what 'bacioni' means? It's probably Gobbledegook, so Bill might know if you don't (if you happen to see him).

Thanks a lot,

Harry

P.S. I made captain. In case you wanted to know.
