



# Shadow Council : Preludes Book One

## Through the Looking Glass (part 1)

Salem Massachusetts

The Explosion that rocked the small estate outside Salem would likely have gone entirely unnoticed had it been even slightly smaller. The fact that it threw debris up into the air almost three thousand feet, however, and rained it down on the town of Salem put an end to any hope the Governing Board had of keeping it quiet from the locals.

Luckily, they were tolerant of such things in Salem, having learned a long time ago that it was best to ignore the unusual as much as possible. The last time they'd really paid attention to the small estate had been in Sixteen Ninety Three, and they'd paid a price for trying to draw the Institute into their petty games of morality, religion, and politics.

Even so, the damage control was difficult, as the local media started looking for the cause of the explosion and source of the raining debris, locals began expounding on old legends and things best left quiet, and the Institute found itself rather tightly pressed and actually unable to put their normal level of enthusiasm into repairs and such.

Additionally, the explosion was proving... difficult to... well, stop.

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"Good Lord, Arthur, what were they mixing in there?" Stephen Smythe muttered, eyeing the gout of flame that was still coming from the Alchemical Laboratories.

"I have my doubts we'll ever entirely know, Stephen," Arthur Fitzpatrick sighed, rubbing his long beard as he subtly shook his head. "I suppose we should move on to new business, however."

Stephen rolled his eyes.

Only Arthur could speak casually of new business while a third of the institute's grounds was covering in what basically amounted to lava, and choking black smoke continued to pour into the sky. He supposed that being a hundred and twenty years old had a generally calming effect on the man.

"Very well," He sighed, "I suppose that the most pressing is new students. The explosion has destroyed much of our freshman facilities, including the Dorms."

"Yes, I know, Stephen." Arthur sighed, "I believe I have a solution, however."

"Oh?" Stephen asked, idly, his mind trying to identify where they would build new facilities.

"Until we get this under control, rebuilding is... of course... out of the question," Arthur said thoughtfully, "And I'm reliably informed that it will be at least six months before we can shut down the eruptions."

Stephen groaned.

"Six months? Sir, that's intolerable."

"I quite agree, however reality often is." Arthur said in kind. "What I have proposed, and the Board has accepted, is that we offer new students placement overseas for the next year."

"Oh, Sir, you know that's not going to go over well with the parents. Too many of their families left Europe specifically to keep their children from growing up with that bunch of lunatics."

Arthur glared at him crossly, but Stephen merely stared back unapologetically until the old man sighed.

"Yes, well, be that as it may I think we can convince them. It is only for a year, after all, and it's good for a child to be exposed to other cultures."

"Bog Rot." Stephen opined.

"Your opinion is, of course, noted. However, the proposal has been voted on and passed." Arthur told him, "We'll divide up the new names and make the presentations to the parents. If they refuse, well there is the option of home schooling."

"Five gets you ten that's what most do."

"Do I look like easy money, Stephen?"

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Stephen Smythe sighed as he looked over the lists, casually dividing up the names and trying to determine who would go where, at least in theory. In practice it was futile, but there would be some who would accept.

He eyed the lists carefully, noting which families could afford proper home schooling, and shifted those names lower on the list. The offer would still be made, of course, but they were far less likely to accept. He bit his lower lip when one of those names crossed his attention, however, and hesitated.

This family could certainly afford home schooling, and in fact he was surprised they had submitted their daughter to the lists to begin with. That said, getting one of THEM out of the country... there were some people who'd worship him for that alone, and the family as a whole tended to be very close... who knew? They might all leave for a while.

He moved that name far up on the list.

It was wishful thinking, he supposed, but he needed what bright spots he could find.

He chuckled softly to himself then looked over the rest of the names. No standouts that he could see, not after THEM... but two names did catch his eye. Not because of the names, but rather the location.

'Oh Lord, we have two possible students growing up in Sunnydale??' He stared, "Good God."

He reached for the intercom, "Sam, could you come in here please?"

A moment later Samantha Hennessy strode into the room, her tailored suit formed impeccably to her body, and she nodded, "Yes Sir?"

"I need you to get a recruiter out to Sunnydale immediately."

"Sunnydale??" Her eyes bugged.

"Yes, I'm afraid we just picked up a couple names there," He sighed, "Just showed up on the roles recently, I assume, or we'd have sent someone out there long ago."

"Uh... Yes Sir. Their names?"

"Alexander Harris and Willow Rosenberg."

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Westfield New Jersey

0001 Cemetery Lane

The recruiter winced as he looked at the house, shivering at even the *\*thought\** of going inside the grounds. Everyone in the Community new full well to steer clear of the Addams', it was an unwritten rule so widely known that it had actually been written down. He steeled himself and pushed open the gate, steadily making his way up the lane to the house.

Once there he mentally reviewed the thirty eight poisonous or otherwise deadly species of fauna and flora living in their front yard and made a silent note to have the rest of the area combed by members of The Force who specialized in mystical cleanup. He didn't expect that they'd find anything, the Addams were many things but clumsy was not one of them, but it wouldn't do for many of the examples he'd spotted in the fifteen foot walk to make their way into normal New Jersey.

He stopped at the door and sighed, again steeling himself, then pressed the bell.

A scream greeted his efforts and he grimaced.

Footsteps were heard a moment later, and the door swung slowly open.

"Youuuuuuuu Rannnnnnng?" A seven foot tall monstrosity demanded in a long drawn out groan, looking down at him with a calmly detached appearance.

The recruiter forced himself not to run.

'*It's not a Golem, it's not a Golem, it's not a Golem*' He told himself, hoping it was true. Again he had to remind himself that the Addams' weren't actually evil. Far from it. In truth they were, in fact, one of the most well known mainstays against Evil in the new World. The problem was that only someone who access to their full files, and a Bureau Seer, would ever believe it.

"Yes, Recruiter Henri to see Mr. and Mrs. Addams."

The Golem... '*Not a golem. NOT a golem...*' just stepped back and turned away, apparently expecting to be followed. Simon Henri took a deep breath and did as he was bid.

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Sunnydale, California

Elizabeth Berkley shuddered. She truly hated being the Junior Recruiter assigned to Los Angeles. Whenever there was some little bit of nastiness that involved one of the Institutes students SHE had to be the one sent to handle it. The entire damned state was a loony bin, in her opinion, what

with the demons and Hellmouth burning so brightly.

It probably had to do with the geological activity of the area, or so most people believed. Geomancy was an ancient practice, almost entirely lost today, but the power in many of those old monoliths was proof enough in its potency. Much of the state was a power sink of one type or another, such that even the normal types were affected.

One didn't have to look much further than Hollywood or San Francisco for that.

She sighed and determined to get on with it, however, and came to her first stop.

The residence of one Alexander Harris.

She looked up at the number by the door, confirming it, and knocked.

After a long wait the door opened and she found herself looking down at a young boy of ten years.

"Yes?" He asked.

"Are your parents home, Alexander?"

The boy stared at her for a long time and then nodded. "Mom's here."

"May I speak to her?"

"I guess."

The boy backed into the house, shrugged, and left the door open. "She's in the kitchen."

Elizabeth sighed and stepped over the threshold, noting the total absence of any protective wards or even the most basic level of protections that even normal households enjoyed.

*'Perhaps they just moved in'* She thought, then instantly recognized that wasn't the case as the place looked far too... well, 'lived in' was being charitable. She shook her head, put the thoughts out of her mind, and made her way into the kitchen.

"Mom! There's a lady here to see you!"

Elizabeth's expression soured involuntarily as she noted the open bottle on the table and the smell of liquor floating up from the woman inside. *'Oh lord, I hate these calls'*

"Who're you?" The woman asked, with just a barely detectable slur.

"I'm Elizabeth Berkley, with the Salem Institute..."

That threw a shot of steel into the woman's spine almost instantly as she froze in place and the room became very quiet.

"Mom? What's wrong?" The boy asked.

"Quiet for a moment, Alexander," Jessica Lavelle said softly as she focused on the woman in her kitchen. "What are you doing here?"

"Alexander's name has come up on our roles and..."

"He's... He's one?"

"A Wizard? Yes, of course." Elizabeth said, sounding confused.

"I didn't think... I'm not, you see... My family didn't take it well..."

"Ah." Elizabeth sighed, beginning to get the picture. Some of the older families were still mired in the Old World, unfortunately, "I suppose they called you a Squib among other names?"

Jessica sighed, but nodded as she looked at her bottle.

The Recruiter shook her head and examined her notebook, "Yes, unfortunately that doesn't surprise me. Your husband, he's the same?"

"Yes."

"The Harris family and the Lavelle's, unsurprising I suppose." Elizabeth sighed yet again. "Both originate from Ireland, your lines are not the oldest in America of course, but they are still as close to aristocrats as we tend to get. A lot of familiar inertia gets built up there, I'm afraid."

"But... Alexander is?"

"On our lists, yes." Elizabeth smiled slightly, getting a better feel for the situation. Perhaps it wasn't entirely unsalvageable after all. "He would have been enrolled in the Institute for next year, however..."

“Would have?” Jessica paled, “Why? What’s wrong with him?”

“Absolutely nothing, I’m sure. No, the problem is a slight accident in the Alchemical Laboratories has left the Institute unable to handle a Freshman year in the next session,” Elizabeth sighed, “For that reason we’re offering support with home schooling...”

“But we can’t teach him... we... we just **can’t** ...”

“Yes, we’re aware, the other option is overseas schooling,” Elizabeth suggested. “We’ve contacted several respected institutions, including your families’ traditional alma mater in Scotland; if you wish we can arrange a one year scholarship there while we work out other options closer to home.”

“Scholarship? We can’t afford much...” Jessica said, “Our families...”

“In this case I believe that we can arrange tuition and transport. That covers room and board, though Alexander will require any of his own spending money.”

“I... I can convince Tony of that...” Jessica said with a stray gleam of hope in her eyes.

“Excellent. I’ll leave you to it, then, please... contact us as soon as you make your decision,” Elizabeth paused, “Uh, you DO know how to contact us, don’t you?”

“Yes, yes of course.”

“Excellent,” She said again. “Well I have another stop to make, and then I can get clear of this town.”

The Recruiter made her exit quickly, not noting the confusion on Jessica’s face as she spoke her parting words. Confusion quickly passed though as she turned to Alexander, who was looking at her with curiosity burning in his eyes.

“What was that about, mom?”

“That...” Jessica swallowed, trying to moisten her mouth, “That was someone who wants to offer you a place in a special school.”

“What kind?”

“Remember the stories I told you about magic?”

“The bedtime stories?” Alexander grinned, “Course!”

“That kind of school.”

“C’mom mom,” The boy laughed, “Those were made up!”

Jessica shook her head. “No, they were real.”

Alexander frowned, “But... they can’t be real. They’re about **magic** !”

“I swear to you, I didn’t make them up.”

Alexander thought about it for a long moment, and then brightened suddenly. “Cool! Wait till I tell Willow and Jessie!”

Jessica smiled, “I think you might have a hard time convincing them until you get your wand and learn some spells, and you won’t be allowed to do magic outside of school for a few years anyway.”

“Aw... that sucks.” The boy pouted, then frowned, “Wait... if I go to this school...”

His face scrunched up as he thought it through, then suddenly dropped as it clicked. “What about Jessie and Willow!?”

“Alex... they can’t go...”

“Then I don’t wanna go either!”

“Alex...”

“No! I wanna stay with Jessie and Willow...”

“Alexander Lavelle Harris!” Jessica snapped, quieting him, “This is a very big deal, and it’s important for you. Jessie and Willow will be here in the summers, but this chance won’t come around again. You ARE going to go.”

“I don’t wanna!” Alexander yelled back, “I don’t wanna and you can’t make me!”

“Alex...!” Jessica said, reaching out as Xander broke free and ran out the back door.

She sighed, shaking her head. Nothing was ever easy, it seemed.

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New Jersey

“Ah! Lurch, dear boy, who was it at the door?”

“Guest.” The huge man groaned out as Simon came up behind him. “Recruiter...”

“Oh? For what?” The man in the purple suit asked with a grin as he pulled the cigar from his mouth, “Have the Dodgers come to their senses and realized what they missed out on in Fester?”

Simon paused, then shook his head, “Uh no... I’m here about... umm... Wednesday?”

“I didn’t know she played baseball?” The man frowned, confused.

“I don’t think he’s with the Dodgers, dear.” a woman in a form fitting black dress glided to the man’s side. “Why don’t we let the man speak, shall we cheri?”

“Tish! That’s French!”

Simon just stared as the man grabbed the woman’s arm and began kissing it obsessively.

“Later, dear Gomez...”

“Huh? Oh, right!” Gomez Addams said, eyes snapping to Simon again, “Now, what was this about?”

“I’m with the Salem Institute,” Simon began, “Your daughter’s name turned up on our roles recently and...”

“But of course she did,” Mortisha said simply, “We submitted her name years ago.”

“Uh... yes, well you see there’s a problem.”

“Problem? With Wednesday?” Gomez frowned, “Don’t be absurd.”

“No, with the Institute, actually. You see there was an explosion and...”

“Say no more, how much to you need!?” Gomez asked, producing a checkbook from thin air. “Five million?”

“Uh...”

“Ten!”

“No, you see...”

“You drive a hard bargain, Sir... Twenty it is!” Gomez said, scrawling out numbers on the check.

“Sir, no, that’s not the issue...!”

“Then what is it? Speak up, man!” Gomez said, exasperated.

“The repairs will take time, money isn’t an issue however, we don’t have room to accommodate a freshman class this year.” Simon sighed, “We’ve discussed options with the board, and are willing to help with home schooling...”

“We can manage, I’m sure,” Mortisha said, frowning, “But poor Wednesday was so looking forward to meeting other children.”

“Well, there is another possibility,” Simon said tentatively. “The Institute has contacted several schools overseas and is prepared to offer placement with them, for the first year at least. Possibly more.”

“Send our little girl overseas!? Nonsense, we wouldn’t think of it!” Gomez countered.

“Dear, she did so want to play with other children.”

Gomez frowned, “Well yes, I know, but...”

“It’s not the hardship you might think, Mr. Addams,” Simon offered, “She would return each holiday, and all summer of course... Even at the Institute most children don’t come home more than that.”

“He’s right, dear.”

Gomez frowned thoughtfully, “Well we’ll talk to Wednesday about it and let you know.”

“That would be perfect, Sir.”

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Sunnydale

Alexander 'Xander' Harris bolted from his home and ran through the backyards and driveways to the one place he knew someone would listen to him. He didn't want to live his friends, couldn't his mother get that? What was so special about some dumb magic school anyway? It was probably all some stupid joke, people always played stupid jokes on him and his friends.

They didn't do it **twice**, but there was always some new moron who thought they were soft and weak and unable to look out for themselves. Xander had learned the hard way how to deal with Bullies, at least the way that worked for him. He wasn't big enough to fight them, so he took the beatings when he had to, but he didn't forget.

Don't get mad, his dad had told him once while he was sober. Get even.

Still, this didn't sound like a joke. His mom sounded serious.

Xander ran up to the Rosenberg house a minute later, frowning as he heard yelling from inside.

*'No one yells at Willow..'*

He approached cautiously, the yelling getting louder and louder, then suddenly the door flew open and he was surprised to see the lady from earlier get pushed out hard by Mr. Rosenberg.

"And stay out of my home you... you... charlatan! I won't have your apostasy in my home! Come here to corrupt my daughter! Get out! Get out of here I say!"

The woman huffed, gathering herself up, and turned on her heel. Xander watched as she strode away, blinking in surprise. Mr. Rosenberg never got that angry at anyone.

He was almost afraid to approach so he watched from the corner of the house as the woman looked around briefly, then drew out a stick and muttered something before vanishing in a crack that sounded like a gunshot from the movies. Xander's eyes widened in shock as he took it in.

*'Magic **IS** real!!'*

He swallowed, sneaking around back, and climbed the tree to Willow's room. Her dad was really angry, so he knew she'd be up there. He tapped on the window and she opened it almost instantly.

"Hey." She said, subdued.

"Hey. You ok?"

"Yeah," She said, "Dad's really mad."

"Yeah, I saw him toss the magic lady out." Xander said, shrugging. "I guess you're not going to that school, huh?"

Willow's eyes widened, "How did you know about that?"

"She came to my place first," Xander said glumly, "Mom is excited, she says I have to go."

"What? You can't! Magic doesn't exist!"

"I just watched that lady vanish right off the street, Wills... and my Mom says it does." Xander told her.

"That's impossible," Willow told him with supreme confidence.

Xander just shrugged, "Between reality and my own eyes, I'm gonna go with my eyes, Wills."

"But... but... you **can't** believe in magic!" Willow blurted, "It's... it's... stupid!"

"Hey," Xander forced a grin, "This is me we're talking about."

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New Jersey

"Scotland?" The young witch asked laconically. "I'm to go to Scotland?"

"Only if you really want to," Gomez said hurriedly, assuring her. "You're an Addams, we can arrange a tutor and..."

"Scotland will do. It's a good school, correct?" Wednesday asked, one eyebrow rising as she looked at her mother.

"One of the best," Mortisha said after some thought, "Though it IS in Europe, and they have... different ways than here in America."

"Oh?"

"More steeped in the old traditions, less willing to see that not everything different is bad." The woman sighed. "I'm afraid that they would look very

crossly on Lurch and Thing there.”

To someone who didn't know her, Wednesday's expression didn't change, but her family noted the frown the instant it crossed her face and even the normally ebullient Gomez sighed and settled deeper into his chair.

“The Old World Addams' don't involve themselves much with the Wizards and their type,” Gomez said tiredly. “We're not welcome with them, and to be honest we're fine with that.”

“I see.”

“You don't have to go, dear,” Mortisha said, “this decision is entirely yours.”

“I want to go.” the young girl said calmly. “It feels... right.”

The two elder Addams' exchanged concerned looks, but there was nothing left to say after that. Their daughter had made up her mind and that... well, was that.

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Sunnydale

2 Weeks to end of Summer Vacation

Xander shifted nervously, eyeing the man who'd been sent to pick him up with some trepidation.

“No need to be worried, Alex,” His mother smiled at him. “You'll do fine.”

“He'd better.” Tony grumbled, thinking about the couple thousand dollars he'd put up for spending money for the boy.

“Now dear, don't be like that.” Jessica said mildly, but shooting her husband an arched glare.

Tony sighed, his head nodded, and he turned to his Son. “Now listen to me, boy. I know a few things about what I'm going to tell you here.”

Xander nodded eyes wide as his father leaned over.

“Lots of kids in that school are probably gonna give you crap about being...” Tony frowned, looking over at the school representative from Salem. “What do they call it over there?”

“I believe you're looking for the term ‘Muggleborn’,” The man said smoothly.

“Yeah, right. That.” Tony turned back to his son, “I know you've been reading those books we got you from Salem, right?”

Xander nodded, “Yes sir.”

Tony half smirked, shaking his head at the comment as he leaned in to whisper, “And less I miss my guess you got your redheaded friend to help you learn em, right?”

Xander nodded again.

“Ok, now listen close boy.” Tony said sternly, “You don't start no trouble with anyone, but don't you roll over for any of em either. You remember what I told you about bullies, right?”

Xander nodded, “I remember.”

“You're no fighter, boy, but you don't need to be to take on a Bully. So you remember what I said and you'll do fine.” Tony said gruffly. “Long as you don't act stupid in class and get kicked out.”

“Tony!”

“What??”

Jessica shook her head, shoving her husband out of the way, “You'll be fine, Alex. Now listen you Mr. Graden, try not to get in any trouble, and do your best. Ok?”

“Ok mom.” Xander said sighing as he thought about the goodbyes he'd already exchanged with his best friends. Things were moving so fast, and he felt pretty lost.

“Ok, now go along.”

The representative of the Salem Institute smiled at him as Xander nodded and turned in his direction.

“Come along, Alexander. Next stop, Salem.”

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New Jersey

“Ready to go, dear?”

“Yes Mother.”

“Fabulous,” Gomez said, clapping his hands. “We’ll run you up there ourselves. It’s been ages since we’ve seen Salem.”

“Hmmm... The witch burning museum was quite amusing,” Mortisha conceded, “But I was terribly disappointed with all the false advertising.”

“Yes well, it’s not easy to get ghosts to haunt restaurants, I suppose,” Gomez shrugged.

“Perhaps, but you’d think that the Hotel would know better.”

“Come now, darling, forgive and forget... we’ll try another place this time, alright?”

“Yes, of course, dear... Merci.”

“Tish! That’s French!”

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Salem

The tugging sensation in his gut let go and Xander stumbled, almost falling before Graden caught him, and he blinked to find himself somewhere other than his home.

“Whoa.”

“Careful there,” Thomas Graden said with a calm smile. “Port keys can take some getting used to. You alright?”

Xander nodded, swallowing as he looked at what appeared to be a thirty foot tall volcano in the middle of school grounds. “Uh....”

“Oh, that.” Grading sighed, “Yes, well, suffice to say that freshmen should always be monitored while playing in the alchemical labs.”

“Students did **THAT** ??” Xander stared, wide eyed, between the volcano and the man.

“Yes, unfortunately.”

“Wow. I’ve never done anything **THAT** destructive before.”

“I should hope not,” Grading chuckled, “Very few students get a chance to blow up their school.”

“A fonder dream I have never had.” Xander replied with a grin.

Tom laughed, “Maybe its better we’re shipping you out to Hogwarts.”

“What kind of name is that anyway?” Xander asked, humor still lacing his voice.

“Oh, I think you’ll find that the Old World wizards are full of strange names and terms.” Graden said, sighing now. “They’re really quite backward, at least by our standards of culture. Don’t underestimate them for it, however, their magical science is just as advanced as anything we’ve developed, and they’re even more comfortable with it.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yes... this way please,” Graden said, guiding Xander away from the volcano, “They isolate themselves from the normal world, what they call ‘muggles’, and are entirely immersed in magic. We tend to mix a great deal more here, and generally have far fewer laws on the subject... well, far fewer laws in general really...”

“Why’s that?”

“Well, American witches and wizards mostly came over here to get away from the Old World way of doing things... and not very many came over, really, all things considered...” Tom said, steering his charge to the dormitories. “There was so much room here that a few hundred Wizarding families could really spread out and only interact when they chose to. We didn’t really HAVE a government until almost the Second World War, and only created what we have now in self defense.”

“Huh?”

“Let’s just say that the war was a little more complicated than you probably learned and leave it at that,” Tom sighed, “The European theatre was a terrible mess, entire Wizarding communities were caught in the crossfire... and to make matters worse, the whole Grindlewald affair actually set off a fair portion of the war...”

“The uh... what?”

"Oh dear," Tom sighed, "You have a great deal to learn about the history of the magical world, but I'm afraid we don't have much time for it now. I'll make certain you get some reference books on it."

"Okay." Xander said, unenthused by the prospect.

It wasn't that he didn't want to know, but reading was a pain. Still, the magic books were sometimes kinda cool, with moving pictures and the like. He brightened up, there might be moving pictures of the war, and he'd always been interested in World War Two. If there was other stuff going on he'd never heard about, well he wanted to know about it.

"Here we are," Tom said, "You'll be staying here until we gather the other students, then we'll send you all on together."

Xander looked at the dormitory and his eyes widened. From the outside it had looked fairly common, but inside it was huge and filled with posters and bookshelves and all kinds of things.

"Feel free to peruse the books; you can pick any of the rooms as you're the first here. Just drop your things off and the room will automatically recognize it as yours." Tom told him, "I'll have a history of Hogwarts sent to you... please, look it over... you don't want to be completely unprepared... particularly concerning their House System."

"Huh?"

"Hogwarts divides its students up into groups according to their... defining motivations," Tom said, considering his words. "Courage, Loyalty, Intelligence, and... well, Ruthlessness I suppose."

Xander recognized the word quickly enough and frowned, "Funny thing to have kids try to be."

"Yes well, the Old World is set in its ways, and Hogwarts has been around for a long time. It's very much the magical world's version of Oxford, complete with some rather odd traditions, but a very high standard of academic excellence." Tom replied. "We don't use the house system here, of course."

Xander nodded, thinking about it. Where would he wind up, he wondered? He liked to think he was brave, and he was pretty sure he was loyal... ok, he probably wasn't going to win any points for brains. Ruthless, well... he had to be honest; he could be that if he had to be. Didn't like it though, so he didn't know what the school would make of that.

"I'll leave you be then," Tom told him, heading out.

Xander nodded, said bye and then went to find a room.

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Ok, the books WERE really cool, Xander had to admit.

The 'A History of Hogwarts' was **huge**, and filled with some of the dullest stuff he'd ever imagined, but at the same time it had pages and pages of all kinds of cool stuff. Wizards sure were funny looking in Europe, Xander decided after only a few chapters.

And what was with the names?

Man, if he'd been named like any of those guys he'd have spent his entire scholastic life with his head in a toilette. When he thought of how easy it was to give someone a stupid nickname in Sunnydale, then looked at names like 'Dumbledore' and Slytherin... well, he was just real glad he was named Alexander. Xander wasn't so bad as far as nicknames went.

*'Probably shouldn't mention that though,'* He thought, *'they might not know how stupid their names are.'*

The house system was kinda cool, once he went through it. Gryffindor got the brave kids, Hufflepuff got the loyal ones, Ravenclaw got all the nerds, and Slytherin... well, there he wasn't sure. There was something wrong about the stuff printed about Slytherin, something that didn't read exactly true.

Xander wasn't a big reader, but he could read between the lines pretty easy. Lots of people didn't like Slytherin's that was for sure. Still, from what he could tell there was nothing wrong with them on paper. The key traits weren't ruthlessness, as Tom had said, but the willingness to see a goal through to the end, even if you had to get a little dirty to do it.

Ok, maybe that was ruthless, but there was nothing wrong with that in Xander's opinion. Just kinda dangerous, since it didn't leave any guidelines for what your goal were supposed to be. Lots of room for pricks to make everyone look bad there.

He put it aside, having found out what he wanted to know, and sighed as he settled into his temporary room.

He was long way from home, he realized, and it felt pretty scary.

Maybe if he didn't like it, he could go back to Sunnydale... and Willow and Jessie.

He kinda wished Willow's dad had let her come, but then Jessie would be alone and that would suck too. He took a breath, forcing himself not to feel too bad.

Better he feel bad than Jessie or Willow, Xander was used to it. He could take it. As long as he knew his friends had each other, he could keep on

moving forward.

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It was two days later, and Xander was getting bored with reading about magic and not being able to try anything. Honestly, his interest had waned by the first night, but he'd kept reading cause he knew Willow would probably kill to be in his position.

The sound of a car outside attracted his attention, however, and he eagerly headed to the door to see who it was. The car was a classic, no doubt. Xander knew a bit about cars from his Uncle Rory, though Rory preferred slightly newer vehicles. This one was a thirties Rolls Royce, Xander thought, maybe even older, and probably was worth more than just about... well, anything he could think of.

It came to a stop and Xander gulped as the driver got out, towering over the vehicle as he stared, looking for all the world like Frankenstein's Monster.

"Whoa." He muttered.

The large guy walked around, opening the door for those in back, and one by one they climbed out. The woman was pretty, he figured, dressed in something that Xander just knew his mom would find outrageous, and looked like a vampire or something out of the story books. Xander thought about the fact that vampires were real and did a quickly glance upward.

*Ok, sun really IS shining... probably not a vampire* ' Xander thought, frowning slightly. *'Too bad.'*

A man in a suit was next, practically bouncing on his feet as he looked around and took a deep breath.

"Tish! Smell that!"

"Yes dear," The vampire lady smiled, "Sulfur and brimstone. The students here do good work."

*'Ok, they're a little weird.'* Xander thought, listening to the conversation as the final occupant exited the vehicle.

This one was a girl about his age or so, dressed similarly to her mother, and looking distinctly unimpressed with... well anything.

"So this is Salem," She said quietly, making Xander strain to hear her. "It looks... **nice** "

The man sighed, "Yes indeed, it's sad how far things have fallen. Why I remember grand papa's stories about running around town, making random accusations of witchcraft, just for fun."

"Do you suppose I could find someone to burn at the stake?" the girl asked.

Xander paled slightly. *'She's kidding right?'*

"Now dear, they're still a little touchy about that here," The woman said calmly. "Best you wait until you've got a few years in before you try anything as advanced as a stake burning anyway."

The girl **almost** seemed to pout, "But we did it last year at home."

"Yes, smashing time that." The man grinned, and then frowned, "Too bad she got away."

"Yes, some people are rather more wiry than you expect, aren't they?" The woman said fatalistically.

*They're completely nuts.* ' Xander thought, stunned as the group walked towards him. *'They have to be, right?'*

"Look, Wednesday Darling, a playmate for you!" The woman said, drawing the girl's attention to Xander.

"He looks... bright." The girl said flatly.

Xander frowned, looking down at the Hawaiian shirt he wore, "I like bright colors, ok?"

"Excellent, my boy," The man grinned, "Nothing wrong with a good splash of color now and then, makes your enemies blink before you slide the knife in."

"Darling, manners." The woman said chidingly.

"Oh right, what **WAS** I thinking of," The man shook his head, promptly offering his hand to Xander. "Gomez Addams at your service. This vision of beauty next to me is my wife Mortisha..."

"Cada-mia..." The woman smiled.

"Tish... that sounded like French!" Gomez blurted before snapping his hand away from Xander, who was reaching to accept the shake, and grabbing his wife's arm and kissing it enthusiastically.

Xander's mouth gaped open as he tried to determine if he was being set up for a joke or something, but the woman just sighed with a smile and pushed her husband away.

Later darling."

"Oh. Right, yes of course," Gomes straightened himself out and looked back to Xander, grabbing his still outstretched hand, and pumping it almost violently. "This is our daughter Wednesday, and our butler Lurch."

The big Frankenstein guy moaned, sending a shiver down Xander's back.

"Uh... Xander." He said, staring up at the big guy.

"What?" Gomez blinked, looking between Xander and Mortisha, "Was that his name, or is he speaking some other language?"

Xander shook his head, "Xander Harris, that's my name. Sorry."

"Fantastic!" Gomez cried out, "Good to know, old chum! It gets confusing when people don't know each other's names or languages."

"Uh... yeah."

"Are you here for school?" Wednesday asked suddenly, peering at him intently.

"Uh... yeah. I guess. I mean, they're not taking students here they tell me, but I'm being sent over to Hogwarts or something like that."

"Oh good show! So is little Wednesday here," Gomez grinned, "I'm sure you'll get along fabulously."

"Uh..."

"Tell me," Wednesday looked at him, "Do you know how to play ritual sacrifice?"

Xander swallowed, "Do you know how creeped out you're making me?"

"I say, man, there's no need to be rude." Gomez frowned.

"Rude? She's talking about ritual sacrifice!" Xander blurted, "I'm no expert, but most of the books I've read say that's a bad thing."

"They what!?" Gomez growled, "What kind of school IS this place? Why I have a mind to..."

"Dear..." Mortisha laid a calming hand on his shoulder, "be calm. You know that many people can't wrap their minds around how we Addams' are."

"That's no excuse!"

While Gomez raged, apparently just as passionate in anger as he was in greeting, and Mortisha worked to calm him, Wednesday moved closer to Xander.

"Do I really creep you out?"

Xander looked at her and just nodded.

She tilted her head slightly to one side, "Is that really a bad thing?"

"I'll let you know when I figure out if you're going to try and cut my heart out with a dagger." Xander grinned in response.

She sniffed, "Certainly not. I'm saving that for my wedding night."

Xander stared, his ten year old mind trying to wrap itself around that... and failing miserably. Finally he just shook his head and lifted his hand to chest level.

"Just so you know," He said, "Creep factor just went from here..."

He moved his hand up over his head, "To here."

The girl looked at him oddly, but didn't have time to reply before Xander shoved his hands in his pocket and went on.

"But I'll be damned if I can decide if it's cause of the dagger and heart thing, or the wedding night thing."

\*\*\*\*\*

Orientation week, as the instructors liked to call it, came and went quickly. There had been around thirty or so American, Canadian, and some Mexican students who'd shown up, each being briefed on the schools they were being sent to.

From what Xander could figure, they'd gone to a lot of trouble to make sure that each student went to a school where they at least spoke the same language. Which was good, in his opinion, to say the least. Some of the Canadians were sent to Beauxbatons in France, and a random handful from the group spoke German well enough to attend Durmstrang. The Spanish speaking were being sent to the Order of the Sun in South America.

A few others were being shipped to smaller schools, and then those like Xander himself were being sent to Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Hogwarts, name notwithstanding, apparently had a fair reputation in the community from what Xander could tell. He wasn't sure he liked the sound of that, cause him and school? Well, not a great mix in the past, and he saw no reason why that would change here. Still, it was all very exciting, and he found himself getting more and more eager to see the place in person.

Wednesday Addams, on the other hand, seemed terminally bored. Which didn't surprise Xander as much as it should have since she'd literally scared off every other student who showed up, and a couple of the teachers.

He'd tried to make her laugh with his patented Willow Perk-Uppers, which went down like a lead balloon. He hadn't fallen on his face that hard since he tried being friendly with Cordelia in kindergarten, yet there was still something about the girl that kept him trying.

*'I'm just a glutton for punishment I guess'* He thought glumly.

Today was the big day, though. They were going to port key across the Atlantic Ocean to Great Britain, and spend some time in a place called Diagon Alley before catching a train to Hogwarts. It was kinda scary, really, and Xander found himself chewing nervously on his lip.

"It'll be fine."

He looked to one side, the monotone voice almost but not quite startling him.

"Huh?"

Wednesday Addams looked at him for a moment, "You don't have to be scared. I've read all about port keys, they're perfectly safe."

"Actually I was thinking about being in Britain," Xander admitted, "never thought of anything going wrong with the port key... until now, thanks so very much."

He smirked at her, waggling his eyebrows.

Another pratfall.

He sighed slightly as her expression remained entirely unamused, the dark look she shot him probably intended to inflict bodily harm. "Sheesh, Wednesday, you need to rent a sense of humor."

"So do you."

Xander sighed again, then stopped and did a double take, glaring at her suspiciously. "Was that a joke??"

She gave him an even look, then turned away.

"It was! Short, dark, and scary made a joke!" Xander grinned, "I'm gonna get you giggling yet, girl!"

"I doubt it."

"Children! Gather round your designated areas!"

Xander filed the odd gleam in Wednesday's eyes as a potential chink in her demeanor, and vowed to make a project of exploiting and expanding that look. The two of them made their way over to the Hogwarts group and the professor who had been assigned to them.

"Alright everyone," He said, checking the old wind up timepiece on his wrist, "forty seconds, children. Everyone touch the key."

Xander looked at the beach ball everyone was grasping at and raised his eyebrow slightly, but did as he was told. The countdown started from ten, and everyone was touching it well before the key activated, and Xander again felt the tug in his guts as the world went lopsided on him.

As the world came back the children went down in a heap as one tripped and fell into another, toppling the group like dominos until only Wednesday and the Professor were left standing. The dark girl looked down at them, one eyebrow raised as Xander looked up at her.

"Is it comfortable down there?" She asked dryly.

Xander shook his head and extended his hand, "Cut out the sarcasm and help me up would ya, man I'm dizzy."

She sighed and took his hand, bracing herself to help him up, but Xander just grinned and suddenly put his full weight into pulling her forward and off her feet. She toppled to the ground in a heap beside him, and looked over as he climbed to his feet and brushed himself off.

"Comfy huh?" He asked, smirking at her.

Wednesday Addams stared evenly up at the boy who'd suckered her, then calmly extended her own hand. He smirked, but perhaps surprisingly took it and lifted her to her feet.

"Of course you realize," She said, standing even with him, "This means war."

Xander felt a shiver run down his spine, but kept the grin on his face. "Whatever you say, Daffy."

Wednesday took a deep breath, her nostrils flaring slightly as she let it out through her nose, then she turned her back on Xander and rejoined the group who were now staring at the two of them with an odd mixture of fear, awe, and childish skittishness. Given that the same mix was present on

the Professors face, Wednesday felt that about the only person in the entire group worth knowing was at her back.

The professor shook himself, and nodded down the street. "Alright, wands first, then familiars and school books."

\*\*\*\*

Ollivander's Fine Wands was, well Xander had to say it... to himself at least, was a hole in the wall shop. It looked like an old second hand bookstore he had been dragged to by Willow back in Sunnydale, and smelled surprisingly the same.

The old man, Ollivander, Xander presumed, was waiting for them when they came in the door and nodded to the professor.

"The little ones from America," He said more than asked. "Well, well... let's get on with it then."

He singled out the closest kid, a boy named Thomas Hardy, and within mere moments Xander found himself ducking for cover as sparks, flames, and what looked like lightning was erupting through the shop and blowing out shelves all over the place.

"Holy!" He muttered, hiding behind a corner.

Only the Professor and Wednesday Addams had remained unmoved as the experimentation went on, and for a while Xander stared at them in shock, but it slowly came to him that it wasn't as dangerous as he'd thought and he crept out to join them.

Ollivander quickly located the wand for Thomas, and moved on to another, plucking a girl named Joy from where she was hiding behind his counter. Her trials in finding a wand took a little longer, but were thankfully less spectacular. One by one the children found their wands, then Ollivander turned to Xander and frowned.

"Hmmm..." He said, checking a list. "Harris you say?"

"Uh... I didn't actually, but yeah." Xander muttered.

The old man ignored him, "try this. Holly, twelve inches, dragon heartstring core."

Xander took the wand, eyeing it for a moment, then flicked it.

He jumped as a force blew out the shelves for three rows, sending hundreds of wands flying down the aisles.

"Sorry!" he yelped.

"No matter, no matter. Here, Thirteen Inches, Vine Wood, with a Unicorn Hair core." Ollivander said absently, handing another to Xander.

Xander accepted it, swallowed, and then flicked it as he'd been told. This time there was a fizzle and pretty much nothing came out.

"Hmmm... not quite. Very well, try this..."

Xander accepted the stick from the man and flicked it, sending a shower of sparks across the room that threatened to light the place on fire. Ollivander extinguished the flames with a casual flick of his own wand and frowned deeply.

"Most troublesome."

"Uh... I can probably get by and," Xander started.

"Nonsense. No one has ever left my shop without a wand properly suited to them," Ollivander said sternly, handing him another one.

Several more times Xander practically destroyed the shop, until he was becoming as jaded about it as Ollivander seemed to be. Finally the shopkeeper pulled out a wand that had been polished to a deep reddish tint and handed it to him.

"Willow, fourteen inches, dragon heart string core." He said calmly.

Xander flicked the wand and was surprised to see a shimmering of lights come out that seemed to match what the other successful matches had been. He smiled, turning to Ollivander, but was surprised when the shopkeeper frowned.

"Not quite right." Ollivander said, looking perplexed.

"It feels good to me."

"No, there's something wrong."

"Uh... ok."

So they went through it again, and again, until everyone was quite tired of the whole thing, and still they found nothing. Ollivander sighed, shaking his head as he looked through the stores that were scattered all over the place. He finally went back to the Willow wand and drew it back out again.

"A second time," He said, handing it to Xander.

Xander frowned, but nodded and flicked the wand to the same results as before.

Ollivander looked downright put out by the results, but finally nodded, “That is the best match of any wand I have in the shop.”

“We’ll take it,” The Professor said tiredly. “Wednesday, your turn.”

“Very Well.”

“Wednesday... Addams?” Ollivander looked up, his eyes widening as he visibly swallowed.

“That’s correct.”

For a moment Xander actually thought the old man was going to bolt or try to refuse service to the girl, but he finally shook himself loose of the effect her name had and nodded.

One wand after another left the disaster area that had been a reasonably neat shop in no less of a mess as it would have been impossible to make things worse after Xander’s excursion through the wands, yet none of the sticks seemed to do well for the Addams scion.

Finally Ollivander frowned deeply and took a deep breath, drawing out a wand from the bottom tier under his counter. He handed it to Wednesday, it’s black surface reflecting very little light as she accepted it.

“Ebony, eleven inches, Dragon heartstring core.” Ollivander said with trepidation. “Very rare, not many wands use ebony...”

“I’ll take it.”

“I believe you should try it at least once, young lady,” He said sternly.

“I don’t need to.” She told him, looking up at him. “This is my wand.”

\*\*\*\*

Xander had spent a great deal of his school life practicing the fine art of driving teachers to distraction, and knew the look intimately. Their chaperon of the moment had that look, in spades. He hustled them out of Ollivander’s, and across to the pet shop as fast as he could, clearly trying not to look at Wednesday as the girl caressed the smooth surface of her wand with an intent look on her face.

Ollivander had the look of man due a major heart attack at any time as well, but Xander just chalked it up to a successful morning so far and eyed the pet shop with some anticipation.

He’d never been allowed a pet, though he’d always wanted one, and now he was not only getting one but he was going to be permitted to take it to CLASS with him. Magic school really had some perks.

Inside they found the place filled with animals of all types, and a few Xander had only imagined previously.

“Please, children. Owls, cats, or rats are preferred.”

The children made their way through the shop, picking out the animals of their choice, but Xander found himself gravitating toward another section where a young pup was looking up at him as if expecting him to say something.

“Please Miss Addams, Owls, cats, or rats.” The professor said in the background.

“I think not.” Wednesday said tonelessly as she went to the counter with a raven on her shoulder. “I’ll take him, please.”

“Such a polite young lady,” The woman behind the counter smiled, ringing it up. “And who might you be?”

“Wednesday Addams.”

The woman went pale, hand shaking as she took the coins offered, and watched the young girl leave. Xander turned his attention back to the pup that was jumping up at him from inside the caged box.

He made a decision in a snap, and scooped the pup up. If Wednesday could get away with a raven, he was going to get a dog.

“Mr. Harris!”

“He’s the one I want.” Xander said, not giving the teacher a chance to continue. He presented himself at the counter, noticing the woman was still staring after Wednesday. “Ma’am? Ma’am, I’d like this one please.”

“Huh? Oh yes, certainly.” She said, numbly taking the money from him.

Xander went immediately outside to wait the rest while the frazzled professor tried to keep the rest in line. He found Wednesday waiting patiently by the curb, the large raven cawing softly on her shoulder.

“Nice.” He said, nodding to the bird, “You know, everyone seems to know you.”

“They know the Addams’.” Wednesday corrected.

“Famous family?”

She **almost** seemed to smile for a moment, then shook her head slightly, “Infamous.”

Xander frowned, thinking hard. “Isn’t that the same thing?”

“Not exactly.”

“Oh. Ok.” Xander shrugged, holding up the puppy he’d gotten. “I gotta name him, what do you think?”

Wednesday looked over at the puppy and raised an eyebrow. “Fenrir.”

“Huh?”

“Fenrir.” She said with an odd twinkle. “He should get along well with Odin.”

“Who’s Odin?”

“This,” Wednesday said, gesturing to the raven, “Is Odin.”

“Ah.” Xander nodded, frowning, “You’re naming your bird after the Norse God?”

“You know mythology?”

“I know comic books.” Xander grinned.

Wednesday sighed, rolled her eyes, and then settled in silently to wait. Xander shrugged, knowing that he’d scored another hit even if she wouldn’t admit it, and settled in beside her as he held up the pup. “Fenrir, huh? That’s cool. You like?”

The pup yipped once and licked his nose.

\*\*\*\*\*

The American hoodlums had been cleared out of her shop finally, leaving the shopkeeper to sit in semi-stunned silence as her assistant came back in.

“Gee Corsa, you don’t look so good.”

“There’s an Addams attending Hogwarts,” She said as the young man went about cleaning the place up.

“A who?”

“Never mind,” She sighed, “You wouldn’t understand anyway. Kids these days.”

“Hey! Who bought the Dire Wolf cub?”

“What?” The shopkeeper frowned, looking over.

“The dire wolf cub, he’s gone, who bought him?”

A look of horror slowly passed over the shopkeeper’s face as she thought desperately back. “Oh my, I don’t know.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Books were next, but there were no explosions, extreme confusion, or name dropping there so things went by fairly quickly as they were all outfitted properly for school, and then were quickly shooed along by the professor escorting them.

School robes were the last stop for the day, and they each got two, though Xander scowled through the fitting constantly, hating the idea of wearing a dress to school. Only the assurance that everyone wore them made him give in finally, though he was still pretty unhappy about it.

When they were done there they were herded back to their rooms to get everything in order for the next day when they would catch the train to Hogwarts to officially begin their scholastic experience.

\*\*\*\*\*

Platform 9 and 3/4s. Xander shook his head at the silliness of it, though he had to admit that the hidden entrance was cool. Still, anyone who reads comic books like he did could figure out that it’s just downright stupid to have something supposedly ‘secret’ this much out in the open. He watched as two people walked through the illusion, vanishing from sight, and let his eyes rove around.

’*Yeah. Thought so.*’ He watched as two people, non magical types he presumed, stared in shock, then quickly moved away. There was no way to hide something that blatant in a place this wide open, Xander would be surprised if it hadn’t been reported to the press so many times by now that they were getting bored of it all.

Oh, sure, they’d never believe it, but still... why take stupid chances any...



Xander's eyes narrowed as he watched a man step up to the two witnesses and wave a wand at them. *'Did he just...?'*

"Children... get ready now."

Xander shook his head, focusing back on the group then.

"Wait for people to look at the incoming train, then run through," The Salem Professor said, nodding to the wall.

Xander took a breath, then frowned as he saw a young boy wander right between them and the wall.

"Hold... wait for him to move on."

The boy wasn't moving though, he was looking around in confusion at the signs and finally he approached a uniformed guard. Xander sidled closer, trying to listen in.

"Pardon me, Sir, but can you direct me to platform 9 and three quarters?"

The guard looked at the boy like he was nuts, and Xander groaned. He glanced to one side, then the other, and was surprised to find Wednesday right there.

"We should prevent him from attracting any more attention," The dark girl said tonelessly, "Otherwise the guard will be obliterated, and there's no reason for it."

"Right." Xander said, moving forward as he put on a cheery smile. "Hey bro, what are you doing? Making a pest of yourself?"

The boy looked confused, but the guard just shook his head, "Here now, push off, the two of you."

"I... but..."

"Come on, bro, back to the group." Xander said, pulling the other boy along.

"Shut up." Wednesday hissed as they came along side, "The guard has no idea what you're talking about."

The boy looked almost pathetically happy to have been found by someone who did. "You... uh... are?"

"A group going to platform 9 and three quarters." Wednesday replied tonelessly.

"Good work you two," The Salem Professor smiled, "Sorry son, didn't know you were going to Hogwarts."

"That's alright Sir."

Xander found that their little group had grown by almost a full factor of two, with the addition of two red headed adults, four boys, and one girl.

"These are the Weasley's," The Professor said, "Now, shall we move through before our little group crowds out the station."

"Yes Sir."

"Alexander, Wednesday, why don't you go first with young...?"

"Harry Sir." The boy answered. "Harry Potter."

"B... b.... bloody hell."

Everyone turned to look at the youngest of the red headed boys, and Xander blinked to realize that they were all staring in shock. He looked over at the other boy, but didn't see anything physical that might have triggered the response. Well, not other than a scar on his forehead, so he assumed it was the name.

"Gee, I seem to be surrounded by celebrities lately," He quipped dryly, earning him an intense stare from Wednesday. Of course, since everything she did was intense, he wasn't worried about it.

"Continue it on the other side, go on! Now, no one's looking."

"You too Ron, go ahead and show them the way." The older woman said.

The youngest boy nodded and pushed a cart on ahead, heading right for the wall with Harry jogging after him. Xander matched his pace to Wednesday, who was walking with a dignified stride that nevertheless covered the ground almost as fast. The two ahead of them vanished into the stone wall, and they followed. Xander flinched hard just before walking into it, but quickly opened his eyes as bright light erupted around him and he found himself on a crowded platform with all sorts of weirdness rushing around.

"Clear the way!"

The call came from behind, causing both he and Wednesday to split smoothly as the two middle redheads came roaring through, riding their carts like race cars. Behind them the rest of the group streamed after. Xander and Wednesday waited beside Harry and Ron as the others assembled.

Are you really... Harry Potter?" Ron asked, his tone filled with awe.

"Uh, yeah I guess so." Harry seemed slightly perturbed by question.

"Brilliant!" Ron enthused, "That's fantastic! And you're going to Hogwarts, first year right?"

Harry nodded.

"Absolutely brilliant." The redhead grinned widely.

"Nice to meet you, Harry." Xander said, nodding. "I'm Xander, this is Wednesday."

"Hi," Harry said, nodding to each.

The Addams scion merely inclined her head in return.

"Those are funny names," Ron blinked.

Xander and Wednesday looked at each other, then at him, and actually spoke as one.

"Says who?"

They looked at each other sharply again, then back to Ron and Harry who were staring at them.

"Cor, do you two do that a lot? Fred and George do it all the time, but they're twins."

"Don't know, we just met." Xander grinned, looking at Harry, "So, you're famous I take it."

"Yeah, it seems so." Harry said, rubbing the back of his head self consciously.

"Of course he is! He's Harry Pot-!" Ron blurted, only to be cut off when Harry slapped a hand over his mouth.

"Not so loud, please!" Potter begged, "I don't want to be stared at."

Ron's eyes bulged, but he nodded in agreement.

"Well, someone's learned quick how to quiet my Ron down," The older woman, presumably Ron's mother, said as she approached.

"Sorry, ma'am, but I..."

"Please, think nothing of it." The woman said with a smile, "We all want to do that to Ron from time to time. I'm Molly Weasley."

"Oi!" Ron growled, trying to summon what dignity he could.

"Pleased to meet you ma'am." Harry said.

Molly turned to look at Wednesday and Xander, "Such quick thinking children, helping Harry out like that. And you are?"

"Xander Harris, Ma'am."

"Wednesday Addams."

Molly was nodding politely to Xander when Wednesday introduced herself, then paused, almost choking as she stared. "A... Addams you say?"

Wednesday raised a single eyebrow, but didn't repeat herself.

"Oh my. Oh my." Molly stammered, pulling back.

"Are you ok, mum?" Ron frowned.

"I... Uh, yes I'm fine. Well, have a good year Ron. Harry, it was a pleasure to meet you." Molly said, eyes never leaving Wednesday as she retreated to where her husband was talking animatedly with the American wizard. The children watched as she hissed something to him, his eyes bugged out, and he stared over at them. They hissed back and forth, then spoke softly to the Salem professor, then stared some more.

"Blimey. Mum never reacted like that, even to Harry here." Ron blurted, staring at Wednesday. "Who are you?"

"I believe I already said." Wednesday said tonelessly, idly rubbing her raven's beak as he cawed softly.

"Yeah, but I mean, I don't get it?"

"Somehow that doesn't surprise me," The dark young girl said before walking back to the American group.

Xander glanced her way, then to where Harry and Ron were standing, and made a quick decision. "I'll see you guys around school, maybe on the train."

Then he followed after her.

“Weird.” Ron said, shaking his head.

Harry raised an eyebrow, looking around the platform at the various oddities he could see, then looked back at Ron.

“What?”

Harry just chuckled.

\*\*\*\*

On the train the group filled up two compartments under the supervision of their Professor, who then nodded to them.

“I’ll be taking my leave now. Behave yourselves.”

“You’re leaving us alone?”

“All children go to Hogwarts from this point on their own,” He smiled. “Don’t worry, you’ll be fine. Just listen to the Prefects and Professors, study hard, and behave yourselves.”

They nodded and watched as he left. Xander glanced over at Wednesday, who was seated by the window with the raven on her shoulder. He followed her eyes to where their professor stepped off the train and then with a jerking motion, they were moving.

“I guess it’s really happening,” he said, feeling a little nervous.

Wednesday just looked at him like he had said the stupidest thing imaginable, shook her head, and looked back out the window. Xander chuckled softly, “Man, it’s like dealing with the Anti-Willow.”

That comment earned him another sharp look, though with a hint of curiosity rather than exasperation this time. It did not, however, earn him any words. Xander took the hint and joined in a conversation going on next to him between a girl from Colorado and a boy from Texas.

Some time into the trip the door slid open to reveal a young girl with curly hair.

“Hullo,” She said, looking around, “Has anyone here seen a frog?”

The kids looked at each other, then back at her and shook their heads.

“Oh drat.” She muttered, “Neville lost his somewhere and can’t remember where.”

“Well I suppose if he could remember where it wouldn’t be lost,” Wednesday offered dryly.

Xander snickered, quickly looking away.

The girl looked narrowly at them both, but apparently didn’t feel like responding. “Well if you do find it, could let us know? It’s important, really.”

“I could ask Odin to look,” Wednesday offered with a gleam in her eyes, “I suspect that he’s feeling a little... famished at the moment.”

“Odin? Who’s...?” The girl trailed off, staring at the raven, and paled as she backpedaled, realizing what the ‘famished’ comment meant. “Err, no that’s quite alright. We’ll find him our way, thank you!”

As the girl retreated, Xander sighed and turned to Wednesday, “That was mean, you know that right?”

Wednesday merely shrugged.

Xander shook his head, “I’m going to go see if I can help, I’ll let her know you were joking.”

“Was I?”

“That’s what I’m going to tell her anyway.”

“Ah,” Wednesday said, tilting her head to one side as Xander left. She looked at the raven, “Odin, please, find the frog.”

The bird cawed once, cocking its own head.

“No, don’t eat him. Yet anyway.”

The bird cawed again and fluttered off, out into the halls as Wednesday crossed her legs and produced a large leather bound book from her luggage. Everyone in the compartment stared at her until she looked up, matching their gaze. After that, they others quickly found other things to occupy their time.

In the narrow corridors of the train Xander quickly caught up with the curly haired girl, “Hey, sorry about that. Wednesday has a strange sense of humor.”

"I can tell."

"She seems alright though," Xander grinned, offering his hand. "Xander Harris."

"Hermione Granger." The girl returned, shaking his hand.

"Cool. Good to meet you, you need a hand finding that frog?"

"Thanks that would be very nice."

They moved together through the train, poking around where a frog might hide and asking if anyone had seen it with little luck. After a bit they made their way into a nearly empty compartment.

"Excuse me, but have you two seen a frog by any chance?" Hermione asked.

"Hey!" Xander grinned, "Ron, Harry. How's the trip so far?"

"We're goof..." Ron said through mouthfuls of food.

"Snacks? How come I didn't see any snacks!?" Xander instantly complained.

"Were you blind? We past the cart three times."

"Well you had me sticking my head in any corner a frog might hide, how was I supposed to see it?"

"You can have some if you like," Harry offered, smiling.

"You sure?"

"Of course."

"Thanks... what are these anyway?" Xander asked, looking over the pile, hoping for something he recognized.

"Oh hey, are you doing magic?" Hermione focused on Ron, who had his wand out. "May I join you?"

Xander looked over from where he had half a chocolate frog in his mouth, "I tough yuf anted oo ind the rog?"

She didn't even bother looking at him, focusing instead on where Ron was tapping his pet rat with his wand and telling it something about the color yellow. "Well, that's not much of a spell, is it?"

"I'd like to see you do better!" Ron instantly challenged her.

"Well, I've only tried some small spells, but they've all worked perfectly for me," She replied, glancing over at Harry's glasses. "Like this... Ocular Reparo!"

There was a small flash and Harry's jury rigged repairs vanished from his glasses, instantly repairing the scratched lenses and cracked frame.

All three boys stared, impressed.

"That was brilliant!"

"Thank you..."

"Oh, I'm Hermione." She said, glaring at Xander, "Since someone forgot to introduce me."

"Sowwy." Xander shrugged, trying a jelly bean looking thing, then instantly gagging.

"What? What's wrong?"

"Who in the name of all that's holy would make a crazy glue flavored jelly bean!?"

"Those are Bertie Bott's every flavored beans," Ron said, "when they say 'every' ..."

"They mean **every**," Xander said, trying to spit the taste out of his mouth. "Gah!"

"I have a better question," Hermione said from where she sat, "How do you know what crazy glue tastes like? I mean, I've heard of eating glue but isn't that a little... strange?"

"What's crazy glue?" Ron asked, confused.

"Don't ask." Xander shook his head, "Let's just say it was a stupid dare, and I regretted it very, very, quickly. I had a piece of popsicle stick stuck to my tooth for three days."

Hermione smothered a laugh as Harry chuckled, but Ron just looked confused.

What's a popsicle stick?"

Before Xander would answer the door to the compartment slid open again, this time to admit a slim blond boy and two boys that Xander instantly pegged as 'goons'.

"So," The blond announced loudly, "I hear that Harry Potter is on this train, is that true? Are you him?"

Xander glanced toward Harry, who just nodded.

"Well," The blond smiled arms wide in greeting. "I thought I'd offer to help you out, show you how to avoid making the wrong sort of friends..."

The flick of his eyes to include the rest of the compartment left them with a good idea of who he considered the wrong sort.

"Sod off, Malfoy!" Ron growled.

"Red hair, hand me down robes... must be a Weasely." Malfoy sneered. "Really, I'm surprised any of your lot can even afford to go to Hogwarts."

Ron surged up, but Harry was already between him and Malfoy.

"I think I can tell who the wrong type of friend is on my own, Malfoy." Harry said in a low, serious tone.

The two groups glared at each other for a moment, only to be suddenly interrupted by a loud cawing sound as a black blur flew in and landed on Malfoy's head.

"What is it!? Get it off! Get it off!" The blond screamed, shocked.

Odin, easily riding out the bucking of the boy, tossed his head in the air and catapulted a frog across the room to where it landed in Xander's surprised hands. It cawed again, then cocked its head to one side and looked down at the blond head below, pecking at Malfoy three times before retreating to the frame above the door just before one of the goons pounded the slim boy over the head with a bag full of books.

Xander winced as Malfoy went down in a heap, "That had to hurt."

"Oi!" Ron roared, "Bloody brilliant! Whose bird is that?"

Xander shook his head, not answering as he looked up at the bird with a smirk on his face. "Wednesday, you ol softy."

He turned to Hermione, handing her the frog. "This belongs to your friend, I think?"

"Huh? Right..." She said, accepting it, but her focus was on Harry. "Are you really Harry Potter?"

He sighed, but nodded and pushed his hair back, showing the scar on his forehead.

"Amazing." She whispered, then smiled brilliantly, "I'm so very pleased to meet you."

"Likewise." Harry smiled.

Meanwhile, Draco Malfoy was being helped to his feet, wavering unsteadily as he glared up at the raven above him.

"Vile creature! I'll show you..." He muttered, drawing his wand.

"Don't."

The quiet voice startled them all as Draco froze, finding a wand at his throat, attached as it was to a hand and arm that had somehow snaked between his two goons. They parted instantly to reveal a small girl with a blank expression on her face as she looked at him with intense eyes.

"Who are you?"

She didn't answer, merely extended her other arm for the Raven to land on, then backed out of the compartment. Once she was clear she just turned her back on him and walked away.

"Hey! You can't just ignore me!" Draco started to charge out after her, wand in hand.

Xander cut him off, tripping him out into the hallway, leaving him sprawled up against the far wall in a heap. Then Xander stepped on the blond boy as he followed Wednesday, only glancing back to wave goodbye to the others.

"See you in school, guys."

Ron just grinned, his face threatening to split as Draco sputtered and struggled with his two friends as they 'helped' him to his feet.

"Bloody brilliant." The redhead simply said, his voice filled with awe.

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"You didn't have to do that."

Xander glanced to one side, noting that Wednesday wasn't actually looking at him as she spoke, but figured it was directed his way anyway. "Do what?"

"Trip him. I could have handled it."

"I'm sure you could," Xander grinned.

"Then why help me?"

Xander shrugged, "Oddly enough, I find I kinda like you."

The dark girl looked over at Xander, eyes intensely searching his face for a moment, then she looked away and that was the end of the conversation. Xander waited for some response for a little while, then gave up on it. *'Definitely the Anti-Willow'*

He tried not to let it bother him, since he didn't really care whether she was grateful or thanked him, or even was mad at him for what he'd done. He'd heard all the responses since meeting Willow in kindergarten, from hug to slap. Being ignored was a new one, he had to admit, but what the hell, she'd had her Raven find the frog and it hadn't even eaten the little critter. Given it a heart attack, sure, but not eaten.

Similarly she'd stepped in to help Harry when he was lost, not to mention the security guy who was probably closer to some kind of magical brainwashing that Xander really wanted to think about. *'That's wrong isn't it? I mean, they just mess with people's heads? That IS wrong... I think?'*

He was getting a headache thinking about that, actually. He wasn't used to great moral questions and honestly didn't know the answer. All the comic books he read said that messing with people's heads was really bad stuff though, and he didn't think Professor X would condone it just cause someone saw something he probably didn't even believe.

At just barely eleven years of age, though, Xander already knew that the world was more complicated than that. He knew that drinking was bad, but his parents did it... a lot. In fact, he'd seen adults do a lot of stuff that was supposed to be pretty bad, enough that Xander wasn't really sure that his comics had been telling him the truth all along.

He sighed slightly, but said nothing else as he absently played with Fenrir while the Hogwarts Express rolled on.

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The end of their journey was in the shadow of an imposing castle that brought Xander up short the second he saw it, and he wasn't the only one. Several students caused minor accidents as they stared in shock, nearly getting run over in the process. It was like something out of a fantasy movie, the good kind not the historical crap, with all the trimmings.

He was shocked out of his stupor by a rumbling voice echoing past him, "Firs' Years this way!"

He looked up, eyes widening, then looked up even further as a huge man came stomping in his direction, and Xander started looking around for escape paths just in case.

"Hagrid!"

The familiar voice of Harry Potter and the obviously eager tone calmed Xander down some, as he recognized that the other boy was certainly not afraid of the imposing figure.

"Ello Arry," Hagrid beamed, and right then Xander forgot his fear. This wasn't a man who was going to hurt kids, that was pretty obvious.

Xander moved forward, nodding to Harry, "Hey dude, who's your friend?"

"Dude?" Ron blinked, looking around, "Who's dude?"

Hermione sighed, rolling her eyes, but Harry just grinned, "Xander, this is Hagrid. Hagrid, these are my friends, Xander, Hermione, and Ron."

"Ello everyone, are you ready to go to Hogwarts then?" Hagrid beamed.

They all nodded as the first years slowly gathered around, and were shown to a series of boats that would apparently be taking them across the lake to the castle. With the usual amount of trouble that came with guiding children, Hagrid got his charges where he needed them to go and within just a few minutes was hustling them into the school.

They were standing there, waiting for this 'sorting' ceremony everyone kept talking about, and generally getting impatient, antsy, and nervous in the process when someone screamed, several other's gasped, and Xander turned to find his eyes widening at the sight of several ghosts floating through the far wall, apparently discussing giving someone, or something, a second chance.

The ghosts seemed to notice that they were being watched and paused in front of the assembled students.

"Ah, first years I suppose?"

"Yes Sir."

Everyone, Xander included, turned and gaped at how calmly Wednesday was as the ghosts looked at her.

"About to be sorted?"

"I believe so."

"Good, good," The ghost, who looked like a friar nodded, "Hope to see you in Hufflepuff, young lady. That was my old house you know."

Wednesday didn't change her expression as she gazed up at him, "That's unlikely, Sir."

"Oh?" The Ghost grinned widely, "And why do you say that?"

"I've read the requirements; I don't believe I will be placed there."

"And where you do you expect to be placed?"

The girl shrugged very slightly, "Not Gryffindor either, I expect. So Ravenclaw or Slytherin is my best guess."

The ghosts looked at each other, exchanging more in the glances than anyone could see, then the friar turned back. "I expect we'll find out how right you are shortly, young lady."

The Friar looked back to the others and nodded, "We'll be seeing you around."

As the ghosts floated off Xander noticed everyone shifting away from Wednesday and made a point to move a little closer. "You sure know how to get some extra elbow room."

"I was feeling a little crowded," She deadpanned in response.

"This way children, form a line," A Professor introduced as McGonagall said sternly, appearing practically from nowhere, hustling them into the Great Hall.

As everyone was ooh-ing and aww-ing at the fantastic night sky above them, Xander heard Hermione speak up.

"It's not real, you know."

"Huh?" Harry blinked, looking at her.

"It's enchanted to look like the sky," She proclaimed, obviously eager to doll out the tidbit of knowledge. Xander almost chuckled at the satisfied look, bordering on true smugness, which crossed her face.

"How do you know that?" Ron practically demanded his voice just short of an actual challenge.

"I read all about it in Hogwarts, A History."

"Ah," Xander sighed happily, "There's my fix of Willowy goodness. Been missing that."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione looked over at him, obviously confused.

"Never mind," Xander said, just smiling easily.

"Right." Ron shook his head.

The redhead was about to say something else, but was interrupted when the Professor brought out an old hat and set it on a chair. They looked on in confusion, and almost everyone jumped as the hat began to **SING**.

Oh, you may not think I'm pretty,

But don't judge on what you see,

I'll eat myself if you can find

A smarter hat than me.

You can keep your bowlers black,

Your top hats sleek and tall,

For I'm the Hogwarts Sorting Hat

And I can top them all.

There's nothing hidden in your head

The Sorting Hat can't see,

So try me on and I will tell you

Where you ought to be.  
You might belong in Gryffindor,  
Where dwell the brave at heart,  
Their daring, nerve and chivalry  
Set Gryffindors apart;  
You might belong in Hufflepuff,  
Where they are just and loyal,  
Those patient Hufflepuffs are true  
And unafraid of toil;  
Or yet in wise old Ravenclaw,  
If you've a steady mind,  
Where those of wit and learning,  
Will always find their kind;  
Or perhaps in Slytherin  
You'll make your real friends,  
Those cunning folk use any means  
To achieve their ends.  
So put me on! Don't be afraid!  
And don't get in a flap!  
You're in safe hands though I have none  
For I'm a Thinking Cap!

Some of the kids hesitantly applauded when it finished, then the professor began calling out names, starting with.

“Addams, Wednesday!”

Xander watched as the dark girl stepped calmly forward and had the hat placed in her head. He seemed to consider for a long time, then finally let out a call.

“**Ravenclaw!**”

Wednesday set the hat aside and glanced down at the table of her house, then back at Xander for a moment. Finally she nodded to him and walked calmly to the applauding students. Xander clapped too, but he was more interested in the look on the Professor's face as she watched Wednesday nervously the whole time.

One kid after another was called up, then dispatched quickly to one house or another, then after some time it the call was...

“Harris, Alexander!”

Xander swallowed and walked up to the seat, knowing by this point that he just had to put the hat on, so he did. As soon as it was down over his head it began to mumble.

“Hmm... interesting. Very interesting, boy. You're one of the tougher ones to place, I'd say. You've got heart, loyal to a fault. The Hufflepuffs would gladly have you, no question. There's courage here too, though your chivalry is a little rusty...” The hat chuckled at its own joke, just confusing Xander, “Your courage isn't blind, but it's more than enough to stand up to the requirements of a Gryffindor. The best I can say for your mind is that you might survive in Ravenclaw, though I expect you'd wish you hadn't. Still... The only answer I can see is...”

“**Slytherin!**” The hat yelled out after its long deliberation, and Xander rose up.

He looked around then found the table with green colors and made his way over to it. Some of the table applauded, some were more stoic. Xander suddenly had a bad feeling in his gut as he looked at the adult standing behind the table, glaring at him as he approached.

*‘Oh man. This is gonna **SUCK**.’* He suddenly realized, having an urge to then turn and rush back, demanding another try with the hat.



Instead he just sat down and tried to make himself invisible as the sorting continued. His sinking feeling continued when the Blond kid he'd tripped on the train was sent instantly over to the Slytherin table, along with his two goons. School was looking to be about as good as it ever did he realized with a sigh, only half paying attention to the sorting until Harry was at the chair with the hat on his head.

There was another long pause as the hat considered, apparently having the same problems with Harry as he had with Xander. Finally, though, the hat let out a roar of "**Gryffindor!**"

The Red and Gold table erupted then, with kids cheering and yelling 'We got Potter! We Got Potter!' Xander winced, and could hear the grumbling around his table. *Harry's got some fans at least.*

Ron and Hermione were also in Gryffindor Xander noted when it was all done, and he found himself sitting across the room from pretty much everyone he personally knew, and beside at least one person he'd found reason to dislike. '*Oh joyous day.*'

When the sorting was done the oldest man Xander had ever seen just clapped his hands and suddenly the tables were covered in foods of types Xander had only imagined, and he actually stared for several long moments as everyone else tucked in and began to eat.

He shook it off quickly, grabbing some food of his own, and was well into his meal when a ghostly figure floated into view, apparently sizing up the Slytherin first years. Everyone shied away from him, but Xander had seen Wednesday speak to them earlier and just nodded to the rather gory spectacle as it passed by.

"Hey man, how's it going?"

The ghost paused to look at him closely, leaning in as the two students on either side of Xander shifted away in a hurry. Xander leaned back, frowning, "Uh. No offense, but I'm eating here dude, and the Baron Harkonnen look is kinda freak worthy."

The growl the ghost let out sent a shiver down his back, but Xander stubbornly refused to back down and finally the ghost moved on.

"Don't talks much, does he?"

"That was the Bloody Baron!" A student next to him hissed, "No one talks back to the Baron, he's just here to look intimidating."

Xander glanced around and noticed that the other tables all had ghosts floating around them and they seemed to be involved in conversation. He filed the information away and just shrugged, "If he doesn't want me to talk to him, he can tell me himself."

The boy looked at him like he was nuts, but Xander had long since determined that he was in a completely different world and the worst thing he could do right now is look like a pushover. He glanced longingly over at the Ravenclaw table, only to find Wednesday looking back at him, her own position just as isolated as his was. At the Gryffindor table, things were different. Harry and Ron were talking and laughing, and the group was generally enjoying themselves as everyone wrapped up their meal.

As the dishes vanished to wherever they were sent, and Xander made a silent plea to whatever Gods were watching that he wouldn't have to wash the damn things, the oldest guy on the planet stood up and cleared his throat.

Xander listened half heartedly as he went on with the standard sounding rules that he'd expect, stay out of the forest, and behave, yadda yadda yadda. When the mention of 'painful death' came up Xander stiffened to attention, focusing on the old man. '*What was that? Third floor?*'

While he was still trying to figure it out, however, the Headmaster had moved on.

"And now, before we go to bed, let's all sing the school song!"

Xander frowned, watching as the Headmaster tapped his wand and shot out a ribbon that formed into words.

"Everyone pick your favorite tune!"

Xander found himself compelled to sing along as the whole school roared, the words spilling from him on automatic as his eyes flicked about. Everyone was singing, and not one was using the same tune as far as he could tell. The result was a deafening roar that slowly began to peter out as the faster tunes finished.

Finally it was just two Gryffindor twins, Xander recognized as Ron's brothers, singing in a slow funeral march tune. When they finished people applauded, the Headmaster loudest of all.

"Ah music," Dumbledore said, wiping his eyes. "Truly, a magic beyond what we do here."

Xander was ignoring him mostly, eyes on the twins as a smile played around his lips. Those two were gonna be fun, he was willing to bet.

"Alright, off to bed with you."

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He was led to the Slytherin rooms by the Prefects, two tall seventh year students who looked rather dark and dreary in his opinion. They stopped at a painting of a pinch faced woman in English riding gear, staring haughtily out at them as she demanded, "Password?"

"Draconic Fury."

The portrait swing open and Xander and the others got their first view of the Slytherin Common room. It was large, with two fireplaces providing head. Green tapestries covered the walls, and Xander had to admit that the place looked pretty comfortable. Despite the heat from the fireplaces, though, it felt cold as he moved through it. There was just something, cool about the room. Not cool in the good way either, but Xander couldn't decide if it was in a bad way so he let it go.

"Well well," A sneering voice surprised him, making his turn around to see the boy he'd tripped standing behind him. "Look what we have here."

Xander's heart slammed in his chest, and his stomach tied up in knots. He knew that there was no way he could take the three of them, and those two goons seemed glued to blondie's sides. He sighed, "Draco, right? We have a problem, I suppose?"

"That's Draco **Malfoy** to you," The boy sneered, "And I don't have any problems, but you do. You helped that Gryffindor scum earlier."

"No, I kept you from going after Wednesday Addams, who is in Ravenclaw." Xander corrected, trying not to let his voice pitch upwards from fear. "She is a friend, and I don't know you."

"You should have stayed out of it!" Malfoy snapped, stepping closer.

"You should keep your temper under control," Xander countered, "From what I read; jumping into fights without looking is a **Gryffindor** trait, isn't it?"

Malfoy jerked back like he'd been slapped, frowning as he eyed Xander coldly for a moment. Finally he shrugged, "Fine. I'll give you another chance."

Xander just barely kept from rolling his eyes at the snotty generosity he was being offered. Out loud he just nodded, "Thank you, I'll give you one too."

Then he turned and walked away from the boy, who was tilting between turning purple and blue, apparently too incensed to respond. That was fine with Xander and he joined the group that was being shown to their rooms.

The rooms were in a sub-floor below the common room, no windows, but well appointed enough to be comfortable just the same. Green seemed to be the color of the day, with white and silver as the preferred accents. Xander tested his bed and found it was more than he was used to, and he had a little hope that maybe... just maybe it wasn't going to suck as much as he thought it was.

He lay down, honestly dog tired, and closed his eyes. In short order he found himself fighting desperately to ward off the wave of homesickness that washed over him as he thought of Willow and Jesse, back home in Sunnydale.

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Classes started off quickly the next morning, with some seriously interesting subjects from Xander's point of view. Charms, Transfigurations, it was all high grade superhero stuff in his mind and for once he was actually cracking the books.

A lot of the novelty wore off pretty quick once he realized that the stuff they were teaching amounted to little more than children's games, and could be done by most stage magicians. Of course stage magicians did it by sleight of hand and trickery, Xander supposed, at least that's what they said.

It did make him wonder.

Charms class was pretty interesting, even if the guy who taught it put him in mind of a teacher he'd once had called Snyder. Ok, Flitwick was nicer and probably a lot better looking, but still the resemblance was there. Still, the Prof aside, charms was cool because it basically let someone put all kinds of spells on normal objects, letting them do some cool things. Xander could already see some interesting possibilities there, but he was going to need to get a hold of his comic collection in order to review and consider them.

The problem was, however, that it was damned **HARD** to make them stupid things work.

Swish and flick. Right. Xander was only eleven years old, but he could make **SO** many off color jokes about swish and flick that he was really happy no one back home could see him trying to do simple charms right now. The ability to completely change anything to do with the object would **NOT** make up for the humiliation he'd get from Larry, or the sneers from Cordy.

Still, if he could pull it off, well... It had possibilities to be sure.

Transfiguration was something else that was kinda cool, though it interested him slightly less. Changing one thing into another was good in a pinch, but honestly if he wanted a flower he could go pick one, he didn't have to turn a piece of paper into it. Certainly he couldn't think of any good reason to turn a match into a needle, not that he was **ABLE** to turn a match into a needle, but the point was still there.

The week progressed much like that, and Xander was pretty relieved to find that no one seemed to have a huge lead on him or anyone else. Hermione was, pretty clearly, a Willow-smart witch, and she was going to build a lead on him to be sure, but for the moment just about everyone was within sight of his own starting position.

Many of his classes were conducted with Gryffindor, interestingly enough, since most of Slytherin seemed to despise the 'kitty cats', and it was pretty clear that the cats didn't much care for the snakes. That made those classes the next thing to unbearable if one was stupid enough to be caught between the active combatants in the two sided turf war.

Xander made it a point not to sit anywhere near Draco and his Cronies, or the 'Potter Crew'.

After classes, though, was when things got pretty bad. Slytherin was a house divided, and Xander wondered if it was the same in the others. To the outside, Slytherin stood fairly tightly united it was true, but Xander thought that was because most of the school seemed to hate them and that made them tighten ranks.

From the inside, though, it was clear that there were schisms so deep someone could fall into them and be lost forever.

Xander nearly did just that on his second day.

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"Mudblood scum..."

Xander didn't know what the first word meant, but the second word and tone filled it in nicely as he stepped up into the Slytherin common room and found himself once again staring at Draco and his goon squad, this time bullying a Slytherin boy.

"I don't know **HOW** you could possibly have been sorted into this house," Draco sneered as the boy crawled back, bleeding from his nose as the Draco and the two larger boys loomed over him.

"Probably because the hat put him here," Xander said sarcastically from where he was leaning on a door frame.

Draco spun on him, eyes widening "Stay out of this!"

"You've had your fun, leave him alone." Xander said, again fighting the urge to shake as he always did when dealing with kids who could beat him to a pulp. "What'd he do anyway?"

"He was in my way," Draco smirked.

"Next time you'll probably have less trouble if you ask him to move," Xander noted, surprised by his own calm.

Draco and the other two turned on him, leaving the other boy alone. "I see you didn't take my advice to heart. Standing up for this sort of scum is a sure way to take his place."

"Yeah well, I've done that before," Xander muttered under his breath.

Of course, he didn't even **know** the other kid, and that was a bit unusual. Normally he wouldn't put himself in this position for just anyone. Getting the crap beat out of him for a stranger was gonna suck.

There was no changing Draco's focus now, though, and Xander tensed as the two monoliths moved to flank him.

"Alright! That's enough!" The four of them jumped as the Slytherin Prefect moved in, breaking up the conflict with a glare in Xander's direction. "We don't fight each other."

"Tell that to Draco and his goon squad," Xander retorted.

"You don't know how things work here, so I'm going to let that go," The older boy growled, "But we are Slytherin, no one else gives a damn about us, so we sure as hell don't fight each other."

Xander glanced pointedly over at the boy Draco had been bullying, who was getting to his feet and wiping his nose clean.

"If he wants to survive here, he'll toughen up fast."

That was the only answer he got out of it.

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As rough as it was for him, Xander didn't see where it was much better for Wednesday. He didn't have many classes with the Ravenclaw's, so he didn't have a clue how she was doing there, but whenever he saw her around she seemed as alone as he was.

He made a point of checking up with her every day, at least once or twice, but didn't really get much information from her when he did. Still, she didn't ignore him entirely as she did pretty much everyone other than professors, and they soon were to be found sitting near one another when they had time. By the third day, ironically Wednesday, Xander was talking to her about his experiences in class and out.

On Thursday, she finally said something back.

He was talking about the fractions he'd seen in his own house, and the level of crap Draco and a few others put out when she looked over at him and simply said, "Why don't you put a stop to it?"

Xander looked at her sharply, "Have you seen the two gargoyles he has with him? Even if Draco was the kinda guy who could take a hint, he won't with those two bookends. I'm starting to think I should have stayed home. School wasn't always easy there, but at least I didn't have to worry about being killed in my sleep."

Wednesday shrugged, "It seems to me that he's not being very Slytherin."

“Yeah, you get that too?” Xander frowned, thinking to what he’d read, “There’s not very many that are, you know. Is it the same in your house?”

“No. Everyone is very interested in learning,” She said in response, “At least...”

“What?”

“They’re close minded,” Wednesday said, almost sighing. “They want to learn from books and teachers, but they don’t want to know about anything that doesn’t fit into their nice little box shaped world.”

Xander found himself staring, impressed that she could string that many words together in one go. He considered her words, though, thinking about it, “I wonder about the other houses.”

“Why?”

“Just curious mostly. You say that your house has some really intelligent stupid people; I know that my house seems to be heavy on the ruthless ambition, really light on the cunning. Wonder what the other two are like?”

Wednesday shrugged, “Probably the same, in different ways.”

Xander chuckled, nodding. “Yeah.”

He sighed, shaking his head. “Alright. Fine. I’m Slytherin, whatever the hell that means. I guess I better learn to act like it.”

Wednesday looked over at him, raising a single elegant eyebrow, “Oh?”

“Don’t worry,” Xander smirked, “I’m not going to go overboard on the ruthless ambition, but a little cunning seems to be in order.”

“Indeed.” Wednesday said softly.

“And from the sounds of it, you may need to start teaching the Ravenclaw’s a few lessons too,” He suggested.

Wednesday considered that. Honestly she didn’t care what they thought, or didn’t think, about her. She was here for her own advancement, not theirs. Still, she was growing bored with their attitudes, and the lessons were mindlessly simple enough to leave her with too much free time, so... perhaps a few games were in order.

“Perhaps you are right,” She said.

Xander smirked, “I know I am. Now, let me know if you need any help.”

She nodded to him, “And you do the same.”

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Friday brought Double Potions with Gryffindor House, which really didn’t seem to be a good thing from what Xander could tell. Half the other kids around him wanted to strangle the Gryffs, and the other half seemed to be afraid of them to one degree or another. Malfoy was leading the first group, of course, and he seemed particularly eager to get to class.

Xander figured out why pretty quickly when the Professor turned out to be the head of Slytherin House, the sallow faced man who’d watched the sorting ritual with an impassive glare the day before. He opened his lecture with a long spiel on bottling fame and putting a stopper in death, most of which flew right over Xander’s head, then turned almost immediately on Harry with a sneer that only seemed to get worse as the seconds ticked by.

The Slytherin’s who’d surrounded Malfoy seemed amused by it, snickering softly as Potter was put on the spot, and Xander was pretty happy with his position suddenly. He didn’t think he’d stand a chance in hell of passing this course if he had to deal with that level of contempt.

He was watching Draco, though, and mentally making notes.

From what he could tell Harry was a pretty famous guy, and that was both good and bad. It had taken him only a little time to get the story from someone. Having his parents killed off had to suck, no doubt. Xander’s mom and dad were pains sometimes, but living without them? Xander couldn’t imagine it. They were his mom and dad.

It was also pretty obvious that Harry was above average in classes, though for the moment that didn’t mean much of anything. As far as Xander could tell, though, the other boy had done nothing to earn the intense level of dislike from Draco.

Or Snape, for that matter, Xander noted as Snape continued to rip into Harry with question after question that he knew that **HE** couldn’t answer. That went on until another Gryff, Xander thought was Neville, suddenly started breaking out in the worst acne Xander had seen since Jessie’s older brother turned fifteen. His attention diverted Snape tore into Neville for a bit until finally settling down to teach the class.

Lots of stuff just didn’t add up, and Xander would be damned if he could figure it out. He’d run it by Wednesday later, for now he had to figure out how he was supposed to brew this gunk without winding up looking like Neville.

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Information gathering was slow, Xander found out over the week. There were so many things under the surface that he didn’t know about.

Wednesday had come through, telling him quietly that Draco's old man had been some kind of cultist back in the day, and the dimwit who got himself killed by a kid was the top dog of the group.

This explained some things a bit, anyway. Harry supposedly offs the head dork, so all the lesser twits are left out to dry. Probably a lot of grudges there, even if it was pretty stupid to blame a kid for something like that. Xander wondered for a bit how Wednesday had found out, but decided he probably didn't want to know.

What he didn't know wouldn't get him expelled. He hoped.

Flight lessons were up next, and Xander had to admit... flying? Now that was major league cool.

They'd all turned out on the grounds, with brooms of all things being passed out, and the professor looking very sternly at each of them.

"Alright, put your hand over your brooms and say '**up!**'"

Xander frowned, doing as he was told. The broom shivered a bit, but that was it. It wasn't the worst result in the class, not by a long shot, but Draco and Harry got theirs into their hands on the first try. Xander scowled at the broom, "**UP !**"

The broom broke loose of the ground, missing his outstretched hand, and smacked him right in the face. Xander flopped back, hitting the ground with an expellation of air, and stared up as the broom floated above him for a few seconds, then dropped back onto his face for a second shot at him.

Both houses were laughing to varying degrees as the professor rushed over.

"Are you alright?"

Xander didn't answer as he glared at his broom, "Of course, you realize, this means war."

"Are you alright?"

"I'm fine, Ma'am," Xander sighed, getting to his feet. "Just caught me by surprise that's all..."

A scream startled Xander and the professor, and they both turned to see Neville rocket into the air like he was heading for orbit, his broom wildly yanking him along for the ride of his life. Hopefully not the **LAST** ride of his life. The professor, Madam Hooch went running after him, screaming at him to calm down until his ride ended with a crashing thud into the ground.

Xander winced when they were told he'd broken his wrist, and were ordered to stay on the ground or be expelled.

No problem. He glared at his broom, entirely unwilling to give the damned thing another chance to off him.

"Give it back, Malfoy!"

Xander turned to see Malfoy playing keep away with something golden and frowned. '*God, does this guy have to cause trouble at every opportunity??*'

He moved closer, unsure what to do, only to have the point rendered moot when Malfoy grabbed his broom and flashed into the air, challenging Harry to chase him. The look on his face when Potter did just that was amusing, but now Xander found himself looking around to see if the professor was anywhere in sight, and wondering how in the hell he could keep them from getting expelled if she came back early.

Again, however, he didn't have time to do anything as the duo took their dogfight on the road, so to speak, and dueled through the air over the school in what had to be one of the coolest games of tag Xander'd ever seen.

It ended when Malfoy tossed the object away, Harry dove after it, caught it after a death defying brush with the ground, and was caught by his own head of house.

'*Yeah. I see why he was sent to the Gryffs.*' Xander thought, shaking his head. '*Being gutsy is one thing, but I don't care what the hell Malfoy stole, it wasn't worth getting killed **OR** expelled over. That was just reckless, not brave.*'

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Of course being reckless sometimes paid off as Xander found out a couple days later. Malfoy was fuming so hard Xander half expected him to spontaneously combust, and Harry was the reason why. Not only had he somehow survived Malfoy's various schemes, but he was apparently now playing in the school teams for some kind of sport Xander had never heard of.

It was amusing and all, but honestly Xander didn't have time to pay any attention to it.

Classes were getting harder, and the life in the Slytherin dorms was getting tenser.

There were two distinct factions, Xander had learned, mostly being defined by the second years and older. The pure bloods, as they called themselves, were the first and strongest. They were probably about three quarters of the house, and basically lorded it over everyone else. Malfoy, though a first year, was solidly in their camp and even fairly high up in the actual ranks as far as Xander could tell.

His family name had some serious clout; otherwise the various humiliations he'd already endured would have done some more damage to his

influence.

The other group was, well, everyone else.

'Muggleborn', 'Half Bloods', and a couple 'Pure Bloods' who'd made a stand. There were also several students of varying years that were pretty clearly neutral. They were all pure bloods as far as Xander could tell, the only classification that **could** be neutral. Xander himself was a bit of an odd duck, he found.

He didn't talk about his family, and he sure as hell wasn't going to start now, so no one was sure where he belonged. His being a 'Colonial' both reduced and protected his status. On the one hand, he was a barbarian from the states, but on the other they had no way to check on his parentage or bloodlines. It gave him a certain degree of latitude that many others weren't afforded, but it was pretty clear that he **wasn't** going to be joining the pure blood group anytime in the near future.

All things considered, Xander figured his best bet was keep his head down, don't cause waves, and hopefully go to Salem Academy in the next year.

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They finally got a chance at some cool stuff in Charms class, when Professor Flitwick told them that they were ready to start making things fly. Of course, start was the key word. Xander found himself muttering the Wingardium Leviosa spell over and over again, to varying results. The only one of which that resembled 'flight' was when his feather exploded in a fiery rain of death and destruction that sent a plume of smoke three feet into the air over his head.

Actually, it was pretty cool for all that.

Xander was quickly distracted, like most of the rest of the class, by the Gryffindor side of the table where Ron Weasely was complaining about the impossibility of the task. Hermione almost instantly jumped on his case, her tone making Xander smile subconsciously as he clearly heard her correcting the red head.

"You're saying it wrong," She told him, her voice travelling clearly across the entire room. "It's Wing Gar Dium Levio Sa."

Xander only winced slightly as he saw Ron redden, instantly recognizing that the boy had a fair bit too much pride for his own good. Jessie did the same thing when Willow first tried correcting him, and it had taken a lot of work to keep the two from killing each other at first.

"If you're so good, you do it then!" Ron challenged her.

Xander shook his head, now wincing for real as he actually smiled.

"What are you smirking at, Harris?"

Xander looked over at Malfoy and then nodded to the Gryffs, "Ronny boy over there just walked right into a wall. Watch."

Malfoy looked over as Hermione did a perfect swish and flick, clearly incanting the charm, and rose her feather with near perfect control.

"Five bucks says Ronny turns red enough to hide in front of one of Gryffindor's tapestries." Xander said, chuckling.

Malfoy found himself snickering slightly at the other boy's obvious discomfort, then spoke up loud enough for the class to hear, "Good lord, Weasely, can't you even get a simple charm right?"

Xander grimaced, knowing damn well that Malfoy hadn't done one yet himself, and yanked the blond back into his seat as Ron and Harry glared over at him.

"Take your hands off me you... you... **American** ." Draco hissed.

"Don't be an idiot. What are you going to do if Ron challenges you to do better? Do you think you can cast better than her?" Xander hissed right back, "Cause I've known a girl just like that, and I'll bet anything you like that she can out cast you on anything in the books."

Draco stiffened, "That little mudblood? I'm far more powerful..."

"Maybe, but my money says she's smarter. That's not an insult, by the way," Xander said, sitting back and trying to look normal. "She's way smarter than me, and I know it. From what she said on the train she's not from a magical family, so you probably know more stuff... but what she's got in her books? Trust me, don't challenge her on it. That's her own territory."

Draco glared at him, but by then the class had settled down and moved on. Xander honestly didn't know how the hell half the people in his House had gotten there. They were obviously **NOT** the cunning type and, the more he watched them, the more it was clear they weren't even the ambitious or even ruthless types either. Oh, there was no doubt that most of them could be as brutal as all get out, but there was a certain level of... finesse assumed when you talked about being 'ruthless', and finesse was **NOT** the forte of any of the students he'd met so far.

Malfoy was obviously one of the top dogs, even though he was a 'firstie' like Xander. His family name had some power, and he obviously swung a lot of clout around with his dad's money bags. The two knuckle draggers that followed him around were proof of that. Pansy Parkinson had ambition, the way she tried sucking up to Draco made that clear, but the girl scored zero points of finesse and that was being polite.

It was a lot like watching Cordelia and her sheep squad back home, really. Draco was the closest Xander could identify to an actual Slytherin by

the qualities he'd read, but he was obviously either too stupid or too ignorant of how the world worked to make use of his advantages. Even at eleven years old Xander knew that there was simply no reason to court as much disfavor as Draco did, no matter how much money you had. It was like the boy was actively **TRYING** to get three quarters of the school angry with him.

Most of the rest were worse than that, and that was being polite about things. There were a few, of course, that Xander couldn't really put a read on. Daphne Greengrass, for one. She was pretty standoffish so far, and didn't go out of her way to attract any attention. The quiet ones were the ones to worry about, Xander decided. At least in the long term, Draco was likely to be a short term pain in the ass.

Charms class broke up, interrupting Xander's thoughts, and leaving with another exploded feather and a couple disgruntled housemates shooting glares in his direction. He sighed and shrugged it off, stopping short though when they stepped out of the class room.

"It's no wonder no one can stand her," Ron was saying, grumbling as he spoke, his words easily audible to everyone in the hall. "She's a nightmare, really."

Hermione Granger stifled a sob and pushed quickly past them, bolting down the hall. Xander shook his head and walked up behind the duo as Harry looked over at Ron.

"I think she heard you."

"No duh." Xander said clearly, slapping Ron in the back of the head.

"Oi!" The Gryffindor yelped, twisting around as he held his head.

"If you're going to be a sneak and talk behind someone's back," Xander said sarcastically,

"Try and have the **cunning** to make sure they're not standing behind **YOUR** back at the time."

The Slytherin's behind Xander laughed openly as Xander paused and looked at Harry.

"Well?"

"Well what? I didn't say anything!" Harry said defensively.

Xander rolled his eyes, "Fine. I'll do it."

Before either Harry or the rapidly reddening Ron Weasely could say anything else Xander had pushed through and headed after Hermione.

The two looked at each other, "What was that about?"

"He's totally barmy." Ron shrugged, "Total nutter."

"You two are useless tools," Daphne Greengrass said, rolling her eyes as she walked past.

"Hey!" Ron objected loudly.

"What did I do!?" Harry asked his tone plaintive.

The blond shook her head and walked regally past, "If you can't figure it out, I'm certainly not going to tell you."

"Nutters." Ron said, shaking his head, "They're all nutters."

Draco chuckled nastily as he walked past, "My My Potter, you're certainly scoring all kinds of points today aren't you?"

Harry and Ron glared at Draco as he walked past, and they both heard him as he chuckled and went on.

"Maybe Harris isn't such a waste; he seems to know how to put Weasely in his place at least."

Ron started to turn an alarming puce color, causing Harry to grab his arm, "Come on, it's time for lunch."

"Right, mate. Lunch."

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Xander sighed; frustrated by the castle he was wandering through. He was missing a class, trying to find a crying girl he barely knew, and the damn place kept changing shape. He was about to give up when a ghost floated past.

"Hey! Spooky!"

The shimmering figure paused, looking back at him, then back down the hall.

"Pardon?" The floating figure asked quizzically. "Are you speaking to me?"

"Yeah, have you seen a crying girl come through here?"

The figure didn't answer him for a moment, looking Xander over. "You're Slytherin."

"Duh." Xander muttered, "Look, pal, I'm trying to find a girl who ran through here some time ago."

"But you're a Slytherin."

Xander frowned, "What's that got to do with anything?"

"Slytherin's don't talk to me, I'm the Gryffindor Ghost."

"What? What kind of stupid rule is that?"

The ghost looked taken aback for a moment, then blinked, "Well I suppose it's not a **rule** per say, but it's just not done."

Xander sighed, "Look, did you see her or not?"

"Well, yes, actually." The ghost said, "But she's Gryffindor too."

"So? She's **crying** dude!"

The Ghost looked truly perplexed, head cocked to look at Xander closely. "Are you **SURE** you're Slytherin?"

Xander growled and stomped forward, actually passing right through the ghost and continuing down the hall. "Stupid effin ghosts... Dumbass Gryffindor ghosts... stupid house bullsh--"

The Ghost known as Nearly Headless Nick watched the young Slytherin stomp off and bemusedly shook his head, causing it to wobble slightly. "Well he certainly has the Slytherin grumpiness down..."

Nick turned after a moment and followed, curious and slightly concerned as well, but remained far enough back to be out of sight.

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The first clue Xander really got to Hermione's location was a small gaggle of girls walking through the hall ahead of him, whispering loudly and gasping.

"Hey!"

The girls, who were wearing Hufflepuff colors, shrieked in surprise as he approached, then got a hold of themselves and eyed him warily.

"What?"

"Did you see Hermione come through here?"

The girls looked at each other, then back at him, "Why would you want to know where a Gryffindor is?"

Xander rolled his eyes, "I just do, ok?"

They eyed him darkly, "Well we never saw her."

The three stuck their noses up and walk passed him, leaving Xander completely confused as to what just happened. He shook head, and thought about it. The last time he'd had to go looking for Willow after Cordelia had ripped into her he'd gotten the same reaction from another group of girls who'd blamed him for making Willow cry.

Since he was a Slytherin 'asshole', that was probably the case here too. Xander sighed, shaking his head.

'Ok... *Hermione is like a Willowclone, right? Where would Will go?*' Xander pondered, frowning.

Well, the library came to mind, but actually that wasn't likely. Willow loved the library, but she never went there when she was sad. Ok, what else? Xander grimaced; remembering that he'd had to pull Willow out of the girls' bathroom the last time, and had caught a lot of heat for it.

He sighed, steeling himself, and started looking for the closest girl's washrooms.

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Nick watched idly as the young Slytherin found the lavatory the girl was hiding in and pounded on the door, calling out as soft as he could while still hoping to be heard on the other side. Oddly enough the boy seemed to actually be trying to comfort the Gryffindor girl. It was rather perplexing, actually. Nick tried to think of the last time a Slytherin had acted quite like this, and had to think back more than a few years. Before Grindlewald, actually.

Of course, back then, Slytherin's didn't have quite as bad a reputation as they had garnered lately. Oh, they weren't universally loved, to be sure, but they were respected at least as much as feared. It was really quite interesting, the old Gryffindor spirit mused.

He really would have to speak with the Baron about it.



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"Hermione?" Xander hissed, far louder than he wanted as he pounded on the door. "Are you in there?"

With no answer forthcoming, he steeled himself and pounded again. "Is anyone there? I'm coming in!"

"Go away!"

Xander sighed, relaxing slightly as he recognized the voice as belonging to the genius of Gryffindor House. "Come on, Hermione. The carrot top didn't mean what he was spouting; he was just trying to save face."

"I said go away!"

"Damn it." Xander groaned, "I hate this part."

He was about to open the door when a lumbering sound caught his attention and he half turned to look down the hall. His eyes grew wide as he watched the **HUGE** figure moving in his direction and he yelped, throwing the door open quickly and then slamming it behind him as he braced his back against the door.

"You can't come in here!" Hermione shrieked, "This is the **GIRL'S** Lavatory!!"

"I really hope that **HE** knows that!" Xander snapped back.

"He?" The girl frowned, confused. "He who?"

Before Xander could answer the door shook behind him, throwing him clear across the room into a skid that finished him with lying at the floor by Hermione's feet, one hand scrambling to draw his wand as the other pointed. "He Him Who Him Him!"

Hermione's stared down at Xander, face confused, but then she looked up as the door shuddered again and cracked opened, revealing a huge troll as it bent over and entered the room. Hermione did what almost any child her age would do in that situation.

She screamed.

Xander winced, scrambling to his feet as he pushed her behind him. "What **IS** that thing?"

Faced with a question, Hermione reacted according to her nature and answered, sounding remarkably calm for someone who had just let out a blood curdling shriek of terror.

"It looks like a Mountain troll. Th... There aren't many of them in this area, and none are su-supposed to be able to get past Hogwarts w-wards."

"Great. We had to get the genius troll." Xander muttered, waving his wand threateningly, hoping that the thing had some fear of them as many animals had fear of guns. If it didn't, well Xander didn't actually know any spells that he could use here so...

"A little help here!?" He muttered, still pushing Hermione behind him as he backed away from the thing, waving his wand futilely as the troll clearly indicated no fear of either him or his stick.

"How!?" Hermione blurted in his ear, "It's a **Mountain troll** !"

"You're the book genius, right!?" Xander growled, flinching back as the Troll swung its club past them hard enough for the air to blast them in the face.

"It's a **TROLL** !" Hermione screamed at him, "Sure I know how to cast a stunner, but I'm not remotely strong enough to..."

"I don't **CARE** ! It's not like we have a lot of other options!!"

"Fine!" She huffed, all signs of fear gone from her face and voice as she snapped at Xander, "You move your wand like this and say **STUPIFY** !!"

A faded red glow burst from her wand, splattering against the troll's face and caused it to snap back for a second, shaking like it had just been slapped. Then it growled at them and hefted its club for a heavy swing, roaring its anger.

"Are you happy now!?" Hermione screamed, "We made it **MAD** !"

"Oh yes, because it was trying to take **SUCH** good care of us before!" Xander snarled, twisting as he did, then grabbing her and spinning around. He used the force of his spin to throw her clear as he was tossed back in the other direction, just missing the splintering crash of the Troll's hammer as it crushed the stonework of the bathroom.

Hermione was sprawled in the corner as the Troll turned on her, and Xander shook himself as he got to his hands and knees and thrust out his wand.

"**STUPIFY** !!"

The blast was much brighter as the discharge slammed into the Troll, but the effect was largely the same. It did, however, momentarily confuse the troll into trying to decide between two targets. As it stared dumbly at them for a moment the door behind it burst open to reveal Ron and Harry, who

froze for a moment themselves when presented with the Troll in real life.

Then Hermione screamed again and everyone unfroze.

The Troll turned at her, hefting its club again, and the two boys burst into action. They charged in, trying to tackle it from behind, only to be thrown clear. Ron hit the ground sliding, then slammed into the far wall with brutal force, leaving Harry hanging on for dear life as the Troll tried to knock him clear.

Harry beat at the Troll's head as best he could, his fists bruising but too little other effect, then reached around to pummel its face. The Troll grunted, more in frustration than any degree of pain, until Harry somehow managed to drive his wand up the Troll's nose.

**THAT** apparently either hurt or really embarrassed the big guy, Xander noted as it howled and started striking at its back with renewed vigor. Xander was about ready to try the stunner again when Ron Weasely let out a yell.

"Wingardium **LEVIOSA** !!"

Xander blinked, confused. '*What the hell is he trying to levitate!?*'

The answer came when the troll's own club rose up then slammed back down on its head, dropping troll and Harry to the floor.

A deep silence fell over the washroom, panting breaths of the four students the only thing breaking it for a long moment, then a screech from outside startled them all into turning with wands at the ready.

"What is **HAPPENING** here!?" Professor McGonagall snapped, striding in with Professor Snape and Headmaster Dumbledore on her heels. The three found themselves looking down the wands of four first years, which were in various states of distress but looked like they were uninjured.

"Uh..." Harry said, looking around. "We uh..."

"It's my fault, professor..." Hermione began, only to be cut off.

"No, it's ours. Right, Harry?" Ron cut in.

Harry blinked, then nodded, "Yeah. We heard about the troll and..."

Ron looked around furiously, "And we thought we could handle him, right?"

Xander shook his head as the Head of Gryffindor House grew redder and redder. "Bullshit."

Everyone stopped and stared at him in shock.

"Mr. **HARRIS** !" McGonagall snapped, "Five points from Slytherin for your language!"

"Explain yourself, Harris." Snape hissed.

Xander pointed at Ron, "He said something stupid, Hermione was hurt by it, she came here to compose herself. I followed, we never heard about the troll. I'm guessing those two did..."

The two Gryffindor's nodded miserably.

Xander shrugged, then went on, "And decided to save their friend. Why they're making up some dumbass story, I don't know, cause it's not like anyone did anything wrong in the first place..."

He paused, then shrugged, "Except Weasely, who should learn to keep his mouth shut if he doesn't have anything nice to say."

Ron turned bright beat red as Xander shrugged past them, then paused by the teachers and looked up at his head of house. "Just in case, Sir... How **does** one stop a Mountain Troll??"

That stunner really didn't work."

Snape stared, one eyebrow rising, "You successfully cast a Stunner?"

Xander nodded, "Hermione too. Didn't work on that thing."

"Excellent spell work," Snape replied, "Five points to Slytherin. We'll speak later."

"And five to Gryffindor as well," McGonagall said, nodding to Hermione, before she turned on Ron and Harry. "However five points from each of your for not following instructions to return to your dorm rooms. Now come along, we'll get you checked out."

Through it all the Headmaster remained silent; eyes twinkling as he carefully set the scene in his mind to reexamine later.

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"Poppy says that they're all fine," Dumbledore said with a sigh as he took a seat and faced the professors sitting in his office.

"Well thank goodness," Minerva said, shaking just slightly. The thought of how close those students had come to serious injury or worse shook even her Gryffindor courage, more than any attack on her own person ever had. "What were those boys thinking!?"

"That they were idiotic Gryffindors," Snape replied, snorting.

Minerva shot him a scowl, but it was weakened by the fact that the headmaster seemed to find the comment amusing, and even Filius was chuckling softly. "All very well for you to laugh, if they had been hurt however..."

Dumbledore held up his hand as the laughter stopped, "We know, Minerva, and the only reason we can laugh is that it's over and they're fine. Still, Severus does have a point... Ronald and Harry were acting as one might expect for Gryffindor students who thought a friend might be in danger."

"True." She sighed, then frowned slightly. "What about Mr. Harris? He had no reason to be there."

"True as well," Severus replied with a matching scowl. "By all accounts he went looking for Miss Granger when Weasley shot his mouth off after charms class."

Filius nodded, "I heard the altercation... to be honest, at the time I thought that Mr. Harris was merely taking advantage of an opportunity to score points off a Gryff."

"That doesn't seem to be the case," Albus Dumbledore said slowly, "The impression I received was quite different. Do Mr. Harris and Miss Granger know one another?"

"Not to my knowledge," Snape shrugged as the others agreed.

Minerva couldn't help but twit her colleague slightly, smirking as she spoke, "I suppose he was just being particularly courageous then... like Gryffindor, one might say."

"And one might **NOT** ." Snape snapped, eyes glinting.

Dumbledore looked on in amusement as the two sniped back and forth for a few moments, then interjected, "Now now, quiet the two of you. Merely because one is a Slytherin hardly eliminates courage from the assets one might wield. You of all people know this, Severus."

Snape scowled, but didn't respond.

Pomona Sprout, head of Hufflepuff house, took that moment to toss a little more fat on the fire as the case may be. "Personally, I appreciated the Hufflepuff loyalty they showed one another."

Albus fiercely locked down on open laughter as both Severus and Minerva turned on the head of Hufflepuff house, their ire dripping from them as they defended the 'honor' of their houses. He shouldn't find it so amusing, he supposed, but Severus and Minerva were so rarely on the same side of an argument... let alone so enthusiastic about it, that he couldn't help but find it comical.

"That's enough," He broke in gently, eyes dancing as he again calmed them down, then glanced at the one head of house that hadn't put in his own two sickles worth, "Unless you have something to add, Filius?"

The short head of Ravenclaw merely smirked and shook his head, "No, I don't believe any of them acted intelligent enough to be admired by a Ravenclaw, though Ronald's creative use of a levitation spell warrants a mention I suppose."

Dumbledore did chuckle that time, nodding, "Quite so. Is there anything else?"

"Yes, actually," Filius broke in, "It's unrelated, however..."

"Please, Filius, what is on your mind?"

"I'd like to ask the Hat about one of my students," Filius said softly.

The other heads of house turned to look at him, curious. Most years no one felt any need to inquire after the Hogwarts sorting hat about its choices, however it did come up on occasion.

"Indeed? Who, Filius?"

"Miss Addams." Filius admitted, shivering slightly. "The girl had literally terrified every girl in her year and most of the boys as well."

Dumbledore sat back, "In what way?"

Filius shook his head, "Honestly, I'm not sure. She's not **done** anything I can find... Personally I think it's just her very attitude, combined with the way she speaks. She's quite intimidating."

Snape snorted, shaking his head. "Really, Filius, intimidated by a first year."

"Have you paid any attention to her in class??" Filius challenged.

"Not that I recall," Snap shrugged, then frowned. "Now that I think of it, she does seem to sit alone mostly. Quiet, studious... typical Ravenclaw."

Filius quivered in place, obviously holding back some explosive retort. "Typical Ravenclaw students don't calmly speak of chaining their fellows up

in the dungeon and **playing** with Filch's artifacts."

Snape raised a single eyebrow, "Indeed. Well now, that **IS** interesting. Albus?"

The teachers looked to the headmaster, who sighed. "The Addamses are a very old family with... well known proclivities."

Minerva snorted, "They're a bloody menace, you mean."

"No, I do not Minerva," Dumbledore said sternly, "And I will thank you not to put words in my mouth."

The Gryffindor head flushed, but nodded.

"No Addams has ever gone... precisely... Dark, as we mean the term," Albus sighed. "That is to say, none have ever attempted to force their beliefs on anyone else. By any definition, they are a very dark family, but they strongly believe that people must make their own decisions. No Addams would have ever joined with Voldemort, I can assure you Filius."



## Shadow Council : Preludes Book One Through the Looking Glass (part 2)

After shuddering slightly at the mention of You-Know-Who's name, Flitwick nodded, "Still I would like to hear from the sorting hat, if you don't mind."

Albus nodded and rose, turning to retrieve the hat from its place on his shelves. "You have been listening?"

"Of course." The Hat replied.

"Have you anything to add?" Albus asked softly.

The hat was silent for a moment, then began, "In Ravenclaw or Slytherin, that girl would go. Either house would be proud to claim her, I promise you both. The Raven's mind will trump the snake's cunning, though, and her future is a great one."

Albus frowned, then nodded, "Well there you have it, Filius."

The head of Ravenclaw didn't look happy, but he nodded.

"Pardon," Snape leaned forward, "What of Mr. Harris, Hat? He's been caught in several fights within Slytherin House already, and tonight's excursion with the **kittens** of Gryffindor have me curious."

Minerva stiffened, glaring at Snape, but before anyone could say anything the hat spoke up.

"Ah, Alexander. The Heart of any Gryffindor, the Soul of any Hufflepuff." The hat replied coolly.

That sufficiently redirected the ire of Minerva McGonagall from Snape. "What!? You put one of my Gryffs in **Slytherin** !?"

Sprout's reaction was remarkably similar.

"A Hufflepuff in Slytherin!? Are you insane!?"

"Minerva, Pomona, please." Albus sighed, calming them, then he looked at the hat, "Please, explain yourself."

The hat took a moment, then began to speak again.

"At Gryffindor's side, this one would stand tall, In Hufflepuff's embrace he would only survive... Molded by Slytherin's fist, however, this boy will **thrive** ."

The professor's looked at one another, more than slightly shocked.

"What does that mean?" Sprout demanded, "Only survive? You said he had a Hufflepuff's soul!"

The Hat, however, had said what it intended and would speak no more.

Albus frowned, sitting back as the professors argued, primarily Sprout and McGonagall he noted. Severus was glaring at the hat, his own thoughts occluded behind the Slytherin's impressive shields. After a few more moments of argument, he leaned forward.

"Well, I think that explains things." Albus said calmly.

"What!?" The two turned on him.

He smiled at them both, "I too have observed young Alexander, and I believe I agree with the Hat. He is most certainly brave, and would do acceptably in Gryffindor. He does seem to lack certain Slytherin traits that I found perplexing until just now... however, with the hat's comments concerning Hufflepuff, I believe I understand."

"Well explain it to me!" Sprout huffed.

"The sorting hat's job isn't to place people in houses that fit their personality, contrary to popular opinion," Albus said, surprising them into silence.

"It's... not?" Minerva asked hesitantly. "But, Albus..."

The headmaster smiled, waving a hand, "Oh that is how it generally works out, Minerva... in fact, that is how the hat will make its choice, barring any other information. In this case, I feel that Alexander is jarringly lacking in the ambition that Salazar held in high regard. That lack, in Hufflepuff, would lead him to fall into mediocrity... As we've seen tonight, I do not believe that he is fated for that. Slytherin will challenge him, force him to grow. It should be a fascinating process to observe." Minerva huffed, "If he needs challenge, I have no doubt my Gryffs could provide it."

"Perhaps. Perhaps not." Albus shrugged, "In either case, the point is moot. Alexander shows no interest in challenging his placement, and I don't see Severus gnashing his teeth at the situation."

The two women looked at Snape, who merely shrugged. "The boy is no worse, nor any better, than most of my students. I see no reason to cause a scandal over some insignificant child."

Minerva began to stiffen, words of censure coming to her lips, but Albus smoothly cut her off.

“Indeed, well then, any other business?”

\*\*\*\*

Severus Snape paused at the face of the blank wall that led to the Slytherin Common Room, considering what he had learned so far. Potter was, as expected, a foolish Gryffindor with delusions of adequacy. His fame and, as much as Snape hated to admit it, the charm he’d inherited from his father, had already led him to gather together his own circle of delinquents.

Granger and Weasley certainly seemed to fill the role of Lupin and Black, and Potter was quite obviously his father’s son.

For the moment, however, there was his own little delinquent to manage. Severus glared at the wall and it slid open without him saying a word, leading the professor to smirk in satisfaction as he stepped inside.

Harris was sitting by the fire, and Severus took a few seconds to observe the boy.

As expected, he was alone. He hadn’t slid into any of the known cliques within Slytherin, and as far as Snape could ascertain, his own semi-close friend was Fillius’ stray raven, the Addams scion. The boy was petting a **puppy** of all things, which Snape found utterly disgusting until he realized that it must be the boy’s familiar.

Odd that, the school notes clearly suggested cats, rats, or toads. Severus scowled as he approached, “Harris.”

“Sir?” Xander Harris said, head turning calmly to look at him.

Snape snorted, realizing that the boy had been waiting to be approached. “Who taught you to cast a stunner?”

“Hermione, Sir.”

“Granger? I wasn’t aware that you two knew each other.” Snape frowned.

“We don’t, Sir. She showed me while the Troll was attacking us.”

Snape stared at the boy, schooling his face to an inscrutable glare. Try as he might he couldn’t even fabricate any evidence of falsehood in the boy’s expression, and that was mind boggling. First that Granger knew how to cast a Stunner, though he supposed that he shouldn’t be so surprised that the little know it all had read that far ahead. However the fact that she was able to **teach** it in the midst of a life or death situation and that this boy had been able to **LEARN** it.

“Show me.” Snape growled.

“Sir?”

“Is there something wrong with your ears,” Snape gestured, “Cast at the wall.”

“Yes Sir.” Harris said, swallowing as he drew his wand.

Snape watched impassively as the boy mumbled to himself, obviously trying to psyche himself up for the task. Finally he slashed his wand, with the distinctive twist of a **Stupify** and snapped out the incantation. Snape merely raised an eyebrow as his wand glowed for a moment, spat a few sparkles then fizzled out.

“That was hardly a stunner, boy.”

Harris flushed, but nodded and tried again, to much the same effect.

Snape was almost ready to tell the boy off for wasting his time when Draco Malfoy called out from across the room.

“Having a little problem, Harris!? I hear that happens to a lot of you barbarians from America!”

Snape shot a glare over his shoulder, annoyed at Malfoy for interrupting his time, and didn’t notice Harris’ face screw up in a flash of anger.

“**Stupify** !!”

Snape snapped around in time to see a bright stunner bolt flash across the room and slam into one of the Slytherin drapes and burst the tapestry into flames. He watched it for a moment, then stepped forward with his own wand raised.

“**Aquamenti** !” Snape called, hosing the fire down.

Silence reigned as he walked over to the wall and idly ran his finger along the scorched surface of the stone wall.

“Impressive power for a first year, Mr. Harris,” Snape said calmly, turning back to the boy. He sheathed his wand and withdrew a book from his robes, handing it to Xander. “This is a reference of mystical beasts, their uses and weaknesses, and common spells used to contain, or combat them. The section on Mountain Trolls begins on page eighty two.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

“One last thing,” Snape said formulating a question he’d wanted to ask all night.

“Sir?”

“Why did you stop those twits from lying to cover for each other?” Snape asked, curious,

“Whatever they said didn’t include you.”

Xander looked at him, then shrugged, “Always tell the truth, Sir. Lying is wrong.”

Snape heard a snicker from behind him, and tilted his head slightly. “Is that so?”

“Yes Sir.”

Severus had the distinct impression that the boy was serious, but there was something else there too. Snape frowned, leaning in and speaking quietly. “I don’t mind telling you, that’s an odd statement from a Slytherin, assuming you mean it...”

Xander just smiled slightly. “Lying is stupid, sir, unless you have a damned good reason. We didn’t, so I wouldn’t.”

“And if you have a good reason?” Snape asked seriously.

“Well then, Sir, I suppose having a reputation for being honest would help me out then, wouldn’t it?”

Snape snorted, “It would indeed. Good Night, Mr. Harris. Try not to get involved in anymore Gryffindor foolishness, it’s beneath a Slytherin.”

Snape’s robes billowed out as he turned and strode from the room.

*‘Courage and Loyalty be damned, the boy may be lacking ambition, but he knows the meaning of the word cunning if nothing else.’*

\*\*\*\*\*

The next day Wednesday Addams found Xander sitting alone, looking out over the lake. She quietly sat down beside him and they both stared for a while before either spoke.

“You know about Mountain trolls?” Xander asked finally.

She nodded, “We don’t have many in America, but there are three who are Addamses.”

That brought him up short, and he turned to stare at her, “Really?”

“Oh yes. Lurg is a great uncle; I think... maybe three times removed?” She shrugged, “He’s very nice.”

“The one yesterday wasn’t too nice.”

“Trolls are easy to anger, and don’t usually like humans.” Wednesday said calmly, “I imagine that he was very put out to find himself in a human castle.”

Xander blinked, “I thought he broke in?”

“Oh no,” She shook her head; “Trolls don’t like human buildings. They like their mountainsides, with natural magic’s reverberating around them.”

Xander frowned, “That’s not in the book...”

“Which book?” She asked, glancing over. When she saw it she grimaced, one of the few genuine emotions Xander had ever seen her make, “Oh. **THAT** book.”

“You know it?”

She nodded, “it’s a hunter’s book, Alexander. It details how to kill and capture mystical people.”

Xander shook his head, “people? There’s no people in here... just a lot of weird animals.”

She rolled her eyes, “really. Didn’t I tell you about Uncle Lurg? You want to tell him that he’s an animal to his face?”

It was Xander’s turn to grimace, “Pass.”

“I thought you might.” Wednesday said with a hint of satisfaction. “The book is accurate, as far as the facts go, just try not to listen to the opinions.”

Xander nodded, “I’ll try.”

“Good. Now, are you alright?”

“Yeah. It was scary as hell, but we survived.”



The Addams scion nodded, "Good. Now then... I need your help."

"Oh? With what?"

"I want to know who forced that poor troll into the castle."

\*\*\*\*

After Halloween the school quickly returned to what passed for normal in an ancient haunted castle entirely populated by pubescent witches and wizards, ghosts and, as near as Xander could tell, totally insane adult witches and wizards.

Of course he was basing that conclusion on the Headmaster, the Defense teacher, and his own head of house.

Of the three, Snape appeared to be the least nutty, but Xander suspected that was only because he was younger than Dumbledore and more disciplined than Quirrel. He obviously had a hate on for Harry, though it was only marginally worse than he appeared to hold for anyone dressed in Gryff colors, and there was no way that was healthy.

No, given a few more years Xander was pretty sure Snape would be at least as insane as the Headmaster seemed to be... if not quite as senile.

The big Gryffindor/Slytherin Quidditch match came and went, with the Gryffs taking the game when Harry damn near swallowed the 'snitch'. His housemates were in an uproar, so Xander was frankly glad that he and Wednesday were working on the Troll Project.

Those studies brought him into the library more often than he'd like, but there seemed to be little he could do about that.

'*Honestly, who wants to hang around a dusty old library??*' Xander thought not for the first time as he made his way in and nodded politely to Madam Pince.

The Librarian nodded back and Xander found his regular table, cram session already in progress.

"Honestly," Hermione sighed in what was now a familiar sound. "I'm telling you there's no such thing, I've read the reference material front to back. Trolls simply can't interbreed with most magical species."

Wednesday merely raised a single eyebrow, eyeing the bushy haired Gryff with what was... for her... a tolerant look. "Really?"

Xander snorted, shaking his head.

This sort of thing had become quite normal in his life, and for the life of him he couldn't decide if it felt like good old Sunnydale, or a nightmare version of his home town. Sure back home Willow would be constantly correcting everything people said, but here there was someone constantly standing ready to not only contradict her, but willing and quite able to prove her wrong.

Sometimes it was funny; most times it drove Xander back to the Slytherin bunks where he could relax by listening to Draco whine about Harry.

"Yes Really, it says so right in The Great Book of Magical Beasts."

"Beasts?"

Hoo Boy. Xander grimaced, knowing that wasn't going to go over well.

"So you always trust the word of a bigoted fool who doesn't bother to research his data over the word of someone with firsthand knowledge?"

The words were delivered calmly, of course, Wednesday wasn't the type to yell after all, but there was no mistaking the cool steel in her tone. Not if you knew her, as both Xander and Hermione did by now.

The Gryff hesitated, stuttering slightly as she tried to parse her arguments.

"W... well, I... I mean, it's in the book and..."

"Hey, Herms," Xander started, smirking uncaringly under the glare the girl gave him for the nickname, "You do know that not all books tell the truth, right?"

"B... but it's a **TEXT BOOK** !" She protested.

Xander paused, then shrugged and looked at Wednesday, "Well she has a point there. You'd think someone would have checked to make sure they're teaching the truth."

"You would, wouldn't you?" Wednesday replied dryly.

"Hey, I'm not saying you're wrong, I'm just saying that Herms has good cause to believe her source. It's not like its some random book pulled out of a store. It's in the library at our school as a **reference** material."

Wednesday seemed to consider that for a moment, then inclined her head just slightly. "I concede that her ignorance is not wholly her fault."

Oi. Xander grimaced rubbing his forehead as Hermione huffed up and started ranting about calling people that most insulting of words, ignorant. Playing peacemaker was such a pain sometimes.

\*\*\*\*

“Hey! Harris!”

Xander paused, glancing back as Draco sauntered in his direction, the two ape like bookends following along behind him.

*‘This I do not need.’*

Aloud, however, Xander merely nodded. “Hey, Malfoy. What’s up?”

The blond boy frowned, then looked up as if he actually expected to find something above him, causing Xander to suppress the urge to either roll his eyes or tweak the other boy’s nose while it was stuck in the air.

“What on Earth are you talking about, Harris? There’s nothing up there.”

Xander shook his head. “What do you **want**, Draco?”

“I understand you’re hanging around with that mudblood of Potter’s, what game are you playing, Harris?”

“Gee, why would I hang around in the library with a Ravenclaw and a Gryffindor who between them probably account for more brainpower than the rest of our year combined?”

The sarcasm was apparently lost on the blond.

“That’s what I’m asking you, Harris. What’s your game?”

“We’re studying, Malfoy.” Xander said slowly and clearly, in a tone that would get the crap kicked out of him in Sunnydale. “You know, with books and stuff?”

Apparently the Wizarding world, while it may have discovered sarcasm in the last couple years, had missed out entirely on condescension in the form of speaking as if to a four year old.

“Why would you do that??” Draco blinked.

Xander had just about had enough of things by this point. Not merely Draco, but the entirely school as a whole. The whole place stank of a mental ward, and he was finally starting to believe that it **wasn’t** some big joke aimed at the ‘muggle born and raised’.

He reached forward and rapped the back of two knuckles on Draco’s forehead, clucking his tongue in time to the knocks to make a hollow sound echo through the old stone hallway.

“It’s a school, Draco. They’re the two smartest people I know, around here anyway,” Xander shrugged slightly, unwilling to nudge Willow from the top slot out of loyalty as much as anything else. “You know, top marks and stuff? Is any of this ringing any bells?”

“Stop that! How **DARE** you touch me!” Draco jerked back, slapping Xander’s hand and grabbing for his wand. “I should hex you right here!”

“Go ahead.”

“W... what?”

“I said go ahead,” Xander replied.

Draco hesitated, looking around as he sensed a trap. “What are you playing at?”

“I’m not playing at anything. You think I’ve never taken a beating before?” Xander asked fists clenched to keep his hands from shaking. He could feel his heart pounding, like it always did when he found himself face to face with a bully.

He couldn’t win this, not as a fight, and he knew it. But there were two things that tended to set a Bully back on his heels. First, having their target reverse the tables. That usually worked best, but Xander knew he couldn’t take the two blockheads, even if he could out hex Draco, which was frankly unlikely. The Second option was a target that simply didn’t bother fighting back.

That one always messed with them.

Oh, it wasn’t enough to just submit to a beating. That was what they thrived on. No, you had to take the beating and act that it was hardly worth your time. That was something Xander had learned to do a long time ago, take the pain and make it look like he was bored to tears rather than crying in agony.

That sort of indifference always freaked everyone out.

Draco, however, wasn’t having any of it just then. He was falling back from Xander, eyes casting about as his voice rose slightly.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Harris. We’re just going back to the dormitories, stop trying to pick fights.”

With that the blond and his bookends turned and hurried off, leaving Xander to ponder the rather odd outcome of the confrontation.

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Christmas was looming quickly, and the Great Hall had been decorated accordingly in a fashion that put anything Xander had ever seen to shame. The floating decorations changed the normally cold feeling of the old castle to something far more festive, and it showed on the entire student body.

Well, mostly.

Some were so stuck in their ways that nothing seemed to impact on them, for good or ill. Xander ducked Malfoy and his goons for that reason, not wanting to put up with the downer they'd bring to the generally cheery mood. Wednesday and Hermione were, for the most part unchanged. Hermione because she rarely seemed to notice that the decorations were there, her nose being perpetually stuck in a book despite the efforts of Harry and Ronald Weasley to shake her out of herself imposed comas.

That relationship had Xander shaking his head, but he supposed that you couldn't hold saying something stupid against someone. Lord knew, he'd said some bad ones in his time and, if he were being honest with himself, would likely do so again. Still, Ron had been more than a little hurtful on Halloween, and it had been malicious, though probably only through his own stupidity rather than through actual intentions.

Outside of Classes, which were going ok as far as he could tell, Xander tended to hang out mostly with Wednesday and Hermione or the other Americans attending. Either or, that is, since neither group could stand the other. Wednesday scared the rest of the American kids; her name alone seemed to spook them more than when someone said 'Voldemort' to one of the Brits. He had to ask her what she'd done to them sometime, but honestly Xander didn't think he wanted to know.

Hermione, well she had a reputation of a know it all, and few of the American kids wanted anything to do with someone who was constantly correcting everything they said. Actually, few of the British kids wanted anything to do with someone like that either come to think of it. Xander sighed, it had taken him years to gently persuade Willow that he didn't need to be corrected for every little thing he said wrong, just the important stuff. The definition of 'important' was something he and Wills were still debating, but that was another story.

Herms, however, had a lot more confidence in herself than Wills ever did, and as such didn't mind correcting the entire school if she thought they had it coming.

Xander was musing about that when a shout startled him as he walked toward the Great Hall for lunch.

"Wait! Hang on, stop!"

He twisted, but continued moving in the direction he had been and was blown across the hall when a light flashed in his face and something slapped across his body like the hand of God. He connected with the wall on the far side and saw stars before the world began to dim.

In the distance he could see two figures run up.

"Oh dear, Brother of mine, I believe," One began speaking.

"That we have most certainly made an error," The other continued.

"In judgment." The first finished, then frowned, "Not our first, I must admit."

"Certainly not," The other said cheerily, before looking down at Xander. "Is the ickle firstie alright?"

Xander groaned, and rolled off the floor to his hands and knees before starting the long climb back to his feet. "What hit me?"

The duo that Xander now recognized as the infamous bane of Slytherin's everywhere, the Weasley Twins, glanced at each other then down at Xander and winced.

"Ah, well you see," The first began.

"We were setting up a little harmless prank..."

"Harmless!" Xander snapped, then winced and held his head. "Oh man, what a bump. What did I do to deserve your attentions anyway?"

"Actually, we were laying in wait for Flint." The first admitted.

The second nodded, "Marcus has some payback coming for the actions of his team in the last Slytherin/Gryffindor match."

Xander closed his eyes, still holding his head. "And throwing him across the hallway is your idea of payback?"

"Umm... well, not exactly."

"That is to say, not entirely."

Xander looked at them, and the both seemed to blush, which caused him to pale. "What did you do!?"

**"HARRIS !"**

The Weasley Twins bolted at the sound of Snape's voice, leaving Xander standing there in confusion as his head of house stormed up.

Explain yourself, Boy."

"Excuse me?"

"Your robes!"

Xander looked down and winced, this time not because of his head but because of his clothing. Instead of the Green and Silver of Slytherin, he found himself wearing Red and Gold with the words 'Slytherin Cheaters Never Prosper' animatedly running around them. He gritted his teeth and just thanked God that he hadn't continued into the Great Hall like this.

"Sorry Sir, I seem to have run into some trouble."

"That much is obvious," Snape said, moving to block Xander from the hall as he drew his wand. "Who did this? I thought I saw the Weasley twins, it was them, correct?"

Now, to Xander's mind, telling the truth here wasn't even remotely an option.

"Sorry, Sir, I don't know," he lied through his teeth.

Snape eyed him closely, then snorted, "Just tell me, and I'll handle it."

"Can't tell you what I don't know, Sir." Xander replied stoically. "I have no idea who did this."

He could tell that Snape didn't believe him, but didn't care. This wasn't a matter for the adults in his opinion. You didn't go running to adults for every little problem, it just wasn't done. The only question was how to handle the twins.

Xander was pondering that while Professor Snape tried ending the charms on his robes, only to find that they had been trapped with various trigger spells that resulted in more and more rude insults appearing as fast as the Professor could eliminate them.

Finally he exploded, "Fine! Back to the dorms and change then, and five points from Slytherin for being out of your house colors!"

Xander nodded and retreated, deciding not to push the man any further as he seemed to be spectacularly frustrated both by the prank itself, his inability to disenchant it, and the fact that Xander refused to name the twin Gryffs.

Down the hall, Xander turned to head down to the dungeons, ignoring the snickering from those who were watching him walk by. Twin hisses caused him to pause just out of site of those students who had been witness to his humiliation and glance to one side to see the twins hiding in an alcove and staring at him.

"What do you twits want?" He snarled, seriously unhappy with the situation.

"Oi! Listen to the ickle firstie," the first smirked.

"They grow up so fast," the second sniffed.

"Or they think they do, at any rate."

"True, oh brother of mine, true."

Xander sighed, "What do you want?"

The twins looked at each other, then back at him.

"We want to know," The first said.

"Why you didn't tell Snape it was us?" the second finished.

Xander rolled his eyes, "What do I look like?"

"Well right now, you look rather like a suicidal Gryffindor..."

"About to go into Slytherin territory in robes even we wouldn't risk."

Xander scowled at the duo, and they held up their hands as they smirked.

"But normally you look like an ickle firstie snake,"

"True, brother of mine," The second frowned, "but a snake would have gleefully let Snape string us up by our entrails."

"Excellent point, dear brother, so what have we here?"

Xander smirked back at them, "Sorry, you got me mixed up with Draco. That's not a Slytherin trait, that's a spoiled rich kid trait."

"Is that so?" Twin One asked.

And what, pray tell," Twin Two began.

"Are Slytherin traits in your opinion?"

Xander grinned openly at the duo, making them drop their own smirks and hesitate slightly.

"Payback." he said, then simply turned and walked away.

Fred Weasley watched him go, then turned to his brother George, "Hmmm brother of mine, it would seem that the snakes have themselves an interesting new member."

"Oh I must agree, brother dearest." George nodded in agreement. "What do you think?"

"The same thing you do."

"Then it's agreed, we watch this one."

\*\*\*\*

Xander threw the charmed robes into a pile in the corner of his room, annoyed at the twins, though not so much as he supposed he might be. They hadn't been aiming at him, after all, and Flint was a prick.

Still, he couldn't just let that go without an answer. Oh no.

Xander smiled slowly, no ignoring Bullies was one thing. Being the butt of jokes, however, was something else. The only problem was that he didn't have a **CLUE** how to pull off anything like the twins had just done to him.

But then hey, what good was it to hang out with geniuses if you couldn't pick their brains a little?

"I bet Wednesday will have some really... interesting thoughts." He grinned to himself as he pulled out another set of robes. His stomach growled, and he hurriedly threw them on and bolted back for the Great Hall.

\*\*\*\*

Wednesday Addams looked up when her, well she supposed 'friend' was the best way to describe him, walked into the library. She hadn't seen him at lunch, but had certainly heard the snickering from other students. He didn't look terribly happy as he walked in, which she recognized as being out of character for the young man she'd grown to know.

Apparently Hermione had noticed it as well as the verbose girl immediately spoke when she saw him approach. "Xander? Are you ok?"

He curled up his lips, "Yeah, just dandy. I've got most of my House ready to strangle me."

Hermione blinked, "What ever for?"

"I lost points."

"How many?" Hermione frowned, "I heard it was only five."

"Yeah, but Professor Snape took them. That basically is the same thing as being called a traitor." Xander scowled, slumping into the chair.

"What? But that's insane!"

"No, it's the way Slytherin works," Wednesday corrected mildly.

Hermione growled, "That makes me so mad! That's not how it's supposed to work!"

"Imagine that." Xander muttered, looking around, "Hey Herms?"

"How many times must I tell you not to call me that!?"

"Uh... at least another time, I guess." Xander shrugged, "Look, you don't have any real strong attachment to the twins or anything do you?"

Hermione glanced at him askance, "Why are you asking?"

"I should think that is obvious," Wednesday answered for him, "Revenge."

"Bingo."

"Alexander Harris! You could get into trouble, and if you wanted revenge why not just tell Professor Snape?"

"This isn't a matter for the teachers," Xander shrugged, "It's between me and them. It's not like they tried to murder me."

"I hardly see what that has to do with anything," She huffed.

“Hey, I stand on my own, Herms.” Xander replied. “Some things you just don’t do, and run to the teachers with every little problem is one of them.”

“I agree.” Wednesday said calmly. “What are you thinking?”

Xander shrugged and frowned, “I don’t know yet. I’ve pulled a few practicals in my life, but nothing on the scale these two manage. They’ve got years of spell experience on me, and it’s pretty obvious that they’re no slouches in the imagination department. I don’t want to use the old cliché stuff, even if I could figure out a way to pull it off, it’s just not that impressive compared to some of the magic stuff they pull.”

“True.” Wednesday acceded. “They transfigured your robes, I assume?”

Xander nodded, “And charmed them, using some kind of trip wire trigger I think.”

“Really? That’s advanced runic magic,” Hermione broke in, “I don’t think they’ve learned anything like that in class yet.”

“So they’re working ahead of the grade too, huh?” Xander slumped a little. “Great.”

He glanced behind him at the books, “Hey, I wonder if there’s anything in here on practical jokes?”

“Honestly, Xander, of course there isn’t. This is a school library,” Hermione said as Xander got up and made his way to the shelves. “I told you, there’s nothing there.”

“I’m just checking, Herms.” Xander replied, wandering the bookshelves as the bushy haired girl got up to follow him. “Not even in the P section?”

“Oh honestly, this library is sectioned by category, not alphabetically.” Hermione rolled her eyes, “It’s a magical version of the Dewey Decimal System.”

Xander blinked, then shook his head as he checked the titles and sighed, “So I’m guessing there’s no practical jokes section then, huh?”

“No their is most certainly is NOT.”

He nodded, “Figures.”

Xander made his way back toward Hermione, only to freeze as one of the books literally jumped out and hit him on the head. “OW!”

“Xander! Are you ok?” Hermione rushed forward, wincing as Madame Pince made herself known behind them with a harsh ‘shhh’.

“I’m fine. I just got attacked by a book,” Xander scowled at the blank tome that had clobbered him. “Weird. There’s no title.”

“No title?” Hermione took it from him, “Let me see.”

“Hey!”

She ignored him, frowning as she flipped it open, “it’s empty.”

Xander took it back, glaring at her, “Empty.”

“Yes, empty, Mr. Grabby.” She scowled at him.

“Look who’s talking.” Xander shook his head, then he frowned, “What are you talking about, it’s not empty.”

He had opened it to the inside cover page and was quickly enthralled to see elegant text appearing in cursive script.

*The Scholastic Grimoire of...*

Xander blinked when an animated image of a big black dog ran out into the page and started barking at the words, scattering the letters across the page, then chased them away.

“Xander, what?”

“Shhh...” Xander said absently, not looking up as he walked back to the table he shared with Hermione and Wednesday.

The dog had finished chasing the words away, then paused and seemed to **grin** at Xander before jumping up and grabbing something out of the page with teeth and pulling down. Like a shade being drawn a new title page appeared before Xander’s eyes.

*The Maleficeum Maraudette.*

Xander blinked.

The words ‘**Sirius Black!!!!**’ appeared in big black block letters, an image of a witch running out onto the page with wand drawn, casting hexes at the dog as she ran him off, a text bubble appearing above her as she seemed to scream at the dog, ‘*Stay out of our journal you mangy mutt!*’.

“This is like watching a bug’s bunny cartoon,” Xander grinned.

Hermione, who was now looking over his shoulder, frowned, “I’ve heard that name somewhere before.”

Xander didn't respond as the witch turned to him and sighed, shaking her head before turning to wave her wand around. The dog induced title caught fire and burned away, to be replaced by the original title, this time in its complete form.

*The Scholastic Grimoire of Evans, Prewitt, and Black .*

Then, below that, in smaller letters new words appeared and caused Xander to catch his breath.

*A guide to the Art of defensive pranking, or Marauding the Marauders .*

"Who do you suppose they are?" Hermione asked from beside him.

"I don't know," Xander admitted, "I'm pretty curious about why the book attacked me, though."

Wednesday looked up, head tilted as she seemed to pay attention to them again. "You were attacked by a book?"

"Look!" Hermione hissed, pointing to the book. The page had turned on its own, and Xander began to read as words appeared.

*If you have found this book, then you are in need of its contents. Within you will find all our class notes from first year to NEWTS...*

Xander winced as Hermione gasped in his ear.

*However, having found and being able to read this book, it is likely the pages on defensive pranking that are of most value to you. Having attended school for seven years with those most annoying of pranksters, the Marauders, and with full knowledge that they have left many of their own artifacts behind as they too finished their Hogwarts education, we of The Coven have decided to seed this book for those who may yet suffer under the tyranny of a Marauder's Rule.*

Xander blinked, looking at Hermione and then over at Wednesday. "I'm just going to go on record now as saying that, while cool, Magic is pretty creepy sometimes."

Wednesday just shrugged, but Hermione nodded.

"May I?" Hermione asked this time, so Xander nodded and handed the book to her.

She accepted it, and began to pour over it, only to gasp a second later.

"What?"

"It's blank!"

Xander paled, he needed that book, and quickly took it back. He frowned, noting the writing reappearing before his eyes.

*For security purposes this book may only be read when being held by the person whose need activated the charms. Be warned; use the knowledge within with great care. Any violation of the tenants of The Coven will result in the rescinding of your right to use this tome and its immediate return to its hiding place in the library.*

"Fascinating." Wednesday said, for the first time taking an active interest in the happenings.

"That's not right." Hermione huffed, crossing her arms as she slumped in the chair. "Books are for everyone."

"Not this one, apparently." Xander said, flipping the pages.

"Indeed. The charms work is extremely advanced," Wednesday added, "In fact, I believe that some of them are approaching Master's level."

Hermione reluctantly nodded in agreement, "She's right. Whoever these people are, they're really good at spells."

"Cool." Xander breathed, then grinned, "So... anyone up for a round of torture the twins?"

"I'm in." Wednesday responded instantly, much to Hermione's horror.

Said horror only grew more pronounced as the dark child went on with a gleeful gleam in her eyes, "In fact, I have an idea for you already."

"Oh yeah?" Xander leaned forward, grinning wide.

His grin dropped a few moments later, and his expression slowly morphed to match Hermione's as Wednesday laid out her idea. He and Hermione looked at each other, naked fear warring with awe as they both shuddered.

"Ah... maybe later," Xander said after a long moment, "I don't think they deserve that just yet."

"Pity." Wednesday said with a shrug, then turned back to her book.

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The book made for pretty cool reading, in Xander's opinion. The three Witches who wrote it had apparently been scarily smart, but they each had

their own personality that the passages they wrote were simply steeped in.

Evans, who seemed to be the ringleader of the Coven, was a ‘Muggleborn’ witch whose skill in charms and potions was obvious even to Xander’s limited experience. Of course it helped that he was only permitted to read the sections she had revised specifically for first year students. She had been the one to enspell the Grimoire, though apparently this Sirius fellow had somehow managed to sneak in some handy work of his own during the process as every now and then a big black dog would show up and trash one of the lesson plans, apparently just for the hell of it.

Prewitt, the second member of the Coven, was a mixed blood student apparently, or at least that’s what Xander thought from the reading. She seemed to come from a pure blood family, but often commented on how she didn’t feel fully a part of the large extended family the bloodline included. Her lesson plans and notes focused more on transfiguration and what she called pre-arithmancy, which Xander was relieved to note was simple arithmetic with a primer on mystical number theory.

Black, now there was a lady who had issues in Xander’s opinion. He could only assume that she was related to this Sirius fellow somehow, but she seemed to hold an aloof disdain for the man whenever his influence made itself known. Her specialties were Curses, Hexes, and Jinxes, along with an enormous section on Pure Blood traditions and culture, written with an aim toward educating the ‘unfortunate and ignorant victims of muggle society’. Xander thought she was mostly joking when she wrote stuff like that, since her two friends were obviously not part of the traditions she was espousing, but it was hard to tell because Black had the most reserved sense of humor of the three.

What Xander found really interesting, however, was the houses each belonged to.

That was right. Houses.

Evans was a Gryff, Prewitt a Puff, and Black was Slytherin.

Now these three made sense.

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The Christmas break was rapidly approaching, and Xander would be relieved as hell when it finally arrived. He wasn’t sure what he was going to do with it, of course, but he just wanted some time away from his own House.

He was, pretty much, officially persona non grata with the Snakes and had been since his encounter with the twins and his subsequent refusal to give them up to Snape. So far as he knew he was the **ONLY** Slytherin to have lost points from their Head of house, and as far as the rest were concerned that meant he had committed that most heinous of crimes... disloyalty to the house.

Since the rest of the school had no interest in getting to know a snake, that left Xander with almost all his free time in the company of Wednesday or Hermione, or of course the few other American students who held very little stock in the house systems.

Still, that meant that the only fun Xander seemed to have was in the library, studying.

It was enough to make him cry.

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“What are you two doing for the holidays?”

Xander frowned at the question, not knowing the answer really. “I don’t know. I guess I might go home, but Cali is a long way off.”

“By port key it’s only a few seconds,” Hermione informed him, her tone taking on that superior sound it unfortunately tended to.

“Yeah,” Xander allowed, “But international port keys are pretty expensive, and I don’t know if my parents can afford it.”

“Salem Academy is covering those.” Wednesday entered the conversation, her eyes piercing into Xander as she looked up from her book.

Xander grimaced, looking down as he pretended to read from the Grimoire he had taken to carrying around with him. “Yeah... well.”

“Tell us.”

The order in Wednesday’s voice wasn’t something Xander would ever have missed, even though this girl’s version of Willow’s ‘Resolve Face’ had little difference from her ‘normal face’. He sighed, “I don’t much like the holidays with my folks.”

The two just stared at him and Xander sighed again.

“Look, I love my mom and dad, ok, but they aren’t the best company around the holidays. They tend to... fight. A lot.” He told them, surprised by his own calm tone and candor. “I try not to be around them much then.”

Hermione looked horrified, but Wednesday merely nodded in acceptance of the facts.

“That’s horrible!”

“Herms, it’s ok,” Xander told her with a smile, “I’ll be fine.”

“Of course you will be,” Wednesday said, “You’ll be coming home with me for the holidays.”



“What!?”

“What??”

Wednesday wasn't one to repeat herself, however, and she merely returned to her reading as Xander and Hermione exchanged confused glances. Xander shook his head, deciding that they'd talk about it later and moved to change the subject.

“So, what are you working on, Herms?”

Hermione stared at him for a moment then looked over at the dark Ravenclaw, then back at Xander. Finally she shook herself and glanced down at her own stack of books.

“Some personal research,” She admitted. “I'm trying to find some information on Nicholas Flamel.”

“Oh? Who's he?” Xander asked, glancing over.

“I'm not certain, that's part of the problem.” Hermione admitted.

“He's an Alchemist.” Wednesday said, not looking up. “A Master Alchemist, to be specific.”

They both glanced over at her, Hermione's jaw dropping open. “How'd you know that?”

“I've read some of his published works,” Wednesday shrugged, looking up again.

“I haven't found anything in any of the lists!” Hermione blurted then flinched as she looked around for Madame Pince.

Wednesday gazed at her evenly, “I'm not surprised. They prune those lists after a century and a half. Flamel's work was all published over two hundred years ago.”

Hermione looked disappointed, which piqued Xander's curiosity. “Oh, I didn't know he was dead.”

“He's not.”

Now Xander shifted his attention completely over to Wednesday, as did Hermione.

“What? But he must be, to have published master's work over two hundred years ago...” She trailed off, obviously at sea.

“Flamel is the creator of the Philosophers Stone,” Wednesday replied calmly, though Xander noticed a faint look of distaste appear on her face.

That seemed to click something in Hermione, however, as her eyes lit right up.

“Of course! That explains everything!” She said, as if it really did, “Wednesday, I could kiss you!”

The dark child merely looked at her evenly, “You will not.”

Hermione apparently didn't notice, however, as she threw all her books into her bag and then grabbed Wednesday up in a tight hug. “Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

Then she grabbed her bag and bolted from the library.

“Well...” Xander grinned, highly amused.

“If you value your life and sanity, you will **NOT** repeat any of that to another soul.” Wednesday informed him in a chilly tone.

Xander threw up his hands, “What? Me?”

She glared at him for a moment and then turned back to her books.

He chuckled, while going back to reading his own.

\*\*\*\*\*

The last couple weeks to Christmas passed quickly, and Xander found himself feeling a little off as everyone prepared to make the most of their holidays. He'd forgotten about Wednesday's declaration, right up until the day the students were leaving for their vacations and the Addamses appeared in the Great Hall during lunch.

“Wednesday, love, how have you been?” Mortisha asked, sweeping across the floor in her graceful, almost motionless step.

“I've been fine, mother.”

“And have you made many friends?”

Xander shot a glare at the Ravenclaw table as several snorted derisively. He made careful note who, for future reference.

As he was finishing that, he was surprised to be greeted by Mr. Addams.

"Ah, Alexander old bean, how are things?"

"They're fine, Sir."

"Tsk, none of that call me Gomez." Gomez grinned, "I understand you're coming with us for the holidays?"

Xander blinked, "I am?"

"Excellent! We've procured a fabulous home on the Continent just for the occasion," Gomez said enthusiastically, ignoring or missing the question in Xander's voice.

"Uh..."

"You'll love it, I'm sure. It's a wonderfully gloomy old castle in the Romanian hills," Gomez went on, "fantastic history there, I tell you. Bloodletting rituals, sacrificial ceremonies, massacre... all the holiday festivities."

Xander just stared for a moment as several of the Slytherin's around him paled or simply looked confused. "Uh, Sir?"

"Now now, Alexander, what did I tell you?"

"Uh... Gomez?"

"Excellent, now what is it?"

"I'm going to spend the holidays with you?" Xander asked, uncertainly.

"Certainly, Wednesday told us all about it. We've arranged everything, contacted your parents and all that," Gomez waved his hand airily.

"Indeed they have."

Xander turned to see Headmaster Dumbledore approach, smiling serenely. "Really sir?"

The old man nodded, "Everything has been signed off on, I thought you knew?"

"Uh... I guess I did, but I didn't think she was serious." Xander admitted.

"Ah," Dumbledore smiled a bit more, eyes dancing merrily. "Apparently she was indeed. Why don't you go get your things so you don't hold up the Addamses."

Xander nodded, then ran off, not noticing the paleness of the professors seated at the head table, or the look of real fear in the eyes of one Severus Snape.

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The port key to Romania left Xander in the dirt once again, dizzy as hell and trying to figure out why he couldn't keep his balance through a simple transport.

"Good lord, lad, what are you doing on the ground?" Gomez asked, leaning over slightly.

"He likes it down there." Wednesday said blankly before stepping over Xander to look at the castle.

"Really? How peculiar." Gomez shrugged, writing it off as a rather strange eccentricity, and moving on.

Xander sighed, closing his eyes and counting to three quickly before climbing to his feet.

He rose up, looking around, and swallowed hard as he turned rather pale. He supposed that he shouldn't be surprised, given what he knew of Wednesday's proclivities, but the castle was... well, creepy was simple the only way to say it. It rose up from bare stone, so black it seemed made of obsidian, and the spires were actually covered in dark clouds.

It simply had to be haunted, though that wasn't much of a deterrence any more now that he thought of it.

"Gomez! About time you got here!"

"Fester, dear boy, how is the place?"

"Fantastic!" The bald man said, grinning wide enough to split his face. "Gram-mama already setup the kitchen and is brewing the stew now."

"Ah, most excellent. Oh, I am forgetting my manners," Gomez clapped Fester on the back and turned around, "This strapping young lad is Alexander Harris, a school chum of Wednesday's."

Xander froze as the bald man grinned at him, the smile seriously freaky, and then walked over.

"Any friend of Wednesday's is a friend of mine, Alexander," The man said, clapping an arm around Xander's shoulders as he turned back to the castle. "Come on, come on, we have things to do, a holiday to plan. Say, do you like explosives?"

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Narcissa Malfoy frowned slightly as she glanced at her bookshelf.

'*Odd. That looks like...*' She trailed off, reaching for the slightly glowing book and drawing it out.

Her copy of the old school Grimoire had been activated. The Malfoy matriarch raised an eyebrow and flipped it open, scowling as the little fight between the title page and Sirius' additions played out. Honestly, Sirius had been such a child.

She settled down in the chair of her study and flipped the book open to the most recently accessed pages, smiling slightly as she noted the first year spells that had been displayed. '*Someone's looking for a little pranking payback. Against who, I wonder?*'

She glanced over the notes and lessons carefully, noting that some of them were obsolete, and noted in the newer techniques. A sad feeling came over her as she did so, knowing that she was the only person currently alive who would, or could, do what she was doing. Poor Lily and Alice...

She forced away the raw feeling in her gut, knowing that it would be detrimental to her lifestyle, and perhaps life, to let it continue. That said, she found herself smiling again as she reviewed the notes and lesson answers the current owner of the school's copy of the Grimoire had filled in.

'*Not bad, whoever you are*' She thought, correcting the answers and making suggestions.

She didn't know who held the book, but they had a decent mind for a first year. Not brilliant, but imaginative and creative both, which would serve them well. It was beyond hope that it had been Draco who had inherited the book; unfortunately, as she knew that her son for all his talents was neither imaginative nor creative. He was a pale copy of his father, a fact that Narcissa hated but could see no way around.

'*Hmmm... Draco will be home soon, I wonder how his school year has gone ?*' She thought to herself, closing the book but leaving it on her desk.

It was nice to have a connection to her old life again, even if it was a tenuous link to the past through an unknown member of the present.

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The first meal of the holidays could have gone better.

He could have been able to eat it, for one thing.

Xander had sat down at the table as the stew was served, the eerie steam flowing from the bowls like some dry ice concoction on a bad TV series. He swallowed as a bowl was set in front of him, and dipped a spoon in, then nearly jumped out of his skin as something grabbed the spoon and yanked it out of his hand.

"Whoa!"

"Down! Down!" The old woman snarled, whipping a knife out of nowhere and stabbing it into his bowl. After a moment she stopped, sniffed the air lightly, and nodded. "Perfect."

"Indeed it is, Gram-mama!" Gomez grinned, smacking his lips. "You've outdone yourself again!"

Xander stared at his bowl with wide eyes,

He didn't say anything aloud, though, knowing from his time at Willow's that the guest should always be polite, and vice versa. That said he didn't see any way out of a little rudeness here. There was no WAY he was eating something that had to be fought with while at the dinner table.

Unfortunately it didn't take long for someone to notice his lack of enthusiasm for the meal.

"Something wrong, Xander?" Fester asked, having taken a bit of a shine to the quiet young man who, like almost all young men, loved anything that went boom.

"Uh..." Xander trailed off, finding himself in a serious jam.

Should he keep quiet and look for something else to eat later? He wasn't sure how far they were from town, but if the castle was rented out to Wizarding folk he might be able to find a floo link, and hopefully work out how to use it. Buy that would really suck for the entire holidays, to say the least, since he had a sinking feeling that this was normal food for Wednesday's family.

A strange thought popped into his head then, and he looked over at Wednesday with wide eyes.

"How do you eat at school?"

Xander's eyes widened even more as everyone turned to look at him, and he wished he had his mouth stapled shut.

"Uh, I mean, if this is the kind of food you're used to then school food must be kinda weird, right?" Xander found himself babbling, "Cause I find this weird, I mean I don't eat food that fights back and if you do then the school feasts have to be strange because they're all normal food..."

Xander paled, "I mean normal for us, not that this isn't normal... I... that is, ok I'm shutting up now."

Morticia and Gomez glanced at each other blankly then Eudora Addams pouted.

"You don't like my cooking? But you haven't tried it."

"I... I..." Xander swallowed, then went for broke with the truth. "I don't think I can."

"Why ever not?" Gomez blurted, shocked.

Morticia sighed, "Gomez, love, its poor conditioning."

"What? Absurd, who would condition a young lad to not eat good food!?"

Morticia smiled, caressing her husband's cheek. "Oh, mon coer, you are so naive, but I love you for it."

"Tish! That's French!"

"Later, darling." Morticia calmly dodged his attentions, then turned back to Xander. "We will see what we can do about meals, Alexander. I understand that something completely new is not easy to adjust to."

"Uh, thank you Ma'am."

She smiled briefly at him, then made a point of returning to her meal. Slowly the rest of the family followed suit.

Pugsley Addams shoveled food in for a few moments then nudged his sister. "Your friend is weird."

She shot him a dark glance, but the one he received from his mother was far darker, and the chubby young boy paled and quickly ducked his head again as he began to eat furiously to hide from his mother's glare.

The uncomfortable silence stretched on for a few minutes, then finally Fester broke it, "So Gomez, did you get your trains set up?"

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Narcissa watched as her son stepped off the train, feeling an odd combination of pride, chagrin, and shame. It was one she was familiar with, unfortunately.

Her son was in many ways the perfect epitome of a pureblood scion.

Unfortunately, he was also most of the things she had despised in her youth. Arrogant without cause, which was her and Lucius' fault, she knew. He knew what he had to know to navigate the treachery of high society, but his father's money and power had gone to the boy's head. He should know to be cautious, but the protection his family name gave him had given Draco some of the very worst attributes of a pureblooded Gryffindor.

She sighed and smiled wanly as he approached; strutting toward her with confidence she knew he had yet to earn the rights to.

"How was school, Draco?" She asked as she guided him away, eyes sweeping the platform for anything of interest, or any threats of note as he spoke.

There was precious little of interest, but Narcissa spotted three of Lucius' political rivals following them both with their eyes. She surreptitiously laid a hand on her wand and quickly guided Draco clear of the platform. Once they reached the apparition point she tightened her grip on him and with a crack they were gone.

The two appeared at Malfoy Manor instants later, and Draco immediately broke clear of his mother's grip.

"Is father home?"

"I believe he is in his study."

"Thank you, mother." Draco said before running off in that direction.

She sighed as he left, and once more thought about the book on the desk in her own study.

How very far she had come from the young woman who had a part in writing that little piece of magical history. So very far, and yet she felt as if she hadn't taken a single step forward.

Life enjoyed its cruel jokes almost as much as the Marauders enjoyed theirs it seemed.

Life, however, didn't seem interested in making up for its cruelty. That was something even the Marauders had strove to do, in the end.

\*\*\*\*

Xander sighed, fairly contended with his meal. They'd had to floo in for takeout, but at least the food was cooked and didn't give off noxious vapors. He made his way through the old castle, more than a little disturbed by it but also incredibly interested. This was the second castle he'd ever seen, and was as unlike Hogwarts as Hogwarts was unlike his school back home.

The Addams, true to expectations, seemed to like things gloomy and more than a little on the spooky side. Not really Xander's taste, but he'd learned enough to be pretty sure that he was safe here, and so was doing his best not to let it get to him. Morticia and Gomez had made it clear that he had full run of the castle with none of the restrictions he'd come to expect, and that was more than a little liberating, almost a heady feel really.

He had moved from one of the wide halls to a new room when a swishing sound through the air caused him to half turn just in time to see a knife thunk solidly into the door he had just opened.

"Drat!" Fester yelled, "no fair, he opened the door!"

Xander crossed his eyes, looking at the knife, then slowly looked back to where Fester, Pugsley, and Wednesday were standing, more knives in hand.

"Uh..." He trailed off, really having nothing to say beyond that.

"Do close the door, Xander," Wednesday suggested, "We're playing a game."

Xander nodded slowly, and let the door close, only to jump again when he spotted a person trussed up against the wall behind the door, with blades jammed into the wall all around him. The man had wide eyes as he moaned against a gag that had been stuffed into his mouth.

"Move aside, Xander," Pugsley called, "it's my turn."

"Uh..." Xander blinked, looking at the guy who was shaking and screaming and obviously trying to get loose. "Who's the target?"

"Salesman." Wednesday said blandly.

"Oh," Xander said, stepping out of the way.

Another knife swished through the air, thunking into the wall between the guys' legs. Xander shuddered, but didn't say anything else as he moved up beside the trio as Wednesday lined up for her shot.

"You're not actually going to hit him, are you?" Xander only half asked.

Truthfully, he already had a feel for Wednesday, and was pretty sure that she wouldn't be part of actually killing the poor bastard. Scaring him to death, followed by resuscitation, that was possible. After he asked, she merely leveled a look at him that Xander interpreted as her 'of course not, you moron' look.

Xander just nodded, stepping away from her as she drew back and let fly. The blade spun through the air and thunked into the wall only a hairs' breadth from the salesman's head, actually slicing several strands of the man's hair from his skull and letting them float to the ground.

His eyes rolled up into his head, and he slumped in his bonds.

"Oh POO! He fainted. You win again, Wednesday." Fester pouted, tossing his remaining knives aside.

"Nuts." Pugsley grumbled, "I was sure the groin shot would do it."

"You guys do this often?"

"Only with salesmen and Jehovah's Witnesses," Fester said cheerfully. "They're the only two groups stupid enough not to take the hint."

"Indeed." Wednesday said in her bland tone, "We use less trying methods for other groups; otherwise we'd never have any visitors... or victims."

Xander walked over, eyeing the knives and their proximity to the body. "You ever miss?"

Fester bridled at the questions, "What? You take us for amateurs!?"

"Wednesday and I have been throwing knives since we were four," Pugsley said proudly, grinning wide. "We hardly ever miss... anymore."

Xander shuddered, but nodded. "What do you do with them now?"

Fester shrugged, "cut him down and leave him in Gomez' study. He'll wake up with a cigar in one hand, bourbon in the other, and a sales contract for everything he's selling."

Xander broke down laughing.

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The Christmas vacation went along in a surprisingly normal manner after that, at least relative to Xander's recent experiences. It was surprising how much he found he could take in stride without totally freaking out now that he'd actually lived in a haunted castle for a few months. Honestly, he found that the Addamses weren't much weirder than, say, Headmaster Dumbledore or any of the other adults he'd recently dealt with.

They had strange ideas, true, but Xander quickly found that the key was to not panic. Just take it in stride, because they seemed genuinely friendly and while they enjoyed things most would consider creepy at a minimum, or downright lethal, they never actually endangered themselves or anyone else.

It took him getting blown up by Fester to figure that one out, mind you.

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Narcissa Malfoy frowned; genuinely puzzled as she read the notes in the Grimoire. The unknown student had taken it with him on vacation, and there was a rather bizarre change in his responses to the basic quizzes she had setup with Lily for Charms and Defence.

For some reason they had suddenly centered on some particularly violent scenarios, including being caught in the premature detonation of something called... dynamite.

The Lady Malfoy found herself furthering her own education as she researched just what this Dynamite was, and what it's effects were. The answer, to her chagrin, was located in A Wizard's Guide to Muggles.

Dynamite (Noun) - A Muggle contraption used in the place of Reductor Charms, primarily for construction or demolition purposes. Please note, while it may appear to be a slightly over thick wand it is NOT advised to attempt to use it as such. Magical conductance is minimal; however some magic's have been known to prematurely detonate a wand of dynamite. Place appropriate shield charms on yourself and any nearby persons before playing with this muggle device. (See Appendix D, Safety Charms for Handling Explosives and Appendix X, Accidental Deaths due to misuse of Muggle Artifacts)

*Dear lord. What on Earth is a first year doing playing with muggle reductor equivalents?* Narcissa shook her head, wondering if she was dealing with a Muggleborn, or perhaps a half blood? She shrugged it off and decided that it didn't matter. She, Lily, and Alice had their disagreements on the importance of blood, but they had all sworn to treat those who asked for aid from the Coven equally.

She drew out her master copy again and noted the shield charms from the book, copying them down into the answers and suggestions sections. Hopefully the child would at least get the idea that playing with such toys was dangerous until one could cast the appropriate charms.

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"Are your family all wizards?" Xander asked, looking up from his book to where Wednesday was studying some of her own.

Wednesday looked up at him slowly, eyes coolly appraising him in that way she commonly did. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, I don't see any wands, but I'm pretty sure that Fester used a basic concussion shield charm on us yesterday right before the dynamite blew up in our faces." Xander replied, twisting his book around to show her the section.

The dark girl leaned forward and examined the section carefully.

"Interesting." She said after a moment, "To answer your question, no. I'm the first Witch, by the definition of Wizarding culture, in several generations. Addamses have a great deal of latent magical energy, however."

"I believe that." Xander replied dryly.

She cast him a cool glance, but didn't respond to the comment as she went on, "Addams Matriarchs have long been guiding the family bloodline, and the results are wide ranging. Some wandless magic has become quite common, mostly centering around defensive casting."

"Cool." Xander said, nodding.

"I believe Uncle Fester learned that charm from Great Aunt Milsol," Wednesday went on, "Who was a Witch. She married into the family in 1877 to Great Uncle Quirke. She was something more of a Potions Mistress, though. Gram-mama apprenticed under Milsol, actually."

"Your Gram-mama knows potions?" Xander looked up, interested.

Wednesday nodded, "Of course. Eudora Addams is one of the foremost Mistresses in the field, though she writes most of her articles under her maiden name."

"Oh? Why?" Xander asked, though he figured it out a moment later when he thought about how everyone seemed to react badly to the Addams name.

"Most of the Journals that deal in Potions theory only want to deal in..." The girl shuddered, "**light** potions. Gram-mama insists on protecting the Addams name from such perversions."

Xander was learning that he really shouldn't take anything on first impressions when it came to Wednesday or her family.

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Christmas came quickly, and despite the increasingly gruesome atmosphere, Xander found himself enjoying himself. It was pretty strange to be seeing what he would consider Halloween being mixed with Christmas, but the more he was around the family the more he saw it as just who they were.

It was kind of fun too, he quickly found, in a novel way.

They never yelled, at least not in anger, and that alone made it one of the better holidays Xander had enjoyed. He and Fenrir found themselves thoroughly enjoying the castle, and the large grounds outside, often spending their days running with Wednesday and Pugsley, exploring the hills

and the castle alike, and more often than not finding things that sent chills down Xander's spine.

It was only the total positive glee the other two took in locating dangerous snakes and spiders that kept Xander from bolting for his life half the time. It quickly became a point of pride that he could stand anywhere **NEAR** those two when their eyes shone with that unholy light that told him they'd located something really disturbing.

Christmas day came quickly and Xander found a pile of gifts under the tree with his name on them. Some gaily wrapped much to the Addams' clear disgust, and some more fitting with the local decor. Xander didn't have to guess which ones were from which parts of his life.

Wednesday got a whole slew of potions ingredients, including a few that Xander was pretty sure were so rare as to be nearly impossible to find. He was surprised when she, Pugsley, and himself all received brooms, American model Stratus Comfort Brooms.

"Wow..." Xander said his quiet awe drowned out by Pugsley's yelp of glee. He looked up at the two Addams' whose names had been on the package. "I don't know, I mean... this is too much."

"Nonsense." Gomez said airily, waving his cigar around. "Top quality brooms are important in the magical culture. These are good training models, we'll get you all racing brooms next year if you learn to handle these well."

"We will, we promise!" Pugsley yelled, still grinning.

Xander smiled, "I.. Well, I'm going to learn, for sure. I don't think we're allowed brooms at school this year, though."

"Bah, what are rules for if not to be broken," Gomez grinned, "The answer to that problem is simple, right Wednesday?"

The dark girl merely smiled **slightly**.

"Of course, Father." She said, running her hand over the dark wood of the broom, one finger lightly tracing the chrome plate on the forward edge, "Don't get caught."

"Precisely!"

Xander grinned, as weird as the Addamses were, they were fun to be around once you started to get used to their unique views of life.

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The rest of the holidays passed quickly, and as with every holiday Xander could remember, ended abruptly with him heading back to school. It wasn't so bad this time, though, cause he had to admit his classes were hilarious, if not outright fun, and the subject matter was almost universally of interest to him.

The port key brought them back to Hogsmeade a couple days before classes were to start, and Mr. Addams escorted them through the wards to the main gate.

"Distasteful things." He said, glaring up as they approached the castle.

"What's that, Sir?"

"The wards. They're clearly racist."

Xander frowned, "I thought they only kept out dark creatures?"

"Precisely!" Gomez fumed, "What if some poor werewolf or vampire wanted to attend classes? It's discriminating, I tell you."

Xander frowned, but nodded dutifully, more because he knew that would satisfy Gomez rather than in agreement. The Addamses had certainly given him a lot to think about, but he just didn't know enough to say anything.

At the gates they were met by Argus Filch, who was as always grumbling about being at the beck and call of the brats who plagued the castle.

"Back in my day they let us string up the little runts who caused trouble," He muttered darkly, quiet enough to expect to go unheard, but that's not how it went.

"Capital idea, old man!" Gomez clapped Argus Filch on the back, shocking the sour faced old man into silence. "Nothing like some decent recreation to break up the scholastic doldrums!"

"They don't let us play with the torture equipment here," Wednesday sighed.

"What!? Why ever not??" Gomez blurted, honestly shocked.

"It's not considered wholesome."

Gomez stopped in mid-step, looking at his daughter with horror in his eyes. "What? Nonsense!! What could be more wholesome than children playing!?"

By this point even Argus was staring at Gomez like he was some kind of strange creature from another world. Wednesday just sighed, "It's alright, Father."

“By George it is **NOT** !” Gomez raised his voice, attracting attention from down the hall. “I won’t have it! Children should be children, and what’s more childish than a spot of torture now and then?”

A soft chuckle announced the arrival of another person, and they all looked over to see the white haired Headmaster approach.

“A quite fantastic way of putting things, Mr. Addams.” Dumbledore said his tone warm and amused.

“It is!?” Filch blurted, his tone horrified, though whether it was by Addams’ statement or the idea of children playing with his collection of torture implements, no one could tell.

“Indeed. However, I’m afraid that the board of governors would look askance on our permitting the children to inflict harm on one another.” Dumbledore said.

“It’s an outrage, Sir.” Gomez grumbled, “How are they supposed to learn?”

That gave Dumbledore pause, and he blinked as he looked at the Addams Patriarch. “Learn? Learn what pray tell?”

“Why, the fundamentals of course! How to ride that exquisite line of pain in order to keep your victim alive and focused without blurring the experience!? How to properly maintain your tools... Rusty manacles are asking for all sorts of problems in the dungeon... and what about...”

“Father,” Wednesday cut in, drawing the attention of all the adults, as well as Xander. “That’s what home study is for.”

That took the wind out of Gomez’ sails, but actually caused Dumbledore to blanch slightly at the little girl who had so calmly made such a statement.

Gomez, however, just sighed. “Of course, you’re right, Wednesday darling. I just hate to see children so disadvantaged.”

Having spent the holidays with the family, Xander had become desensitized to the often bizarre trains of thought they all seemed to follow, the others in the area didn’t however, and the pale faces and shocked looks almost had him laughing out loud at the entire group.

“Uh, yes well, we must all endure.” Dumbledore managed to get out in a strangled voice.

“Too true.” Gomez nodded sadly, putting an arm across the old wizard’s shoulders as he patted the Headmaster’s back in commiseration. “It seems our lot in life to see inequity ravage our world’s children.”

As everyone stared Gomez just shrugged and turned back to Wednesday, “Are you certain you’ll be alright here?” Wednesday merely nodded, “Of course, Father.”

Gomez nodded and sighed, “very well. I’ll be off then, owl me if you need anything.”

“I will, Father.”

Gomez turned to Xander then, “And the same to you, young man. It was a pleasure to have you with us for the holidays.”

Xander, now used to the family’s sense of formality smiled slightly and half bowed. “It was my pleasure, Sir. Thank you for having me.”

“Anytime.”

With that, Gomez Addams turned and strode out of the school, leaving gaping figures in his wake.

Xander exchanged a glance with Wednesday, noting the hidden smile in her eyes, and wondered just how oblivious to other people’s morals she and her family really were.

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Slytherin house was pretty quiet when Xander made his way in, most of the house still at home for the holidays as far as he knew. That left Xander with the time to carefully stash his new broom under his bed, carefully sandwiched between some random stuff that should hold no interest to any snoopers. It wasn’t the best security, but it would do.

For the moment his concern was actually the twins, and how to appropriately return the experience they had favored him with. It was going to take some heavy duty planning, and a lot of study. Now, normally that would have been enough to send him packing, but this was one time that study was actually fun.

Xander really didn’t understand how anyone could NOT love most of the assignments they were given. Making things fly? Changing some things shape? Every class was an experience in comic book goodness brought to life. Oh, it wasn’t always easy, for sure but he was willing to endure in exchange for the ability to shift his shape, turn invisible, and fly around at better than a hundred miles an hour on a fricken broomstick.

Nailing the twins, however, was going to take some tricks well beyond his year and skill.

Xander sighed, opening up the Grimoire and moved on to the next step in transfiguration techniques.

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Narcissa Malfoy frowned softly as she read over the notes made in the Grimoire. The person on the other end of the book was focusing heavily on transfiguration so far, and she wondered if it was because this was his or her passion, or if they had a plan.

"Draco, honey," She glanced over to where her son was playing a game of wizard chess against the magical board. "Tell me about Hogwarts today."

"Hmm?" Draco glanced up as one of his knights eviscerated the opposing Bishop. "What do you want to know?"

"When I was there we had to deal with a group calling themselves the Marauders," Narcissa said pensively, "They styled themselves as pranksters supreme, is there anyone like that?"

Draco snorted, "The Weasely Twins. They're always causing trouble, usually picking on Slytherin's."

"Oh?"

"Yeah." Draco said, distracted by his game. "They got one of ours just a little while before the holidays, though I think it was by accident."

"Why do you think that?"

"I think they were aiming for the Slytherin Quidditch players," Draco said, "but they got a first year instead. He refused to give them up to Snape, though. The professor was furious."

"Ah."

Narcissa expected that was an understatement, knowing her son's godfather's proclivities. How Dumbledore had managed to get him installed as a Potions professor still utterly boggled her mind, even with Lucius pulling strings on the board.

Draco didn't look up from the board as he continued, "Harris stuck to his wand though, and wouldn't give them up for some reason."

Narcissa straightened slightly, looking at her son sharply. "Did you say 'Harris'?"

"Yeah, Alexander something Harris. He goes by the ludicrous nickname 'Xander'."

"Is he of the Harris line?" Narcissa asked bluntly.

Draco frowned, "What Harris line?"

"The Harris Family is a very old pure blood line, Draco. I had thought they had died out ages ago." Draco shrugged, "I don't know. I can't imagine him being of any important bloodline, mother, he's a colonial."

"The Americas or Australia?" Narcissa asked sharply.

"Uh, America. Why?"

"Many of the Australian families are descended from families that sent their black sheep members away as punishment. Most of those were stricken from the family line before being packed away on the ships." Narcissa explained, "The Americas were populated primarily by those who chose to leave, some were stricken from the lists anyway, but many were not."

"So Harris might be a family Heir?" Draco blinked.

"It's possible. I'm sure Gringotts still maintains the vaults for the old families."

"Why would they do that?"

"Family lines go dormant quite often, particularly in the Wizarding world, Draco." She told him, "Squib descendants can't claim a vault, but if they have magical children then those may come forward. Additionally many of the old families, most in fact, are patriarchal. It can take several generations before a magical male heir comes forward by times."

Draco snorted, "So Harris might be rich?"

Narcissa shook her head, "Unlikely. Most of the old vaults would have been stripped by their last heirs, or their inheritors. The vaults themselves, however, are contracted to the family line."

"An empty vault? What good is that?" Draco rolled his eyes.

Narcissa permitted herself an expression that bordered on both a smile and a frown. "Draco, please, put some thought into it."

Draco blinked, looking taken aback, then frowned. "Only an heir can claim a vault... would there be other things in the vault?"

Narcissa smiled very slightly, "Precisely. There may well be, though it's hard to say. Of course, unless he is quite wealthy, an heir could well bankrupt himself trying to claim it."

"Why?"

"Goblins, Draco, don't stop charging Vault fees simply because a vault is empty you know." Narcissa shrugged, "On a particularly old vault one might find the fees associated with claiming it to be... quite significant."

Draco blinked, then shuddered. "Filthy sub creatures. They should have been wiped out ages ago."

Narcissa sighed, but said nothing further on the matter. Lucius had infected her son with his attitude and, worse, neither showed the slightest aptitude of being able to **HIDE** their internal prejudices. It would get her son in trouble some day, but she couldn't seem to impress on him the importance of diplomacy.

It was terribly frustrating.

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He almost had it.

What he had, he wasn't sure yet, but Xander was certain that he almost had it.

The plan to get back at the twins was still percolating, but slowly it had begun to firm up into something he could really begin to work on. The first step had been the concept, which had been easy. The twins themselves gave him the biggest part of that, Xander was an eye for an eye kind of person. The next step was the hardest, the prep work, but he had an idea for that.

Delivery and Execution, it turned out, would be almost as easy as concept.

The Grimoire was the key to it all, Xander found, when he read one of the sections describing how the Marauders got away with many of their pranks. A couple days after arriving back to school, Xander made his first appearance in the Hogwarts kitchens.

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"Yes, young Sir, cans we be helping you?"

Xander shifted nervously, looking around, "Uh... yeah, I was wondering if I could get a snack?"

The funny looking little fellow practically shuddered in glee, nodding instantly. "Certainly, young master, what would you likes?"

"Uh... a sandwich?" Xander blinked; surprised that it was that easy, despite what the Grimoire had to say on the matter.

The elf quickly belted out a long selection list, and Xander asked for roast beef, then it was off like a flash as the little fellow built a sandwich, literally, on the fly. When it came back, large plate of food and a large mug of pumpkin juice in hand, Xander could see how incredibly happy the little fellow was to be of help.

"Um," Xander took a bite, then smiled, "Great food, thanks." The little elf twitched again, sighing in pleasure, then bounced up and down. "Mikey is pleased to help, anytime, young master."

"Uh, how come you guys don't show yourselves anyway?" Xander asked, leaning against the wall as he ate.

"Oh, school elves is not allowed to show themselves to students, Sir."

Xander blinked, "But what about... now?"

"Mikey did not show himself to young master, young master showed himself to Mikey." The Elf explained patiently.

Xander nodded, he'd guessed that it was something like that from the description in the book. The rules were there, and were ironclad, but the iron seemed to have rusted through in more than a few spots. "Say, uh, Mikey, could you help me out? I was wondering where they did the laundry."

"Oh, Laundry elves handle that, Sir. Mikey show you."

And the elf proceeded to do just that, leading Xander through the back rooms and passageways of Hogwarts as he made mental notes and tried not to get lost all the while listening the elf babble on in it's odd way of speaking.

The Grimoire was right; he found quickly, the elves were the key to Hogwarts.

They ran everything, from what Xander could tell, controlled everything from behind the scenes. Food, laundry, most cleaning, hell Xander was honestly trying to figure out what Filch did other than catch students who were out of bounds. Of course, it was possible that was his entire job.

When the tour was finished, and Xander had stopped asking questions, he thanked the elves profusely and made his way back to the Slytherin common room.

One obstacle down, one more to go.

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The student's arrival back at Hogwarts was a big deal, with food and a lot of merry chatter filling the great hall as people shared stories of their holidays. Xander considered doing just that, but somehow playing torture with Wednesday seemed creepy even to him now that he wasn't surrounded by the Addamses twenty four hours a day.

They had a cool yet creepy effect on people, Xander decided.

He smiled to Hermione as she walked past the table, heading for the Gryffindor seating, earning himself a smile in return. Draco Malfoy, on his right, however sneered at her and then glared over at Xander.

“Why are you smiling at the mudblood, Harris??”

Xander glanced over at the blond boy, “Why not?”

Draco paused, seeming to look for a response, “Because she’s a mudblood!”

“Which means what?” Xander asked, shrugging.

“She’s not a pureblood, you idiot.”

“I’m still trying to see why that matters.”

Draco was slowly turning a rather disturbing shade of pink at Xander’s continued oblivious stance. He could handle someone attacking him back, but how was he supposed to handle someone who didn’t even acknowledge that his point of view had any validity?

“She’s beneath us!” Draco blurted, not noticing that he had unconsciously referred to Xander as a pureblood, one of his own in effect.

“So... you’re argument is based on the assumption that we’re better than she is?” Xander replied.

“Of course.”

“Ok. Prove it.”

Draco blinked again. “What?”

“Prove it. What makes you better?”

“I’m a pureblood!”

“Uh... ok, what makes a pureblood better?”

“Uh...” Draco stammered, thinking furiously. He couldn’t actually think of any examples, but that was just the fact that he was being put on the spot, of course. His father had talked about how inferior mudbloods were all his life, so there had to be some examples in there.

“She’s one of the smartest students in the school,” Xander said calmly, “Ok... she’s a bit of a know it all, really, but that’s cause she’s nervous a lot. I’ve got a friend back home who’s the same way. Magically, she seems to be at least equal to the average, I mean she’s not the strongest but she’s not the weakest either. Right?”

Draco found himself nodding, almost against his will. It was true enough, he supposed.

“So why is she beneath us?” Xander asked, unknowingly cementing the opinions of everyone around him that he must be a pureblood from the colonies.

“I’m a Malfoy.” Draco ground out.

Xander frowned, wondering what that had to do with it, but remembered some of his classes so far. “Ah. Nobility, right?”

Daphne Greengrass snickered.

Draco just turned redder, fuming.

“What?” Xander looked confused.

“The Malfoy’s aren’t nobility. They’re a merchant family.” Daphne said after a moment’s indecision.

“Ah, well Hermione’s family are dentists. That’s a type of healer,” Xander said, “in Muggle terms they’re very respected and very well paid... well, ok, not so much on the respected. No one likes dentists,” he finished with a grin.

Some of the table looked curious, but it was Daphne who asked. “Why?”

“They do specialized healing of the teeth, it can hurt and it really sucks to have anyone poking around in your mouth for a couple hours.” Xander replied, grinning.

“Barbarians.” Malfoy said with a sneer.

Xander shrugged, having had this conversation with Hermione some time ago. “They don’t have potions and charms, so they do things their own way. It works, though not as good as the right healing charm. The point is, they are rather well respected despite my earlier joke, and are pretty comfortable when it comes to money.”

“But they’re not magical.” Draco said, trumping the conversation.

“No, but Hermione is.” Xander returned. “So what makes her worse than you?”

Draco redoubled his glare, but honestly Xander didn’t give a damn. He’d been glared at by kids and adults his entire life, usually for doing just what he was doing here and now. At least so far it was just talking, though Xander supposed that had as much to do with it being in the middle of the Great Hall during meal time.

“Tell you what, take your time, come up with a reason or two, and we’ll do this again.” Xander said after a moment, smirking perhaps a little too childishly for his own good. “In the meantime, let’s eat.”

Draco glared at him for several minutes, then spent the rest of the meal shooting death glares alternatively at Xander and Hermione. Xander just tried to ignore him; at least the boy wasn’t insulting his friends for now.

He didn’t notice Daphne Greengrass eying him with a curious air during the rest of the meal.

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That night Xander moved into the next step in his plan, code named ‘Operation: Twin Humiliation’.

This time it involved making his way to the Slytherin common room and finding someone specific. He lucked out, noticing that she was alone and reading in a corner, and quickly made his way over to her.

“Hey.”

The seventh year lowered her book, her garishly pink hair practically qualifying as a stunner spell.

“Wotcher.”

“I need help.” Xander said, taking a breath.

She snorted, “Do your own homework, midget.”

“Not that kind of help.” Xander forced a smile. “I’ve got a plan to take the twins down a peg. You’re the best in your year in transfiguration, right?”

Her hair cycled colors for a moment, then she smirked, “Comes naturally, you might say. You think a midget like you can take on the twins?”

“Hear me out, then decide. Deal?” Xander said, extending his hand.

She laughed, and took his hand. “Deal. Call me Tonks, midget.”

“The name is Xander, Tonks.” Xander grinned, “Here’s the plan…”

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With things set up, Xander just had to decide on timing. That, however, was proving trickier than expected to decide on. The twins, like the rest of the Gryff Quidditch team, were barely around for classes as the team Captain poured on the practice sessions like some kind of insane monkey. Xander considered springing it on them during those couple of weeks, but frankly he felt sorry for the poor buggers and let it go for a while.

In the meantime school went on as usual, which was both for the good and bad.

Xander had earned a cold shoulder from Malfoy with his challenges, but little else, while the rest of the house had apparently shifted him from ‘unknown’ status toward the neutral camp. That caused a few to open up a bit, but in Slytherin house there weren’t too many warm buddies of any type so nothing much changed.

Draco remained a prick to the rest of the school, bullying and taunting wherever he could get away with it, and a few places he couldn’t. Xander watched him and his two goons’ corner one of the Gryffs who’d been caught out alone, hitting him with various jinxes before taunting him and leaving him with a leg locker in place.

After they’d gone, Xander stepped out of the corner he’d leaned in and drew his wand.

“You too? Go ahead,” The Gryff muttered, shaking his head, “Why not?”

Xander didn’t say anything as he cast the counter to the jinx and pocketed his wand again. “Longbottom, right?”

“Yeah... What do you want from me?”

“Nothing.” Xander shrugged, “Just don’t much like bullies.”

Longbottom snorted, “I thought you were a Slytherin.”

“I’m me.” Xander told him, “My house has nothing to do with who I am.”

“Right. Well, thanks.”

“No problem. You want some advice?” Xander replied as the boy walked past him.

“Sure, why not?”

“Hit them back.”

“Huh?”

“Hit them back. They’ll leave you alone.”

“Sure. Just hit them back and they’ll run off, I bet.”

“No, they’ll beat the crap out of you. But if you hurt them too, next time they’ll look for someone easier.” Xander replied honestly. “Bullies don’t like getting hurt.”

“Makes two of us.”

“Look, Neville, right?”

Neville nodded.

“No one likes getting hurt,” Xander replied, then frowned, “Well, no one I know except the Addams family... but they’re pretty twisted.”

Neville blinked, confused.

“Never mind, my point is, if you’ve got the guts to take the pain, you can prevent more of it in the future,” Xander told him. “That’s how it works with Bullies. You fight back, yeah you’ll take a beating, but if you take it with style and send them whining to their momma they won’t come back the next time.”

Neville stared at him for a moment then nodded curtly before walking off. Xander watched him go, then shook his head and wondered why he bothered really.

“You’re wasting your time.”

Xander twisted to see Daphne Greengrass approach from around the same corner he’d been concealed at. “It’s my time.”

The brunette nodded, acknowledging the point. “I guess. He’s not worth it though. Longbottom’s practically a squib, there’s no value there.”

Xander looked confused, “Excuse me?”

She didn’t seem to notice, “Of course his family is old money, with a seat on the Wizamgamot. I suppose that in the long term it may pay off.”

“What are you talking about?”

She looked at him evenly, “You mean you’re not trying to earn favors?”

Xander just looked confused.

“Why’d you help him then?”

“He needed help, and I don’t like bullies.” Xander told her, “I have a couple good friends who were bullied a lot when I was a younger.” Daphne just laughed, shaking her head, “Are you sure you’re not supposed to be in Gryffindor?”

Xander shrugged, “The hat seemed to consider it a tossup between Gryff, the Puffs, and the Snakes. I didn’t much care which.”

“Loyal, brave, and... well, must be cunning, cause you’re obviously not ambitious.” She concluded, “Interesting. I was offered Ravenclaw, myself.”

“Why’d you turn it down?” Xander asked, somewhat curious.

“I wanted to make family connections, and Slytherin is the best place to do that if I want to hook up with as many real power families as possible.” She told him casually. “You’re not like most of the kids we get here, not the purebloods anyway. You act more like a muggle born.”

Xander shrugged, not planning on admitting to being muggle born or whatever it was that he was. Frankly he wasn’t sure on that, and trying to figure it out kind of gave him a headache. “So?”

“Nothing,” She said in reply, “Just commenting. Most of the purebloods who come here are trained from the time they can talk to move through the shadows of power, you just act different.”

“I’m an American.” Xander said, having found that to be a good answer to anything weird.

She nodded, “Yes. I’d heard that they had a far different system than we have here. How does it work, anyway?”

Xander shrugged, “Never really my thing.”

Daphne just nodded.

"I don't get this pureblood thing myself," Xander shrugged, "but there's a lot I don't get, so that's no surprise."

"Purebloods are really just another term for old families," Daphne said after a moment, "those who have power and don't want to lose it. Malfoy could have claimed nobility, you know if he'd been able to think through the rage you put him in. The Malfoys are merchants, but his mother is a Black. They're full on nobility; I think that the head of house is a Duke or Baron, though it's pretty pointless now."

"How come?" Xander asked, the name 'Black' pricking up his ears.

"The family is dead." She shrugged, "The only living members have been cast out, I think, and Malfoy will inherit the title and estate when he turns seventeen. Since he's a Malfoy, the family title will be transferred over to him and the Black family will die out officially. Then he'll be able to answer yes if you ask him if he's nobility."

Xander shook his head, "Sounds complicated."

"It's the way things are."

"Why are you telling me this?" Xander eyed her closely.

She smiled, "I see there's some Slytherin paranoia in you after all. I'm telling you this because I'm thinking maybe you're going to have some influence. Maybe. Maybe not. Either way, I don't risk much by telling you some stuff everyone already knows, but you will owe me a small favor. Maybe later, you will be able to tell me something I should know. That's how things work here."

Xander stared at her evenly for a moment then frowned slowly. "How many people in Slytherin are thinking like this?"

"Most of us, of course." Daphne shrugged then waved her hand, "Oh Malfoy and his two dimwits aren't. Draco is too arrogant to think about what other people might be willing to do for him; he only sees what he can make them do. Crabbe and Goyle are bookends, too dumb to tie their shoelaces let alone think for themselves. But they're not really what make up Slytherin house."

"And the rest of the school?"

"Most of the purebloods think the same or pretty close." She frowned, considering, "I suspect that Longbottom is probably the furthest from that, even though his family is minor nobility. From what my mother told me, they didn't expect him to come to Hogwarts, so his family didn't train him to take over. They're probably scrambling to do that now. The Weasley's know the game, I expect, what with the mother being a Prewitt and their dad being in the Ministry, but they don't have the cash to play the game so they mostly ignore it."

That was the second name he recognized, and now Xander was actually getting interested. "Prewitt? Important family?"

"They were," Daphne nodded, "but they took a lot of deaths in the last war. Now they're mostly dead too. I think there's a direct line heir, but he's some old man who doesn't get involved in politics."

"How do you know all this?" Xander asked, actually pretty impressed.

"I told you, most of the purebloods know it by our age. It's how you figure out who not to annoy, and who to help in exchange for favors." She told him, "its important business, life and death for a family. Especially now."

"Why now?"

Daphne had known that he was clueless, but it hadn't really penetrated just how little he really knew. She was getting the picture now, and berated herself for starting the conversation. Still, he was gaining some credibility in the house among both the pure bloods and the neutrals, and several of the mixed blood and muggle born outcasts in their year looked to him for protection, though it was clear he didn't know it.

For the moment he was nothing, but that could change, and her mother had always told her to watch for the future power, not merely the present. In Slytherin house the present power was Draco Malfoy, Marcus Flint, and a small scattering of others across the years. The future power, though, was obscured as was usual for the house.

In Gryffindor it was blatantly obvious. Potter was going to be a force to deal with, assuming he survived all the enemies he had, with him Weasley was likely to rise into some power, and the muggle born Granger would also share in Potter's influence.

The Puffs were hard to tell, though Diggory was clearly on the rise there.

Among the Ravenclaw's things were a little clearer, since Cho Chang was carving out a place for herself beyond her year, guided by Marietta Edgecombe, who had strong pure blood ties. The dark horse there, literally it seemed, was the Addams girl. She held no sway, but neither was there anyone in the entire school basically who wanted to go against her. That in itself was power, and could change into influence later on.

Daphne licked her lips unconsciously, considering that Harris had by luck or genius foresight placed himself in a position to influence two potentially interesting individuals in other houses. Yes, he was worth spending some time on.

Speaking of which, she found him staring at her, and shook her head clear of her straying thoughts and focused on his question.

"Why now? Because of the war," She answered, "A lot of prominent families were basically destroyed, like the Blacks and the Prewitt's. Wizards live long lives, which can put a crimp in inheritance laws, but basically over the next few years a lot of houses are going to change as their heirs

come of age to claim the head of family title. Longbottom, Malfoy, and Potter are just the most visible."

"Harry too?" Xander mused.

"Oh yes, The Potter's are an old family, something of a mixed blood line but they're considered pure blood by most." She said, "Not quite nobility, but they have their own crest and coat of arms, the Potter's have traditionally been Knights and, more recently, Aurors. I understand that Harry's relatively wealthy, though no one is really sure of how much because the Goblins don't let even the ministry mess around with family vaults and finances."

"Sounds like a complicated mess."

"It is." Daphne admitted with a shrug. "But it's our complicated mess, we know our way around."

They may, Xander noted, but she'd admitted that Neville probably didn't know as much as he should, and Xander would bet Harry didn't know anything from what little he'd heard from the boy and Hermione.

"So Malfoy acts like a dick cause he's going to inherit a title?"

Daphne laughed, "No, Draco just is a dick as you put it. The title makes him worse; don't be surprised if he works it into the conversation at meals as soon as it occurs to him."

Xander nodded, unsurprised. He wondered just how much education actually went on outside of Hogwarts suddenly, and whether it really mattered to him. He didn't have to walk through the minefield, after all.

"Thanks," He said after a moment, "I'll think about what you've said. You mind if I ask you some questions later, maybe?"

"Just not in front of Draco," She told him, unwilling to be seen to be taking sides.

"Deal. Thanks again."

Daphne just nodded and left him there, leaving Xander to think about it for a moment before heading for the library. He needed to think, and the talk to Hermione or Wednesday, and just maybe look some stuff up.

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Hermione wasn't there, but Wednesday was, and Xander dropped into the seat across from her with a cheery grin. "Hey there."

She looked up at him evenly, "Hello."

"You know anything about all the family stuff everyone seems to care so much about here?" He asked, leaning in to check what she was reading.

A History of Witch burnings. Lovely.

"Some." She told him. "Why?"

"Dunno, just got a crash course on it from a housemate," Xander shrugged, "Seems like Malfoy is set to inherit a noble title, and he's not the only one. Guess that war everyone whispers about really messed them up around here."

The Addams Scion raised an eyebrow, "Really? Wars are so interesting. The death, carnage, mayhem. It makes for fascinating reading."

"You read about it then?"

She nodded, "Yes. However the books are probably wrong."

"Oh? How come?"

"They're mostly written by people who weren't involved, often based on reports by people who heard about the events from someone else. That does not make for a good history book."

Xander had to agree with that point. "Well I guess there were a lot of families basically destroyed, and a lot of the next people in line to take over those families are just starting to come of age now."

"That would explain some of the things I've seen," Wednesday mused, "Family survival is nothing to be played around with. People have committed genocide over less."

"Yeah..." Xander said slowly, "Sure."

"I suppose the question becomes... what do we do about it?"

"Do?"

She shrugged, "You must have a reason for bringing it up."

Xander frowned, "I... guess I didn't think that far ahead."

Wednesday rolled her eyes, “Boys.”

\*\*\*\*

“My my, who have you been talking with?”

Narcissa Malfoy was surprised to see the shift in direction the young man had taken, moving away from practical spells into pureblood politics of all things. This was one of her areas of expertise, of her family only Andromeda had surpassed her in this field, and Andy had long since retired from this field to live with her muggle born lover.

In her mind she refused to consider the man as Andy’s husband, he simple wasn’t worthy of her sister, even if Andy had been stricken from the family lineage.

She noted some interesting observations in the notes, and was surprised that the boy seemed to grasp some of the less obvious effects the war had had on house lines. Given his relative ignorance of such things up to this point, it seemed obvious that he had acquired another tutor.

Narcissa made some notes in return, pointing out a few of the things she had determined over the intervening years, and corrected a few of his false assumptions. She hesitated when she noticed his notations on the Black family as it pertained to one Draco Malfoy in particular. He was under the impression that the Black family was, for all intents and purposes, dead.

Now that thought rankled, even if it was her son who was poised to take over the family in a few years. It especially rankled because it was true. Narcissa was a proud Black, and it maddened her to know how badly her family had fared in the war.

Oh, it was certainly no worse than many others, she could admit, but they were Blacks by God, they were better than that. Many of the Blacks had sided with the Dark Lord; many others had chosen the ministry. Sirius had stepped into line with Dumbledore, alone among his family.

The results for the male heirs of the family were uniformly consistent. They all died, no matter what side they chose. All save for Sirius, of course, who had turned out to be a traitor.

Narcissa hadn’t believed it when she heard it, actually. It seemed impossible; Sirius was devoted to James Potter. If the Potter’s had been a Noble Family, Narcissa had little doubt that Sirius would have sworn allegiance to them.

For him to betray them, well it was inconceivable.

However, after long weeks and months with no public trial, no scandal, no sound out of him whatsoever... well, even she had her doubts. If he had pulled off such a spectacular infiltration of the so called ‘light’, well she rather suspected that his mother would have been proud. For all the good it would have done the old bat, her sons both dead on the altar of that maniac’s agenda.

Narcissa sighed and closed the book, not in the mood to make the usual corrective notes any longer. She remembered the days following the Dark Lord’s defeat quite well. It had been a panicked time in Malfoy Manor, with Lucius constantly hosting meetings with the surviving Death Eaters and Ministry officials.

A huge chunk of the Malfoy fortune had vanished in those few weeks, but they came through it intact and still strong enough to rebuild, which was better than most. She had gained a respect for her husband then, recognizing that he was capable of great things when pushed. His adulation of the Dark Lord aside, Lucius Malfoy was an impressive individual.

Over the years, through, he had grown more and more bitter over the loss of destiny as he saw it. Muggleborn were becoming more common, as squib births also rose among pureblood families. Narcissa closed her eyes, thinking of her second son and only daughter, two children who had mysteriously vanished when the standard magical tests revealed them to be squib born.

After the birth, and disappearance, of Morgana Malfoy, her third child, Lucius stopped coming to her bedchambers entirely. Their love life had never been what Lilly would have referred to as ‘hot and heavy’, but it ended then, with the second squib birth. She had never been able to get Lucius to tell her what happened to either of them, whether he’d sent them away or...

Narcissa closed her eyes and cried silently, as she learned to do a long time earlier.

\*\*\*\*

The second term seemed to rush along, Xander felt, weeks passing in a blur as he attended classes and found himself actually trying to learn as much as he could for the first time in his life. Part of it was the fact that the classes were simply damned cool, in his opinion, but part of it was self defense as well.

He wasn’t really safe even in his own bed, he learned after some petty retribution from Malfoy left him in the infirmary for a few hours after a hex on his bedclothes left him with a bad rash. So advanced reading in defense put him around fifth in the class, behind Harry, Hermione, Wednesday, and Draco himself unfortunately enough.

Charms were cool, and he did pretty well there, second in his house year, but only eighth overall. His marks in transfiguration and potions were roughly in the same category, which meant that while he wasn’t up for any honor awards, his scores were respectable.

Willow would be so proud.

That said, he filed Malfoy away as a minor pest, and returned his focus to the twins.



The Gryffindor/Hufflepuff Quidditch match was nearly on them by that point, and Xander decided that the time was set to spring his little trap. After a hurried conference with Tonks, who had held up her end of the bargain, Xander planted the goods in the Gryffindor laundry while the Elves were away, and ducked out to await the fireworks.

\*\*\*\*

They hit the morning of the match, much to Xander's delight. He hadn't been able to exactly ensure the timing, so he'd hedged his bets a little with some extra work, and it seemed to pay off.

Breakfast was in full swing; the whole school turned out as they were eager to see the match play out and wanted a good jump on the day. At the Gryff table the twins were making their usual spectacle when one of the pranks went off on Neville, leaving the boy sprouting feathers and attracting the attentions of the entire hall on their table as the Gryffs began to laugh.

It was the perfect cue for Xander and he drew his wand under the table then carefully nodded to Tonks. She nodded back and they both cast the spell she had tutored him in until he had it perfect. It was really just a slightly more advanced version of the first year Finite spell, designed to cancel simple and unprotected charms and jinxes. This one was selective as well, letting them target a specific spell, as long as they knew it was there.

Which, of course, they did.

Half the Gryff table suddenly yelped as the other half were just as suddenly dressed in Slytherin Green. Ronald Weasley had somehow found himself wearing a large green foam finger with the #1 written on it in silver, and he wasn't the only one. As most of them stared at it, and the other similar touches in dumbfounded shock, it slowly penetrated into their heads and the roar of outrage began.

A roar that ended just as quickly when they realized that not everyone affected had been hit the same way.

Xander had considered leaving it at that, for about a second. Then he decided that merely returning the favor wasn't remotely enough. So he made special arrangements for two of the Gryffs.

The Twins were staring at each other in a strange mix of shock and delight, which Xander found kinda disturbing actually. The rest of the school, however, was just staring in delight as the laughter swelled.

Their robes had been replaced by green and silver, true enough, but the ultra short miniskirts they now had on showed off two pairs of truly horrifying legs, and the stuffed shirts gave the twins more prominent chests than any girl in the entire school.

They, in unison, came to a conclusion and instantly drew their wands and pointed it at each other just as Xander had **dearly** hoped they would.

**"Finite Incantatem !"** They yelled together.

The school gasped in total shock as their spells worked flawlessly, removing the spells on the Cheerleader outfits instantly. Unfortunately, since both outfits had been conjured by Tonks and not made from real materials, the Twins found themselves standing in front of the entire school in their underwear.

One had red shorts with blue polka dots, while the other apparently preferred blue shorts with red dots. Xander, very briefly, wondered which was which but really didn't care. He just smiled smugly and sat back as everyone else laughed their asses off.

Justice served.

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"Merlin, Xander that was perfect!" Tonks laughed, tears rolling down her cheeks as she leaned against the stone wall. "Forgive me for doubting you!"

"You're forgiven, but please not so loud!" Xander hissed, checking around the common room to see if anyone was near.

Tonks nodded, catching her breath, "Sorry. Though anyone here who hears you will likely give you a medal!"

"Maybe, but I'd rather the twins didn't get any idea who set them up, if you don't mind." Xander smirked.

"Yeah, that would be bad," She agreed. "Whatever gave you the idea of using cheerleader outfits anyway?"

Xander shrugged, "I've never liked cheerleaders."

Tonks raised an eyebrow, but didn't comment, "Well midget, if you need any more help, I'm your metamorph."

"I'll keep that in mind," Xander grinned, "But all things considered I'm hoping to stay under the radar for a bit."

She laughed and nodded, heading for the seventh year girls dorms as Xander made ready to do some work while the rest of the school obsessed over Quidditch.

\*\*\*\*

The Gryffs won their match despite the flaming red faces and general humiliation they went through over the next couple days. Their point lead in the race for the house cup was secured by the win then lost the same night when Harry, Hermione, and Ronald were caught out after dark, which

lead the Xander being on the receiving end of a long and bitter pity party when he met Hermione in the library with Wednesday.

He would have let it go, knowing that his friend did have some cause to wail, but he wasn't an Addams.

"Shut up."

Hermione snapped back like she'd been slapped, staring in shock at the other girl. "What?"

"I said, shut up." Wednesday told her. "You took the risks of breaking the rules, and now you suffer the consequences of getting caught. Have the strength of your convictions and accept the responsibility for it. Next time either do not break the rules, or do not get caught."

Hermione quailed under the flat glare sent her way, but shuddered at the very idea of a next time. "Next time? There won't **BE** a next time! I'm never breaking the rules again!"

Wednesday raised an eyebrow, "And you're sure you are a Gryffindor?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"There are times when you do what is right, not what is expected or required. That is having courage of your convictions," Wednesday told her, "tell me, was it worth it?"

"What? Was what worth it?"

"You were out after curfew for a reason. Was it a foolish reason, or did you have a worthy cause?"

Hermione hesitated then chewed on her lower lip. "We had a cause."

"Was it worth a hundred and fifty points?" Wednesday asked, not caring what the cause itself was.

Hermione hesitated again, and then nodded.

"Then congratulations, most would have lost those points for something stupid. So shut up and let's study." The dark girl said calmly, returning to her books.

That ended the whining for the evening in a single swoop, and Xander was glad of it because he had been feeling a little guilty about having made his friends day a little harder with his counter-prank.

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The end of term was upon them quickly after that, with days rushing by until the exams were looming in the near future, and Xander found himself worrying about his brown haired friend.

Put frankly, Hermione was acting pretty weird.

Even Wednesday had remarked on it in her normal laconic way.

Of course it might have been the stress of exams, since Hermione was one seriously scary person under stress, but somehow Xander didn't think that was it. He found himself watching her intently, and realized shortly that it wasn't just her, but also Harry and Ronald as well.

He hoped they weren't up to more of whatever it was that got them in trouble before, cause he figured that there was only so much even the lax Dumbledore would accept before kicking someone out of school, but was actually kind of relieved that it wasn't just his friend. She'd have someone to cover her back, at least, and would hopefully know to ask for help if she needed it. Besides, he was having more twin problems himself.

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"We know..."

"It was you."

The two red heads had cornered him after dinner some time after the great green Slytherin cheer event and confronted him with that.

"What was me?" Xander asked, faking a bewildered look.

They leveled steady gazes on him.

"That little prank."

"Me!? How could I pull that off!?" Xander went into his prepared act, "I'm only a firstie, remember? Those spells were way beyond me!"

The twins sighed in unison.

"That bothered us too,"

"Until we decided that you simply recruited help."

The two glared at him then, “You hang out with Hermione, did you put her up to helping you?”

Ouch. Xander almost winced at that, then returned the glare.

“Leave her out of this, if you go after my friends I’ll make that prank look like a tack on your chair!”

The two looked confused.

“What’s a tack?”

“And why would it be on our chair?”

Xander groaned, shaking his head, “Never mind. I didn’t recruit Hermione in any pranks, I wouldn’t do that to her.”

“You’re a snake.”

“Of course you would.” Xander growled, glaring up at the duo, “I’m warning you…”

The twins smirked, “ooh, the ickle firstie is warning us.”

“So scary.”

“We’re just telling you we know.”

“So watch your back, ickle Alex.”

“We’re Weasley’s. We don’t get even…”

“We get ahead.”

\*\*\*\*\*

After that conversation, Xander had spent the following days dodging minor pranks and jokes from the twin’s bag of surprises. Luckily in this matter he **HAD** recruited Hermione, and she fed him inside information on what they were cooking up. Or, at least, what they had cooked up.

The twins were, as he found out in short order, pretty impressive at potions and charms. He learned quickly to be careful what he ate, as the twins were good at packing tricks into food, and had some way of getting it on the tables even in the Great Hall.

That really only meant one thing, of course.

They had an in with the Elves.

Luckily they tended to test their concoctions on their fellow Gryffs, which usually let Hermione warn him about what may be coming down the pipeline. After the first bout of transfiguration at the table, Xander had quickly gone to the elves and asked them to remain neutral, but had been informed that they never took sides.

Of course, as Xander had already proven, they could be duped.

That resulted in a sudden interest in learning detection spells, after which Xander and the twins found themselves at a stalemate once more. Of course, no one else had any idea that there was any sort of feud ongoing, as Xander wasn’t admitting to anything, and the twins sure as hell weren’t going to tell anyone that they had been pranked by a firstie.

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“How long do you intend to let them get away with this?” Xander looked up as Tonks sat by him in the corner of the common room where he was studying for the exams that were beginning the next day. “Get away with what?”

She glared at him, “All the charmed food and stuff they’ve been sneaking onto the table.”

Xander shrugged, “its minor stuff, Tonks. If I shoot back it’ll just confirm that I was behind the stunt they’re really mad about. Then we’ll have a real war on our hands.”

“Scared of them then?” Tonks smirked.

“Honestly? Yes.” Xander grinned back. “I’m not in their league, and next year you’ll be gone. So let them have their fun. They’ll soon get tired of it and start to think that they have the wrong guy, and that’s when they better start looking over their shoulders.”

Tonks smirked, “Damn. You are a snake.”

“No, I’m Xander.” Xander replied, extending a hand, “nice to meet you.”

She snorted, “Almost makes me wish I wasn’t graduating, should be interesting next year.”

“If I come back.” Xander shrugged.

“You’re not coming back?”

“Don’t know. This place isn’t as bad as I thought at first, but it’s kinda treacherous,” Xander admitted, “I don’t like having to check my bed for Malfoy’s tricks, my food for the twin’s pranks, and my back for whoever else I may have annoyed.”

Tonks nodded, “Yeah, I get that. Still, be a shame to lose you, midget. You’ve got potential.”

“Thanks, Tonks.”

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Exams ended with Slytherin in the lead for the House cup, and the common room was pretty happy about it though Xander didn’t really see the point. The cheating for points had reached a level so blatant that he was surprised it hadn’t been curtailed by the professors. It was one thing to bend the rules a little, or even tread right over them, if you got away with it unnoticed but the sheer staggering arrogance of cheating had been stunning, even to an eleven year old.

House points were forgotten for a brief moment, though, when rumors began to burn wildly through the entire school about Harry Potter and his two friends. When the first of them reached Xander’s ears he bolted for the hospital wing.

Madam Pomfrey had it barred off, but he was relieved to find his friend well and waiting.

“What happened?”

Hermione looked over at him, her expression a little tired and perhaps even desperate. She hugged at him and he hugged her back.

“Oh Xander! Harry and Ron are hurt, we had to beat all these traps to find the philosopher’s stone and then it turns out that Professor Quirrel was really Volde... Voldemort... or something...”

Xander let her go, pushing her back so he could see her as he frowned questioningly “That Dork lord dude? I thought he was dead?”

She shook her head, “Just his body.”

“That usually means dead, Hermione.”

“We’re magical, Xander, remember? He must have done some ritual to stay alive.”

“Lovely. Bad guys who won’t stay dead, I knew this place felt like a comic book.” Xander drawled, rolling his eyes. “Are Harry and the Twit ok?”

She slapped his arm lightly, “Don’t call Ron that! He’s not that bad, he beat McGonagall’s giant chess set by sacrificing himself to get us through.”

Xander raised an eyebrow, “Giant chess set? **Wizard** Chess?”

She nodded.

He was impressed despite himself, “Alright that earns him his name back. Are they going to be ok?”

She nodded hesitantly, “I think so. Ron was just a little battered, but Harry was pretty bad.”

“He took on a professor turned evil overlord, that’s to be expected. They have Quirrel chained up somewhere?”

“No, he died.”

“He **killed** an evil overlord, even better,” Xander cracked a grin, “Bonafide superhero stuff.”

Hermione rolled her eyes, but didn’t correct him.

They waited together until Madam Pomfrey came out and shooed them off, telling them that Harry would be fine. Relieved they both left, however reluctantly Hermione was, passing the headmaster on their way out. When he was out of earshot, Xander shook his head and leaned in to Hermione.

“What the heck is a Philosopher’s stone anyway??”

“Honestly, Xander, weren’t you listening to Wednesday when she told us about Nicholas Flamel!?”

Xander frowned, “um... no?”

She growled at him and proceeded to lecture him, in detail, on the stone and its history.

To Xander it felt a lot like home.

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The morning after Xander was seated with the rest of the Slytherin’s when Harry and the others showed up to breakfast and he breathed a sigh of

relief. He didn't know Harry much, and while Ron had earned his name back Xander still didn't care much about him, but they were both friends of Hermione so that made them important to him too.

The hall was draped in Slytherin green, and Xander could feel the smugness around him as he turned his focus on the meal once again. As he'd felt earlier there was no glory in winning something when everyone **KNEW** you'd cheated to get it, so he just let it be.

Then the Headmaster began his speech, and over the process of less than two minutes, destroyed the Slytherin's winning streak with the dispensing of a hundred and sixty points to Gryffindor. Around him the Slytherin's began crying out in outrage, but were drowned out by the cheers from the other three quarters of the school. Xander just rolled his eyes and went on eating.

"What's wrong with you!?" Draco shoved him, "They just stole the cup from us!"

Xander looked up at the blond and shook his head, "So?"

"So? It's the **CUP**, it's **OURS**."

"Draco, if everyone knows the game is rigged, the prize ain't worth squat." Xander replied, having seen enough of rigged games in Sunnydale. The teachers there always favored the rich kids, and that was just the way things were.

"What are you talking about!?" Draco was turning red as he ranted.

"Draco, how many points did you get unfairly from Professor Snape? How many did he steal from the other houses?" Xander shrugged, "The points are a joke, and most of the other kids know it. In the library they were joking about the 'snakes' winning again, cause they know it's meaningless."

"What!? But..."

"Look around, the Claws and the Puffs aren't happy for the Gryffs, you know. They're just glad **WE** lost." Xander shrugged.

"But... that old muggle loving fool cheated, he gave them points for..."

"Saving an artifact from the Dork Lord Mold-in-his-Shorts." Xander finished, "Or something like that. Yeah, probably not a school thing, but still pretty impressive. Still, yeah, he cheated. No one cares except you and the Gryffs. The Puffs and the Claws didn't expect to win it anyway, the older students told all their first years that Slytherin cheats to win and the professors don't care. If the teachers don't care, why should they? The cup is worthless, Draco."

Draco slumped back, pouting, but fell silent so Xander returned to his meal in peace.

Until Daphne leaned over, her face barely composed, "Mold in his Shorts?"

Xander shrugged, "I can't remember his real name."

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School let out and the children found their way to the train, breaking off into the small groups of friends that had formed over the school year. Xander found himself sharing a berth with Wednesday, Hermione, Harry, and Ron as they headed back toward Platform Nine and three Quarters. Ron pointedly ignored the 'snake' in the room, while Hermione split her time between her two groups of friends. Wednesday in return ignored Ron as insignificant, save to ask him if he knew how to play 'is there a god?' That question sent him as far from her as possible, and gave Xander a comfort zone as he talked and joked with Hermione and Harry.

School was out, and despite his initial concerns, Xander had to admit he rather enjoyed the year overall. He wasn't certain what was going to happen for the next year, but it had been cool and he'd learned a lot of neat stuff. In London they disembarked, and milled around until finding their families and minders.

Xander watched as Hermione was met by a pair of nice looking adults and he smiled when introduced, nodding to each. The Weasley family was impossible to miss, unless someone had set fire to the crowd, and Xander snickered as Ron was nearly smothered by his mother. Harry, though, walked off to a fat, red faced man, who looked like he wanted to explode just standing there.

Xander had seen that look before, and felt a cold chill as he watched Harry walk toward it. He was no real friend of Potter's, not really, but they weren't enemies either. He grimaced, "hey Harry!"

Harry paused, turning around, "Yeah?"

"You going to be ok?" Harry hesitated, but nodded. "Sure."

Xander didn't know what else to say, and could only watch as Harry left with the fat man. He was pulled along into the American group a moment later when the professor from the Salem Institute caught up with him.

"Come along, port key to Salem in three minutes."

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Back in the states they were given one more class for the year, a short briefing on their rights as Magical Citizens of the Northern Americas.

Xander was somewhat surprised to find that the borders of the magical communities weren't the same as the borders of the Nationalities. In fact, the US, Mexico, and Canada were part of the same Magical 'Government', such as it was. It was really more of a group of departments within the federal governments of each nation, who all more or less agreed to follow the same set of magical rules.

It all sounded horribly complicated, so Xander just focused on what he was allowed to do, which had been broken down into much simpler terms.

He was permitted to use magic at home, but violations of the Magical Secrets Act of 1803 were punished severely, beginning with stiff fines and moving up to forcible relocation to an all magical community until he'd served his sentence. Extreme breaches were punishable under criminal law, which seemed worse.

As a newly active 'Wizarding Home', his parents could apply to be hooked up to the national floo network, and have wards erected as they chose. His teacher had slipped him a pamphlet on Gringotts USA Warding services, telling him to give it to his parents. Xander just nodded and pocketed the pamphlet, uncertain on whether they could afford anything like that.

Still he was pretty glad to be home and, as far as he could tell, so was Wednesday who was almost hopping with excitement. Well, for her at least.

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"Hey, looking forward to the summer?" Xander asked, smiling.

"Yes." She replied, her tone flat as she looked over at him. "We haven't played wake the dead in a long time."

"Yeah." Xander didn't really need any more information on that than what he already had. "Well, I've got permission from the teachers to go shopping before they send me home, the local magic district in Sunnydale is supposed to be kinda dangerous."

"Really?" Wednesday asked, sounding interested. "The Hellmouth sounds very... interesting."

Xander shrugged, "boring to grow up in, but I guess there are things I never saw."

"Indeed."

"Anyway, I want to buy some potions stuff," Xander said.

"Why?"

"I've got some of the twins gag stuff here," Xander grinned, "I want to try and figure out how they made them."

"Ah," Wednesday **almost** smiled. "Enjoy. Would you, perhaps like to visit?"

"Sure, that'd be cool. Are you guys hooking up to the Floo?"

She nodded, "You?"

"I hope so. We have a fireplace, but I don't think it's ever been used." Xander admitted, then looked a little glum. "I hope we can afford it."

Wednesday didn't say anything, merely rubbed the beak of her familiar, "I'll send Odin with our floo address when it's ready."

"Cool. Thanks." Xander grinned, hefting Fenrir up so the pup could bark at Wednesday and Odin. Oddly the pup had barely grown in the nearly ten months since Xander had picked him up, but Xander wasn't complaining. Fenrir was fun to hold and play with as is. "We'll be seeing each other then, right?"

"Of course."

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The two friends split ways shortly after that, Wednesday being picked up by the family butler. Lurch, not being much of a conversationalist had merely groaned at Xander when he greeted the big guy, then groaned again when Xander and Wednesday exchanged awkward goodbyes.

After that he'd gone out to shop in the Salem District, picking up a small cauldron and a book on identifying magical spells cooked into potions and foodstuffs. The twins had come up with some really cool stuff, and he was really hoping to give them a surprise or two on the off chance they met again.

Salem was apparently ready to accept students again, however, so Xander wasn't counting on seeing the two red heads soon, but he'd see to it that their work lived on in America. After he was done with shopping, Xander was led to the port key terminal and sent off in a whirling cyclone for Sunnydale.

Home sweet home.



# Shadow Council : Preludes Book One

## The Snake and the Lion (part 1)

Xander shivered as he made his way up the drive to his home, the feeling of his hometown was like the opposite of Hogwarts. The old castle was cold, drafty, and damp in many ways, but despite all that it seemed to wrap itself around you like a warm hug from your mother. Sunnydale was warm on his skin, the sun beating down in a way that felt incredible compared to the cool Scottish weather he had endured all year, but beneath that, to his magical senses that were now awakened the town froze his blood.

He shook it off, knowing the reason, and forced the chill out as best he could as he opened the door to his home.

“Mom, Dad?” he called out, “I’m home.”

He came up short, though, when he found himself face to face with a group of people, most of whom he’d never seen before. His mom and dad was there, but other than them his Uncle Samuel Ruidri Harris. His Uncle liked his name about as much as Xander liked his middle, though, and generally just called himself Rory, or if a full name was required, Sam Axe. Xander never could figure out where the ‘Axe’ came from.

Four other people, however, were total strangers to Xander but it was easy enough to identify them as magical. Their sense of dress was just skewed enough to make it clear that they weren’t used to keeping up with fashion, though Xander wondered how dumb you had to be to screw up men’s fashions, cause as far as he could tell they hadn’t really changed much in a few hundred years unless you were a teenager with more money than brains.

His thoughts on the strangers were interrupted when his mother spoke up.

“Alex, honey, these are representatives of your father’s and my families.”

“Thank you, Jessica,” One of the men spoke up, “I’ll take it from here. This is Alex is it?”

“Xander, Sir.”

“Pardon me?”

“The name, it’s Xander.” Xander told them, “not Alex. Alexander if you’re pissed with me, I guess, but I’m just Xander.”

The man raised an eyebrow, and then shook his head, “Hardly an appropriate name, young man. Xander is meaningless; Alex and Alexander have a sense of power behind them. They have weight.”

“I’m twelve, Sir. I can’t carry much weight.” Xander replied dryly.

Rory chuckled loudly, earning him a glare that he cheerfully ignored.

The speaker rolled his eyes, staring at Rory, “For goodness sakes, Anthony, why did you invite this fool?”

“Sam is family, Marcus.” Tony said stonily, neither warm nor rude in the ways Xander might have expected from his dad. “And really, I don’t trust you.”

Marcus snorted, “Really, and this **squib** is going to do what to protect you from me?”

“Other than cut your heart out before you can pull that stick from the hidden holster on your left thigh?” Rory asked idly, a knife appearing in his hand as he calmly used it to pick his fingernails. “Get on with it, Marcus. I’ve got a date in LA with a hot momma who’s gonna want her Lincoln back.”

Marcus sighed, eyes not leaving the knife for a moment, then turning back to Xander. “We are here about you, boy.”

So much for names, Xander figured, “Oh yeah? What about me?”

“You’re a scion of the Harris and Lavelle lines, despite your parents... condition, which entitles you to a place in the world. With that place comes responsibilities, child. We are here to ensure that you are prepared to meet them.”

“Oh lord,” Xander groaned, looking over at his mom, “this is more pureblood bullshit, isn’t it?”

Rory started laughing again, but his mom and dad flinched, though they both nodded.

“Boy, watch your tongue...”

“Marcus Harrison. Enough.”

The room fell silent as one of the two women Xander didn’t know rose up and stood across from him, “I am your Great Aunt Jessica Maeve Lavelle.”

Xander’s eyes flickered to his mom, and she nodded slightly. Xander nodded to the woman, remembering his lessons from the book and nodded slightly to the woman, bowing from the waist. “Aunt.”



A flicker of a smile passed across her face even as frustrated annoyance marred the expression on Marcus'.

"Very good, child. You understand some of the proprieties."

Xander shrugged a little, "I was sorted into the unofficial pureblood superiority house at school. It was learn to fit in at least a little, or get a knife in the back."

"I'm sure you're exaggerating," His mom said, smiling hesitantly.

Xander smiled a bit, "A bit, mom, most purebloods wouldn't know how to handle a knife."

Rory near split a gut laughing, again drawing irate glares from the Marcus and the other man Xander didn't know. "Sounds about right, kid. You ever want to learn to use a blade in a real fight, just ask."

Xander grinned, much to his mother's disconcertion. Rory had, like many of the squib members of the families, including Tony Harris, joined the service to escape the influence of the families. Unlike Tony, Rory had chosen to make it a career and stayed in for his full twenty, serving fourteen of those years as a SEAL. The idea of him teaching her son how to use a blade was more than a little worrisome.

"Rory, I'll thank you not to give my son bad ideas."

"Sorry, Jess." Rory smirked, then winked at Xander.

Xander just grinned back.

The Lavelle Matriarch just sighed tolerantly, but kept her focus on her young great nephew. "I understand that you've spent the year in Hogwarts."

It wasn't a question, but Xander nodded anyway. "Yes, Ma'am."

"Our family once held a seat on the board there," She said, then glanced back at Marcus and nodded, "both our families did."

Xander hadn't realized that, "Really?"

"Yes. The British branch of the family, arguably the trunk branch really, died out over a century ago for the Lavelle's. I believe that the Harris line ended during the War?" She glanced back, and received a nod from Marcus.

"What, with that Mold in his shorts dude?" Xander asked, eyes rolling up as he wracked his brain to remember the Overlord dude's name. For the life of him he could never quite remember it.

Jessica raised an eyebrow, but easily decoded his meaning. "No. I mean the War. Grindlewald's uprising and the Second World War"

"Who's Grindlewald?" Xander blinked, suddenly interested. The Second World War had some personal meaning to him, as it had deeply affected Willow's family, and he knew that his Dad had family who had served with the US Forces abroad then.

"Grindlewald was a Dark Wizard, a true Dark Lord in fact, who led an uprising across Europe's Wizarding world. The fallout of his reign of terror spread into the normal world, both directly and indirectly allowing for the rise of Adolf Hitler." She told him seriously, "A great many of the old families were crippled or destroyed then, in the chaos of the aftermath the one calling himself Voldemort rose and inflicted even more damage across the pureblood families. The European trunk lines of many great families were destroyed by those two madmen."

"Whoa." Xander said, nodding dumbly. There was a lot more to the history of the world than he knew, apparently. "Grindlewald was behind the Nazis then?"

"Not precisely, young man," Jessica said, taking her seat again and carefully crossing her legs. "The National Socialist Party were entirely founded by normal humans, however there were several Wizards who pushed it into the direction it went. Don't mistake me, Hitler was hardly a nice person... or one that I would want in any level of power, but many of the excesses of his followers were not precisely at his command. He fired them up, before unleashing them on Europe. I truly doubt that he ever really imagined what he had done until it was too late to do anything about it. Whether he would have done something to stop it, or not, is lost to history now. Grindlewald and several of his followers took the war machine Hitler had begun to forge and used it to their own ends."

"How?"

"Everyone knows about the six million Jews they killed," Jessica said pensively, "Few, though, even in our world know that they also rounded up over one million squib families, dozens if not hundreds of poor Wizarding families who refused to join Grindlewald's forces, and also nearly wiped out the Vampire clans, Veela Enclaves, and many other demi-human communities across Europe. Today, France is the only place in central Europe where you can find any significant Veela population. The underground hid them, you see. Vampires have retaken many of their old haunts; however there are large swathes of Europe where the Lycan's still hold sway, notably Paris."

"This is ancient history, Madame Lavelle," Marcus muttered, "And entirely over the boys head. You're wasting your time, and ours."

"My time is my own, Marcus Harris, and you are free to leave." She retorted icily.

Marcus grimaced; glaring at her, then abruptly rose up. "I've had enough. The boy is obviously unfit to take on family responsibilities. I will reconsider him when he graduates. Good day, Anthony."

Ignoring everyone else, Marcus and one of the women that Xander had not been introduced to, left in a huff as Rory snorted.

“Good riddance you old bastard.”

“Rory!” Jessica Harris snapped.

“Sorry, Jess.” He gave her a lopsided grin. “You know I can’t stand the folks.”

Jessica Lavelle stayed silent for a long moment, then rose. “For the moment, I have to concur with Marcus, Jessica. Teach him of the family history, I will speak with the boy again before he begins the new school year.”

“Yes, Lady Lavelle.”

Xander raised an eyebrow as Jessica Lavelle swept out of the house, her motions as graceful as Marcus’ had been abrupt.

“That was fun,” Rory smirked.

“You don’t have to wind him up like that, Rory.” Tony said, sighing tiredly. “You know Marcus is a bit of a stick.”

“He’s a bit of a stick like I’m a ‘bit’ of a womanizer.” Rory retorted. “He’s the stick up the families’ ass, and you know it, Tony. Why you let him come here at all is beyond me.”

“The family asked.” Tony responded, then burst out, “Damn it, Rory, it’s the first communication we’ve had with the family in over thirty years! Don’t you miss it? Any of it?”

“Of course I do, you know that,” Rory responded, irritated. “Walking away from the magic, even for a squib, is like cutting your own heart out. But I did it, and I’m done with it. I’m not going back, Tony. You shouldn’t either.”

Tony just sighed and said nothing in response.

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Xander was arranging his room a little later when Rory knocked at the door.

“Hey kid, mind if I come in?”

“Sure, Uncle Rory.”

“Call me, Sam, kid.” The retired Navy man grinned, “You survived the family gauntlet down there, you deserve the use of my name.”

Xander grinned, “Thanks, Sam.”

“So how was school?”

“Was ok...” Xander said hesitantly.

Sam chuckled, “You loved it, right?”

Xander smiled slowly, “Yeah.”

The older man nodded, “Yeah, I still remember magic, kid. It’s a whole other world, though I’ve seen enough of the normal world to know that there’s some amazing stuff here too.”

Xander nodded, though he wasn’t really sure what Sam was talking about.

“Don’t forget the real world, kid. Magic is fun and really damned awesome, but the world the families live in is really small too.” Sam told him seriously. “Learn to live in both, and you’ll love life a lot more.”

Xander nodded, “I will.”

Sam smiled, then moved to leave but was stopped when Xander spoke up.

“Hey, Sam?”

“Yeah?”

“You serious about showing me how to use a knife?”

Sam eyed him for a minute, “You’re not planning on killing a schoolmate, are ya?”

Xander chuckled, but shook his head, “No, it just sounds cool.”

Sam hesitated a bit, considering, “not a real good reason, kid, but in this town it may not be a bad idea. They told you about Sunnydale, right?”

"Yeah," Xander frowned, "If it's so dangerous, though, how come my parents moved here?"

"Land's dirt cheap, lots of ways to make a buck, and your folks are both squibs."

Xander looked confused, "huh?"

"Squibs, you know what they are, right?"

"Sure, non magical people born to magical families, right?"

Sam shook his head, "Naw, kid. Squibs are **low** magical people born to magical families. Your mom and dad both have some magic, just not enough to cast spells. They've got full internal stores, though, and that makes them just about as tough as you are."

Xander blinked.

"You never noticed that it takes one hell of a whack to seriously hurt you?" The Navy man asked, chuckling.

"I never thought about it," Xander confessed.

"Well, trust me, you're tough. Your magic will heal you fast too, given a chance, and you even put out a low level defense against most supernatural types." Sam told him, then waved a hand, "Don't get me wrong, kid. It won't stop a vamp or much else, but it will encourage them to look for another meal, given the option. Squibs are the same, so your folk are pretty safe from most of the trash around here."

"Oh." Xander nodded, considering. It made sense, given what he'd seen in school. Hell, Harry alone offered enough proof on that matter, come to think of it. He should have been killed for a couple of the stunts he pulled on the Quidditch pitch alone.

"Yeah, that's why a lot of us, Squibs that is, join the forces." Sam said, "We're tough, strong, and hard to kill. Plus the military is a good way for a kid who's never lived in the normal world to ease into it. When you start in the service they tell you how to do EVERYTHING. Right down to how to properly soap your ass, if you get the right... or maybe that's wrong, instructors."

"That makes sense."

"Anyway, I'll show you a few tricks, and hang around town a bit to give you some pointers on the night life, k kid?"

"Sure, thanks Sam."

"No problem," Sam told him, "but not tonight. Tonight I have a date."

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Xander spent the rest of the night settling in and getting permission to use the basement for some of the homework and potions projects he'd decided on for the summer. He couldn't practice some of the defense spell work down there, at least not until he was at a higher level and could reinforce the basement with some structural charms, but it was perfect for most everything else.

His dad helped him clear it all out, and Xander found himself enjoying the time spent with the old man for the first time in a long time. He hadn't realized just how much of the bitterness his father had shown throughout his life had been aimed at the family who had abandoned him, or passively forced him out. The way they treated people left a lot to be desired, in Xander's opinion, and he privately swore he wouldn't do that to anyone.

The next day Xander set out early, heading for Jessie's place first.

"Hello, Mrs. McNally, is..."

"XANI!"

"Jes!" Xander grinned, ducking under the sweep of his friend's arm and coming up behind him. He gave Jessie a light push, sending him stumbling out onto the doorstep, then closed the door.

"As I was saying, Mrs. McNally, is breakfast ready?" Xander asked with a wide grin as Jessie started hammering on the door.

Sarah McNally chuckled, but shook her head, "You just missed it."

"Nuts." Xander snapped his fingers, stepping clear of the door.

Jessie scowled at him as he let himself back in, "So not funny."

"Was pretty funny on this side of the door." Xander countered.

"True."

"MOM!" Jessie howled, "Don't encourage him, alright!?"

"How have things been, man?" Xander asked after the laughter died down.

"Boring!" Jessie complained, "Without you, Willow is out of control!"

Xander blinked, “Are we talking about the same girl? Red head, timid, scared to say boo?”

“Except when it comes to study!” Jessie countered, “She’s insane, Xan!”

“Jessie’s grade went up over ten percent across the board,” Sarah interjected proudly from the kitchen.

“MOM!”

Xander chuckled, “Well, you know in that case, I met another girl just like Willow. If you want I could introduce them and…”

Jessie paled, looking horrified, “Don’t you DARE!”

Xander found himself again laughing at his friend, “Relax, I doubt that Hermione is going to come over here from England just to drive you nuts.”

“Alright, alright, you got me again. So come on, dude, how was it?”

“School was pretty cool, actually.” Xander answered, wanting to say more, but knowing he couldn’t. Jessie didn’t know about magic, and the law said it had to stay that way. Willow knew, at least some, so he could talk to her about it, Xander figured, but even there he knew he had to be careful. “Scotland is bloody cold, though, let me tell you.”

“Bloody?” Jessie smirked. “You sound all British.”

Xander rolled his eyes, “You try living with a bunch of em all winter and not have some bad habits sink in.”

“I’m sure it was a great educational experience,” Sarah said as she reappeared with a tray of cookies and a pitcher of milk. “Here you go boys, enjoy.”

“Thanks, Mrs. M.” Xander grinned, grabbing a glass and a couple cookies. “You have no idea how much I’ve been craving milk.”

The two looked at him oddly.

“They don’t have milk in Scotland?” Jessie asked, skeptical.

“They do, but it doesn’t taste the same, and really pumpkin juice is way more popular,” Xander shivered a bit. “It’s not bad, I guess, but it got kinda sickening real quick.”

“Pumpkin juice? Oh gross.” Jessie made a face.

“Jessie! Don’t judge other people like that; you weren’t the one over there.”

“But mom! Pumpkin juice!”

Sarah McNally sighed, shaking her head. “Eat your cookies then get outside and blow the stink off you, but be back for dinner! Xander would you like to eat here?”

“Sure, thank Mrs. M. I’ll let mom and dad know.”

She smiled nodding at the young man, then went back to her daily activities as the two boys made short work of the snack before heading out.

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“Oh my GOD! Xander!” Willow squeaked, staring in surprise. “You’re back!”

“So I am!” Xander grinned, “Good to see ya, wills.”

Willow abruptly stopped smiling and slapped him on the shoulder.

“Ow! What the hell?”

“That’s for no phone calls, no letters, no…”

“Hey, chill…” Xander held up his hands, placating her, “No phone there, Wills, and the place is like, really isolated.”

Willow’s eyes widened, “Really?”

“Really.”

Jessie frowned, “Man, no phone? That’s nuts.”

“No TV either man.” Xander said, sighing theatrically.

Jessie stared at him in undisguised horror. “Oh God, you’re not going back, right? Tell me you’re not going back!”

Xander grinned, “Probably not. But there’s a school on the east coast that I might be going to.”

Jessie sighed, wiping his brow in mock relief, “At least they will have TV. No way there’s a place in the states that sick.”

“Not having TV is NOT sick,” Willow lectured, “It probably results in better grades...”

“And a lot of practical jokes.” Xander added.

“There, see... wait, what!?”

“Trust me, bored people with time on their hands in an old Scottish castle equals some really nasty gags,” Xander grinned, “I think TV would distract some of em.”

Willow glared at Jessie, then sighed and smiled at Xander. “It’s good to see you back, Xander.”

Xander grinned back, then hugged her, “It’s great to be back and see you.”

He looked over at Jessie and pulled him into a one armed hug that rapidly turned into a headlock.

“Both of you.”

“Hey! Let me go!”

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The vacation was off to a great start as far as Xander was concerned, even if he didn’t get any work done for the first few days as nearly every waking moment was spent with Jesse and Willow. By the end of the week, though, he was squeezing in a couple hours here and there to practice his magic and work on the potions project he had set himself. Hopefully he’d have some stuff to surprise the twins with, if he ever saw them again.

Willow had surprised him by sitting in on many of these study sessions, mostly because Xander never really considered them studying and he could distinctly remember that Willow often ducked out of anything he considered fun in order to study. She was, however, fascinated by what he had learned and he showed her a lot of the basics.

Unfortunately she didn’t match well with his wand, and with none of her own there wasn’t much she could do until she found him working diligently on his private potions project one day.

“What’s this?”

“Potions.” Xander said, carefully cutting up some of the supplies he’d bought in Salem. “I’m trying to figure out how the Twins made these things.”

“What things?”

“Huh? Oh,” Xander nodded to the pile of candies and such the twins had taken to spiking his food with at the end of the year. “Those. They’re spells in food form. You eat one and all kinds of weird things can happen.”

“Like?”

“Like body transfiguration, delay cast charms, some jinxes and even a hex or two.” Xander said, “There’s one there the twins call Ton Tongue Toffee, for example, it makes your tongue grow so big it rolls out of your mouth and across the table.”

“Ew! That... so wrong.”

Xander shrugged, “That’s the twins. They’re twisted, but pretty brilliant.”

“So how are you working out what’s in them?” Willow leaned over his shoulder.

“I got an identification spell from my journal,” Xander said, “and I’ve been trying to break down the results. Here, see?”

He showed her a page of notes he’d made, and Willow read it with a scrunched up face as she tried to work out what it all meant.

“This is just colors and stuff.” She said finally.

Xander nodded glumly, “Wizards haven’t moved into the digital age yet, Wills. Identification spells are all based on auras, and you have to interpret what they mean.”

Willow looked around, “Do you have references?”

Xander grinned and nodded to the small bookshelf he’d setup, “Yeah, there’s a book there on basic aura reading and common spell components.”

Willow grabbed the book instantly as Xander turned back to his work, “I think the twins have worked to disguise their work, though... either that or they’re using some really rare components, cause some of the auras don’t match up.”

“Ummm hmmm...” Willow mumbled from where she was reading, already oblivious to him. Xander just smiled and turned back to his potions experiment, laughing internally at his redheaded friend.

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A few days after that, while coming back from a movie with Jessie and Willow, the three of them were treated to an odd sight.

“Dude. Check out your dog.”

Xander turned to see where Fenrir was running around his yard, being dive bombed by a raven. The black bird would swoop in, let out a loud caw, then Fenrir would leap up almost five feet in the air as he took a swipe at the bird.

“I didn’t know a dog that small could jump that high.” Jessie said in wonder.

Xander just grinned, “Odin!”

The two looked at him like he was nuts, but the raven broke off from its play and zeroed in on Xander instantly.

“Dude!” Jessie ducked away as Willow too squeaked and dropped to a crouch.

Odin swooped around, settling in on Xander shoulder with a triumphant caw, its eyes gleaming as he watched Fenrir run up. Xander chuckled at his two friends.

“Relax guys, this is Odin. He belongs to a friend from school; she trained him as a passenger pigeon of sorts.”

Jessie slowly straightened up, eyeing the bird with awe, “He came from SCOTLAND??”

Xander laughed, “No, she’s from the States, out on the East Coast.”

“Still, X, man, you mean to tell me he flew across the **country** ??”

Xander nodded, fishing some theater snacks he’d saved for Fenrir from his pocket and offering them to the bird. “Here you go, boy. Let’s see what you’ve got for me.”

Odin patiently let him take the note, then cocked his head questioningly and cawed once.

Xander checked the note briefly, and shook his head, “It’s cool, I don’t need to send an answer. I’ll call her later.”

Odin cawed loudly, then jumped clear and flew off.

“Man.” Jessie breathed, “That is one well trained bird.”

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As soon as Jessie and Willow left for the evening, Xander went straight to the fireplace. They’d managed to get the floo hooked up, but it was for communication only. He lit it with a barbeque lighter that was there and tossed the floo powder into the flames.

It flashed bright green as Xander called, “Number One, Cemetery Lane.”

Across the country, in an old and decrepit looking home, the fireplace roared to life and exploded out into the living room. When a face appeared in it shortly thereafter, no one deemed it remarkable and Lurch walked slowly over and groaned.

“Hey Lurch,” Xander grinned, “Is Wednesday around?”

Lurch moaned again, then nodded and turned away.

“Cool. I guess I’ll just wait then.” Xander grinned.

“Alex, my boy,” Gomez grinned as he approached, “How are things out in... Sunny California?”

Xander grinned as the dapper man shivered as he said those last two words. “Oh, you know sir, nothing like a Hellmouth to keep things interesting.”

“Hellmouth?” Gomez leaned forward, “You don’t say? Wednesday didn’t mention Sunnydale.”

“You’ve been here, Sir?”

“Fourth honeymoon, young man,” Gomez smiled, puffing on his cigar. “Lovely time. It’s just too bad about all those Sabbath breeds, distasteful creatures, those. No sense of soul, you know?”

“Not really, but I’m learning, Sir.”

“Ah, excellent.”

“Hello, Xander.”

The two twisted, looking around to see Wednesday approaching. Gomez smiled and rose up, “Well I’ll see you another time then, my boy. Enjoy

your chat.”

“Wednesday.” Xander said, his tone almost matching hers, then he grinned wide. “Good to see you.”

“And you as well.” She replied, “I see Odin made it to you with no problems.”

“He’s on his way back now,” Xander said, “Sorry I couldn’t send him back through the floo, but our connection doesn’t handle transport. Costs too much, and I guess it has to be warded heavily for security, and those cost a lot too.”

“That’s fine. Odin is a perfectly capable bird.” Wednesday said, “He’ll be fine.”

Xander nodded in agreement, “Oh hey, our address is Sunnydale Harris Home.”

“I will remember. How have your holidays been?”

“Pretty good, been working on my potions project, and getting some practice in too. You?”

“Much the same, Gram mama is helping me with potions, though.”

“Cool. Hey, can you ask her how to identify potions ingredients? The twins seem to have obscured their work,” Xander griped.

“I will ask,” Wednesday promised, and the talk quickly moved along into other subjects, including what each family was up to. Xander decided that whatever else was true about the Addamses they knew how to have an interesting time.

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Xander’s summer holidays quickly settled into a routine, between spending time with Jessie and Willow and working on his magic he didn’t have time for much else. He was forced to make time, however, when Sam came back to make good on his promise, which he eagerly did.

Well, Xander was eager until the training Sam offered him consisted of exercise and lots of it. Sam just smirked, stole a beer from Tony, and settled in to watch as Xander sweated through the calisthenics.

“Tell you what, kid,” He called once after Xander whined about this not being what he’d asked for, “you get through the whole routine without dying on me, or puffing like a freight train, then we’ll start with some fighting basics, deal?”

Xander glared at him, but Sam only laughed and went back to sipping his beer as Tony came out and joined him as they watched Xander groan through the paces Sam had set for him.

So things quickly broke down into a set series of patterns that Xander rather enjoyed, and the summer became one of the best of his life. He, Willow, and Jessie roared through Sunnydale, doing all kinds of things that he never really got around to with them before. The normal stuff too, like movies and parties, but they often just found themselves out on the cliffs looking over the ocean for long hours as they talked about the past year and just simply reaffirmed their friendship.

Then he would spend time with his magic, sometimes plotting to nail the twins even if he had to do it from across the ocean, sometimes just reading ahead in his workbooks. Wanting to do homework was a new experience to Xander, but from what he had found at Hogwarts it was common to muggle born and raised. The very idea of doing magic was just so awesome they HAD to do as much as they could.

The pureblood students had a lead on them, but one thing every Muggleborn had over their pureblooded brethren was that they enjoyed trying to catch up. What was old and dull to the magically raised was awesome and incredible to Xander and those like him.

So he read ahead, and practiced some stuff from the second year books while his potions brewed. At the same time, Willow spent long hours over in the basement with him, buried in a book and asking questions that forced Xander to review everything he’d learned. In turn, he found it all the easier to move ahead with the past years work fresh in his mind.

He and Willow both wished they could tell Jessie, though; keeping the secret of magic from him was complicated and made things harder on all of them. If Xander had to do it for more than the summer, he doubted he’d be able to manage.

Through it all he kept careful notes and continued to work in the Coven Journal.

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Narcissa shook her head, amazed at the work being run through the journal. She wished that Draco would spend as much time on learning magic as this one did. Lily was the same, though, she remembered idly. When she was spending time doing all sorts of inconsequential things, Lily Evans had been absorbing everything she could about magic and its practices.

How often had that happened, Narcissa wondered idly. Lily had started fast, it had been obvious from nearly her first day that she was bright, but just how bright wasn’t evident until her fourth or fifth year. By Seventh year, well it had been a foregone conclusion that the little Muggleborn girl would be Head Girl.

There was drive there, that Narcissa would have expected in Slytherin or, at least, Ravenclaw. What made her a Gryffindor would forever be a puzzle. Still, Lily hadn’t been the first Muggleborn to take that position, nor the last. Indeed, if she was reading correctly between the lines in Draco’s ranting, there was a young Miss Granger who was well on her way to being the latest.

There was a certain... love, no, not love. A Lust for magic that the Muggleborn seemed to have, Narcissa supposed. This all consuming infatuation that would eventually die down to a lifelong love similar to that which Narcissa herself held with the magic of her life.

The pale wife of Lucius Malfoy sighed, remembering the envy she had held for her Muggleborn friend during their school years, then went back to working on the journal. She truly enjoyed this diversion from her daily life; this young man was a fresh wind blowing through her life. She only wished that her fellow coven founders were still around to offer their points of view and enjoy it alongside her.

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The worst day of the summer happened right around halfway through the holidays while Xander was working on his attempt at re brewing the twins' ton tongue toffee. He could have sworn he had it right, but when he tested it on himself nothing seemed to happen.

Resigned to another failure Xander had started to pack things away when he felt a tightness in his pants and began to fidget.

"Xander?" Willow frowned, noticing his grimace. "Are you ok?"

"Pass me the antidote we brewed..."

"Why? It didn't work..."

"Willow! Just pass me the antidote!" Xander snapped, grabbing at the crotch of his pants as he tried not to be obvious about it.

Willow, puzzled, quickly handed it across to him and he drank it down but unfortunately found that it had no effect. "Xander, what's wrong?"

"Uh, nothing." Xander lied. He shifted again; managing to maneuver himself to his jeans weren't threatening to crush the affected part of his anatomy. "I, uh, need to go and do... something."

Willow blinked, confused, but before she could say anything Xander got up and bolted for the stairs out of the basement, only to run dead into his uncle as Sam came down the stairs.

"Hey, whoa kid, where's the fire!?"

In my PANTS, Xander snarled internally, glaring at his uncle. "Nowhere, just need to go upstairs."

"Kid?" Sam blinked as Xander pushed past him.

Willow just shrugged when Sam looked to her for an explanation, so he decided to follow and see what was up. Upstairs he found Xander in the hallway, fighting with his pants.

"Uh... kid?" Sam asked hesitantly, then he noticed the bulge in the kids' jeans and started to wonder just what he and the redhead had been up to. "You know kid; maybe it's time for you and your old man to have the talk..."

"What?" Xander stared at him for a moment, then grimaced, "Ow! God, Uncle Rory give me a hand here!"

"Hey kid, that ain't even legal in Tennessee." Rory held up his hands.

"What are you... Ahhh..." Xander sighed as his pants came loose and he relaxed a bit, "God that sucked. Stupid potion."

"Potion?" Sam blinked, "Uh... that was caused by a potion?"

Xander nodded; face reddening, "Yeah. God, what if Willow had seen me!? Oh man, this is so humiliating!"

Sam eyed the kids' crotch for a moment before realizing what he was doing and shook himself clear, "Uh... how long does it last?"

Xander blinked, "I dunno, why?"

"Just curious, kid." Sam said, thinking hard about the potential benefits. "You got any left?"

Xander slumped in a sofa chair, his zipped now undone as his underwear tended through the split. "Why!?"

"I've got a date tonight, kid." Sam grinned.

Xander groaned a little shifting again for comfort, then looked at Sam oddly. "Yeah, sure I guess. It's down in the cauldron. Just get it from Willow, I think I'm gonna spend the day in bed."

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Xander quickly put that humiliation out of his thoughts and, after the effects of the potion went down, literally, a few hours later he vowed to never test potions on himself again. The twins had the right idea, in his opinion. Get some suckers to do it.

In the meantime, though, he refocused on just enjoying his vacation time.

Well until his dad came to him one day and said that Sam had suggested they have 'The Talk'. After an hour that quickly became the second most humiliating thing that happened to him that summer, Xander escaped with pretty much no dignity left and a vow to NEVER tell anyone about those



events as long as he lived.

As the end of July came, Xander was surprised to come upstairs one morning to find Miss Berkeley speaking with his parents.

"Ah, hello, it's been a year, hasn't it, Alexander?"

"Ah, I guess so, yes."

"Tell me, how was your time at Hogwarts?"

Xander shrugged, "Was ok I guess."

The scholastic recruiter smiled, "I think it was a little better than ok, you did quite well actually. Not top in your classes, but usually within the top twenty, which is quite respectable."

Xander smiled, "Well I learned the trick to that here."

"Oh?"

"Find the smartest girls in school and hang around them," Xander grinned.

Elizabeth Berkeley smiled widely, "That sounds like an excellent plan. I was just speaking with your parents about your options for this year."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yes, the Salem Institute has reopened its doors to new students, though space is still at a premium due to the volcano..."

"Yeah, I remember." Xander smirked, "Has it kept growing?"

"Quite." Elizabeth nodded, then sighed, "To be honest it's been a nightmare. We still haven't worked out what those students were working on, and if we could we would certainly ban it in the future."

The woman sighed, then shook her head, "At any rate, you have a place in Salem, of course... also, home schooling remains an option, and I am pleased to say that we have decided to encourage an ongoing scholastic exchange."

"You mean we can keep going to other schools if we want?" Xander asked, interested.

She nodded, "yes, though there are some restrictions."

"What kind?" Jessica asked, leaning forward.

"While Hogwarts and its sibling schools in Europe are well known for high standards in scholastic pursuits, there are several courses they do not offer that are highly encouraged in Salem." Berkeley stated, "American Wizarding History, for one. Chemistry, Physics, Biology. These are core courses in the normal world, but only electives at Salem. Still, they have become increasingly more important as technological advances begin to match, and in places outstrip, magical alternatives."

"What are you suggesting then?"

"These are mostly introductory courses, because magic is taught so young, they basically amount to prep courses in case Alex here may wish to pursue them further after he graduates." She explained, "So we're considering offering a tutor to help balance the Old World education and atmosphere with some of our own new world curriculum."

"That sounds pretty cool," Xander said.

"We'll have to discuss it," Jessica said, frowning, and wondering about her son being so far from home yet again and possibly remaining there for several years, barring holidays.

"Of course, just contact me within a week or so?"

Jessica nodded in agreement, and Elizabeth rose and said a few parting pleasantries before leaving.

"So, Alex, what do you think?"

Xander frowned, considering, "I don't know. Hogwarts is cool, and I had a lot of fun..."

"And got pretty good grades too," Jessica said, looking at his report, "I'm impressed, Alex, this is a big improvement."

Xander flushed, but nodded as he smiled, "Thanks mom."

"Now though, this is a big decision."

Xander nodded in agreement, "yeah."

"Did you make any friends?"

“Sure, Mom, Hermione and Wednesday are great.”

“And will they be at Hogwarts?”

Xander paused, “Well Hermione will be.”

“What about this Wednesday?”

“I don’t know, she’s like me, Mom.”

“Is she the one you talk to over the floo every few days?” Jessica smiled.

Xander nodded.

“Well go check with her then, see what she’s thinking about doing.”

Xander nodded in agreement, “Thanks Mom.”

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## #1 Cemetery Lane

The explosion of the floo flame startled the Addams clan for only a moment before Wednesday ran up to the fireplace and actually smiled a little.

“Hello, Alexander.”

“Hey Wednesday,” Xander’s flaming image grinned back, “You get a messenger from the school?”

“He’s still here.” Wednesday said, taking her normal seat. “He and father are speaking about the options available to us now.”

“Mine left; has he talked about the exchange program?”

She nodded.

“Any idea what you’re going to do?”

“I believe I would like to return.” Wednesday said after a moment, “I believe that it may be important.”

Xander raised a flaming eyebrow, “Oh? Are you a seer or something?”

“No, but the family blood often exerts an influence.”

“Watch it,” Xander smirked, “You’re starting to sound like some of the purebloods.”

Wednesday arced a brow in return, unsmiling as she responded, “Please. The Addams bloodline is a carefully monitored integration of all blood traits. Those stagnant families are nothing compared to mine.”

Xander’s fiery image threw up his hands, “Whoa, ok, I give. Just saying.”

“At any rate, father is discussing the matter now.”

Xander nodded, and then grinned as he heard Gomez yell something about a donation in the background. “What was that?”

“I believe that father is offering to pay for our tutor.” Wednesday said with a smirk.

Xander rolled his eyes, knowing from the past Christmas just what Gomez could be like. “So you’re going back?”

Wednesday looked at the burning image of her friend, considering the question. She had a distinct feeling that it was important for her to be in Scotland, for the moment at least. She also thought that it was likely important that she and Xander remain close, but she didn’t know why. Should she convince him to go back? The question bothered her, as she didn’t have all the information for herself. Did he even like it there?

He hadn’t been unhappy, she didn’t think, but perhaps Xander wanted to go to Salem. Should she try and convince him otherwise?

Wednesday took a breath.

“I am.” She said, “And you?”

“I’m not sure,” Xander said seriously, “I need to talk it over with my mom and dad.”

“Do so.” She said, then smiled ever so slightly. “If you choose not to, write me.”

“Count on it.”

Xander’s image vanished then, and Wednesday stared at the empty fireplace for a long moment.

No.

His will was his own; he would make his choice as she made hers.

Come what may, she was an Addams and not some pawn of destiny.

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Xander was torn, actually, concerning the coming year. Returning to Hogwarts wasn't really something he had looked forward to, though he did have brief flashes where he considered a given. Moments where he thought about studying with Wednesday and Hermione, nailing the twins to the wall, maybe even talking more with Daphne about pureblood politics.

The journal rested on the bed beside, and he realized that it too was a sign that he had expected to return, on some level. Of course, what else could he expect? He didn't know Salem, had no clue about any other school for magic THAN Hogwarts. To some degree, he supposed, he'd never really considered going elsewhere.

He took a breath and nodded. He supposed that was settled then.

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"You want to go back?" Jessica asked softly.

"Yeah, Mom," Xander smiled, "I've got some friends there, and Wednesday is going back too."

"I'll call Miss Berkeley."

"Thanks."

Xander found himself feeling nervous again, just like last year when he was getting ready to go, but this time found the sensation to be a bit more thrilling than frightening. He was going to learn more magic; it just didn't get any cooler than that, unless you counted the fact that he got to do it with friends.

Of course he was leaving Wills and Jessie again, and that really sucked, but they'd have a great summer and another one next year. He wished that Willow's parents had let her attend magical school, but then Jessie would be alone and that wasn't cool either.

There were so many things he wished were different, but the world didn't respond to wishes and he'd learned a while ago that making them was futile. Oddly, though, after he'd given up wishing for things, some of them started coming true. He was magical, special, that was an old one, a wish he'd had since he was old enough to read comics. Every kid wanted to be Superman or Spiderman, or something, and he got to live the dream. A more important dream, one where his parents got along a bit better, seemed to be coming true too. His dad didn't drink so much now, and his mom seemed more... here than she had before.

He wasn't sure it was something that would hold, but in the meantime he had to admit that it felt pretty good to think of his parents as a combo rather than two separate individuals.

The rest of Xander's summer proceeded at an ever increasing pace, making him feel like he was riding an accelerating train. The days flashed by, crammed with everything he could think of doing with his friends before he had to leave them, but it wasn't long before he could see the end of summer looming and knew that their time was short.

Oddly, his Uncle had taken a bit more of an interest in Xander's magic work in addition to his physical training, which resulted in a strange conversation toward the end of the holidays.

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"Hey kid, what are you up to?" Sam asked nonchalantly, leaning against the stairwell as he watched Xander practice.

"Pretty good, I think I've got this 'Protego' shield charm almost right." Xander said, demonstrating the spell with a powerful shout of 'Protego!'

The shield shimmered into existence between them, an iridescent bubble that slowly firmed up as Xander focused on it.

"Neat," Sam said, pulling his keys from his pocket and whipping them at Xander.

Xander jumped, the shield flickered and burst like a bubble as the keys struck it then went on to bounce off his forehead.

"Ow!"

"Stay focused kid," Sam said, walking into the room. "A shield is no good if you can't keep it up."

Xander rubbed his forehead, glaring at his uncle. "Yeah, yeah. Jeez, did you have to throw them so hard?"

"No," Sam answered, then smiled, "but I wanted to."

Xander grumbled, but went back to work.

"They teach you shielding spells in first year?" Sam asked, looking over the book Xander was working out of.

“Nah, I think it’s like fourth or fifth year, but it’s COOL.” Xander grinned, “hard as it is to believe, I’m doing homework I don’t have to do yet.”

“I think that one might be a bit ahead of you, kid.” Sam chuckled, shaking his head. “Just remember what I said about magic, ok kid?”

Xander nodded seriously.

“And, on that note, I was wondering kid... can you make any more of that potion I borrowed?” Sam asked his expression hopeful.

“Why?” Xander blurted, then remembered ‘the talk’ with his dad and shivered, “You know what, never mind. I don’t want to know. Uh, yeah, I kept notes so I wouldn’t try the same thing twice...”

Xander picked up his potions journal and frowned, flipping through the pages until he found the one marked as ‘utter failure, do NOT mix again’ and handed the journal over to Sam. “That one, copy it if you want, but leave the original there. I don’t want to accidentally mix that again.”

“Sure, sure, kid,” Sam said, pulling out a pen. “Whatever you say.”

Sam then ignored Xander as he went back to practice his spells, preferring to focus on copying the page contents as perfectly as possible.

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“Hey bro!” Jessie called as he and Willow came into the house.

“Guys,” Xander grinned, “I thought we were meeting up later?”

“We thought we’d have a little celebration, dude, we did miss your birthday you know.”

Xander smiled hesitantly, “That’s ok, guys, I mean I wasn’t here.”

Willow ducked her head, “We wanted to.”

“Come in,” Jessica said, coming into the room with a big cake, surprising Xander. “Is everyone hungry?”

“Yes ma’am!” Jessie grinned, bolting for the table.

Xander looked around, a little lost, but Willow tugged him to the table and he followed willingly.

“Guys, Mom, I don’t know what to say... thanks.”

“Looks like you figured it out easy enough,” Jessie grinned.

Xander grinned in response as Willow stepped to his side and pushed something into his hands.

“What’s this?”

“What’s a party without presents?” Jessie asked from the other side of the table, a big slice of cake halfway to his mouth.

Xander glanced at Willow, who had reverted to her shy self.

“It’s not much or anything, I just... kinda thought it would come in handy.”

Xander grinned, then opened the package. He was surprised when he saw the lovely pen set inside a hardwood box, both because it was a rather elegant style that he’d never seen before, but also because of how much he actually appreciated it. A year ago, he knew, he would be disappointed not to have a toy or something similar.

“I told her we should get you a mini TV or something, but she insisted,” Jessie apologized from across the table.

“It’s ok isn’t it?” Willow asked, her voice suddenly worried. “I mean, it’s not disappointing to you or anything, right?”

“Willow.” Xander said softly, cutting her off. “It’s great. Thank you.”

Willow beamed at him, “It’s a really fancy fountain pen, so you might have some trouble at first, but I thought, you know, with what you told me about the school it might kinda fit in.”

Xander blinked, pulling the silver pen out and looking at it carefully. Willow was right, actually, the nib of the pen looked very much like the quills they used at school. Some of the Muggleborn kids had the foresight to bring ballpoint pens with them, especially the older years, but such things were frowned on by many of the teachers. Snape especially detested them and wouldn’t grade any work done with one.

He experimentally scratched out his name on the wrapping paper and was both shocked and pleased to see it write almost exactly like the quills, only much smoother and easier to work with. He mentally compared it to how quill work looked and was pretty sure it was almost identical.

“This is perfect!” he blurted, gleefully examining the pen closer, and noticing several refill cartridges.

“There’s a book on calligraphy too,” Willow said helpfully.

“Oh, just brilliant, Wills, Jess... its great!”

“Careful, your inner nerd AND inner brit is showing, dude.” Jessie said, mock mournfully, “My best pal, lost to the whims of the nerdy British. It’s horrible.”

“Yuck it up, smart guy,” Xander scowled playfully at his pal.

“I will,” Jessie grinned.

Xander grinned then, and looked at his two best friends on this side of the Rockies. “Thanks guys. You’re the best.”

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After the impromptu party, the trio went out to the movies and spent the rest of the evening in the Bronze. Despite all the warnings he’d had about the dangers of the Hellmouth, Xander had yet to see a vampire and he was actually a little disappointed, thought not by too much. Even Gomez Addams had referred to the local vamps as ‘Distasteful’, which either meant they were sun loving pacifists, or seriously freaking scary.

Given the fact that they were, after all, Vampires, Xander figured for number two. He’d already wrung a promise out of Willow to not go out alone or with someone she didn’t know, and to make sure Jessie did the same. His parents and Sam had also said they’d keep an eye on the duo, but Xander was seriously going to break the law just as soon as he could provide some good proof to Jessie and get away with it.

Sam had told him that most vamps don’t grab younger kids, though, because it attracted too much attention. Xander had felt better after that, but Sam had then gone on to say that in Sunnysdale the attention tended to die out pretty quick, and that teens were considered primo targets cause of how often they ran away.

Xander figured that he had a couple years, tops, to figure out a way to break it to Jessie without getting himself in deep with the Magical Law Enforcement types.

He would worry about it more, except that he’d been looking every time they were out after dark, and the town seemed dead at night. If it wasn’t for everyone agreeing, Xander would think they were pulling a joke on him or something.

As it was he just pushed it aside, and trusted that everything was under control. After all, if the vamps and dangerous types weren’t anywhere to be seen, it should be pretty safe.

Right?

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“Xander, your port key is here!”

Xander clomped down the stairs, running over to where his mother was taking a letter from a post owl and grinned. “When’s it set for?”

She checked the note, and one eyebrow went up. “Five minutes. Lord they cut things close, don’t they?”

“I’ve got my stuff, mom.” Xander grabbed the handle of his school truck to show that he was serious, and reached out for the key.

The port key turned out to be an actual key, he found as his mother handed it to him and Xander examined it for a moment curiously. “Looks kinda beat up.”

Jessica smirked slightly, “Wizards like to use old things for port keys, it cuts down on the odds of the wrong person picking it up. They probably got this out of a lost and found tray.”

Xander chuckled, and his mother gave him a quick hug.

“Behave at school, try not to get into too much trouble, and don’t forget you’re great Aunt Lavelle is going to meet you at Salem for a chat. Be polite.”

“I will, mom.” Xander promised.

Jessica pulled back, checking her watch. “Almost time, hon. I’m going to miss you.”

“I’m gonna miss you and Dad too, Mom,” Xander said, just a tiny bit surprised that he was telling the truth.

“Are you coming home for the holidays this time?”

“I... I don’t know yet. I’ll let you know, ok?” Xander asked hopefully.

Jessica smiled softly, “Alright.”

Xander started to say something else when he felt a tug at his navel, and the world whirled around him, and he was gone.

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Xander’s arrival in Salem ended with him on his backside in the office of the Dean, staring up at the bemused faces looking down at him and

flushing in embarrassment.

“Sorry,” He said, climbing to his feet. “I can’t seem to get the hang of those things.”

“No need for apologies,” Said an old man who reminded Xander a lot of Dumbledore, though with a little less insanity showing through. “I believe I was in my forties before I learned to land properly from a port key, though they were a tad rougher back then.”

The two other people in the office smiled slightly, and Xander recognized one of them as his great Aunt and quickly bowed to them both.

“Well, a polite young man as well,” The old man said, smiling. “I’m Arthur Fitzpatrick, young Mr. Harris, Dean of Salem Academy for the Magical Arts.”

Xander blinked, then turned and bowed slightly to him as well. “Pleased to meet you, Sir.”

“And you, young man. I regret that you have chosen to school yourself elsewhere, I think you would have been a fine addition to the campus.” Arthur said, smiling widely. “Now, we gathered here to speak of how things will work on this exchange program, if you’re amenable?”

Xander blinked, not actually knowing what the word meant, but decided to agree anyway just based on context. “Yes sir, of course.”

“Excellent,” Arthur smiled again, then nodded to the man Xander didn’t recognize.

“I am Professor Hardy,” The hawk faced man said; “I’ve been assigned to liaise between Salem and Hogwarts, Beauxbatons, and Durmstrang. I will be providing you with extra tutelage in the coursework you’ll be expected to know should you go on to higher learning in a non-magical institute after you write your NEWTS.”

“Nice to meet you, Sir.”

“You will be expected to maintain a certain level of grades, Alexander,” Arthur said seriously, “Last year we didn’t watch as closely because we had nowhere else to send you, but if your grades drop you will not be permitted to continue at Hogwarts.”

Xander swallowed, but nodded. “I understand.”

“Judging from your marks last year, I don’t believe there will be any great issues,” Arthur said, glancing through the sheaf of parchment he was holding. “You’ve turned out very respectable results that, while not exceptional, do show you to be ahead of the class averages at Hogwarts and here.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

“Now, the standard warnings of gloom and doom done with, I believe that you’re great Aunt wishes to speak with you in private.” Arthur stood, “You may, of course, use my office if you like.”

“Thank you, no, Dean.” Jessica Lavelle said as she too rose up. “I believe we’ll talk and walk.”

“Of course.” Arthur replied, returning to his seat with an affable grin.

“Come along child,” Jessica said, laying a hand on Xander’s shoulder.

Xander nodded and let her lead him out.

Once they were away from the office, outside and moving along the manicured paths that made up the non-volcanic portion of the campus, Jessica spoke again.

“Lesson one; never hold a private conversation in someone else’s office.” She said out of the blue, “It is an invitation to nosy busybodies to spy on you.”

Xander blinked, looking back, “You think he would have...?”

“Unlikely, but possible. No, I meant it as general advice, child.” The older woman said, “It is far too easy for Wizards or Witches to get the idea that they deserve to know everything about everyone around them. Power Dementia is an ugly thing.”

Not knowing what else to do, Xander nodded in agreement.

Jessica smiled, “You don’t know what I mean yet, child, but you will. Tell me, what do you know about your family?”

“About my mom and dad?”

“No, Alex. Your family. The Lavelle’s and the Harris’.”

Xander shrugged, “not much. Mom told me some over the summer, but it seems really complicated.”

Jessica sighed, shaking her head. “You should have been identified as magical a long time ago, Alexander. The scrying devices must have been blinded by the infernal portal you live near, and no one thought to check The Book. Marcus will tell you nothing of the Harris family, I expect, and there is little I can say other than some background.”

She paused, considering, “The Harris magical line is Irish, as is your Lavelle bloodline, though we Lavelle’s are a widely traveled bunch. Both trunk lines were destroyed, as I told you before, and now only the Colonial lines exist. Some here, some in Africa, Australia, South America. Likely a few extended relations in the Ural Mountains, and possibly even into the Russia, Lavelle family only. Harris clan members are almost entirely in Australia and America, and most of those in Australia have been disowned at some point in their ancestry.”

“Why?”

“As the non magical folk sent criminals to Australia as punishment, so too did our lines send... black sheep. Family members who chose not to fit in, but rather to cause trouble in one form or another.” Jessica shrugged, “Actually, many of those types came to America as well, but our ancestors on this side of the Atlantic were usually too important to strike from the family register and so your paternal blood is possibly one of the last of the official Harris lines.”

“Whoa.” Xander blinked.

“You don’t understand any of this, I know,” She sighed. “So much to learn, so little time. On the Lavelle side you’re not quite as important, but you’re still one of ours and we tend to stick together.”

“I know some of this stuff,” Xander said, frowning. “Blood seems really important to a lot of people in England, you know.”

She smiled slightly, “I was aware, yes.”

“A lot of my schoolmates,” Xander wouldn’t say friends, “seem to think it’s the most important thing when it comes to being magical.”

“Many people do, though I will say that few of them are intelligent folk.” Jessica said, faintly amused, “Of course, in fairness, few folk of any sort are intelligent.”

“My friends are.” Xander said his tone defensive.

She smiled at that, amused by his instant leap to the defense of his friends. “Perhaps. Are they purebloods?”

Xander snorted, “Not hardly. Hermione is Muggleborn, and Wednesday thinks purebloods are pretty thin blooded.”

“Interesting names.” Jessica raised an eyebrow.

“I guess.”

“I’ll tell you a little secret, Alexander, something pureblood lines hate to dwell on.” Jessica said after a moment, “If you go back far enough, even the oldest pureblood family begins with a ‘Muggleborn’. We came from the non magical populace, as does every variation of humanity in existence. Vampires, Lycan’s, Wizarding Kind, all from the same source. What many would consider ‘lowly’ humans.”

Xander smirked, “Makes sense. I knew there was nothing to this pureblood stuff.”

“I did not say that, Alexander.” Jessica said sharply. “Remember this well, we may have originated from them, but bloodlines that have existed for centuries and even millennia are changed by time. There are talents, little blood traits that arise from time to time in a bloodline, that do follow the blood. They separate us from the majority of those who are born to non magical folk. You will almost never see a Speaker born to normal folk, not one of any stripe.”

“Speaker?”

“Those who have a natural empathy with an element of magic. There are those who speak with animals, elements, even the spirits who have crossed over.”

“Spirits? You mean ghosts?” Xander grinned, “Anyone can speak with them.”

“No, those who have crossed over. Not the souls who remain here for whatever reason, those who have moved on.” She corrected sharply. “These are bloodline traits; it’s almost unheard of for a first generation Wizard or Witch to enjoy anything of the like.”

Xander considered that for a long moment, then spoke up, “Do our families have any talents like that?”

Jessica smiled, “Good question, child. One I will table until another time, however. If you’re very good, you’ll be able to answer it for yourself.”

Xander crossed his arms over his chest and sulked slightly, causing her to laugh again.

“Come, Alex. Our time runs short, and you have another busy year ahead of you.”

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His great Aunt led him back to the dorms, then bade him goodbye, leaving Xander feeling very confused as to what the whole meeting had been about. One thing he did know, however, was that he was going to be doing some research into his family lines just as soon as he got a chance.

The possibility of having magical talents that went beyond casting spells was just too cool to leave unchecked.

He played with Fenrir a bit, then went to sleep for the night with the knowledge that he’d be heading back to England the next day dancing through his dreams all night. Lack of proper sleep aside, however, Xander was up early and excited to get moving. He was meeting up with Wednesday

again today.

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The Addams once again arrived by car, forgoing the faster modes of transport in favor of the ancient automobile chauffeured by the title character from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

"Wednesday!"

"Alexander." Wednesday Addams returned his happy shout with a more reserved greeting, leading Xander to slow his approach slightly, and shift to a more laid back wave.

"Ready for more Hogwarts?" he asked, smiling.

"Of course. Are you?" She asked pointedly, one eyebrow peaking.

"Probably not." He grinned.

She sighed slightly, shaking her head, then turned back to her parents. "Mother, Father."

"Wednesday, Darling, we'll miss you so." Mortisha said, leaning over to hug her daughter.

"Alex, my boy," Gomez greeted Xander as he came around the car, "How have you been? Care for a cigar?"

"Uh, no thanks, and I've been good, Sir."

"Sir. Please, call me Gomez lad." The exuberant man laughed, "No need to stand on ceremony with me."

"Gomez, honey, Wednesday is ready to go." Mortisha said, dabbing at her eyes.

"Ah yes, off on another adventure. You do us proud; Wednesday, just remember the Addams motto and you'll do fine." Gomez said with a fierce grin.

"Of course."

"Addams motto?" Xander asked, curious.

"We gladly feast on those who would subdue us." Wednesday said in a deadpan delivery.

"Yikes. Cheery." Xander blurted with a shiver.

"I know," Gomez clasped his hands together. "Gives me goose bumps just thinking it. That's a strong family statement, my boy."

Xander nodded, slowly. He couldn't really argue with that, that was for sure.

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The elder Addams left shortly after, and with only a short bit of milling around Xander and Wednesday were herded into a smaller group than the last time, with professor Hardy chaperoning.

"Is everyone here?" he asked, looking around. Once he had satisfied himself that he wasn't missing any of his charges, he gave out the last minute directions and held out the port key.

When they all touched it, the key tugged them into the swirling space they transited, and then spat them back out in London's Diagon Alley. The group arrival created a bit of a fuss, but things calmed down shortly as the group made their way around the alley, getting their books for the year. There seemed to be a lot more of them this year, Xander noticed, most written by the same guy.

"Who's this Lockhart dude?" He whispered to Wednesday.

"I do not know." She admitted, "I've never read any of these books."

"They look kinda cool." Xander said hesitantly.

Indeed, they looked a lot cooler than the other books they had to buy. Shiny covers, moving pictures, and a wizard posing on the front of each book with wide smiles and heroic looking postures made the books seem pretty interesting. Xander tucked them away, counting out his money quickly, and wondered if he could get some time in some of the other stores before they had to go.

It wasn't to be, however, as Hardy rounded them up shortly after that and another port key later found them on platform nine and three quarters as people milled about, saying their goodbyes to students who were boarding the train.

"Alexander, Wednesday, I'll see you on the train now." Hardy said firmly.

"You're not coming?"



"No, I have to take the others across the channel to Beauxbatons and Durmstrang." he said, "You two are the only two returning to Hogwarts."

Xander nodded and Wednesday merely pulled him along.

"Come along, it's time to board."

"Alright, see ya, Sir!"

Professor Hardy nodded as the duo boarded the train, then turned to the rest of his charges and withdrew his port key ring yet again.

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Xander and Wednesday had taken a seat in an empty compartment, the dark girl's quiet stare more than enough to scare away any firstie who may have normally dared intrude, and several second through fourth years who had appeared as well. The train rumbled once or twice, and then a few minutes after they had boarded they were on their way. The two sat in what could have been uncomfortable silence for most, but was more of a companionable quiet for them, both reading their own books up until the door burst open and Hermione rushed in.

"Herms." Xander grinned, putting his books aside.

"Oh god, have either of you seen Harry or Ron?" The young witch asked tightly.

Wednesday raised one eyebrow, "Have you misplaced them?"

Used to the Raven of Ravenclaw's sardonic comments, Hermione just slumped into the seat across from them, "I can't find them anywhere, they didn't get on the train."

Xander frowned, "Huh."

"Huh!? HUH!? Is that all you can say?"

"Have you told the prefects?" Xander asked.

"Of course I have."

"Well, until we get to Hogwarts we can't do anything else. Unless you want to fly back on broomstick and search London." Xander suggested wryly, then paled when he saw the gleam in Hermione's eyes, "And I was JOKING about that. Wednesday and I are Americans, for god's sake, we'd get lost before we even FOUND London."

"I would not." Wednesday objected calmly.

"Fine, I would." Xander retorted. "They probably just ran late, they'll get hold of someone and probably be in the castle before we are."

"You really think so?" Hermione asked expression hopeful.

"If not, I think that there's a small army of professors who'll be out looking for them, and THEY know the area." Xander shrugged. "Besides, Harry's tough."

"Right and Ron is with him too." Hermione let out a breath.

Xander glanced at Wednesday, then shrugged, "I'm sure he'll be ok anyway."

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Their arrival in Hogwarts was uneventful, though Hermione flew right at Hagrid when the big man arrived to gather up the first years.

"Hagrid! Hagrid, you have to help!"

"There, there, Hermione, what's wrong then?" Hagrid paused, turning away from the quailing first years.

"Harry and Ron never made it on the train!"

"WHAT!?" The giant of a man roared, sending eleven year olds cowering to the cobblestones.

"Relax." Xander said, "Hagrid's alright."

They looked up at him, unbelieving.

"Are you sure?" one asked quietly, looking like he was about to pee his pants.

"He's harmless, unless he sits on you," Xander replied with a smirk.

That was a joke most of them got, and the giggled hesitantly. A redheaded girl nodded in agreement.

"Yeah, my brothers say Hagrid's the best."

Xander turned his focus on her, one eyebrow crooking. "Let me guess, Weasely?"

She glared at him, noting his green and silver, "Something wrong with that?"

"I suppose it depends." Xander replied dryly, "Do you take after Ron, the Twins, or Percy?"

She grinned cruelly. "The twins are scared of me."

"Lord help us all, we're doomed." Xander returned with an expression and a tone to match Wednesday at her sarcastic, cutting best.

The girl reddened, but their attention was diverted away from their banter to where Hermione was chattering urgently with Hagrid.

"Right then," The big man said, coming to a decision, "Let's get your first years in the castle. Don't you worry, Hermione, I'll go straight to McGonagall as soon as we arrive. We'll get 'em back, don't you worry none."

"Too late," Hermione said softly.

Xander put an arm around her shoulders and squeezed slightly, then nodded to the carriages. She nodded in agreement and along with Wednesday they headed in that direction.

As they arrived at the waiting carriages, however, two more redheads were waiting.

"Oh brother of mine, look here, our favorite..."

"Test subject has returned."

Xander rolled his eyes, "Do you guys mind? Hermione is worried about Harry and your bother."

The two shrugged, "Those two will be fine..."

"We taught Ron everything he knows."

"Well that explains the attitude." Xander retorted sarcastically.

The twins looked at each other, the grinned evilly at him.

"Just so you know..."

"We didn't get enough time to properly pay you back last year."

"But now, the gods have smiled on us. We must have done something right in a previous life."

The two glanced at each other, puzzled, then spoke together. "Can't imagine what that would have been."

They shrugged, then went on with their normal back and forth.

"Anyway, now we get you for a full year."

"Our prayers have been answered."

"We do hope you're ready for pain,"

"Humiliation..."

"Degradations..."

"And then, when you're used to wearing green and silver again," The twins smirked, "We'll take a shot or two at you as well."

Xander rolled his eyes, "Get a new act, this one's stale."

Then the three boarded the carriages as the twins looked at each other with determined expressions.

"What should we do, brother of mine?"

"I know, we will get him..."

"At the feast!"

"Brilliant!" The two grinned together as the carriage doors closed, leaving Xander to sigh.

"Those two are a good argument for birth control."

"Xander!" Hermione flushed hotly.

\*\*\*\*

As they approached the castle, Xander noticed that Hagrid had indeed beaten them there in the normally slow boats and was conferring urgently with Professor McGonagall. The older woman got very tense and hurried off into the castle, which told Xander that at least someone was doing something. He relaxed a bit himself, letting out some tension he hadn't really known he was carrying.

Harry was a good enough guy, and Hermione liked the two of them, so yeah he was a bit worried.

"Oh look, the Barbarian is back and hanging out with his little mudblood again."

The drawling voice cut into the thoughts of the trio as they walked up to the castle, and they looked up to see Draco Malfoy leaning against a wall ahead of them.

"Still with the same old routine, huh?" Xander shook his head, "I told the twins that their act was stale, but yours is growing mold, Draco."

Draco stiffened, glaring at Xander, "How DARE you?"

"Besides," Xander went on, ignoring the question, "It's not like 'mudblood' is a good description of muggle born, Draco."

"What?" The blond boy blinked, noticing now that the 'conversation' was drawing a crowd.

"Actually, I think that mudblood would be a better description for purebloods that have children with known problems, like squibs." Xander went on, "I mean, how can you call Hermione a mudblood when you don't know what her blood line is, was, or will be? She could be anything, from the worst traits on the planet, to the very best. You just don't know, right?"

"Uh..."

Draco looked lost as Hermione stared at Xander with an expression alternating between horror and fascination.

"I think that muggle born, real muggle born," Xander said pensively, "are better named... Wild bloods."

"Wild blood??" Draco blurted out, going red. "What kind of nonsense is...?"

"Well, if you can't predict her blood traits, then she's a wild factor, isn't she?" Xander asked, shrugging. "So you can't call her a mudblood, because you can't prove it. In a couple hundred years, after she's had children, grandchildren, and so on... well then you can say one way or the other, but right now it just makes you sound stupid."

"Indeed." Wednesday intoned as she walked past, "Not that you need the help."

Several of the gathered crowd stopped murmuring at what Xander had said to laugh nervously at Wednesday's comments, which only riled Draco up more. He jumped forward, grabbing Wednesday by the arm and whipping her around violently.

"You freak! You can't talk to me like-!"

Hus statement was cut off by Wednesday's wand jabbing into his crotch, Xander's driving up under his ear, and Hermione's glowing between his eyes. He froze, turning remarkably pale as Xander glared at the two bookends who had only just realized he needed help.

"Back off." Xander growled at Crabbe and Goyle before turning to Malfoy. "Here's how this works. You can insult all you like, we'll insult back. You can argue, we'll argue back. Or you can get violent."

Wednesday looked up at Draco, jabbing her wand once into his groin, "And then we will get violent back... after that, you won't insult, argue, or get violent again. Ever."

Draco, still staring cross eyed at the glowing wand between his eyes, squeaked.

"Now go and play, little boy." Wednesday said softly. "Before I decide to play with you."

They released him and the Malfoy scion stumbled back, practically falling on his ass before Crabbe and Goyle grabbed him to keep him from falling. He stared at them in undisguised fear before the three of them retreated.

"You've gotten better." Wednesday nodded slightly to Xander as they put away their wands.

"Practicing over the summer," he said, "Plus my uncle is former Navy and he decided I needed some exercise and stuff."

Wednesday nodded, not bothering to comment on what 'stuff' was. Xander just grinned at Hermione, nodding to her wand. "That was so freaking cool. What spell were you ready to cast?"

She blushed, "Actually, it was just a tinted lumos spell. I thought it would look intimidating."

"Sweet." Xander grinned, glancing over his shoulder, "I think you intimidated Draco into a new pair of shorts."

"Oh ew!"

"Indeed," Wednesday rolled her eyes, "I did not need that image, thank you very much."

Xander shrugged, "Everyone's a critic."

The trio glanced around, noting finally that they had drawn a crowd. Wednesday coolly ignored them as Hermione blushed at all the attention, but Xander just bowed.

"Thank you, thank you, we're here all year folks." he said with a flourish and bow, "please, no flowers, just throw money."

The crowd chuckled at that and began to break up. The trio were heading in to the school when a scream went up, and they spun around to see people pointing into the air as an old car **flew** past.

"That I did not see coming." Xander said, staring at the sky as the car looped around, barely missing a tower, and came back.

"Oh my god!" Hermione screamed, hands flying to her mouth.

"I'm just guessing, but I'd say that Harry and Ron are here." Xander said to no one in particular.

"What makes you think it's Potter?"

Xander glanced to one side, then nodded to Daphne as the dark haired girl stepped up beside him.

"Two reasons," Xander said as the car did a loop the loop. "First, Harry's the only guy missing who can make an entrance that big..."

The car missed its landing, then swerved left and careened into the whomping willow, which proceeded, well, whomp on it with a great deal of enthusiasm. Xander winced, "And two, only Ron could possibly screw it up that bad."

Professors rushed out of the school, running in a group down to the willow as it proceeded to pound on the car and, as the school watched, Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley were rescued from the flying car before it, apparently on its own cognizance, took off for the forbidden forest.

"Welcome to Hogwarts," Xander said, looking at the group of first years that was nearby. "Believe it or not, this isn't really all that strange."

A few of them tittered nervously, then several laughed outright, and as the word came back that both Harry and Ron would be alright after a stay in the infirmary wing, they began to laugh almost uncontrollably as the teachers came back, looking completely befuddled by the reaction of the students to the events in question.

Xander let out a breath, then looked around to see that Hermione was gone, chasing after the teachers who had Ron and Harry. He shrugged, then extended an arm to Wednesday with exaggerated gallantry.

"Shall we?"

She looked at him evenly for a moment, then nodded and accepted his arm.

Green and Silver strode with Blue and Bronze, walking through the laughing first years and into Hogwarts and their second year of magical education.

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Xander watched the sorting from the Slytherin table, trying to ignore the sheer weight of the loathing he could feel emanating from Draco as the blond boy sat in his normal position to Xander's left. Daphne had taken a place on his right, for which Xander was grateful cause it meant that he at least had some semi decent conversation as things moved along.

The hat had sent Slytherin it's fair share of the firsties, Xander noted, though most of them seemed a little cowed compared to the exuberant ones that were ricocheting around the Gryffindor table. Xander supposed that there were some good things to being the 'evil' group.

As the sorting was finished, the headmaster looked around and delivered his normal speech, introducing the new defense professor as one Gilderoy Lockhart. Xander frowned, thinking about where he'd heard that name before, then realized that it was the author of many of his new books.

Weird, Xander frowned. School books were standardized, right? A professor couldn't just pick his own books as the ones to teach out of? Maybe the standards had been updated this year, Xander supposed, and Dumbledore had elected to hire the man because his books were considered the new standard.

Still seemed weird. He wondered what Hermione thought about it.

Thinking about the bushy haired girl caused Xander to glance over at the Gryff table just as the headmaster uttered his final words and the tables groaned under the heavy weight of food appearing from nowhere. In that moment Xander's eyes crossed over the Twin's positions and he noticed them both studiously looking anywhere but at the Slytherin's.

That brought him up short and he glared at the food in front of them.

"The banquet do anything to you, Harris?" Daphne asked curiously, noting his expression.

Xander hesitated, then drew his wand and glanced around. He spotted a Firstie wearing glasses and reached over Daphne to snag them.

“Hey!”

“Quiet. I’ll pass them back in a moment.” Xander tapped the glasses with his wand under the table and uttered the charm he used to try and break down potions ingredients, then brought the glasses up and put them on.

The prescription nearly crossed his eyes when he looked through them, and he shook his head. “God, are you part bat? You’ve got to be blind as one...”

He forced himself to look at the food, though, and noticed that most of it was fine but the meat pie was showing a familiar pattern. He pulled the glasses off and slid them back to the table, catching Draco’s hand as he lifted a slice of the pie to his mouth.

“What are you doing?” Draco asked his expression disgusted as he looked down his nose at Xander. “Unhand me this instant.”

“Twins got to the meat pie.” Xander hissed, “Pass it on down the line. Don’t know what it does, but let’s not make fools of ourselves at the first meal of the year.”

Draco swallowed, but nodded and set down the slice of pie before turning and whispering the message along as Xander turned to Daphne.

“Pass the word, stay clear of the pie. Weasley twins got into the kitchens.”

Daphne paled slightly, but nodded and in a few moments the word had rippled down that side of the table as well. She turned back to him as he helped himself to some potatoes. “How’d you know?”

“Used an ingredients charm on the meat pie.”

She blinked, “Did it show you something poisonous?”

Xander looked at her, startled, “Course not. They’re pranksters, not assassins. No, the twins use an obscuring method I haven’t cracked to protect their recipes.”

She frowned, “So how did you know they did anything?”

“Well when the pie wouldn’t tell me what was in it, I was pretty sure someone was up to no good.” Xander replied dryly, then chuckled at the chagrined look on her face.

While they were talking, a fifth year moved behind them and leaned in. “What’s going on?”

Xander explained, and the older kid frowned, “Those charms don’t give you specific information, you have to interpret the aura of the magically affected ingredients. Everything on this table was just transported up here magically; you mean to tell me you can tell every possible aura, and its combinations, at a glance like that?”

Xander shook his head, “Of course not. But the twins use an obscuring technique on their jokes, so people can’t copy them. I recognize that pattern.”

The fifth year shook his head, “I don’t want to know.”

Xander chuckled, and the meal went on with the Slytherin’s carefully avoiding the pie as they ate, while the twins shot confused glares in their direction. Xander snagged a piece of pie before it was banished at the end of the meal, then stole the firstie’s glasses again when desert appeared. After a careful look around the table he handed the glasses back, canceling the charm, and nodded to everyone.

Slytherin tucked in as the twins glared at them from the Gryff table but apparently they’d only had time to nail the one dish since they had only arrived less than two hours earlier. When the meal ended, the prefects led the first years to the dorms while the rest filtered in on their own. Inside the Slytherin dorms Xander took out the pie and looked around at a few who were watching him expectantly.

“Alright, let’s see what the show was supposed to be...” He said, taking a breath before hesitantly taking a big bite of the pie.

For a moment nothing happened, then suddenly Xander’s whole body shook and he seemed to inflate like a balloon. In a few seconds he had gone from a fairly average looking sort to the poster boy for Pillsbury. He sighed, looking down at himself as he spat the bite of pie out into the trash.

“Right. I need someone who knows runes and someone who knows arithmancy.” Xander said coldly, the tone sounding odd coming from his huge body as he waddled around. “Draco, you know how to get around the school unnoticed after dark, right?”

Malfoy glared at Xander, but remembering that he had kept him from eating the tainted pie nodded grudgingly. “You’ll never get into Gryffindor dorms without the password though.”

“Who wants into Gryffindor??”

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Xander got his volunteers, so the four of them, Xander, a seventh year named Harrow, a sixth year named Jacobs, and Draco snuck out after curfew through a passage Draco swore them to secrecy about.

How'd you know about that?" Xander asked, grudgingly admiring the knowledge of the blond.

Draco smirked at him, "You would never believe the things I know about Hogwarts."

"Right." Xander rolled his eyes.

The four made their way through the back halls until they reached the great hall.

"Keep watch," Xander hissed to Draco, "If you see **anyone** you come get us. Don't yell, don't run, come get us."

Draco waved at him, "Yes yes, just hurry up before we lose enough points to sink any hope of the house cup."

Xander nodded and led the other two into the hall. They looked expectantly at the Gryffindor table, but Xander shook his head and lead them straight to the Slytherin table.

"Here," He said softly, drawing his wand and casting the reverse of the identification charm, "This is the plan."

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Sometime later the four snuck back into the Slytherin common room, led by Draco with Xander taking up the rear. Once inside, Xander looked at them seriously, "Just remember, act surprised and shocked when it happens."

Harrow nodded jerkily, as pale as a ghost, and Jacobs wasn't much better.

Draco looked at them, then back at Xander, "When what happens? What did you do?"

Xander smirked, "You don't want to know."

Draco started to object, but Harrows shook his head, "You really don't, Malfoy. I wish I didn't know. If anyone finds out we did this..."

"They won't." Xander said confidently.

"Did what??" Draco was beginning to become concerned. Not for whatever it was they had done, but for how it might bleed over on him.

"Call it plausible deniability, Draco. Trust me; you do NOT want to be blamed for this one." Xander said with a grin.

Draco looked at the three of them and growled, "Fine. Like I care anyway."

He turned in a huff and stomped off, as the other two looked at Xander with concern.

"I hope you know what you're doing." Harrow said tensely. "If Professor Snape or the Headmaster figures this out... They might just let Filch break out his 'toys' just for us."

Xander nodded, "I know. So just remember, don't let on that you were expecting anything and don't go sneering at the twins either. You'll give the game away."

"Better tell that to Draco," Jacobs sighed.

"If Draco **doesn't** sneer at the twins, that'll give the game away." Xander said, rolling his eyes.

"He's not exactly subtle, is he?" Harrow asked, chuckling.

Xander shook his head, "He's not as cunning as he thinks, that's for sure. And lord knows his only ambition is to spend his daddies' money. You ever get the idea that some people just get dumped in here by default because no other house would take them?"

Jacobs winced, "That's dangerous talk, Harris. Just a friendly warning, Malfoy may not be subtle, but with the power his family wields he doesn't have to be. You might want to stop pissing him off."

Xander shrugged, "I don't really care, I mean it's not like I have to live around him, you know? I'm an American, and I'm going home sooner or later."

"Just don't expect the rest of us to join you in annoying the bear cub, ok Harris?" Harrow said with a sigh, "We have to live around here."

"No problem." Xander smiled, heading for the stairs to his room. "See you in the morning."

The two shuddered, thinking about breakfast.

"You know, I might sleep in." Harrow said with a shiver.

"Me too."

Xander chuckled evilly, and headed to his room.

The two older students looked at each other after he left and shook their heads.

“You know, I think I’ll not gamble against Harris.” Harrow said carefully.

“Yeah, tough to play against someone who’s willing to risk everything without blinking.” Jacobs agreed.

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The next morning saw Xander coming into the Hall for breakfast a little early. He knew it was stupid, but there was simply no way he wasn’t going to be present when this one went down. He wanted to see the looks on the Twin’s faces when everything hit the fan.

Kids were trickling in, and Xander noticed that the twins hadn’t arrived yet. He was a little disappointed, really, because he was pretty sure that they weren’t the types to let their gags go off without being around to watch the fireworks either. Xander shrugged it off, remembering that it didn’t matter if they didn’t pull anything this morning.

Sooner or later they’d try again.

He settled in, this time with the safety goggles he’d used for potions work in his basement resting in his pocket. The hardened acetate goggles were crystal clear, and wouldn’t give him a headache like the borrowed prescription lenses had yesterday. He cast the charm on them quietly and scanned the table quickly, but found nothing out of the ordinary so he settled in to eat.

The twins came in a few minutes after he did, and Xander tensed as he watched them.

They didn’t look at him as they sat down at Gryffindor table, along with Harry and Ron Xander noted with some relief. He’d known that they would be ok, but it was good to see them up and around. He nodded to Harry, then smiled and waved at Hermione. The twins glared at both Xander and Hermione briefly, but seemed to give it up as pointless a moment later before they both looked over at Xander, smiled sweetly in unison, and waved.

Oh crap, Xander thought, his stomach roiling. Did they do what he expected? Or something new? There was nothing he could do about it now, though, other than hope they kept up their barrage.

The professors were settling in now, chatting amiably for the most part as they ate. Xander noticed that Snape seemed to prefer reading the prophet in the morning, but Lockhart was attempting to chat his ear off and the dark professor was visibly restraining himself from cursing his colleague, probably magically as well as verbally.

It happened shortly after that.

There was an audible ‘pop’, the sound filling the Hall, and Xander instinctively looked over to the twins, who were gleefully looking back at him. He saw their expressions grow puzzled, then both paled as one as their attention twisted away from the Slytherin table.

Xander followed their gaze, biting his cheek as hard as he could when he saw what could only have been Professor McGonagall squawk loudly, feathers fluttering as she bounced around the table in obvious aggravation. The other professors were staring in rampant shock, except for Headmaster Dumbledore who seemed to be shifting between amused surprise and mild annoyance.

The next disruption was at the other end of the faculty table, when Professor Snape suddenly began to gag as his mouth was forced open and his tongue rolled out of his mouth, thumping down onto the table, and rolled to the left across Professor Lockhart’s hand as the shocked man froze in mid reach for a platter of hash browns.

That was the signal for pure pandemonium as one professor after another began to change into various colors, forms, and whatever else. Even the headmaster was not immune as his face turned a bright red, then gold, and began to cycle rapidly between the two like some signal light. Students were caught between staring in shock and laughing in hysterical glee. Xander settled for what he hoped was a blank stare of surprise and shock.

Lockhart, one of the only professors unaffected by virtue, Xander thought, of not having had time to eat while chatting to professor Snape, drew his wand immediately and began yelling.

“It’s alright, I’m here! I know just the counter curse for this, professor Snape, hold still now...”

Snape drew his wand in a flash, but the four foot tongue made a total hash of whatever he was trying to cast, and Lockhart quickly cast his counter curse with a flourish.

This time Xander didn’t have to fake shock as Snape’s tongue **fell out** and flopped around the table. He winced and jumped up quickly, running over, *God I hope they can reattach that!*

“Go get the nurse!” He yelled at the closest student he could grab, then rushed the head table as Snape glared murderously at Lockhart as the Defense professor stammered and looked at the writhing tongue in shock.

“Uh, well there now, you can close your mouth properly, right?” he asked with halting laughter.

Snape’s eyes practically glowed with an unholy light as he snapped his wand out and cast a silent stinging hex at the Defense professor.

Lockhart jumped in pain, yelping. “Here now, there’s no cause to... OW!”

The third hex sent Lockhart running from the hall with Snape on his heels just as Xander arrived at the faculty table and grimaced down at the

writhing tongue that was curling around a plate of bacon and eggs.

"Ugh... No way am I touching that."

The transformations began to reverse, starting with McGonagall, just as Nurse Pomfrey came rushing in.

"What's this about someone cutting Severus' tongue out?" She asked, eyes searching blood.

"I don't know about cutting, Ma'am." Xander said, nodding to the still writhing tongue. "But Professor Lockhart cast some kind of spell that did that."

"Merlin's beard." Pomfrey hissed, looking around. "Where's Severus?"

"Chasing Lockhart across the Channel, heading for France right about now." Xander replied dryly.

"I doubt they've reached that distance just yet, young man." Albus Dumbledore said with an amused twinkle as he too examined the tongue. "I haven't seen this curse cast in many a year, I must say, Professor Lockhart has quite a hand with a very obscure silencing curse."

"I don't think this is what he meant to do," Xander said dryly.

"Yes, well, that's what we'll tell Severus at least." Dumbledore chuckled.

"FRED AND GEORGE WEASELY!!"

Minerva McGonagall's scream of outraged ire froze the twins in place where they were trying to sneak out of the hall.

They turned around, both quite pale.

"We swear, professor, we didn't..."

"REALLY didn't..."

"Do this." Both said together.

"Don't you lie to me! I recognize your idiotic hand in this insane prank!" McGonagall roared, "Fifty points from Gryffindor and detentions for the rest of the month! And I swear, if I catch you pulling anything like this again, why I'll... I'll..."

They didn't get to hear what she would do as the room was distracted by Snape reappearing, dragging a badly beaten Gilderoy Lockhart by one leg. He dropped the leg just inside the hall and walked with as much dignity as he could muster to the head table, nodding to Madam Pomfrey, then at his tongue which had returned to normal size on the table.

"I'll see what I can do, Professor," The nurse said quickly, "I'm afraid I don't know this curse, though..."

"I do, Severus," Dumbledore said calmly, "And it can be reversed with little trouble. Have no worries."

Snape visibly seemed to relax as Minerva continued laying into the twins, who had finally seemed to come to a realization as they stared at Xander as one.

"YOU!"

"Me?" Xander tried to look shocked.

"Him?" McGonagall blinked, "Sure you're not blaming a second year for this ruckus!?"

The twins froze, not wanting to be the ones who dragged teachers into it, nor to give credit to someone for pranking THEM. Albus Dumbledore, however, had already turned to Xander.

"Did you do this, young man?"

Xander was about to answer when Snape twisted him around and glared at him. Xander swallowed, "Professors, I freely admit that I've tried to duplicate the twin's pranks, but I've not had any luck. Frankly the work is beyond me, and the twins use some kind of obscuring charm to keep people from working out their things."

Snape glanced over at Dumbledore and nodded slightly as Minerva whipped out her wand and examined the tainted food.

"He's right," She said, "There's a complex obscurement charm over all the... prank products. It's far beyond a second year. You two, with me. NOW."

The twins fell in behind their head of house as she left, shooting death glares over their shoulders at Xander. He didn't dare smirk at them, however, not with Snape and Dumbledore watching him.

"Come along Severus," Poppy said, levitating the tongue with her wand. "I'll need your help as well, Albus, if we're to do this quickly."

"Of course, Poppy," Dumbledore said calmly. "Let us be off."



Xander watched them leave and let out a relieved sigh as he fought to keep his legs from turning to jello. He walked as calmly as he could back to the Slytherin table, sitting woodenly as he began to force himself to eat.

Daphne looked over at him, eyes wide. Everyone knew that he was planning something, but this was beyond anything they'd even dreamt. "What did you do?"

Xander didn't look at her as he whispered back, "We warded the table. Anything the twins send here with that obscurement charm on it gets dumped on the professors table instead."

She stared at him, jaw dropping open, then closed it slowly and went back to eating. Xander didn't move until Harrow and Jacobs entered the hall. He got up and left the table, meeting them as they were about to sit down.

"Destroy the runes, eliminate the evidence." He hissed. "Professor Snape will be looking for blood on this one."

The both paled, then nodded curtly as Xander kept moving past them, heading for his first class.

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The rest of the day was damage control as Xander rapidly learned to regret letting so many people know, or even have a hint of what he had been up to. Slytherin's were all but publically congratulating him on the stunt, and Xander knew it was only a matter of time before it got back to Professor Snape, and quickly started working on a story that fit the facts.

He snagged Harrow and Jacobs in between classes and filled them in, leaving Draco out because the blond didn't really have any details. After that he spent the rest of the day repeating the same thing over and over, and praying that it got back to Snape before the original rumors did.

Defense class with the Gryffindors was tense as hell, but luckily Lockhart broke that up by the end when he unleashed a horde of pixies on the class. Xander and Draco wound up back to back as the damned things fluttered around, wands out for all the good they did.

"Break for the door on three?" Xander asked over his shoulder.

"Right. Vin, Greg, you with us?"

The two larger boys nodded, also waving their wands around to little effect.

"Three!" Xander snapped, barely ducking a dive bombing pixy as he leapt over a desk and rolled into the aisle.

"Hey! What happened to one and two!?" Draco yelled, sliding to the ground under a flying book, skidding into the aisle across from Xander as Crabbe and Goyle followed on their hands and knees.

Xander blasted a Stupify into the air, scattering a group of pixies that were lining up for a run on Hermione and Harry's position, then scrambled to his feet and pulled Draco along as he bolted for the door. "One and two were too damned slow and they got left behind! Now run unless you want to join them!"

They reached the door just as another mini horde of the damn things swung around, and both Slytherin's dove through under the assault, scraping their knees and elbows as they slid into the hall. They rolled over onto the backs, wincing as Greg Goyle and Vincent Crabbe were caught in the attack that missed them. The pixies picked the two hulking boys up, tossing them around for a bit, then casually flicked them out the door.

Xander and Draco split apart, rolling clear as the duo splattered into the floor and wall where they had been.

"You two dead?" Xander asked from where he had rolled to a stop.

Vince groaned as Greg just managed to roll his head up and look around with a stunned expression.

"I'd move if I were you."

"Huh?" Greg blinked. "Why?"

Xander just grimaced as the horde of students came rampaging out of the classroom, screaming and waving their hands around to hold off the pixies. They proceeded to trample Goyle and Crabbe into the ground as he and Draco pressed against the wall and watched them rush past. When the majority had gone by, Draco looked down at his two friends and winced.

"Vince? Greg? Are you two alright?"

"I think we'd better get them to the infirmary." Xander suggested.

"Don't be stupid," Draco muttered, "They're tough. Right guys?"

Vincent groaned and sat up as Gregory shook his head and rolled to his knees.

"We're fine." Vincent said after a moment. "Right, Greg?"

"Uh... yeah. Fine. What hit me?"

Xander shook his head as Lockhart came rushing out, hitching his robes up and running full bore down the hall. He risked a glance back in the classroom and winced. "Looks like Lockhart has Harry, Ron, and Hermione on cleanup."

Draco laughed, "Good for them. Come on, let's get out of here."

Xander took a breath and sighed, "You go on, I'm going to help out a bit."

Draco gave him an incredulous look, "You mean that after all that, you're going back in there?"

"Oh hell no." Xander muttered, "But my stunner needs practice, so I'm going to play sniper."

"Play what? No, never mind, I don't care." Draco shook his head, "Come on, Greg, Vince. Let's leave the mudblood lover to his friends."

"Wild blood lover, if you please." Xander replied with a smirk, causing Draco to let out a snort of exasperation as he stomped off with his bookends in tow.

Xander chuckled and snuck his head around the corner of the door, jabbing his wand in as he settled his focus on a pixy well away from the others. "Stupify!"

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Clearing out the classroom took most of the rest of the period devoted to DADA, so Xander figured practicing his stunner on the pixies should count toward his class work, even if it was a fourth year spell. The rest of the day wasn't nearly as eventful, thank god, and soon enough Xander found himself in the library with Hermione and Wednesday as they reviewed the day's events and did their own reading.

"Thank you again for the help in Defense, today, Xander." Hermione said, sounding grudging.

Xander looked up at her, eyebrow raised, "Are you mad at me?"

"You shouldn't have done that to the Professors, Xander." She scowled.

"Me?" Xander blinked, going into his preplanned story, eyes flickering around to see who was listening. "Herms, come on, I'm a second year... I spent all summer trying to match the twin's gags and failed at every shot. Ask Wednesday, I even had her check with her Gramma about potions work. There's no way I could have pulled off those transfigurations and stuff."

She glared at him narrowly, "The twins are swearing that it wasn't them, they were set up."

"I guess it's possible," Xander said, shaking his head, "But I'm nowhere near the level in potions and transfigurations to pull that off."

Hermione chewed on her bottom lip, mulling it over, then sighed. "I'm sorry I blamed you, Xander. I guess the twins have annoyed someone else."

"Yeah well, more power to them, whoever they are." Xander shrugged, mentally cataloging the listeners. A few Ravenclaw's, a sprinkling of others, and Madam Pince were all in earshot. "To be honest, I was going to get them back with a prank, but after this morning we decided it would be smarter to call it off."

"We?" Hermione raised an eyebrow.

"A couple others from my house," Xander shrugged, "It's not like the twins don't deserve some payback, you know. But, like I said, after this morning... it didn't seem prudent to unleash anymore insanity."

"Well good." Hermione said after a moment. "At least you're showing some common sense. Whoever set off that insanity this morning was a complete fool with no respect for the hard work of the professors here and..."

As she went on Xander noticed Wednesday eyeing him evenly over her book, the girl's expression as unexpressive as always, but Xander clearly got the impression she didn't believe a word he had just said. He just shrugged at her and flicked his eyes to Hermione, causing Wednesday to nod once and return her attention to her book as Hermione continued to rant about rule breakers.

Xander cut her off there, "Say, who was it who cursed Neville last year anyway?"

Hermione went beet red, shut up quickly, and ducked her head into her book at that, leaving Xander to smirk softly and return to his own work in the Coven Grimoire.

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Narcissa whistled softly as she read through the notes her unknown student had made. There were some advanced arithmetic and runes work there, devised as part of a warding scheme. It was work well ahead of any second year, and she wondered where he had come across it? It was only an idle thought though, as she was finding herself interested in his notes on the blood tensions in the school. She had to smile when she read the term 'wild blood' and its description.

Narcissa was a Black, part of an older pureblood culture than the Malfoy family, and she had been brought up as an alternate to take over the family bloodline. Her sister Andromeda had been the first choice, their other sibling Bellatrix being too unstable to entrust with such responsibility. When Andy fell in love with a Muggleborn, however, their Aunt had struck her name from the family register.

That had shocked many in the family to the core, and set the Blacks steadily on the road to destruction. Then Matriarch Black was NOT an approved keeper of the line, and was nothing really, but a small minded and petty bitch. The grand old lady who had trained both Andy and herself would have reluctantly accepted Andy's choice, and merely removed her from the primary line.

Now, because of the old bitch and her stupid ideas, Andy's blood was lost to the Blacks, as was the potential in the blood of her Muggleborn... no, her Wild blood Husband. And it was a very interesting bit of potential, Narcissa noted. There had never been a full metamorph in the Black line before, so the trait in Andy's daughter was either fully inherited from her father, or had resulted in the mixing of blood. A few generations down the line, it would have been a great boon to the Black bloodline to bring the descendants of that line back into the Black's primary blood.

Narcissa sighed.

So many things ruined by the small minds of fools who thought to play above their station. The wars had taken the lives of so many of the best and brightest of the world she loved, it seemed that the idiots had inherited what had survived.

Wild blood.

Narcissa reached for a quill and began to pen a note to her sister. Andy would love to hear this.

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The time ran by, with Xander trying hard to deflect the blame, and credit, for the prank of the first morning. He succeeded for the most part; the professors seemed to believe that he didn't have anything to do with it, especially once Draco started bragging loudly about having taken the Twins down a peg or two.

Xander would have smacked him, but he'd expected it and planned for it. When Snape rounded on Draco, and the twit spilled his guts, Xander's cover story had already filtered through to the professor and he just angrily berated Draco in the common room, then stalked off. Snape clearly believed that the twins were to blame, and wasn't interested in hunting down nonexistent Slytherin perps.

He was the most obvious candidate, of course, but that was working in his favor slowly as many of the more even minded types convinced themselves that he couldn't have been the guy who pulled off anything that big. Harrow and Jacobs knew better, but they had done the dirty work and were both Slytherin enough to keep their mouths shut until they were safely away from the school. Xander might have to worry about what Harrow might say after he graduated, but until then he wasn't going to open his yap.

Luckily for him, Draco was bound and determined to move into the limelight and unveiled that same night that his dad had bought brooms for the team, and he was the new Slytherin seeker. The expensive new brooms were the talk of the dorms that night, and the school the next day, and by the end of the week Xander found himself relegated to yesterday's news.

The only people who believed he had pulled off the prank of the year, so far, were a few Gryffindors, and a handful of scattered kids who had all the credibility of UFO spotter back home. Oh, and the twins of course.

Xander had started letting the twins catch him with a few pranks here and there, and to be honest getting caught by a few he hadn't seen coming, just to make himself look like the poor victim. Not the most satisfying way to pass his time, but Xander much preferred to be overlooked.

His close brush with a prank spiraling out of control and nearly getting blamed for it had taught him one lesson.

Secrecy was golden.

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Thankfully the term smoothed out after it's rather spectacular start, and Xander quickly fell back into the routine of classes and hanging out with Wednesday and Hermione. It was odd, he supposed, but that was pretty much all he did. Of course, back in Sunnydale he really only went to classes, hung out with Jessie and Willow, and watched TV. Ok, he also read comics, but he did a lot of reading here too.

The new wrinkle this year was Professor Hardy, who showed up right on time over the first weekend. Xander and Wednesday were waiting in the classroom when he strode in and nodded politely to them.

"So, how are things going?"

"Well, Sir." The answered in unison.

Hardy's lips quirked slightly, "I do hope they teach you more than that old gag here in Hogwarts."

Xander grinned back, "Of course, sir."

Wednesday merely raised an eyebrow.

"Alright, here are you're texts for this year." Hardy said, handing them out. "Nothing complicated. American Wizarding History isn't difficult; it's just reading and remembering. I'll trust you to do that yourself, for the most part."

They nodded.

"Now, these," He produced several slim workbooks. "Are a little different. You'll have to do some work here, and I'll be available to make sure you understand the work. These are introductory courses to basic physics, chemistry, and biology. For today, let's look at the chemistry primer, as I

suspect you'll find some of the details on lab work to be surprising."

The two frowned, but read as directed and very shortly it became clear what Hardy had meant.

"Sir, some of this sounds like potions, but we do it very differently here." Xander said hesitantly.

Hardy nodded and smiled tightly, "You do, don't you. At Salem, however, the Chemistry and Potions classes are... or, rather, were... held in the same labs and used the same procedures for safety, among other things."

"Then why are things different here?" Wednesday asked, genuinely curious, as her Gram mama brewed her potions in a very similar manner to the Hogwarts Curriculum.

"Salem is a member of the New School of potions theory, or as the Europeans tend to call it, The Jeune Ecole." the hawk faced professor said, "Hogwarts, along with most of Europe are adherents of the old school. Most of North America, Australia, and Japan are proponents of the new school of potions theory, while Europe, South America, Africa, and China follow the Old."

"Which one's better?" Xander asked, looking over the notes. "Hey, I used some of these procedures at home this summer. Mom insisted."

Hardy looked over his shoulder and nodded, "Safety one oh one, it's a good idea when working on your own with no experience, no matter which school. As to which is better, that is a hotly debated issue. There are some clear advantages to both systems, however, which can be considered."

Hardy paused, making sure that both were paying attention, then went on.

"First, the New School uses very tightly controlled procedures, carefully regulated variables, and meticulous lab work. You cut most of your ingredients on glassware, unless the recipe calls for a specific cutting surface, and then you never used the same surface for different ingredients. The idea is to eliminate as many variables as possible, to ensure a consistent brew. Are you following me?"

Xander frowned and looked confused. "Uh..."

Hardly chuckled, "Alright. I'll tell you a story that might help explain things. A long time ago, people used to believe that tomatoes were poisonous, did you know that?"

Xander blinked and looked at Wednesday.

"Uh, no?"

Wednesday smiled, "I did."

"Excellent, do you know why?"

"Lead poisoning."

"Exactly," Hardy nodded, then glanced over to see Xander totally confused. He smiled slightly, "People of the day often used lead dishware, plates and the like. Tomatoes are mildly acidic, and would dissolve the lead, so people eating tomatoes would also consume lead in dangerous quantities. Now, many magical potions ingredients do the same thing when you prepare them. They interact with the cutting surface, sometimes even the knife itself, and add another variable to the potion. Do you understand?"

"I guess so, Sir."

Hardy nodded, "The striving goal behind the New School is to minimize all unknown variables and allow for potions brewers to produce reliable, consistent, brews with minimum effort and time."

"And the Old School, Sir?" Wednesday asked, curious now. She had never been taught any other way, and wondered what he would have to say about it.

"Well, if the new school is a scientists system, then the old school is an artisans system." He replied, "Those with real talent tend to flourish better in the older, less precise system. If you have that talent, you learn quickly to adjust for the variables, and can turn out superior products... generally at a cost of time and effort, however."

As his two students were considering that, Hardy went on, "At Salem we don't turn out potions masters and mistresses, we prepare people to take their doctorates in potions theory. The difference between a Master and a PHD is currently a hotly debated issues at the ICW level, and we don't get too much into it for now other than to say that, on average, a Doctor of Potions Theory can brew known potions faster and cheaper than most masters, often in bulk, however Masters tend to make better overall brews and currently lead the world in innovations within the field."

Hardy chuckled, "Master's tend to call Doctors 'assembly line workers' while doctors refer to masters as prima donnas. If you ever get to that level, I assure you, the parties are interesting to watch."

The two children nodded dutifully, not entirely understanding but getting the gist of it.

"The reason I bring this up is that at some point you may find yourselves back in Salem, or at another school or facility that practices the 'Jeune Ecole' method.... here in Europe the only school that does so is Beauxbatons, in case you're interested. So I advise you to familiarize yourself with the lab procedures, just in case."

"We will, Sir."

"Very good, now then let's have a look at basic physics and how magic interacts with Newton's Laws." Hardy said, "I think you'll be surprised by some of the things that **aren't** happening when you cast certain spells."

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Those tutoring sessions were short, only a couple of hours once a week, but the reading assigned was significant and Xander found himself spending more time with his school books than the Grimoire as the weeks moved on.

Hermione was soon pulled in by the prospects of books not available in Hogwarts library, and Xander found himself sharing his texts with her more and more often. She had immediately gone on a rant about how the new school methodology made so much sense, and had then gone on to bring it up in potions class to Professor Snape.

Now there was a class Xander wished he could have missed.

Snape's rant had take the entire class, and threatened to spill out into the next period until he'd noticed the time and stormed out of the class, after taking twenty points from Gryffindor of course. Hermione had been caught between tears and rage, huffing about the backwards attitude and such, while Snape had spent the next week growling at her about Potions factories and all sorts of other nastiness.

Suffice to say it made potions with the Gryffs a tense class.

Halloween was almost on them by then, though, and the school was providing its own distractions to break up the tension. The decorations were being setup, and the kids were eager for the holiday. All in all, even with the sniping between Snape and Hermione, things were pretty cheery.

Except for Wednesday, of course.

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"You ok?" Xander asked, "You look kinda down."

Wednesday gave him a look that would have send most others running, but only shrugged. "There is something... wrong in the school."

Xander grinned, "You want to pin it down some more?"

She rolled her eyes, "I have been hearing... things lately."

"It's an old castle; I've been hearing things since last year."

"Not the normal castle sounds, Alexander," She said sharply, "darker sounds. Sounds steeped in black magic."

Xander leaned back at that, "In Hogwarts?"

"Indeed. This is a bastion of the light," She said with a twist of her lips. "But it's ancient as well, and there are many dark secrets buried here."

Xander nodded, "Alright. Any idea what you're hearing?"

She shook her head, "No. Not yet. But when forces this dark entangles in a place this steeped in the light... things will be, ugly."

Xander shivered slightly. He wasn't sure he wanted to know what there was in the castle that could set Wednesday on edge.

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Halloween was upon them in no time, though, and Xander made his way to the Great Hall with several others from his year and house. The decorations were spectacular, as always, with floating jack-o-lanterns lighting the hall, and food bending the large tables under its weight.

He settled in beside Daphne, nodding to her as she smiled back and tapped a monocle she had resting on the table beside her.

"Food's clean, far as I can see."

"Thanks," Xander nodded, taking her word for it as he started to dig in.

The twins' pranks had been petering off as Xander continued with his strategy from last year of taking the small hits and storing them up until the twins had another big knock coming. At this point he suspected that they were starting to doubt he was the culprit themselves, and that was the way he wanted it,

In the meantime, most of Slytherin had figured out the identification charm and the pattern the twins used to obscure their gags. Xander had also noticed some of the Ravenclaw's examining their food before eating, and so he knew that particular method wasn't going to last much longer.

As a whole, thankfully, the twins were far more dangerous to the Gryffindors than to anyone else, and with Hermione often ranting about what new stunt they were pulling on poor first year Gryffs, Xander had at least some warning of what they were working on.

He had to admit, though, they were geniuses when it came to this stuff. Way beyond him, and he didn't think he was ever going to catch them. Their real liability wasn't their skill; it was their love of notoriety. As long as they were looking to take credit for their stunts, on one level or another,

he had an advantage to play into.

He glanced around the hall, expecting to see Hermione and exchange some greeting for the season anyway, but was surprised to find that not only was she not there, but Ron and Harry were missing too. He shook his head, wondering for a moment what they were up to but decided that they could look after themselves.

He nodded to Wednesday, who nodded back, and was about to move on when he saw the normally unexpressive girl suddenly go tense and snap upright, throwing her chair back to the floor. The other Ravenclaw's around her jumped away from her, obviously afraid of the girl, but she didn't move. Filius approached the table cautiously, and Xander rose up himself, making his way around the table.

"Are you alright, Miss Addams?" Filius Flitwick asked, eyeing his most disturbing student carefully.

Wednesday didn't reply as Xander hurried over himself.

"Wednesday... Wednesday, are you ok?" Xander asked, moving around the table.

She snapped her head to stare into his eyes.

"Something just died."

Xander paled, thinking about what she had said before, and was about to reply when a scream was heard from outside the hall. He, Filius, and Wednesday were the first to move and got out ahead of the crowd. They made their way through the halls until they found Ron, Harry, and Hermione staring at a mess on the floor in disgust.

On the wall beyond them were words written in blood.

"Enemies of the heir, Beware!"

\*\*\*\*

The panic that captured the school in those few moments was broken as Albus Dumbledore pushed through the crowd, his very presence broadcasting a quiet security that calmed the younger people present, and even had a noticeable effect on the adults.

"Calmly everyone," he said serenely, "Be calm, and we'll work this out. What has happened?"

"Potter did it!" Draco bellowed, loud enough to be heard through the school. "It was Potter!"

"Shut it, Malfoy!" Ron snarled, taking a step toward the young Malfoy heir, only to be held back by Harry and Hermione.

Albus was looking around slowly when Argus Filch pushed his way through, grumpily telling the children to shove off. "What are you all doing out here, no gatherings in the halls, I'll put you all on... Mrs. Norris?"

The caretaker froze for a moment, staring at the body of his cat, and then let out a wail as he rushed forward.

"What happened here!?"

"That is what we're here to determine, Argus." Dumbledore said calmly.

Filch looked around, eyes lighting on Harry, Draco's screaming coming immediately to mind. "What did you do to my CAT!?"

"I... I didn't do anything!" Harry protested.

"And yet you were here when we all arrived," Severus Snape said silkily.

"We were just going back to our rooms!"

"And skip the feast in the great hall?"

"We were invited to Nick's death day party!" Harry protested again, looking for all the school to be wallowing, lost in the events.

Xander stepped back, not really caring about it right then. He had the same morbid curiosity as anyone, but while Hermione seemed to be alright, he was worried about Wednesday.

"Hey," He nudged her, "Are you ok?"

She didn't look at him, her eyes fixed on the cat's stiff body. "Something's not right."

"I think we sort of established that."

"No. That's not what I meant." She said, eyes glaring at the cat. "There was death in the air, Alexander. I could feel it."

"Cat looks pretty dead to me."

She shook her head, "No. It's not."

“Argus, your cat isn’t dead.”

Xander twisted back as Albus made that pronouncement, the echoing sound of Lockhart yelling ‘I knew it!’ going unheeded by most.

“She’s not?” Argus looked up, hopeful.

“Merely petrified.” Albus confirmed, frowning pensively.

Xander again tuned out the others, focusing on Wednesday. “How’d you know that?”

She gave him a flat look, “I know death.”

“Oookay,” Xander said slowly, “You remember what I told you last year about the creep factor? The bell at the top of the meter just dinged.”

Wednesday paid him no mind, however, as the crowd moved away from them and followed Dumbledore toward the DADA offices. She looked at the blood on the wall, then shook her head. “It wanted death. It was calling for it, for a painful death. Why did it show mercy?”

“What?” Xander asked, looking around to see if anyone was listening. He didn’t like the way everyone was ready to jump on Harry as the culprit, and couldn’t help but feel that Wednesday might be setting herself up for the same. “What it?”

She let out a slow breath, then looked at him steadily for a moment.

“The serpent.”

Then she turned and was gone.

Xander watched her go, hands going out in plaintive confusion. “Serpent? What serpent!?”

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The castle had little else to speak of in the coming days; the rumors of the Chamber of Secrets were on everyone’s lips as the aftermath of Halloween rolled over them all. In history of Magic, Hermione actually managed to talk old Prof Binns into recounting some of the legend before he droned off about Goblin’s again.

After classes, Hermione was noticeably absent from their normal study hours, leaving Xander and Wednesday to themselves. Which seemed to Xander to leave him all alone, as Wednesday had become even more focused than her normal self, leaving him out in the cold.

He turned back to his Grimoire, learning spells as the fancy struck him, mostly looking for the cool ones. He tried his hand at Arithmancy, the concept of developing his own spells being incredibly cool to him, but found that he wasn’t much better at magical math than he was at regular math, and he’d tested pretty low there.

So, for the moment, he moved that aside and started looking into other types of magic for fun. The Grimoire had a really excellent index system, in which all he had to do was whisper what he was looking for and the book would fly to the appropriate page, and even provide a list of books in the library on the topic.

While he had been looking through for creating spells, Xander got sidetracked by enchanting objects, then was immediately enthralled by a single notation at the very bottom of that page.

The Magic of Body Art.

Xander blinked. Magical Tattoos? So cool.

Unfortunately the book only had a very brief discussion of one example, which kind gave Xander the creeps. A Spell known as the Dark Mark, which had been used by Mr. Mold in his Shorts during his reign of terror over a decade earlier. It described the mark in detail, surprisingly, listing it as a means of summoning the Lord’s minions, punishing those who failed the Lord, and possibly even providing the Lord with information about those who had been marked.

The hows weren’t listed, though, just some speculation on the methods. According to Evans, who had seemed to have done the majority of the research on the topic, the Mark had to be a compilation of several spells from multiple fields of magic. One of the fundamental cornerstones, in her opinion, was the Protean Charm, which originated from a school of magic not commonly used by European Wizards.

The Sympathetic magic of the charm would allow the lord to affect any other Dark Mark, as long as he had access to at least one. From there the spell work was presumed to be fairly simple, though according to Evans the Lord had managed to somehow lock the spells in such a way as no one had yet discovered how to unlock it.

The concept was cool, Xander thought, not that he had any interest in creating dark marks for himself or anyone else. Still, he found the bibliography for the subject and started pulling books out of the library. Unlike most of his preferred areas of interest, almost everything on magical tattoo work was actually in the open area of the library and not in the restricted, so Xander soon found himself happily learning all there was to know about the art and magic of body pictures.

Which, actually, wasn’t as much as he’d hoped?

Most magical tattoos were, literally, magical tattoos. They had no powers, or anything really cool, they just moved around the body like their real

world counterparts might, and looked cool. Xander had no real interest in that, however, since he really didn't understand the idea of marking one's body with something permanent just for cosmetics. What if his taste changed in the future? When he was five he loved the care bears on TV, but the idea of one of those printed on his chest was really kinda disturbing at twelve.

And so he was about to give up the avenue of reading when he came across one spell, buried deep in an old tome that had more dust on it than paper.

To Charm an Image with the effect of a spell.

That was more like it, Xander decided, and he dove into some of the coolest reading since he had discovered comic books when he was four.

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Life moved on at the Castle, however, and within a few days things were slowly coming back to normal as the school prepared for the next Quidditch match of the season. The Gryffs were playing this time around, against Slytherin, and that all but guaranteed an exciting match. Xander found himself pressed into attending as part of the Slytherin group, ostensibly to cheer on their new seeker, Draco Malfoy.

Much to her dismay, Xander had succeeded in guilt-tripping Wednesday into joining him; so that he'd have someone to talk to, err, talk at. Even if she never said a word back, Xander was pretty sure she'd be more intelligent company than most of the rest in his section.

The game got underway more or less normally, with the usual high flying and heavy handed play from the two antagonistic teams. Immediately the crowds were treated to a show of aerial acrobatics from Harry as to give them all shivers as he dodged a particularly insistent bludger that seemed bent on turning him to paste.

The game went on, scoring climbing, and it became clear to everyone save Madame Hooch apparently, that something was up with said bludger.

"Why don't they stop the game?" Wednesday asked, sounding only mildly curious. "As I am to understand, that thing is obviously been tampered with."

Xander shrugged, "Don't know."

"Maybe the Slytherin's have it right," She shrugged, "Cheating is part of the game. Curious, I had thought that these people believed otherwise."

Xander winced as one of the Gryff chasers took a hit from the other bludger while the twins were covering Harry. "That had to hurt."

"Indeed. It's a more interesting game than I had believed."

Xander chuckled dryly as the time out ran out, and the game began again. In seconds the bludger was chasing Harry down again as he swooped and twisted in the air to evade it. Xander wished that he could fly half as well as Harry, but knew that there was some serious talent packed into the scrawny kid and just had to admire it from the ground level.

"Why has he stopped?" Wednesday asked calmly.

Xander shrugged, then followed Harry's gaze to where Draco was floating on his broom, taunting Harry as the Golden Snitch floated just by his head. Xander groaned softly, shaking his head, and couldn't help but imagine just how scary the world would be if Draco Malfoy really was as good as he thought he was.

"He had better move now..." Wednesday shook her head mournfully as the bludger slashed out of nowhere, slamming Harry around, "Too late."

Harry careened about, heading for the ground in a hurry as Draco seemed to wake up. They two almost crashed in mid air, then Harry slammed into the soft ground and seemed to stick there. There was a hush as everyone watched the players rush his position, then Harry shifted and looked down at his hand in a daze. He lifted it slightly, then seemed to pass out as Wood arrived and held his hand up to show the Snitch secured in it.

The crowd screamed, but not as loud as Harry, who let out a wail that could only be of one dying it seemed. People hushed again as the teachers arrived, Lockhart leading the way with his wand already drawn.

"Step aside everyone!" Lockhart called dramatically, "Just a broken arm, I can fix it with a simple charm..."

Harry murmured something, shaking his head, and Lockhart laughed genially. "He doesn't know what he's saying, folks... one moment boy, I'll have it fixed in a jiff..."

The Professor leveled his wand at Harry's arm, began to flick it through the air as he opened his mouth to speak, and then screamed as his arm broke in three places. There was a shocked hush as Lockhart screamed pitifully on the ground next to Harry, who seemed to only want to move away from the Professor.

Xander, in the stands, meanwhile glanced at Wednesday who was sliding her wand away.

"Didn't know you cared about Harry," he said.

"I do not. I, however, care a great deal less about that fool."

"Fair enough. Teach me that one?"



Wednesday considered for a moment, then nodded curtly.

“Cool.”

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The excitement over the match only lasted a few hours, however, before it was eclipsed by something far more sinister.

The mysterious agent of the Chamber had struck again, and this time it wasn't a cat.

\*\*\*\*

The school descended into a panic that didn't abate for the rest of the week when the news that Colin Creevy had too been found petrified, his omnipresent camera glued to his face and an expression of naked fear visible on what could be seen of his features. Xander didn't know the kid at all, he was a muggle born Gryff, which made him pretty much the last person in the school who would be seen with a snake, but even so he felt bad for the guy. Everyone said that being petrified was like going to sleep, but it still was going to seriously suck since the mandrake root needed to cure them was several weeks or more from being full grown.

At their weekly session with Professor Hardy, however, more questions seemed to come up than were answered when Xander asked about the situation.

“They're waiting for what?” Hardy asked, blinking.

“The mandrakes are too young to mix the reversal potion,” Xander said, frowning. “Couldn't they just call a magical hospital? There are some of those, right?”

“There are.” Hardy nodded, frowning. “Someone is running around petrifying students?”

“Not someone.” Wednesday corrected, “Something. A serpent.”

The American professor raised an eyebrow, “A Basilisk? Surely not. You'd have seen deaths by now if you had one of those on the loose.”

Wednesday glared at the table, “That has bothered me as well.”

Xander shivered, “The lack of death is a good thing in my eye.”

“Quite.” Hardy just suppressed a shudder of his own.

Addamses were hard to deal with at the best of times. Their reactions to stress were legendary, however, and Hardy wanted nothing more than to get clear of the girl as soon as possible. He, however, had a responsibility to the two children in his care.

“No, it's not likely a basilisk.” He said after a moment, “More likely you've got one of those death eater twits, or one of their kids, playing around with black magic.”

Wednesday just shrugged.

“Still, I'll see what I can do. Read to chapter eight for our next session, please?” He said, nodding to the children. “Alright. Be on your way.”

After the two had left, Hardy withdrew a small compact from his pocket and flipped it open.

“Salem Head Office.” He said into the mirror.

The mirror buzzed, once and then twice, and then again and again for several moments. Finally it stopped and shimmered to show a tired looking face staring back out.

“Hardy? Do you know what time it is??”

“I'm at Hogwarts, Arthur.” Hardy said curtly. “They've had an incident.”

“Are the kids ok?”

“They're fine, but some local by the name of Creevy got himself petrified. Second incident this year.” Hardy explained.

“Oh lord. Some idiot playing with potions?”

“Maybe. I was thinking one of their terrorist cells; maybe the kid of a member,” Hardy admitted, “The Addams girl thinks it's a basilisk.”

Arthur shuddered visibly in the small mirror. “Sweet Franklin, I hope not.”

“I can't see it myself. You know how those things are, we'd be neck deep in bodies in a school this packed.”

Arthur nodded, “You're right, but don't underestimate the girl. Those Addams, well if there's one thing they know its dangerous magical creatures.”

“I'll bear it in mind, in the meantime could you put in a call to the CMDC for me; see if they've got any reversal potion on ice?”

“I’ll call them right away.” Arthur promised, “Are you pulling the kids out?”

“Not yet. Like I said, it looks like it’s those Death Muncher twits. Neither of our kids are targets for that sort of thing. Killing American wizards are a damned good way to bring the ICW into play, and they don’t want that level of pressure on them anymore than the British ministry does.”

“Agreed. Alright, keep a closer eye on Hogwarts for a while though. I’ll get a hold of the CMDC right away.”

“Thank you, Arthur.”

The dean of the Salem Academy nodded curtly and the mirror flashed once before becoming a simple makeup mirror again. Hardy flipped it closed, then decided to speak with the headmaster before he took a port key back to Durmstrang.

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The time sped past, and after a couple weeks the worst of the tensions began to calm down again, though the underlying tension just continued to grow. Potions class was increasingly a trial as the Gryffindor contingent tightened ranks, such that Xander was rarely able to speak with Hermione now.

He locked down, just doing his own work and basically keeping his head down while occasionally regretting coming back. Wednesday was growing more and more distant, not that most people could tell. He could see it though, and was worried about her, but the word unreachable had been invented with Wednesday Addams in mind.

Xander worried and tried to talk to her, but she just ignored him most of the time, and glared at him like he was some insignificant insect the remaining times. Finally he just gave up; sitting next to her silently and just hoped that she would talk to him.

Christmas was approaching when one morning, during mail call; a large eagle winged into the Hall and zeroed in on Xander’s position. It circled him once, dropped a letter, then left when it was sure Xander had picked it up.

“You got mail?” Draco sneered, “You never get mail.”

Xander shot him a glare, then turned the envelope over and read the address. “Weird.”

“What is it?”

Xander glanced over to where Daphne was leaning in his direction, obviously curious.

“I dunno.” Xander shrugged, tearing it open.

He pulled the pages open and started to read, his eyes almost crossing as he tried to understand the wording. “Whoa. I thought you only saw this kind of writing in bad lawyer movies.”

Daphne got curious and moved over to his side, “May I?”

“Huh? Sure.” Xander passed her the first page while he turned to one that had been handwritten and began to read.

A moment later Daphne looked up, confused, “This says that it’s an advance on royalty payments for a medical patent?”

Xander stared at her, “in MY name??”

Daphne nodded.

“Weird.” Xander shuffled through the pages, then blinked as he located the receipt. He stared, blanking out until Daphne leaned over his shoulder.

“Oh. My. God.” Daphne swallowed. “Is that real?”

“I don’t know. It says it’s a draft on a Gringotts of America account.” Xander said, paled. “That’s a LOT of zeroes.”

“What did you invent!?”

“I don’t KNOW!?”

The two of them tore through the papers, attracting attention from the rest of the table. Finally Daphne looked up, a page in her hand, frowning. “Xander... What is ‘Viagra’??”

Xander frowned, “I have no clue.”

“Here’s the patent,” Daphne said, handing it to him.

Xander took it, reading through it rapidly, and actually growing paler by the second until he matched Draco in color.

“I’m gonna KILL him.”

“Xander?”

"I'm gonna KILL HIM!" Xander snarled, startling basically the entire hall.

"Who?" Daphne demanded, totally lost.

"My Uncle! He did this!"

"He invented Viagra?"

"No! He sold my formula!"

Daphne looked confused, "And stole your money, right?"

"No, he put that in my name..." Xander said, tearing through more pages.

Daphne looked around, a little lost. "Uh... What's the problem then?"

"Problem!? Problem!? The problem is...." Xander looked around suddenly stopping as he realized everyone was staring at him.

He rapidly turned red enough to match a Weasley's hair, swallowing as he stared around.

"Nothing." He whispered. "No problem."

"But..."

"No problem!" Xander exclaimed, grabbing all the pages and crumpling them to his chest. "There's no problem!"

The school watched as Xander scuttled back from the table and then bolted from the hall, clutching the papers to his chest as he ran.

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Xander ran back to his room, barely able to breath, and slumped on his bed as he reread the patent application. He pulled out his potions book, flipping over to the failed experiments page, and his heart sank as he confirmed his worst fears. His Uncle, the man he trusted, had sold him out. Xander knew he'd never live this down, not when people found out what he'd invented. He didn't know much about sex, but he knew enough to know that this was gonna come back and bite him in the ass later.

It was a LOT of money, mind you.

Xander stared at the bank draft again, barely able to believe the zeroes after the one printed there. He checked again, confirming that it was indeed his name.

I'm gonna kill him.

Xander took a breath, shaking his head.

No. Death is too good for him.

I'm gonna **PRANK** him.

He had all year now to plan for it. But Sam WAS going to pay. Oh yes, he was going to pay.

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Rumors spread fast concerning Xander's explosion in the Great Hall, but since there had been several close witnesses, including Draco Malfoy, pretty much the entire school knew, or thought they knew, the real story behind the explosion. There were twisted versions in which Xander was flat broke now; his money stolen by an evil uncle, and others in which he was rich, the sole heir to an uncle's fortune, but basically everyone knew that an Uncle and Money were involved.

Thanks in part to Daphne they knew it was Money with a capital 'M' as well, but Xander didn't really blame her since she had been trying to curb some of Draco's more ludicrous stories. As a story that approximated the real one began to filter out, Xander found himself the target of various levels of interest from students who had ignored him before.

After barely evading the attentions of a fifth year girl, Xander ducked into the library the next afternoon and was pleased to see both Hermione and Wednesday at their usual table.

"Hey," He said, smiling pleasantly as he sat down.

"Hey."

Hermione smiled back.

"Hello."

Wednesday did not.

That was ok, of course, she never did. Xander rubbed the back of his head, shaking slightly. "Man this is nuts."

"Are you alright?" Hermione asked, frowning, "There are stories all over school about you."

"Yeah, I know." Xander sighed, "The latest ones are closest to the truth, I guess."

"You invented a medical potion and have been paid a fortune for it?" Hermione raised her eyebrows.

"Ah... yeah, those ones." Xander admitted, "Though I wouldn't call it 'medical' exactly."

"What is it??" Hermione perked up, bouncing a little.

"Please," Xander begged, "Don't ask. Please."

"But..." Hermione pouted. "But why?"

"Cause I didn't do it on purpose, Herms," Xander muttered, "And really, it was a humiliating lab accident, that's all."

"What would you call it?" Wednesday asked.

"Huh?" Xander and Hermione both looked at her, confused.

"You said you wouldn't call it medical exactly. What would you call it?"

"Judging by my Uncle?" Xander replied sourly, "Recreational."

Hermione screwed up her face in confusion as even Wednesday looked a little at sea by the comment.

"Please, just don't ask anymore, ok?" Xander begged again, "I can't tell it to you two, it's too embarrassing."

Wednesday raised an eyebrow, looking over at Hermione, "Now I simply HAVE to know."

"Me too." Hermione happily agreed.

Xander moaned, slumping at the table, covering his head with his hands.

"Show us the patent."

"What?" He looked up, peeking at Wednesday from under his arm.

"Of course!" Hermione squealed, "You don't have to tell us, just show us the patent, we should be able to work it out."

"You think?" Xander asked doubtfully. "I don't know, it's pretty complicated."

Wednesday gave him a glare that would melt steel, while Hermione perked up even more at the word complicated. Xander sighed, drawing the papers from under his robe.

Wednesday raised her eyebrow again, "You have it on you?"

"Leave this in \*Slytherin\* territory??" Xander asked incredulously.

The dark girl tipped her head to acknowledge the point, taking the papers from him as she and Hermione moved closer together to pour over them. Xander sighed, leaving them to it, and opened up the Grimoire to work on some of his other personal projects.

That was what he loved about this school more than anything else, Xander had found. The fact that the subject matter was really only a base for doing your own thing. Magic was all about creativity, working with things only comic book writers ever got to play with in the 'real' world. The classes were important, but they were just prep courses for living day to day in the magical world. It was what students could do when they moved PAST the classes that was utterly and totally cool.

Xander found that he loved the idea of Spell Crafting and its related spheres of magic, which really meant he had to learn pretty much every sort of magic he could since spell crafting, artificing, and enchanting all required firsthand knowledge of a vast array of spells.

Right now he was working on the arithmetic formulas for charging a rune from a caster's own magical core. He'd been able to lift large sections of the work from the rune and warding work done by Harrow and Jacobs had done for him at the start of the year. Most of it was pretty similar, actually, since he was working on what was, essentially a ward you could draw on your own body.

It wasn't quite as simple as that, though, Xander had found quickly. There were warnings about doing it, actually, since the runes would permanently lower the wearer's magical core. Additionally, wards were 'always on' so to speak and that would make all sorts of daily experiences rather inconvenient. Xander thought that those two things were the reason very little had been done in this area of magic, at least as far as he could tell.

The Dark Mark was a piece of work for much of the same reasons. It actually put a constant drain on anyone who wore it, albeit a very slight drain. Xander rather suspected that the drain was bigger than Evans guessed, though, cause he knew that if he was going to go the evil overlord route he would put a tap into the mark and use the magic drained for himself.

That wasn't what he was working on, of course. Xander just tended to have giggling fits at the thought, and he felt he needed some cheering up. He was trying to put a valve on the charging rune, and create a magical analogue to a battery so that the runes would only draw power when they were charging, and would shut off when full.

The math, however, was a nightmare.

He knew he had to learn it, he desperately WANTED to learn it, but Xander had a sinking sensation that it was just beyond him. Beyond him now, and maybe forever.

"What's wrong?"

Xander looked up, realizing that he had been gnawing on his fingers as he scribbled down another attempt at solving the formula he was working on.

"Nothing." He muttered.

Wednesday merely stared at him until he broke.

"It's the math." He sighed, "I don't get the math."

Hermione looked up from where she was pouring over the patent information, ears perking at the mention of math. "What math? We don't have any classes in Arithmancy yet."

"I know, I'm trying to figure it out anyway." Xander muttered.

"Let us see." Wednesday said, reaching out a hand.

He sighed and handed the page over, on one level happy to be distracting them from the patent information, but on the other a little embarrassed that he needed help. The two read his notes for a long moment before saying anything.

"Xander, some of this is incredibly advanced." Hermione blinked, looking up.

"Yeah, I know, I lifted stuff from a warding scheme." Xander replied, "I'm trying to adapt it to create a magical battery."

"This will not work," Wednesday said after a moment, "The warding formulas are not designed to tap a person's magical core."

Xander grimaced, glancing at Hermione, who nodded.

"She's right." Hermione frowned, "The arithmetically important numbers are totally different when dealing with a human. What are you trying to charge?"

"Nothing in particular, yet," Xander sighed, shaking his head. "I just want to be able to charge **something**, and stop after the charge is full."

"Won't that drain off the magical energy when it stops?" Hermione frowned, looking up, "I read that runes are constantly charging."

"Yeah, but that's when the battery comes in," Xander said, "We should be able to store power; I mean it can't be that hard? Normal folk invented batteries ages ago."

"Over two thousand years ago, actually." Wednesday said, "The original versions were used for limited electroplating on ancient jewelry."

"See?" Xander said, "If normal people can do it, we should be able to."

"It's not the same thing," Hermione complained, "electricity isn't stored, exactly. Batteries store chemical energy and then turn it INTO electricity. You can't just store chemicals that turn metal into magic, Xander."

Xander sighed as Wednesday nodded.

"She is correct," The dark girl replied, "It will not work."

Xander finally gave up, nodding, "Alright. Thanks for the help."

"I'm sorry, Xander," Hermione apologized. "I wish I could tell you what you want to know."

"No, it's ok." Xander forced a grin he really didn't feel. "I needed to know before I wasted more time on it."

"You're trying to work too far ahead," Hermione stated, hesitating.

Xander snorted, "Says the girl who's already read up to, what? Sixth year books? Seventh?"

"Fifth." She corrected, irritated. "I'm working on sixth and seventh this summer."

Xander chuckled, a little more real this time, and grinned at her, "Don't change, Herms. I need my Willow Fix."

She scowled at him, "I don't think I like the sound of that."

He just smirked and took back his papers, incidentally retrieving the patent information at the same time. He glanced longingly at the worthless formulas for a moment then slid the pages into the back of the Grimoire under 'Failed Ideas' and closed the book with a sigh.



# Shadow Council : Preludes Book One

## The Snake and the Lion (part 2)

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Class was buzzing later that day when Xander attended potions, but thankfully he was entirely off the minds of his classmates. No, they were now excited about the upcoming Dueling Club that had been announced. Xander was mildly interested himself, as he knew a couple spells for that sort of thing already, but was still a little down over his failure with the formulas and wasn't paying much attention.

The class progressed as normal until towards the end when Crabbe's cauldron exploded, covering much of the class, Xander included, in an engorgement potion similar to the twins ton tongue toffee, only with none of the precision. Xander found himself with a giant left arm, and ear that was flopping down like something out of Dumbo as much of the class wailed under similar afflictions.

"Every one calm down!" Snape instantly yelled, using a sonorous charm on his throat. It got their attention and they all stilled, "If you've been splattered with the potion come to the front for a reversal draught."

Everyone filed down, Xander included, and were quickly set right as Snape fumed and stomped up to Crabbe's cauldron. He tipped it up and his eyes almost literally flared when a burned out firecracker fell clear of the pot.

Xander winced, every safety lesson he'd learned while working on his own was just screaming at him that he'd gotten off really lucky. He'd been closer to Crabbe than he really wanted to think about.

"When I find the person who did this," Snape hissed, "I **WILL** see them expelled."

The dark potions master looked around, eyes lighting on where Harry was sitting and resting there for a long moment. Finally, after the moment passed, Snape spun away. "Class dismissed."

Xander glanced at Harry, but shrugged and put it down to Snape's apparent hatred of the guy. He'd never done anything that stupid before, at least not with no sign of heroic sacrifice to be found. Xander glared at the cauldron for a moment and went over the ingredients for the standard engorgement potion in his mind.

Luckily there was nothing flammable or particularly unstable. Xander shuddered at what would have happened if it had been either his, or the twins, specific versions of the same potion. He quietly packed up his stuff and filed out with the rest.

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Xander met up with Wednesday that night, two among the many students who had elected to see what the new 'Dueling Club' was all about. They made their way to the appointed place, noting the crowd, and took over a section in the corner away from the worst of it.

"This should be cool."

"I hope it's not some inane club intended to promote Professor Lockhart," Wednesday said dryly.

"Nah." Xander shook his head, thinking about the Defense Professor. "The guy's a coward. No way he'd put himself at the end of anyone else's wand."

"People do strange things in pursuit of obsession."

Xander was about to respond when he noted the door open and his stomach dropped as none other than Lockhart himself came prancing in.

"Crap."

"Indeed."

The two of them sat through the Professor's normal long winded introduction of his favorite person, himself, their expectations dropping by the second. He finally nodded across the hall with a flash of a smile, "And just in case things get out of hand, I've invited the school nurse to be here to help out. Please, a little polite applause for Madame Pomfrey."

The entire room applauded, considerably louder than the sparse reception Lockhart had received, which earned a frown from the toothy professor. He shook it off quickly though, inviting the school nurse up to the front.

"Now, perhaps we should show the children what we'll be practicing," he bowed with a flourish as the matronly woman stepped up, lips puckered in a frown, then winked at the students. "Have no fear; you'll still have your nurse when we're done."

Xander rolled his eyes, then did a double take and rolled them again when he noted Hermione staring with a glaze in her eyes as she watched the Professor. Wednesday watched his gaze and nodded minutely.

"Yes. She's still infatuated with him."

"Still?" Xander blinked, "How long has that been going on?"



Boys.” Wednesday muttered, shaking her head. “If you weren’t so tied up in your own little games, you would have noticed it at the beginning of term.”

Xander frowned. That long?

“Wow.” He finally said, then frowned, “Why?”

“I’m sure I have no idea.”

They were distracted then as Lockhart and Pomfrey stood across from each other on the platform, wands out.

“On three then,” Lockhart chuckled, waving his wand around carelessly. “One... two... three!”

They both snapped their wands forward, snapping out the incantation in sharp tones.

“Expelliarmus!”

Jets of light crossed the platform, striking each of the adults, yet while Lockhart’s arm snapped out wildly and his wand flew across the room, Pomfrey managed to hold onto hers. There was a quiet moment, then Lockhart smiled widely.

“There you have it, children. The disarming curse and I kept my word you see... took it easy on the lovely lady. Thank you so much for your help, madam.”

He poured on the charm and the nurse blushed a little in response.

“Not at all, professor.”

“Alright, into pairs then.” Lockhart said, “Practice the spell as you saw, curse to disarm ONLY!”

Xander glanced at Wednesday, who nodded practically imperceptibly, and the two of them cut a bit of space out for themselves. They were soon tossing the curse back and forth, with varying degrees of success, as they practiced the spell. It wasn’t long before a disturbance across the room distracted them, and everyone else, however.

“I said disarm only! Disarm only!”

They stopped, glancing over as Lockhart rushed into the middle of what looked like a brawl between Ron Weasley and Draco Malfoy. As he broke it up, Draco said something they couldn’t hear from across the room and Ron turned ever redder than his hair.

Ron snapped his wand out, yelling, “Take this you turd!”

The spell charged through the Gryffs wand, but something went wrong as it had all session and the wand misfired. A sparkling pulse of magic exploded out the side and drove straight through the crowd and at Xander. He snapped his wand up in response, barely able to think, “Protego!”

A thin, barely formed shield pulsed into being, intercepting the spell before it could hit him, but the power of his shield was too little and it burst an instant later. It had the effect, however, of deflecting the spell to one side and directly into the unusually surprised face of Wednesday Addams.

The Addams Scion gasped in shock rather than anything else as her head snapped back, raven hair haloing around her as she staggered back a step and went down to one knee. Xander lunged in her direction, sliding to his knees at her side.

“Are you ok!?”

Wednesday glared evenly at him and Xander grimaced to see her nose had grown several times its proper size. Several people were giggling madly around him as Madame Pomfrey pushed through.

“It’ll be fine, my dear, I’ll have that fixed in just a...”

“I’m fine.” Wednesday said coldly, waving the nurse aside. The giggling stopped as several people, including Pomfrey, gasped as her nose visibly began to shrink again. In a few seconds the enlarged nose had returned to normal and the nurse was stammering to explain it.

Wednesday ignored her, however, as did Xander. The duo focused on Ron, who was staring with an interesting look of horror on his face as the terror of the Ravenclaw second years and a Snake stalked in his direction. Before they got halfway there Harry had moved in beside Ron, stepping a little forward to protect the red head.

“It was an accident.”

“Accidents happen a lot around him lately.” Xander growled.

“It’s not my fault!” Ron blurted, “My wand...”

“Should be replaced.” Xander ground out.

Ron flushed, “I... I haven’t been able to get to Diagon Alley and...”

“Need I remind you that accidents can happen... to anyone?” Wednesday asked darkly, causing several people around her to pale.

Hermione, swallowing, stepped in between them. “He didn’t mean it, really...”

“He’s a menace, Hermione.” Xander muttered, then shook his head.

Wednesday glanced at him and seemed to come to a conclusion. “Indeed. Come, Alexander. I think we’ve learned what little there was to learn here.”

The two turned and marched out of the room as people moved out of their way.

Harry looked over at Ron and let out a sigh, “You need a new wand, mate.”

Ron just looked a little sick, but didn’t argue. Hermione looked torn for a moment then looked back at her friends. “I have to go for a minute.”

She rushed off, leaving them confused.

“Girls.” Ron muttered, shrugging.

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That evening, after the dueling club had let out with no further incidents, Ron and Harry were making their way back to the Gryffindor tower when a shadowed form stepped out into their path and stopped them. Both went for their wands as they recognized Xander.

“You want trouble, Harris you snake; we’ll give it to you.” Ron threatened, his wand wobbling a little as he shook it.

“Weasley, the safest place in this entire school is staring down the business end of your wand.” Xander countered, rolling his eyes.

Ron flushed his hand shaking even more, but before he could do anything Xander threw something at him. He caught it on reflex, dropping his wand in the process, then winced as it hit the ground.

“Yeah. That’s not a great reflex either, Weasley.” Xander rolled his eyes. “Might want to work on that.”

Ron flushed, then glanced down at the object Xander had thrown him. “What’s this?”

He shook it, then his eyes widened as he recognized the sound of Galleons rattling inside. He looked up, confused.

“I want to buy your wand.”

“What??” Ron blurted, “Why? It’s broken!”

“Exactly. I want to find out a bit on how they’re made,” Xander said, “And I’m sure as hell not going to take **mine** apart. Yours is already broken, you need a new one and I need one I don’t care about. There’s fifteen galleons there. That should cover a new wand.”

Ron swallowed, looking down at the money pouch. “I...”

Xander just waved off what he was saying, already moving to leave. “Think about it. When I get back from the holidays you either give me my money back, or you give me your old wand. I don’t **really** care which, but if you ‘accidentally’ curse Wednesday or Hermione again I’m going to take it out of your hide as if you did it on purpose.”

Ron didn’t get another comment out before Xander was gone. He looked over at Harry, face confused. “What do I do, mate?”

Harry was torn, uncertain what to say. His best friend was notoriously uptight about money, something Harry had yet to find a way around. If he accepted this from Harris, well all the better in Harry’s opinion. Harry didn’t want to make it seem like he was trying to encourage Ron to accept charity or anything though.

“Well, fifteen galleons is probably a little above market for a broken wand,” Harry allowed after a moment.

“Yeah,” Ron mumbled, sagging a little.

“On the other hand, I haven’t seen too many around.” Harry said, thinking about it. “What do wizards do with broken wands anyway?”

Ron seemed a little surprised, “Well... throw them out I suppose. Doesn’t happen a lot, though. Most wizards take good care of their wands.”

“Well, then it wouldn’t be easy for him to get even a broken wand, would it?” Harry said reasonably. “I think he knows it’s a bit over the top for price, but I expect he doesn’t care.”

Ron nodded sourly, “He got all that money, right? Rumors are all over school.”

“Not what I meant, mate.” Harry corrected, “You hit his friend with a curse...”

“That was an accident!”

“I know that, mate,” Harry said placatingly. “The point is, what would you pay to protect Ginny? Or Hermione?”

You think he doesn't really care about the broken wand?" Ron asked, a twisted look on his face.

"Probably not a lot," Harry admitted, "But who knows? Now that I think about it, I wouldn't mind figuring out how a wand is put together myself."

Ron looked at his friend like he was a little batty, "it's a wand, Harry. What's so special about it?"

Harry sighed. Sometimes he really didn't understand people who were raised in the magical world. "Ron, just cause you don't care how it works doesn't mean others feel the same."

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The school's fall session ended shortly after that and Xander met Wednesday at the train as they had agreed.

"Ready?" She asked him as he approached.

"For another holiday with your family? No, but I'll muddle through," Xander grinned.

The dark girl almost smiled at that, not quite giving away her amusement. The Addamses were not as oblivious as it often appeared to outsiders. She, and they, knew that their way of life was far from the accepted norm. They mostly just didn't care. They lived as they chose and would not apologize for it, even by way of explaining themselves to outsiders.

Few such outsiders voluntarily exposed themselves to further contact after the first, however. She was impressed that Xander was coming, even though she knew that his options were limited. International port keys weren't cheap and, while he did have money now, she didn't think it had quite settled in to his way of thinking.

Still, he could stay at Hogwarts easily enough, yet she had a distinct feeling that he wanted to come with her. The year before he had honestly seemed to enjoy his time, mostly, and he seemed to be looking forward to more.

She just shrugged, "Father is meeting us in London. Apparently the headmaster asked him not to come to the school again... he scared Mr. Filch."

Xander snickered. It figured that Filch would be scared of anyone who seemed to agree with the caretaker's own suggestions concerning the ancient torture devices he was constantly jabbering about.

"Well then, let's catch that train." Xander said with a smile, "We wouldn't want to strain poor Filch's heart any more by missing the ride and making Mr. Addams come fetch us."

"Certainly not." Wednesday agreed solemnly as they made their way to the train.

Xander almost would have sworn he heard the tiniest hint of a giggle in her voice. Almost.

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"Alexander, my boy!" Gomez Addams boomed cheerfully as Xander and Wednesday stepped off the train, "And my darling Wednesday, we have missed you at home."

"Father." Wednesday nodded, smiling at the exuberant man who was attracting attention all across platform nine and three quarters, "Mother isn't here?"

"She and Thing are seeing to our temporary home."

"The castle again, Sir?" Xander asked.

Gomez glared at him for a long moment.

"Sorry, Gomez." Xander corrected himself with a slight flush.

The wide smile was back in an instant as Gomez swept them both up and hustled them along, "Not this time, my boy. We tried, but some movie company had the place leased. It didn't seem right to push them out for a family vacation."

"Oh?" Xander said, curious but mostly polite.

"Quite. No, we've chosen a place a little closer this time." Gomez stated, grinning widely. "It took some doing, lad, but we've acquired a lovely little chateau right here in London."

"In London?" Xander frowned, thinking, "I didn't think there were any castles in London."

"Your education is frightfully lacking, my boy. The Tower, of course." Gomez winked.

"Tower?" Xander kept racking his brain. The only tower he knew of in London was, "The Tower of London?"

"Precisely!"

Xander frowned again, still thinking very hard. "I'm pretty sure they don't rent that out."

"Course they don't," Gomez replied, "Dreadfully difficult to get a place there too, but with the right application of money, magic, and, well, Charm... anything is possible, as you'll learn. Come now, here's Lurch with the car."

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They were going to be arrested.

That was the only thing that Xander could think as the car pulled up in front of the London monument, and Gomez quickly jumped out and dragged Wednesday and himself along.

"Come along now," The man grinned, leading them toward the old castle set on the river. "Lurch will see to the bags."

It was an incongruous sight, Xander decided as he followed out of morbid curiosity. He was waging with himself on how close they would get before being challenged, but was surprised when Gomez led him both to a slit in the walls that had no guards.

He looked around, curious, "Shouldn't there be guards here? There are everywhere else?"

"Wizard entrance, my boy." Gomez chuckled, "Haven't bothered with guards here in almost twelve years."

"Oh." Xander said, clutching Fenrir to his chest as they moved through the walls. "Then why...?"

"Crown jewels, of course. They were worried Voldy Thingamajig would steal them, took the guards off the day after the celebrations ended." Gomez said with a shrug, "Ministry is a touch weird, if you ask me."

There was a mind numbing statement. Gomez Addams considered someone a touch weird.

"Ah, here we are." Gomez said, stepping out into a hallway that was as dark and dank as the Hogwarts dungeons. "The Royal Wizard's Suite."

"Royal??"

"Of course." Wednesday spoke up for the first time, "The British monarchy has always had a Wizard to attend them, since Merlin."

"They don't use these rooms, now, of course." Gomez grinned, "And the Wizarding world doesn't have much care for them, which is why we were able to procure their use for the holidays."

"But... isn't this sort of, historical?"

"Alexander," Wednesday said flatly, "How many wizards do you know who care about the 'muggle' side of the world, even the royalty?"

She had a point, Xander supposed, but it still felt... disrespectful to be walking around here like they owned the place, let alone living here for a couple weeks.

"Precisely." Gomez said, "To most wizards this is a dirty little secret you don't talk about in polite company."

"They seem to respect Merlin." Xander said, frowning.

"It's always easy to respect a giant, my boy," Gomez said, oddly solemn in that moment, "no matter what his quirks. Especially if he's safely dead and not around to embarrass you anymore."

Xander shook his head.

"So on the real world side of this," he said, "The Tower is a historical landmark, protected and guarded... and on the magic side... what? You can rent a room?"

"Not quite so crass," a new voice entered the conversation, and they looked up to see Mortisha approaching, "however that mostly covers things."

"Tish," Gomez smiled widely. "I've missed you."

"You were only gone a few hours."

"A few hours of eternity, my love."

Mortisha smiled a hint of amusement in her look but mostly just adoration, "Mi Amour."

Gomez growled, shaking his head from side to side before looking up at the ceiling and letting out a howl. "Tish! That's French!"

The man rushed across, plucking up his wife's arm, and began to kiss passionately along as she patiently let him indulge for a moment. Then with a wave of her hand she gently pushed him away, "Gomez, later. The children."

"What?" Gomez looked up, lost and confused. His expression cleared up and he smiled regretfully, "Of course, my love."

"Wednesday," Mortisha nodded to her daughter.

"Mother."

“How was school?”

“Fine.” Wednesday replied, “Alexander invented a potion and was paid a small fortune for it.”

“Really?” Mortisha looked over at Xander, “What kind of potion?”

Xander turned beat red, alternating between glaring at Wednesday and swallowing hard. Wednesday, of course, didn’t blink in response. “I… uh, well it was really an accident, so it’s not a big deal…”

“He won’t tell anyone,” Wednesday said, “I believe he’s embarrassed.”

“Embarrassed?? Nonsense!” Gomez declared, “You got paid, right lad? That’s the American way, how could you be embarrassed?”

Xander shook his head, clutching Fenrir so tightly the pup yelped.

Mortisha cocked her head slightly, eyes focusing on the dog. “Is that Fenrir?”

“Uh, yes ma’am.”

“How curious.”

Xander blinked, “What?”

“He hasn’t changed in a year.” Mortisha said, sounding puzzled.

“By Jove, you’re right.” Gomez said with a crooked grin as he drew out a cigar. “What sort of dog is that anyway?”

“He is a Dire Wolf.” Wednesday supplied.

“Wolf!?” Xander yelped, holding the puppy out from him and staring at it. Fenrir barked once and panted back at him. “Why didn’t you tell me!?”

“I believed that you knew.” Wednesday said dryly, “You did choose him, after all.”

Gomez snapped his fingers, “Dire wolf, of course! That explains it!”

“It does?” Mortisha asked, sounding confused.

“Doesn’t it?” Gomez asked.

“Explains what!?” Xander asked, hopelessly lost.

“I don’t know, my boy,” Gomez admitted with a grin. “What does it explain, Tish?”

“Really, Gomez, doesn’t it seem odd that the puppy hasn’t changed in a year?”

“Now that you mention it, that is passing strange.” Gomez frowned, “I don’t know much about puppies though, creepy little things.”

Fenrir barked once, then growled at Gomez.

“Gomez!” Mortisha chastised him, “Be polite. Fenrir is Alexander’s guest.”

“Of course, you’re right, Cadida. I sometimes lose all manners,” Gomez sighed, then looked evenly at the puppy. “I apologize.”

The dog seemed to consider than, then yipped once and turned away.

Mortisha examined the dog intently for a moment, “Even a Dire Wolf ages far faster than a human, he should be near full growth by now. How curious.”

“Is something wrong with my Dog?” Xander asked, voice worried.

“I don’t know.” Mortisha admitted, considering it. “I am hardly an expert, but he seems fit and hale. Gomez, what do you think?”

The Addams patriarch considered for a moment, then held up a finger. “Cousin Itt.”

“Of course, darling, you’re a genius.”

“Cousin Who?”

“No, Itt. Who is the family Doctor.” Gomez said, shaking his head. “Unreliable fellow. Never around when you want him, can’t get rid of him when you don’t.”

“Gomez.”

“I’m sorry, Tish, but that fellow is a little strange if you ask me.” Gomez replied, shaking his head.

Mortisha sighed, shaking her head slightly, "I'll put in a call to Cousin Itt. He's a fully certified Master in Care of Magical Creatures."

"Family over achiever, that one," Gomez confirmed. "He'll know what's up."

Xander nodded hesitantly.

"Where are Uncle Fester and Pugsley?" Wednesday asked, now that the issue of the dog had been settled for the moment.

"Sulking." Mortisha said with the slightest hint of exasperation.

"Poor boys," Gomez said with a shrug and a wave of his cigar, "but what can you do? The rental agreement was quite clear, no explosives in the tower."

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Xander settled into his room that night, thinking about what had been said about Fenrir. The call had been put into Cousin Itt, or that, or whatever his name was and they said that it would all work out, but he was a little worried about the pup.

"Are you ok, boy?" Xander asked, looking at the dog as he sat on his bed.

Fenrir yipped once, sounding happy to Xander.

"So why aren't you growing?" Xander asked rhetorically.

Fenrir barked again, several times, leaving Xander in no greater clarity than before. Xander sighed, throwing himself back on the bed and stared up at the ceiling. He hoped his dog was ok.

There was a draft then, and a chill and Fenrir began to growl softly from the floor.

Xander sat up fast, eyes wide as he looked around and snagged his wand from the end table. "What is, boy?"

Fenrir continued to growl, and Xander got his feet, wand leading the way as he looked at the wall the dog was focused on. Xander didn't see anything, and leaned in slowly.

"I don't see any- AHHH!" Xander yelped falling back on his ass as a ghostly shape came through the wall, holding its head in her arms. He scrambled backward for a moment, holding his chest, then glared at the form. "You scared the crap out of me, Lady! What the hell!?"

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Narcissa Malfoy nodded to her son as he entered the manor, smiling warmly. "Welcome home, Draco."

"Thank you, mother." The blond boy said, dropping his school trunk to the floor. "Dobby!"

The house elf popped into being, flinching back from the boy, "Yes, Master Draco?"

"Put my trunk in my room, and mind you don't go looking through my things." Draco growled.

"Right away, Master."

The elf and trunk popped away as Narcissa sipped her tea. "Hard semester?"

"No more than usual." Draco said, slumping into his chair.

"Sit straight, Draco," She corrected instantly. "Slovenly posture is for your private rooms, we entertain here. You do not wish to get into that habit."

Draco sighed and shifted until he was sitting up, "Of course."

"You seem perturbed."

"No, not really. Just thinking about things."

"Such as?"

Draco glanced around, as if looking for someone. "Where's Father?"

"Lucius is at the Ministry, he won't be home early."

Draco nodded and sighed, giving Narcissa a clue to what was on his mind. Something he didn't want his father to know about, at least not just now.

"Mother..." The boy suddenly seemed many years younger as he hesitantly spoke up, "I... Why are purebloods better than mudbloods?"

Narcissa raised her eyebrow, both eyes widening in surprise. "Pardon me?"

"I mean, I know we are!" Draco said quickly, hands up as if to stave off punishment, "But I need to know why."

"I am curious," Narcissa said after a moment, "What brings this up?"

"One of my housemates challenged me to answer that question," Draco admitted, "And I still can't. Not the way he wants me to. I know that the reasons have to be there, we ARE better than they are, but I don't know what they are."

She smiled slowly, "Very good, Draco. You're learning to question, be careful however... your father is not the sort who likes to be questioned."

Draco nodded, swallowing.

"But... we are better, right?"

Narcissa smiled a little wider, "Yes Draco. Purebloods are, at least to a degree, superior."

"So... what makes us better?"

"There are many ways to answer that question, most of which I will tell you now, your father does not understand, nor does he care to." She told her son. "I heard a word recently that describes muggle borns far better than the term you tend to prefer. Not mudbloods, Draco... Wild bloods."

Narcissa was shocked when Draco hissed and grimaced at the term. "What's wrong?"

"That's what Harris, the housemate I was talking about, calls them."

Harris. So that was the one who had the book, or it seemed likely. Interesting.

"Well they are," Narcissa replied, then shrugged, "Or at least those who are not descended from a squib line are. Consider a well bred hound, Draco, and compare it to a fox. The fox is a wild blood, the hound a pureblood. You can, to a certain degree, predict how a Hound will perform based on its bloodline. You can even, if you are very careful, influence how a hound's blood line will develop."

"And... that's good?"

Narcissa smiled thinly, "Sic a hound on a fox and see which one is more likely to come out on top. The fox is generally quite lucky to escape with its life."

Draco nodded slowly, understanding at least slightly.

"There are more factors, however. Blood traits, such as Speaker talents, follow a bloodline. Muggleborn almost never develop even the weakest of these," Narcissa continued. "Parseltongue is a known trait of Salazar Slytherin's line, for example."

"The Dark Lord." Draco said, nodding.

"Precisely. Rowena's bloodline has been rumored to have strong instances of Second Sight; perhaps ironic since Rowena herself was a powerful detractor of seers and the like," Narcissa said, "though it's perhaps because she herself suffered from an uncontrolled gift. Each of the founder's lines had powerful gifts, as do many of the older pure blood lines."

"What were the others?"

"Gryffindor supposedly had a very advanced instance of Mage Sight," Narcissa said thoughtfully, "And Helga was a powerful emotive caster. The Malfoy line has begun to show hints of several talents, but nothing steady quite yet."

"What about the Blacks?" Draco asked eager to hear about his own heritage.

"The Black line," Narcissa paused, sighing, "The Blacks were known for several uncommon talents, but the signature trait of the Blacks was a form of Mage Sense similar to Gryffindor's Mage Sight."

"What can you do with it?"

"Those with a strong gift could feel raw magic," She told him, "including wards, natural lines of ley magic, and conjunctions of such. Many Blacks took on duties as curse breakers, and were unparalleled at it."

"Could I...?"

"It's unlikely, Draco," She told him gently. "That was a trait of the main Black line; you're from a cadet branch. I'm afraid that the wars have all but destroyed that particular gift."

For the first time in a long time, Narcissa could see her son really thinking about things instead of parroting what her husband had told him. It wasn't that she disagreed with her husband's position, but she knew that blind faith often led to a dead end and was pleased that Draco was considering the ideas for himself.

"There is one thing to remember, Draco." She said after a moment.

"Yes, mother?"

The fox is a wild blood, as I said... but never forget, so is the wolf." Narcissa told her son, "And a wise hound will think twice before stalking a wolf."

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Wednesday Addams paused outside the door to Xander's room, and eyebrow going up as she heard conversation from within. She knocked after a moment and waited until she heard Xander's voice inviting her in.

Inside the room she was only mildly surprised to see Xander leaning back on his bed, chatting with a headless ghost.

"Hey, Wednesday," He greeted her with a grin, "This is Anne."

The ghost tilted slightly at the waist, not a bow but a greeting. "Good evening, young Wednesday."

"You're Majesty," Wednesday returned, with a respectful tilt of her head.

"Majesty?" Xander blinked.

"Boleyn, I presume," Wednesday directed at the ghost.

"Indeed."

"She is a former wife of Henry the Eighth, and one time Queen over England." Wednesday said to Xander, slightly disdainful of his lack of awareness.

Xander grinned, shrugging as he caught the tone, "hey, what do I know about England? I'm a Cali boy, remember? And it's not like they bother teaching us anything about real history in Hogwarts."

Wednesday had to concede the point, "True."

"Anyway, we've been having a nice conversation... at least we have since my heart started again," Xander said with a playful scowl.

"Must I apologize once more?" The ghost asked, her eyes rolling as she held her head against her side. "Few are the living who can see me, and even fewer are those who can do so consistently as you two do."

"We aren't normal." Wednesday replied dryly.

"I had divined as much." Anne replied in kind. "Though we did officially repudiate witchcraft, I was aware of the Royal Wizard young one. You are of his sort, I assume?"

"We are."

"Fascinating. I have not seen any like you before, and I have been wandering these halls for many years."

"You likely have," Wednesday corrected, "However were likely ignored. Ghosts are commonplace for those of us who live in the magical world, and this building holds little interest for wizards. So those who did bother to come here would have no particular interest in yourself."

The ghostly woman winced, "I suppose that makes some sense."

"No, it does not," Wednesday replied evenly, "however it makes as much sense as anything else done by men... wizard or otherwise."

Xander got a sinking sensation when the ghost laughed bitterly at the joke, and the two began to chatter about how oblivious his gender was. That was his queue to escape and he quietly sidled up to the door before bolting down the hallway. No way was he hanging around a ghost of some woman who got her head cut off and Wednesday Addams when they started talking about men.

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He was congratulating himself on the escape as he explored a little when he heard sounds from ahead and decided to investigate. Xander made his way into a large setting room and noticed that Gomez had apparently taken the room over, having setup a large train set. Xander idly walked around it, checking out the impressive layout as he did.

"Ah, Alex my boy, how are your rooms?"

"Inhabited."

"Pardon?" Gomez frowned curiously, teeth clenched on his ever present cigar.

"Wednesday and Anne Boleyn are complaining to each other about men," Xander explained. "Given that one had her head chopped off by order of her husband, and the other is Wednesday, I did the smart thing."

"Ran for your life," Gomez nodded, "Good job, lad."

"What's with the trains?"



Every man needs a hobby, Alex,” Gomez grinned, waving Xander over. “Have a look.”

Xander did so, marveling at the detail of the set. It really was a pretty spectacular layout. He peered closer as one of the trains moved past, and tilted his head slightly as he could have SWORN that there was a man looking out at him.

“Uh...” Xander held his hand up questioningly.

“Not the same though,” Gomez sighed, setting down the controls. “No explosives clause... it’s a travesty.”

“Um...” Xander shifted, trying to see if he could spot the train’s passenger again.

“Terribly annoying. Frightfully unfair.” Gomez went on, pacing around the table. He suddenly stopped and shook his head, “Listen to me, here I am in lovely historic London, in one of the most haunted places in the world, and I’m pouting like Fester and Pugsley over the lack of explosives.”

Gomez laughed, “I’m truly a spoiled American, Alex. Can’t live without the modern pleasures. Well, time to correct that.”

“Uh, right...” Xander said, eyes still following the train.

“I think a little old world entertainment is in order. You game, my boy!?” Gomez bellowed.

Xander blinked, then shrugged, eyes still on the train. “Uh, sure.”

“Excellent. En Guard!!”

“What?” Xander snapped up, looking around in time to see a sword coming his way. “Ahhh!”

He caught it on reflex, but unfortunately not by the hilt. The blade bit into his palm, blood running freely as Xander fumbled it twice, cutting his fingers as well, then got a grip on the hilt before the weapon hit the ground. “Ow!”

He looked up, eyes betrayed by the injury Gomez had inflicted, just in time to see the attack coming. Gomez vaulted the table, flipping easily over it in a perfect somersault, and landed just a few scant feet away as he slashed his own blade in a cutting stroke at Xander.

“Ahhh!”

Xander screamed, throwing himself back as the blade ripped his robes open.

“Defend yourself!” Gomez cried, lunging in.

“Gahhh!”

Xander swiped his own blade across, but totally missed the strike, and winced as he felt a slice open up in his leg.

“Come on, lad! You can do better than that!”

“No I really can’t!!” Xander cried out, dodging to the left and nearly impaling himself on Gomez’ next strike.

Luckily Gomez pulled the blow and paused as Xander gasped for breath. “My lord, lad. Didn’t anyone teach you the basics?”

“Sword fighting isn’t ‘basics’ anymore!!” Xander snarled, glaring at Gomez, “it stopped being basics a hundred years ago!!”

“Nonsense!” Gomez declared, shaking his head at the state of education in the world today, “Alright then, let’s start with footwork. We have a great deal to cover, and so little time to do it in.”

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Wednesday Addams raised an eyebrow when she entered the drawing room and found Xander wincing as he bandaged his hand.

Xander, looking up, noticed her and grunted, “Your dad’s nuts.”

She considered that for a moment, debating whether it was intended as an insult or a statement of fact, then shrugged. “Fencing?”

“Is that what you call it? I call it ‘Stab Xander Time’.”

Judging from the cuts and blood Xander was sporting, Wednesday had to admit that his appellation had merit. She sighed, shaking her head slightly.

“What?” Xander defended himself, “I’m twelve! I’ve never used a sword before!”

“The second is a reason, the first is not.” Wednesday replied dryly, idly taking up a blade from the wall and swishing it through the air. “How is your hand?”

“It’ll be ok. I’ve had worse just mucking around with Jess back home,” Xander admitted.

“Good.” She said, replacing the sword. “Did father show you anything more than how to bleed?”

Xander rolled his eyes, “He started on about footwork, and talked about lessons.”

She smiled lightly, “Perfect. Pay attention to him, Alexander. Father is perhaps one of the finest swordsmen alive today.”

“I believe it.” Xander grumbled as he reached for another bandage.

“Ah! Alexander, I’ve been looking for you!”

Xander started as Gomez entered the room, “What for? Come to finish me off!?”

Gomez laughed, “Course not, my boy, I’ll do that next lesson. No, I wanted to introduce you to Cousin Itt.”

Xander stood up, turning around to say hi to this Cousin, and froze dead as he found himself staring at a walking, five foot tall, bundle of hair.

The hair suddenly jabbered something Xander couldn’t hope to decipher in a fast machine gun burst of what Xander could only suppose was words of some kind.

“Quite right!” Gomez responded, “Well boy?”

“Well what!?”

“Bring out the pup, lad, you think Itt here has all day?”

Xander blinked, still confused.

Wednesday sighed, “Cousin Itt came to see Fenrir, Alexander. Remember?”

“Oh, yeah.” Xander said slowly, still staring.

Itt chattered again.

“No, no, of course not. You look absolutely spiffy as always,” Gomez assured the hair ball.

“Alexander.”

The cold tone broke Xander out of his reverie and he shook himself, “What? Oh, yeah... sure.”

He whistled once, and there was an almost instant reply as Fenrir bounded into the room while yapping happily. The hairball turned toward the dog and chattered again, causing the pup to skid to a stop and growl as his hackles came up. That didn’t seem to perturb the Addams cousin, however, and Xander took a step forward as Fenrir began to circle around.

“It’s alright, boy. Not gonna let him, er... it, hurt you.” Xander said, causing Fenrir to relax and Itt to go off on another chattering spree.

“Itt, not it.” Wednesday growled instantly, in a tone low enough that the other’s didn’t hear.

“Uh...” Xander blinked, staring at her.

“His name is Itt.” She hissed as Itt produced a dog treat from somewhere and tossed it to Fenrir.

“That’s what I said?” Xander offered weakly.

She gave him a glare that clearly showed how little she bought into that story, and he buckled.

“Sorry. I’ll remember.”

Wednesday nodded curtly, and Xander recognized the matter was closed. For now.

Meanwhile Gomez was listening intently to Itt as the furball chattered away.

“You don’t say,” Gomez said, sounding shocked.

Itt chattered on a little more.

“You don’t say.” Gomez replied, this time sounding amazed.

Itt nodded, more of a bob Xander noted, and went on again.

“You don’t say.”

By this point Xander had had enough, he wanted to know what was up with his dog.

“What? What is it?”

“He didn’t say.” Gomez shrugged.

There was a long moment of silence as Cousin Itt snapped around and seemed to somehow **glare** at Gomez while Wednesday delicately pinched the bridge of her nose as if to stave off a headache.

Gomez, for his part, grinned widely as if he'd just delivered the best punch line ever.

Itt sighed audibly and turned to Wednesday, chattering away.

Wednesday nodded in understanding and looked over to Xander, "Everything is fine with Fenrir."

Xander, distracted from glaring at Gomez, let out a sigh of relief. "Thank god."

"It seems he's made a Familiar Bond with you," She explained, "which has altered his aging to match your own. It's not precisely rare, but not terribly common either."

"So he's going to age as I do?" Xander asked, considering it. That didn't sound too bad at all.

Itt chattered again, then Wednesday nodded.

"Precisely. Cousin Itt says that he should be due for a growth spurt quite soon, as should you." She said, "Though he mentions that there could be some unexpected incidents since Fenrir is a magical creature."

"Huh?"

Wednesday rolled her eyes, "Dire wolf, if you'll recall."

"That's not a normal breed of wolf?"

The Addams scion just rolled her eyes and sighed.

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Draco Malfoy's mind was reeling as he tried to understand all the things his mother had laid out, knowing even as he did that there was no way his father would agree with even half of them. There was a cold logic to his mother's statements, though, a sort of certainty that he couldn't refute.

One thing that he found disturbing, though, wasn't the differing beliefs of his parents so much as the level of bitterness his mother seemed to hold. He'd never noticed it before, as she had always held herself as the perfect pure blood wife and mother. The way she spoke of the Black line, though, seemed to physically hurt her.

It did hurt him, though he wasn't sure why.

He was a Malfoy. The Malfoy heir even. To the Black line, if the family still existed, Draco was under no illusions of his importance there. If the family were still intact, he would be a moderately important tool and nothing else.

His mother's words still shocked him on that account.

"Muggleborn have their place, Draco. Make no mistake of that," She had told him hours earlier. "Take yourself for example. As the Malfoy heir, no Matriarch of the Malfoy Line would permit you to be wed to a muggle born..."

Draco had been indignant in his reply, "I should hope not!"

His mother had merely smiled slightly, "A Matriarch of the Black Line, however, would indeed consider a match between you and, perhaps Granger, as a suitable... even desirable, match."

Draco still shuddered to think of his mother's words, even now unable to find any suitable way to respond to them.

She had, of course gone on, "As a member of a Cadet line of the Blacks, that would be your duty. Cadet branches exist to test unknown blood lines, and to filter out unwanted traits. Within a few generations, one of your get would, ideally, be bred back into the main line in the hopes of preserving the best traits of yourself and your wife."

Wife.

Draco shuddered; thanking Merlin that he was the Malfoy heir and not some play toy of the Black line. The very IDEA of being married off to some mudblood...

It made him physically ill.

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Narcissa laughed softly to herself, remember the look on her son's face from their earlier discussion.

Draco was many things, she supposed, but flexible was not among them. As a mother, she doubted she should take quite so much pleasure in his discomfort, but the bulge in his eyes at the mention of the muggle born's name had been too funny. She had used Granger intentionally, of course, knowing from Draco's previous rants that, one way or another, her name would evoke an emotional response.

Narcissa wondered if Draco had quite realized yet how open he left himself when he allowed someone to affect him so deeply. Likely not. She wasn't sure if he harbored some hidden crush on the girl, or more likely just a deep envy of her intelligence. Likely the latter, Narcissa supposed, though the former was far from impossible.

The Malfoy Matriarch sighed as she fastened her cloak and made her way down the alley and into Muggle London.

She easily found her way to the hidden bistro buried deep in one of the city's back streets and walked in.

"Ah, Madam Malfoy." The Maitre D' smiled warmly. "Your table is waiting, and Madam Tonks has already arrived."

"Thank you, Charles." Narcissa said her voice polite but cool.

She walked past the man into the dining area and made her way through to the semi-private table where her sister was sitting.

"Ciss."

"Romy."

The two sisters smiled at one another briefly, then laughed softly.

"Your regular orders, my Ladies?"

"Yes, Charles. Thank you." Andromeda said as Narcissa nodded.

"Very well, it won't be a moment."

"Take your time; we have much to catch up on after all." Narcissa told him, her eye gleaming as she looked back at her sister.

Andromeda nodded in return, "Indeed."

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The holidays progressed quickly, Xander found, and as normally as one could expect when one was hanging around the Addamses. Despite the ban on explosives in the tower, Pugsley and Fester had found a nice little quarry a few miles out of London which served as a nice testing spot for various explosives the duo cooked up.

"What are you two up to today?" Xander asked, swooping down on the two and hopping off his broom.

He had to admit, flying was one of the big bonuses about having magic, but he really wished it wasn't on broomsticks. Comfort charms be damned, the stupid thing rode up his crotch and kept binding up the Wizard's robes in really uncomfortable places.

Unfortunately there simply was no spell to 'superman' the whole process, at least not under his own control. As far as Xander had been able to find, it was patently impossible to levitate or otherwise 'fly' under one's own magic. He could do it to someone else, or they could to him, but something about trying it on himself would case the magic to be annulled by his own core.

"Hey Xander!" Fester grinned, hunched over as he sidestepped from one charge to the next, "You're just in time. We're going to be trying semtex today!"

Xander blinked, looking at the dull white blocks of putty. "Hey, wasn't the semtex you used last Christmas like orange?"

"Yup!" Fester grinned widely.

"Why isn't this stuff that color?"

"Couldn't get a permit to buy any in England." Fester replied.

"So... you what? Brought this from the states?"

"Nope."

Xander sighed, "Where's it from?"

"Black market." Fester grinned, "Only the legal stuff is color coded. Military semtex doesn't have the coloring, or the chemical markers to trace back to its source."

Oi. Xander pinched the bridge of his nose.

Fester finished up and turned back, "See how I did that? Always be very careful with the wiring, boys. Last thing you want is a misfire."

"Yes, Uncle Fester." Pugsley replied dutifully.

Xander leaned in slightly, "Triple twist with a cap?"

"Right you are, you remembered!" Fester grinned gleefully.

“Yeah well, blow me up once, shame on you... blow me up twice, shame...”

“On me!” Fester cackled, pulling them back. “Come on, come on.”

Xander let himself be dragged away, snagging his broom as they moved back to the safe zone. Safe being by Addams definition, mind you. Hunkered down behind a boulder, Fester produced an old plunger style detonator and grinned.

“Ready?”

“Ready!” Pugsley grinned.

“Are we far enough...”

Apparently, in Addams talk, what Xander started to ask translated directly to ‘ready!’ because Fester instantly depressed the plunger. The explosive crack made him jump slightly, pressing closer to the boulder, then the shock wave rolled over them and popped Xander’s ears.

Fester was yelling and dancing with Pugsley as Xander’s hearing came back, and the two looked at him and yelled something.

“What!?”

“Watch out for falling debris!” Fester repeated himself.

Xander blinked, then looked up and yelped. He dove to one side just as a chunk of rock the size of his head slammed down into the boulder he’d been sheltering behind and splintered into shards. Xander rolled to his feet and glared at Fester.

“Safe distance!?”

Fester shrugged, “Very slim chance of being hit.”

“Slim. Slim he says,” Xander muttered, shaking his head.

“If you boys are quite done,” Wednesday’s voice rang clearly through the general melee as she swooped in on her own broom, riding side saddle with a level of dignity Xander wished he could approach, “Father says we’re going to Diagon today to do some shopping.”

“Cool.” Xander grinned, “I need to get to Gringotts and check out this cash I’m supposed to have.”

“I’m certain the Goblins will be able to answer your questions.”

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Diagon at Christmas time was a site, though the more Xander thought about it, the more confused he got.

“Something bothering you, Son?” Gomez asked as they navigated the throngs.

“Well, yes Sir. Christmas is a Christian holiday, so why are witches and wizards so big on it?” Xander asked, looking around.

“Complicated question, my boy.” Gomez replied, “Do you want the short answer, or the long one?”

“Uh... short?”

“They’re not big on it.”

Xander waited, but it became obvious that he wasn’t going to get much more than that. “Ok, longer than that.”

Gomez smirked, “Part of it goes back to the fact that Wizarding society as we know it today really didn’t begin until a little over a thousand years ago, which was well after the entrenchment of Christianity into the society in which most wizards come from.”

“Hogwarts is a thousand years old,” Xander frowned, “the school is as old as wizards?”

“Well no, there were wizards around long before that, just not connected as a society the way they are today.” Gomez told him, “Druids and Shamen, priests and seers, they were all around but mostly they were part of world society in general. So now, for bonus points, what caused the separation of the two societies?”

Xander grimaced; this was NOT covered in history class. “Uh. Witch hunts?”

Gomez glared at him, “Come now, lad, aren’t you paying attention in history class?”

“They don’t teach that in history.” Wednesday spoke up.

“What!? It’s the single most important event in Wizarding history, and they don’t teach it?!” Gomez blurted, drawing attention. “What about the classes from Salem?”

“Those are mostly American Wizarding History. I believe that they expect Hogwarts to teach us the rest.”

"What do they teach??"

"Goblin rebellions mostly."

Gomez paused, actually shaking slightly as he slowly changed color. Seeing any color in the normally pale man's skin was interesting, but Xander didn't think the puce look was healthy. "The more I learn about this school of yours, Dear, the less I like."

He sighed, shaking his head, "Wands my dear boy. Around eleven hundred years ago, give or take, the first modern wands were developed."

Xander frowned again, then looked over his shoulder back to where he had bought his wand. "But, isn't there a sign about 'fine wands since 40 BC'?"

"Ah yes, the Ollivander's." Gomez rolled his eyes, "Nice folk, but a little dreary. The family began creating Staves in 42 BC, however Staves while based on many of the same principals as wands were much more power intensive."

"I don't understand, Sir."

"Call me, Gomez, lad." Gomez quirked a grin as his cigar twitched in response. "Simply put, only a tiny fraction of people can use wands, we call them wizards today. Only a tiny fraction of THOSE people can use a staff, in fact I think there is only two in England today who could. Your headmaster Dumbledore, and Nicholas Flamel. We call those people, legends."

"Not much of a market for Staves then, huh?"

"Not much, no lad." Gomez grinned, "Actually, as the legend goes, the original Ollivander created only one, as much by accident as anything else, and it found its way into the hands of Merlin. The family knew that they had magical potential, however, and spent generations refining their work. The breakthrough of wands came about with the help of Rowena Ravenclaw and Salazar Slytherin during their younger days, before Hogwarts."

Xander frowned slightly, considering that carefully.

"Now, mark me, lad." Gomez said seriously, "Because for your sort, that is perhaps the most important event in history. Most wizards without a wand? Nothing more than peasants working the land. With a wand? Well, you get what you see here today."

Xander looked around, all the decorations lit up around him, the entire place animated without any hint of technology or electricity, and he rather imagined that it probably had been very much like this ever since Diagon Alley was created.

"Now, back to your original question, most wizards came from normal society and they brought along the various Christian influenced holidays with them, and even as they began to drop Christian beliefs, they kept the link to the holidays."

"Cool." Xander said as he thought about it. "I kinda thought it was something to do with the old druid holidays, like Christians were supposed to have co-opted in the first place."

Gomez shot a sharp glance at the young man, then smiled, "Sharp, lad. I like that. But no, modern wizards have mostly lost all touch with Druid and Celtic rituals, the same as the rest of the modern world. Some tell themselves that story, mind you, because they hold no love for the church and don't like to admit any connection, but it's all bunk. Now, if you want to learn about real druid rituals, I know a few people."

Xander swallowed at the nearly feral grin on the man's face and shook his head, "maybe later, Sir."

"Pity. And how many times must I tell you, call me Gomez!"

Wednesday cleared her throat, and the two looked at her.

"Yes?"

"We're here." She said, nodding up.

The two looked up, spotting the Gringotts sign.

"Ah, yes. Come along then," Gomez said, "Right inside."

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Gringotts was certainly not what Xander had come to expect, though in fairness he really had no idea what a Wizarding bank would look like. The little Goblins running around sneering at people didn't really fit any of the images he'd come up with.

Mr. Addams led them up to a teller and glanced at the name plate idly as the Goblin finished scratching out something or other on parchment.

"Yes?"

"Yes, Gilfarb," Gomez said airily, "be a good fellow and see to this document for the young man."

The Goblin, Gilfarb, scowled at Gomez and took the papers from Xander's hand. He glanced through them quickly and scowled again. "This is a draft on a different bank."

"Is that an issue?"

“There are transferee fees.”

“Of course.” Gomez said dryly, “You are bankers.”

“Will the young man be wanting to open a vault?”

Gomez glanced at Xander, who just looked confused. “No. I believe a transfer of, we’ll say five hundred galleons will be sufficient.”

“Very well.”

The Goblin scratched out the paperwork in record time, then handed it and a quill over to Xander. “Sign this.”

Xander reached for the paper, but was blocked by Gomez who scanned the paper quickly.

“Now see here, Goblin.” The normally jovial man snarled his face suddenly very much a mirror of the goblin he was facing, “Transaction fees are one thing, but they don’t give you the right to fleece the boy!”

“I assure you, that is our standard...”

“Twenty five percent!?” Gomez cut him off, “You’ll take two POINT five and be happy with it.”

“Or what, Wizard?” Gilfarb challenged.

“Don’t insult me, Goblin. I’m no Wizard, I’m an Addams.”

Gilfarb paled to an almost pastel orange at that and his mouth shut instantly, his teeth vanishing from sight. After a moment he spoke again, hesitantly, “A... Addams? Which family are you...?”

“I’m the American Patriach, Gomez Addams. And if you like our accounts as they are, you’ll take two point five and not try to cheat a friend of the family.” Gomez replied, his tone suddenly dead even.

“Yes Sir. Two point five will do nicely.” Gilfarb said, hastily scrawling out a new paper and pushing it across.

Xander slid it to Gomez this time, who nodded, then Xander signed. He received his money directly and the three made their way out of the bank.

“Are Goblins always like that?” Xander asked hesitantly when they were clear.

“Bankers are always like that,” Gomez responded, his tone again jovial. “You just need to know how to handle them. Goblins are a little different, though.”

“How?”

“Well, lad, you know the expression humans like to bandy around, Respect is earned?” Gomez asked.

Xander just nodded.

“Well, humans don’t really believe that. For humans, respect is lost.” Gomez said with a grin, “We tend to give people we don’t know a certain level of respect until they’ve earned more, or lost what they started with. Goblins, though, don’t work that way. With a Goblin you always start at zero, so mark that boy, if you have to deal with them in the future.”

“Oh.” Xander said, feeling a little at sea.

He understood the meaning, he supposed, but it was a weird way of looking at things. “That kinda sucks.”

“Maybe, but earn a Goblin’s respect and they’ll never cheat you, they’ll never stab you in the back, and they will never betray your trust. Still, never give a goblin any respect he hasn’t earned,” Gomez finished, “That’s a mark of weakness to them. And they’ll mark it, and you, for an easy target.”

Xander swallowed, but nodded, “Alright. I’ll try and remember that.”

“Good lad,” Gomez grinned, “Now, on to some shopping, shall we?”

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Shopping took the rest of the day, but it whizzed by like lighting until they were back in the tower. Xander once more found himself creeped out, yet occasionally awed by the Addams as they went about the preparations for their yuletide celebrations.

He found himself wondering what the Addamses really celebrated, however. They weren’t remotely Christian, that was certain, yet they bedecked themselves in all the trappings of the holiday with vigor and joy. They even went so far as to put a Santa hat on Lurch, or someone did. Xander privately wondered if the big guy had noticed it yet sometimes, but didn’t want to be rude by asking.

From Mr. Addams’ comments earlier, Xander thought that they might actually be celebrating the winter solstice, but at the same time that didn’t seem quite right either.

It was only a few days to Christmas when he finally broke down and asked them.

Gomez had looked at him queerly; surprised by the question, but it was Morticia who spoke up.

"Why Alexander, we're celebrating family of course."

Xander just stared blankly.

Fester looked at him oddly, then grinned, "You didn't think we were celebrating a religious holiday did you? Please. Christmas isn't about religion. How many folk worship Sandy Claws anyway?"

"Precisely, Fester old chum," Gomez broke with a wide grin, "Jesus of Nazareth wasn't even born in December, lad. Christmas is as much a Christian holiday as Halloween, which is to say... not at all. This is a time for friends and family, Alexander."

Xander didn't really have a response to that, so he just nodded quietly.

Sometime later, Wednesday moved over beside him and spoke softly as she watched the decorations across the room.

"Do you miss your family?"

Xander had to consider it, "A little. But things were always tense around the holidays."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Not for sure," Xander admitted, "But I think it had a lot to do with my family being from magical families, and maybe they were missing their families."

Wednesday just nodded and fell silent.

The two sat together for the rest of the night, just quietly thinking about the past, the present, and the future.

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Christmas day came quickly after that, and like the year before it was one of the more pleasant ones in Xander's memory.

Since neither he nor Wednesday had shown any interest in high performance brooms, their gifts this year had been new school trunks with four compartments each. One bookshelf, two normal trunk sections, and one room sized section Xander found absolutely incredible.

"How do they make it so much bigger inside than out?" He blurted, not for the first time, as he withdrew his head from the room sized compartment.

"Arithmancy." Wednesday replied calmly.

"Huh?" Xander blinked.

"It's all maths, Alexander." She said simply with a shrug.

"Oh." Xander pouted, sighing. "I suck at math."

"How do you know, I doubt you've ever tried this."

"They did the tests at school and everything." Xander shrugged, "I'm not, you know 'special' or anything, but I'm not so good with math or spacial whatsit."

Wednesday regarded him stonily for a long moment, "I think you would learn to trust yourself over some test given to you by people you neither know, nor have any reason to believe in."

"Why would they lie?" Xander blinked.

"I did not say they did. However, were it me, I would do my best to prove the matter to myself."

"Yeah, maybe." Xander replied, trying not to feel down.

"Enough of that for today, children." Morticia came to his rescue. "Let's finish with the presents."

Holidays with the Addamses were creepy, but surprisingly enlightening.

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With Christmas past the rest of the holidays swept by in a blur, leaving the second part of the school year upon them before they really knew it. Xander didn't know about Wednesday, but he had far more mixed feelings concerning the return to school that he normally had.

On the one hand, it was still school.



No matter what else was going on, it was school and school was, by definition, boring.

Still, it was MAGIC school.

Xander had to admit, short of having classes on The Enterprise or something, that was about as cool as you could make school.

But damn it, it was still SCHOOL.

This cycle of thought was playing through his mind the entire time he and Wednesday were waiting for the Express to leave and return them to Hogwarts, the slightly geeky goofball in him railing against the bizarre new love of learning Xander had picked up since being introduced to magic.

He really had no idea where it came from; he had after all spent a good many year making sure that he didn't catch it from Willow.

"Jessie would be so disappointed in me." He murmured softly.

"Excuse me?"

Xander looked sideways at Wednesday, surprised that he had spoke aloud, then grinned. "My pal back home, he'd be horribly disappointed in me for looking forward to school. We were dedicated underachievers together."

She raised an eyebrow, "And were you good at it?"

Xander blinked, "Uh, I suppose so."

"No you weren't."

Xander blinked. "Huh?"

"If you were dedicated to underachieving, and were also good at it, then you were achieving what you set out to do. So you weren't very good at underachieving."

"Uh..." Xander stared for a long moment, then finally blinked. "Brain... hurts."

Wednesday just shrugged as the train lurched on the tracks and they were once more heading for school. "At least that's evidence of having one."

Once more, Xander found himself swearing that the girl beside him was having a good laugh at his expense, even though she was physically doing nothing of the sort.

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The school looked majestic as they approached, the fresh snow coating it from tower to cornerstone, with lights dancing off the powdered white. Xander had donned his Slytherin robes, but underneath he was packing all the layers he could muster as he felt like he was freezing his appendages off with each passing moment.

"Stupid snow." He said through chattering teeth, "I'm a Cali boy for crying out loud. This just sucks."

Wednesday rolled her eyes and casually waved her wand at him, casting a warming charm.

"Ahhh..." Xander moaned, "That's so good. How'd you do that?"

"I'll show you later." She said, shaking her head.

"Thanks."

As the two approached the castle they saw Harry and Ronald coming in their direction from inside. Xander nodded coolly to the Gryffindors as they paused.

"I just wanted to give you this." Ron said, shoving his broken wand at Xander.

Xander accepted it with a nod, "thanks. You have a good match with your new one?"

Ron nodded, actually smiling in the company of a 'snake', "Oh yeah. It's fantastic, nothing like the old one."

"Good. Then there'll be no more accidents." Xander said pointedly.

Ron reddened, but nodded, "No more accidents."

The redhead turned away, but Harry paused for a moment then looked back at Xander.

"Thanks, mate. He really needed that wand."

"I don't give damn what he needed, Harry. Hermione is my friend and Ron was a menace with this thing," Xander said, holding up the wobbly wand. "Safest place in the school was wherever he was trying to curse. Worse, he's got a temper and tends to go for his wand first. You and Hermione were going to get hurt sooner or later."

Harry just shrugged, “Ron wouldn’t hurt us.”

“Right. I’m sure he’s a great guy, but I wouldn’t want Jesus Christ himself at my side if he had a backfiring gun and an itchy trigger finger.” Xander returned dryly. “Friends like that do your enemies job for them.”

Harry hesitated, “I’ll talk to him.”

“That would be my advice, dude. Remember, he’s got a new wand so no excuses. He hurts Hermione or Wednesday, and I’m gunning for a lion pelt.” Xander promised.

Harry nodded and followed his friend as Wednesday stared at Xander evenly.

“What?”

“I am quite capable of looking after myself.”

Xander smirked, “I know it, but sometimes it takes an outsider to make people see things that should be fixed.”

The Addams scion stared for a moment longer, then nodded curtly and the two proceeded into the warmer environs of Hogwarts as they prepared for the winter term.

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After getting settled in, his new trunk replacing the old with all his belongings stashed inside it, Xander headed out of the Slytherin dorms and into the school, just getting used to being in the castle again. Unsurprisingly he found himself in the library, and smiled when he spotted Hermione at their normal table with a stack of books practically hiding her from sight.

“Hey Herms,” he said, dropping into the seat across from her, “How was the holidays.”

She looked at little frazzled as she looked up at him, but she quickly smiled, “Xander! God, it’s good to see you. Is Wednesday back too?”

Xander nodded, idly plucking a book from the stacks and checking it out. “Petrifactions? Doing some research into the ‘incidents’?”

Hermione nodded, sighing, “There are just so many possibilities, but they’re so obscure! It’s taking forever to rule each one out.”

Xander grunted, flipping through the book. “Our professor from Salem seemed to think that it was probably one of the kids of the terrorist twits you guys had here fifteen years ago.”

“Ron and Harry thought it was Draco,” Hermione whispered, leaning forward slightly.

Xander laughed sharply enough to get hissed at by Madam Pince; he winced but shook his head.

“No way, Draco couldn’t keep a secret if his life was on the line.” Xander said, still chuckling. “If he’d been doing it the only mystery would be why he hadn’t been caught yet.”

Hermione giggled slightly, “That’s pretty much what we figured out.”

Xander eyed her carefully for a moment, then shrugged, deciding that she’d tell him if she wanted to. “Anyway, Wednesday says it’s a snake.”

Hermione’s head shot up, “A snake?”

“Yeah, like a Basilip or something.” Xander shrugged.

“A Basilisk.” Hermione hissed tightly, eyes wide, “I think that would do it.”

“She and the Professor said that there should be deaths, though, if it’s a Basilisk.” Xander said, “Anyway, don’t know anything about them.”

“I think I have a book here somewhere... oh drat, where could it be??”

Xander smirked slightly, shaking his head. “Let me know if you need any help.”

“What? Oh, right. Sure...”

Xander chuckled softly and pulled out the Grimoire and laid it out on the table in front of him, he had come up with a few thoughts for one of his ideas and wanted to do some checking.

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The term started off smoothly, thankfully, with no more accidents. The winter was still making it difficult to cultivate the mandrake required for the restoratives that the victims would need, which was seriously of the bad, but beyond that things slid back into a routine.

Draco was still prancing around like he owned the castle, and pretty much everyone else was still ignoring him. Xander had happened on him terrorizing the first years a few times, especially those Muggleborn and mixed bloods who had the misfortune of being sent to Slytherin, but had managed to deflect him each time with little effort.

For some reason Draco seemed unwilling to get into any debates with Xander, and had apparently also decided that violence wouldn't be useful either. That surprised Xander, to be sure, but he figured he'd take what he was given and be happy for it.

He never noticed the relieved looks on the first years face when he would walk into the common room, or the fact that many of them tended to choose to study wherever he was spending his time. It was something that didn't go unnoticed by everyone, however.

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“Is Harris building a cabal?”

Daphne Greengrass shook her head as she glanced across the room to where Xander Harris was reading the same book he always seemed to have in his hands. She turned her focus back to her friend, Tracy Davis, “No. I don't think so at any rate. Believe it or not, as far as I can tell he honestly doesn't notice.”

“But look at them.” Tracy said, nodding to the group of first and second years who were arrayed around Harris.

“I know, but honestly, he's a bit thick.” Daphne said, delivering her considered opinion. “I don't know what the hat saw in him, but it wasn't ambition. Or if it was, it was buried under so much cunning that he's just a brilliant sneak.”

“This IS Slytherin.”

“You don't really think that a twelve year old is that good, do you?”

“I suppose not,” Tracy conceded, then scowled, “But it's a whole lot nicer to consider than that he's bumbling around like an idiot and doing by accident what we're all trying to do on purpose.”

Daphne chuckled, “It's possible, I guess, that stunt he pulled at the start of the year was brilliant.”

“How did he pull that off anyway??” Tracy demanded, “The only people who know, or claim to know, are Jacobs, Harrow, and Draco... and the first two aren't talking while I don't believe a word Draco says.”

Daphne closed her mouth, her eyes moving away.

“You know!” Tracy hissed, leaning in.

“It's actually kind of obvious once you know the answer,” Daphne said softly. “They didn't do anything much, just redirected the Twins pranks away from our table.”

Tracy stared, blinking. “That's it?”

Daphne nodded.

“But.... but, that's so simple!”

“Shhh!” Daphne shut her up. “And yes, it was. Which is why no one figured it out.”

Tracy leaned back, eyes falling over to Xander, “So is he some sort of genius, or the living embodiment of Occam's Razor?”

Daphne frowned, “What?”

“It's a philosophy thing,” Tracy told her, “basically it says that if you have two answers that are equally likely to be true, you're best choosing the simpler of the two until more evidence is available.”

“Well Xander certainly is the simpler of the two,” Daphne snarked as she nodded from Xander over to where Draco was holding court at the far end of the room.

The room quieted for a moment as the boys looked nervously over at the two witches as they broke down in uncontrollable giggles.

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Valentine's day arrived in the castle, much to the delight and disgust of the school. Delight and disgust because Professor Lockhart took it upon himself to cheer things up and turned the entire place into a nightmare from the most twisted minds at Hallmark. Lurid pink was the color of the day, with actual dwarfs running around singing poems and generally embarrassing the hell out of half the school while the other half laughed.

Xander watched in mild amusement as Harry was the recipient of a particularly horrid piece of writing, then felt something of a chill as one of the Dwarfs cleared his throat from the Ravenclaw table and attracted the attentions of many in the hall.

It had stopped right in front of Wednesday, and was preparing to read from the paper in its hands when she interrupted it.

“Life is short enough,” She said coldly, “Must you really hasten the approach of the spectral hand of death?”

The cupid costumed dwarf swallowed hard and shook his head, ripping up the paper in his hand. He turned to Lockhart, “I quit!”

Xander smirked, then exchanged a curious glance with Wednesday. She arched and eyebrow at him, which he interpreted to mean 'did you send that?'. He shook his head slightly, twisting his head slightly and exposing his neck.

She nodded, receiving his message loud and clear.

'Of course not. Do I look like I want my throat slit?'

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With the horror of Valentine's day past them, and classes settling down to the normal routine, Xander finally found time to do some work with Ron's old wand. The Ash wand was held together by the spello tape still, and he had to carefully unstick that and peel it slowly off to reveal the damage. The wood had been totally shattered, but the unicorn tail hair was still intact and held the two ends together.

Xander supposed that was what allowed the wand to still work, though it obviously became unreliable after the break. Probably because proper wand movements would be next to impossible with the tip of the wand wobbling slightly, though it was possible that the magic simply didn't jump across the break in the wood properly.

"What ARE you doing, Harris?"

Xander glanced up as Draco approached, "Just pulling apart an old wand."

"That's Weasley's isn't it?" Draco sneered, as he usually did. "I noticed he had a new one. Why'd he give you that?"

"I asked." Xander shrugged, "Wanted to see what these things were like on the inside."

"Why ever would you want that?"

"Funny," Xander drawled in an imitation of Draco's tone, "You sounded exactly like Ronald there for a moment."

Draco reddened, his hand wrapping around his wand, "Are you calling me a Weasley!?"

Xander considered it, not reaching for his own wand, "Well, I don't know how far the inbreeding actually goes..."

The Malfoy scion shook, wand out in his hand now, "How DARE you?"

"Draco," Xander sighed, "Think about it. Why would anyone want to see how wands are made?"

Draco rolled his eyes, "That's what I asked!"

"And I'm asking you to answer it."

Draco cooled down a little, then shrugged, "I suppose if you wanted to be a wand maker it would be important."

"One good answer." Xander agreed, "Any others?"

Draco just shrugged.

"Did you know that the current wands haven't really changed in over eleven hundred years?" Xander asked, "Before that it was mostly Staves, and only a handful of wizards could use them."

"Everyone knows that, Harris."

"I didn't," Xander shrugged, "And I suspect that most muggle born don't know it either."

"Why would I care what they know?"

"You wouldn't, but the point is that not everyone knows it." Xander said, turning his focus back to the wand. "This little stick changed the world, it's probably the single most important item in the entire Wizarding world, and no one cares how it works?"

"Why should we?" Draco asked with that permanent sneer he maintained, "Tools are there to be used."

Xander shrugged again, "No reason, I guess."

Draco smirked at him, confident at having won the argument, and pranced off with his nose in the air. Xander watched him go for a moment before returning his attention to the wand. He noted that the unicorn hair had been pulled just slightly out of the wood, which meant that the two pieces could no longer be fit together properly without bending the hair.

Another point of failure, probably.

There were no books on basic wand making in the library, Xander had discovered, so he knew too well that most of this was just guess work at best. As near as he could tell, the secrets of wand making were controlled by certain pureblood families.

The Ollivander's in Britain, The Marceau family in France, and the Gregorovitch family in Eastern Europe had a rather tight grip on the construction of those little pieces of irreplaceable wood and magic. Wands in the states were mostly imported, Xander had learned after a discussion with

Professor Hardy, though there were some wand crafters who had setup shop in various places in the American Wizarding World.

Crafters were different than the Three Families of Wands, according to Hardy. They custom designed wands for their users, which roughly approximated the same quality as a matched Ollivander wand, however it took several weeks to craft each wand, where as Ollivander and the others of the Three Families could make a wand with their technique in as little as an hour.

Of course there was no guarantee that said wand would match with a given wizard, but the sheer number of wands they could make, combined with the huge backlog each of the Three Families had from generations of wand makers, nearly guaranteed a good match for any wizard or witch who came in the door.

For that reason, the cheaper yet equally effective wands from the Three Families basically owned the market in Europe, most of Africa, and much of Asia. Only in the Americas, Australia, and a few oddball places did crafters survive due to import tariffs and other local restrictions. If he had bought his wand in the States, Xander found out, he would have paid closer to a hundred galleons for it and would have had to wait several weeks at a minimum if he commissioned it from a crafter.

Xander couldn't put his finger on it, but there were whole aspects of the Wizarding world that just seemed off somehow, and this was one of them.

He kept trying to compare them to stuff in his comic books, but really couldn't get the reality to match up with the fantasy. It kinda disappointed him, really, he had been seeing the magical world as an extension of his comic book fantasies, but something was just... wrong.

He sighed, scratching down some notes in the Coven Grimoire and settled back into the chair to think.

"Interesting pen."

He opened his eyes and flicked over to see Daphne sitting across from him.

"Thanks, it was a gift."

"I don't believe I've seen one like it before, is it a muggle pen?"

He nodded, "A fountain pen, invented a long time ago. Marks just like a quill, but you don't need an ink pot, it holds the ink inside."

Daphne nodded, leaning forward to get a closer look. "And you use it for class?"

Xander smirked, "Not Professor Snape's, but I do use it for his homework. Have all year; he's never noticed a difference."

She smiled slightly, tipping her head slightly as she leaned back. "I couldn't help overhearing your conversation with Draco."

"Translation," Xander said with a grin, "my Slytherin side made me listen in, along with everyone else in the common room."

Daphne smirked tightly, glancing around as several other students suddenly found very interesting things in their own books to focus on. "Precisely."

"So what of it?"

"I'm just curious, really," She admitted, "What do you hope to learn?"

Xander shrugged, "Don't know. Just seems wrong, somehow, to wave these around and not have some idea how they work. You know, in my school back home, I took 'muggle' classes, including some science courses. They always tried to explain HOW something works, even if it's just a really simple explanation that leaves out the details. I guess I'm used to that."

She nodded slowly, eyes hooded slightly as she considered his words.

Xander knew she was smart enough to have noted that he admitted to taking normal classes, but he was banking on her being smart enough to read more into what he'd said than he meant. He'd learned that Slytherin's tended to do that, and if she did than he expected she would draw conclusions that would lead her away from the truth of his family situation. The last thing he needed was for the house to figure out that his parents were squibs, as that was really only slightly better than their being muggles.

"I guess that makes sense." She said after a moment, "Is schooling that different in the States?"

Xander considered for a moment, thinking about the classes he had to take now. "Well, I'm taking classes in physics and chemistry even now, as well as biology."

"You are? Wait... what are those?"

Xander raised an eyebrow, he'd known that the wizard world didn't put much stock in 'muggle' sciences, and with some good cause really. Magic really did violate many of the rules of science so utterly that it made the courses seem stupid. Hardy had been adamant there, though, that the 'laws' in the books were in fact accurate despite the appearances.

Magic didn't follow Newton's laws of motion, for example, or really any of the common 'laws' of the world. Apparently magic fell into a category Hardy called 'High Energy Physics' for the most part, where the laws of nature were markedly different. Xander hadn't understood a word of it, though, and Hardy had told him that he wasn't expected to unless he went to a Doctorate program and beyond in certain specialties'.

At any rate, what surprised him here was that Daphne didn't even know the words. She wasn't a stupid girl, and you'd think that one some level or another she'd have at least heard the basics about them. He had, after all, probably before he could say the words. They were the sort of thing you were bombarded with in what Xander was rapidly thinking of as 'the real world'. Biology? Spiderman, Frankenstein, almost every monster flick he'd ever watched were based on some screwed up version of biology. Chemistry was the basis for all kinds of stuff in horror movies and comics, from the acid blood in Aliens... which, now that he thought about it, was also a weird kind of biology... to the Joker's maniac persona in Batman. Physics, well that was the basis of every sci-fi flick he'd ever watched, of course.

And she'd never heard of any of them?

"Uh, well, Chemistry is sort of a 'muggle' version of potions," Xander answered, "it's the basis for, well a LOT of stuff they make. Physics is how the world works, you know... if I push you I have to brace myself or I'll also push myself **away** from you? Stuff like that. And, well, biology is just how living things work. Sort of like Care of Magical Creatures, I guess."

Daphne frowned, but nodded. "Those muggles, they can be kinda cute with their playing around, can't they?"

Xander blinked, "Uh... I guess..."

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The Gryffindor/Hufflepuff game was on them shortly after that, and Xander joined most of the school outside to watch it. He wasn't really into sports, but he had to admit that as far as sports went, Quidditch was probably one of the more fun to watch.

As they were getting ready to get the game underway, however, they all saw professor McGonagall stride out onto the field with a megaphone and the crowd hushed.

"Quidditch is canceled!" She called out, then ignored the protests as she told them to make their way back to their dorms.

Xander watched as he got up and started to move with the group, eyes on the professor as he spotted Harry chasing after her. On a hunch he broke from the pack and followed at a distance. Harry and Ron went with their head of house to the infirmary, and Xander moved in quietly just close enough to see through the door.

Inside he could hear their gasps of shock as he spotted Hermione on the bed, arms sticking up in an awkward position, her eyes open and unmoving.

"She's been petrified, I'm afraid." McGonagall said from inside the room.

Xander's knuckles turned white as his face rapidly paled to match, and he fell back from his position and retreated towards the Slytherin common room.

\*\*\*\*

Professor Hardy had dealt with students for some thirty years and had seen most everything there was to see in that regard. So, when Alexander Harris kicked open the door to his classroom at their regular time and strode in looking like he wanted to murder someone, Hardy merely raised an eyebrow.

"Problems?"

Alexander simply growled, slamming his books down as he paced back and forth furiously.

"Calm down."

The ice cold tone from Hardy's second student at Hogwarts brought both of them up short, and even Alexander seemed to freeze for a moment as his fury seemed to cool.

"Damn it, Wednesday!" The angry flared back up again, "She's our friend!"

"And anger, undirected, will do neither her, nor you and I, any good." Wednesday countered calmly.

Xander slumped, "She's our friend."

Hardy sighed, shaking his head, "You knew the last girl to be petrified, then?"

They both nodded, and Xander turned to him.

"Sir, did you hear back about those calls you were making?"

Hardy winced, but nodded, "Yes. The CMDC keeps certain potions on ice in Atlanta, including petrification cures, but there's a problem."

"What problem!?"

"The local ministry has a ban on imported medicinal potions," Hardy sighed, "or, rather, they insist on a two month quarantine to 'assure against tainted imports'."

"You called more than two months ago," Xander countered, "Why isn't it through?"

"Because this type of potion doesn't keep that long without some rather extreme refrigeration," Hardy explained.

"Bureaucrats." Wednesday said flatly.

"Quite." Hardy sighed. "In point of fact, I have two doses available. They were shipped to the embassy in a diplomatic pouch, one for each of you."

"Give mine to Hermione." Xander said instantly.

"I wish it were that easy, son." Hardy said wearily. "For either of you, I could force the situation. You're American citizens, and are both technically my wards while you're here in Britain. I can't do anything for a citizen of the UK without the consent of their guardians, and I'm not likely to be even told who Miss Granger's parents are, let alone where they live."

Xander let out another curse, slamming his hand into the desk. "Just GREAT."

"Patience," Wednesday suggested, "She will be fine, the petrification causes no lasting effects."

"That's true," Hardy interjected. "Given the current climate around here, she's probably safer than most."

Xander settled down, nodding.

He knew that was true, of course. The Ministry had sent in Aurors to arrest Hagrid for the crimes, and Dumbledore had been given the boot by the governing board of the school in the day following the attack on Hermione. Draco was prancing around like a peacock in full strut, bragging about how his father had given Dumbledore the boot.

For now a peace was holding, since McGonagall had received the temporary placement as Headmistress, but Xander was privy to a lot of background information and he knew that Draco's Dad seemed intent on putting a pureblood sympathizer into the position. If THAT happened, Xander was checking out and going home. He'd be sending notes to Hermione's parents advising them to get her out of the country at the same time, cause there was no way the school would be fit to live in if someone like Professor Snape took over the position.

Xander didn't have anything personal against the professor, but the way he favored the purebloods was painfully obvious, and if people like Draco thought they didn't have to worry about the rules anymore? Anarchy, at best. Tyranny at worst.

He took a breath, "Can you get that potion here, Sir?"

"It'll only keep outside our cold storage for five days, Alexander." Hardy said quietly. "We have to store it in freezers normally intended for cryogenic containment of samples."

"Five days." Xander sighed, "And when did they expect to be able to mix their own here?"

"By the end of the month."

Xander shook his head, "I hate this."

"Not much to like, son." Hardy shook his head, "Now, not to be an ogre, but we do have some work to do. Have you both done your reading?"

\*\*\*\*

Xander was still in a sullen mood after the class as he and Wednesday walked back toward the library.

"So when do we start?"

Xander looked sharply at her. "Start what?"

"Hunting down the Creature."

Xander paused, leaning on a wall for a moment. "You still think it's a Basilisk, then?"

"I know it."

"And the lack of deaths?"

Wednesday shrugged, "The mind of a Basilisk is easy to understand, the mind of a human who orders one about? That can be more complicated."

"Yeah," Xander said slowly, his jaw tightening. "Someone's pulling its strings, aren't they? Someone ordered it to attack Hermione."

She nodded.

"How big are these things anyway?"

"That would depend on age," Wednesday shrugged, "Like many magical creatures, Basilisks are quite long lived, and they do not stop growing."

"If the legends are true, it's been here, what? A thousand years?"

"Then it would be quite large."

"Hard to hide."

Wednesday shrugged, "Old castles have a tradition of secret passage ways."

Xander nodded, "Alright. So we just have to find some secret tunnels, track down a big killer snake, kill it... then find the person ordering it around and, what? Catch them?... Kill them?"

Wednesday raised an eyebrow at the hesitancy in Xander's last question, "First we determine who they are, then we decide on how to proceed."

Xander nodded, "How do we find the passages?"

"That," Wednesday admitted, "Will be the difficult part."

\*\*\*\*

They duo marked off their usual table in the library and began to do research as best they could, focusing on the location of the victims, as well as the few details they could locate on the last time this had happened.

"I wish I could speak with Hagrid," Wednesday said while reading.

"No way he did any of that," Xander shrugged, remembering how the big man had treated the first years. "Hagrid's a soft touch."

"True, though it is remotely possible he did something by accident." Wednesday countered.

Xander had to concede that point, but just shook his head. "Doesn't matter, he's not here. One fatality the last time, Myrtle Rountree."

Wednesday frowned, looking up, "Myrtle?"

Xander nodded, "Yeah, why?"

"There's a ghost, she haunts the girls' bathrooms."

"Yeah?"

"They call her Moaning Myrtle."

"Sounds like a lead." Xander said, pushing the books away.

She nodded and the two packed up their books and quietly left the library. As they walked, Wednesday continued to consider the situation.

"To order the basilisk, we must be looking for a Parselmouth." She said out of the blue.

"A whasit?"

"Parselmouth, someone who speaks to snakes. A speaker." She said, "It's a rare talent that follows certain bloodlines."

"You know which ones?" Xander asked, drawing out his Coven book.

"No. Why?"

"Just checking." Xander scribbled down a couple notes, and closed the book. "Ok, so other than a parcel package, what else can we guess about this guy?"

"Most likely pureblood, of course, though if he or she is smart they may be hiding their affiliations."

"Right. Sneaky dude pretending to be a good guy, check." Xander replied.

Wednesday rolled her eyes, nodding at a door ahead of them, "We're here."

The two cautiously made their way into the bathroom, and Xander frowned. "Hey, this is where we near got killed by that troll last year."

Wednesday sniffed, causing Xander to hide a grin. The youngest of the Addamses was still more than slightly ticked at having missed a shot at the Mold in his Shorts dude who'd involved the troll.

She didn't say anything about it though as she looked around, "Myrtle?"

They waited, but there was no response.

"Hey Myrt!" Xander called.

There was a bubbling as one of the toilettes began to overflow, and then in an explosion of water a ghost appeared and charged up in Xander's



face.

“Oh sure!” She called, “Don’t bother to learn poor moaning Myrtle’s real name, why should she care if you call her funny names, she’s just a ghost...”

“Chill, Spooks.” Xander cut her off, grinning. “I call everyone by funny names.”

The ghost paused, head cocking, “Really?”

“Well, almost everyone.” Xander admitted, then pointed at Wednesday. “She scares me.”

Myrtle turned to look at the dark Ravenclaw, let out a screech that nearly sent Xander scrambling for cover, and dove back into the toilette.

Xander worked his fingers around in his ears, then glared at Wednesday, “What the hell was that?”

“Addams are often trained in necromancy.” She replied, “It’s a natural gift.”

“Oh.” Xander rolled his eyes, “Some gift. You scared our lead down the toilette.”

He walked over to the toilette and shook his head, “I hope you got a plunger, cause I ain’t going after her.”

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After leaving the girl’s washroom, their abject failure in coaxing Myrtle back out of her hidey hole, the duo spent the next couple days trying to brainstorm another lead when matters were forced on them. The rumors of the mysterious ‘chamber’ abounded, and the fact that ‘she’ would rest in the chamber forever.

The identity of the girl in question was the subject of rumors, but in short order it became obvious that there was only one missing student.

“Ginny Weasley.”

Xander blinked when Wednesday delivered that information, “You sure?”

She raised an eyebrow and said nothing.

“Right. Of course you are.” Xander rolled his eyes. “Ok, new plan. Let’s move.”

“Where?”

“Where else, we find Harry and follow him.”

“I fail to see how that will help.”

Xander half smiled, “You ever hear the expression ‘better lucky than good’?”

“Of course.”

“Harry’s lucky.” Xander said, then shrugged, “Both kinds of luck, in spades, but he’s lucky. Ron’s little sister is in the Chamber, right?”

“I see your point.”

“Then what are you waiting for?” Xander smirked, nodding to the door of the library.

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Finding Harry and Ron wasn’t hard, figuring out what the hell they were up to on the other hand was another matter.

“What are they doing?” Xander hissed from where he and Wednesday were shadowing the duo.

“I believe that they’re going for help,” Wednesday replied, disgust in her voice.

“From **Lockhart** !?” Xander returned, equally disturbed.

The dark girl didn’t answer as the two reappeared from the DADA professor’s office, holding wands on the so called professor.

“The very fact that two second years got the drop on him should clue them in to the fact that he’s not going to be much use.” Wednesday said dryly.

“Better lucky than good,” Xander replied in a soft hiss before the twosome broke cover to follow the group.

They were led through the halls until they wound up right back at Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom, much to Xander’s disgust. Xander and Wednesday crept forward in time to hear an argument going on inside.

“So how do we get in??” Ron grumbled, kicking at a fixture.

"I don't know," Harry replied, equally perturbed, but calmer about it. "But it has to be here somewhere. Myrtle said..."

"I know what the moaning ghost said, Harry!"

Xander shot Wednesday a dark look as he whispered, "Oh look, some people don't scare the ectoplasm out of the only witness around. Imagine that."

Wednesday scowled at him and calmly laid a hand across his thigh, then squeezed. Xander's eyes bugged out as he crumpled to the ground, teeth clenched in pain. When she let go he took a few breaths, then nodded, "Good point, it's probably time to let go of that and move on. Never dwell in the past, that's what I always say..."

She rolled her eyes slightly and focused back on the argument in the bathroom.

"It's impossible, I tell you," Lockhart was saying, much calmer now than he had been earlier, "Only the Heir of Slytherin can open the Chamber, accept it and move on."

"Move on!?" Ron snarled, jabbing his wand at the professor, "That's my SISTER you're talking about!"

"Yes, yes, tragic I admit, but there's nothing to do." Lockhart said, obviously faking a sad tone. "However it would require at least a bloodline trait of the Slytherin family to gain access."

"How do you know that?" Harry asked suspiciously.

"Well obviously I know how to do my research," Lockhart sniffed, "My books didn't write themselves, you know."

"Wouldn't surprise me if they did, you git." Ron growled.

"What traits did the Slytherin line have?" Harry asked, his tone a little desperate sounding.

"Well, several really. The line is one of the oldest pureblood lines in existence, you know." Lockhart said, rolling his eyes. "Most famous is Parselmouth, of course, then..."

"Wait, what's Parselmouth?"

"Talking to snakes," Ron answered, "Only dark wizards do that."

There was a long silence from inside the room.

"Uh... but I can do that, I think." Harry's voice said, sounding very small.

"What!?" Ron and Lockhart yelled together.

"I mean, I did it once I think." Harry said, "When I was younger."

"But... but... that's a **dark** wizard ability." Ron hissed.

"Look, do you want to save your sister or not!?"

They didn't hear another else out of Ron, but instead heard movement followed by a soft hiss and then a harsh grating sound.

"Blimey." Ron said softly. "You found it, Harry!"

"Yes well," Lockhart spoke up, "Glad I could help, and I'll just be going now and..."

"Move it!" Ron growled, "You go first."

Wednesday and Xander waited until they heard three whooping yells, then ducked inside. They found a gaping hole and tunnel where the fixtures had been.

"My my," Wednesday said, her voice idly interested. "Harry Potter is a Parselmouth. Fascinating."

"We going down there?" Xander asked, looking down the tunnel, "Cause I'm not really fond of sewers, you know."

"Honestly. There are no sewers in Hogwarts, especially not in an area of the castle this old." Wednesday replied, "When the castle was built sewage was handled entirely externally."

"Huh?"

"Think outhouses."

"Oh." Xander nodded, then grimaced, "Still looks like a sewer."

Wednesday sighed, then jumped. As she spun silently out of sight Xander grimaced again and followed suit.

\*\*\*\*

At the bottom they slid to a stop and got to their feet in a hurry as they heard shouting just ahead. The two drew their wands and quickly jogged down the path to find Lockhart threatening the two boys with a wand, obviously about to cast a spell as he sneered at them.

Xander glanced at Wednesday, who looked at him, and they both nodded together and aimed their wands.

“Difindo Ossi!”

The two bone splitter curses slashed out, one striking the professor’s right arm, the other his left. Xander winced slightly as Lockhart’s arms were suddenly jerked straight out in either direction and snapped with a sharp tug. He howled in pain as he collapsed, his wand clattering across the floor.

“Buh... buh... bloody hell!” Ron swore, face sweating slightly.

“This yours?” Xander asked, hefting the fallen wand.

“Yeah,” Ron nodded.

Xander tossed it back to him, then looked down at Lockhart, who was moaning in pain as he tried to cradle his broken arms, which only resulted in twisting them more than they were already. “What were you two thinking, bringing this waste of good O2 along?”

“Waste of what?” Ron blurted.

“Never mind,” Xander shook his head. “So, this is the Chamber, huh?”

Harry nodded uncertainly, “We think so. See the snakeskin?”

Xander looked over and paled as he saw the size of the skin in question, “That’s one big snake, Wednesday.”

“Indeed. It would appear that the legends are true. A Basilisk would have to be almost a thousand years old to be that size.”

“Right.” Xander looked around, eyeing the walls. “New plan. We grab Ron’s little sister, run like hell, and then maybe collapse this tunnel. It doesn’t look too stable; I think we could do it.”

“But...” Ron started to object.

“Look, I’m not too keen on killing a thousand year old snake, ok?” Xander cut him off. “Anything that lives that long, it’s meaner than me.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” Harry said, looking at Lockhart’s whimpering form.

“Oh please.” Wednesday rolled her eyes.

“We going to do this, then?”

Ron and Harry exchanged glances, then nodded.

“Alright then. Onward and, well... downward.” Xander said with false enthusiasm.

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“What did you hit him with anyway?” Ron asked as they walked away from the moaning Professor.

“Bone splitter curse,” Xander shrugged, “Wednesday showed it to me. It’s a tournament legal version of the Frasier Ossi curse, cause it’s non lethal.”

“What if you hit him in the head?” Harry asked, grimacing slightly.

“Skull fracture,” Wednesday answered, “Unless they hit the ground badly, that’s all.”

“That’s bloody enough if you ask me.” Ron replied.

“And the other one?” Harry asked, curious.

“Bone fragmentation curse,” Xander answered, “You don’t want to know what that does when you hit someone in the head.”

Harry and Ron turned a little green, but nodded as the group came to a stop at a set of doors.

“This the place?” Xander asked, looking up.

Wednesday rolled her eyes, but said nothing.

“I guess so.” Harry shrugged, “More snake speak, you think?”

Likely," Wednesday said, eyeing the ornate craftsmanship.

Harry hissed at the door's snake carving, and for a moment nothing happened, and then a loud clunk sounded and the doors slowly opened on their hinges. The four kids looked at each other nervously, then pushed forward past the doors and into the Chamber.

"Oh bloody hell." Ron whispered.

"Yeah, I can rock with that." Xander replied.

"Impressive." Wednesday said softly, eyeing the large room interestedly.

"Guys! It's Ginny!" Harry said, surging forward. The three others chased after him, spotting the girl's form on the ground, and the teenage form standing over him.

They led with their wands, eyeing the unknown person warily as they approached.

"Back off! Get away from my sister!"

The teen looked at them calmly, eyes alighting on Harry and automatically rising to his scar.

"The Great Harry Potter," The boy smiled, "I've heard so much about you from dear Ginevera here."

"You're... Tom? Tom Riddle?"

The boy nodded.

"You know this dude?" Xander asked, wand dropping slightly.

"He was Slytherin head boy back when Hagrid was in school."

Xander's wand jumped back up, "He don't look that old."

"Ginny! Ginny! Wake up!" Ron said, nudging his sister gently as he knelt by her side.

"She won't wake."

"What did you do to her!?" Ron snarled.

"She's not...?" Harry swallowed.

Riddle ignored Ron, eyes only on Harry, "Dead? No. Not yet."

"What are you, dude? A ghost?" Xander asked, eyes flickering over to Wednesday.

"A memory." Riddle responded softly, eyes moving over to take in the other two present. "And you are?"

"Harris." Xander said curtly.

"I know a Harris," Riddle said, losing interest. "Useless near squib."

Xander shrugged, "Oh joy. Blood supremacist I assume?"

"Only as it suits me." Riddle said in response. "I believe in power, boy."

"What did you do to Ginny!?" Ron cut in, wand stabbing forward as he rose to his feet.

"Forget him, Ron." Xander advised. "Grab your sister, we're out of here. Madam Pomfrey can look after her."

"I'm afraid that won't be possible." Riddle said.

"Look, Tom, we have to get out of here!" Harry said urgently, "The Basilisk..."

"Won't come until it's called for." Tom said calmly.

"It was you." Wednesday cut in. "You're the so called 'Heir'."

"Why yes, I am." Tom said with a cool smile. "And you are?"

"Wednesday." She told him, "Wednesday Addams."

Riddle's eyes widened slightly, "Are you really? My my, There's hasn't been an Addams at Hogwarts in... well, ever, I think. As a member of a renowned dark family, you must appreciate the genius of what I've done."

"A memory couldn't control the Basilisk," Wednesday said idly, walking around the fallen girl. She paused and looked up sharply, "Possession?"

It is nine tenths of the law, or so they say.”

Wednesday looked down at the redhead, “She opened the chamber and controlled the basilisk.”

“Bravo.”

Ron reddened, “No way! My sister would never have...!”

“Silence, fool.” Tom snapped before focusing back on Harry and Wednesday. “It was easy really, if a bit dull. She’s such a silly little girl...”

He assumed a mocking pose, raising his voice slightly to imitate his victim, “Oh dear Tom, how will I ever let Harry know how I feel? What if he doesn’t feel the same about me? He **so** cute, and he’s the boy who lived...”

Tom rolled his eyes, “Frankly, I was shocked. I didn’t believe it was possible to be nauseous without a body.”

Wednesday smiled slightly, “She fought you.”

The memory of Riddle glared suddenly, “She failed pitifully!”

“No one died.” Wednesday said her voice suddenly clear as if a light had lit in her mind. “The Basilisk is insane, I’ve heard it ranting. It’s a killer, and yet no one died. She fought you, right to the end.”

“And she FAILED.” Tom growled, “Soon she will be dead, and I’ll be back... and the Wizarding world will tremble at my feet.”

“You’ll be stopped!” Harry yelled.

“By who? YOU!? Don’t make me laugh, boy.”

“Dumbledore will stop you!” Harry said.

“That old fool was chased from the castle by a mere MEMORY of me!” Riddle snarled back. “He couldn’t stop me before, and he won’t be able to now.”

“Liar!”

“Haven’t you figured it out yet, Harry?” Tom sneered, “I don’t care about Dumbledore. This is all about you.”

Harry fell back as the others looked confused, “M... me? What do I have to do with it?”

“Everything.” Tom said, stepping toward Harry. “As soon as she wrote about you, I knew that I had to arrange this little meeting. I had to know, you see. How did a little BRAT like you take down the most powerful Dark Lord of all time?”

Harry swallowed, “What do you care? Voldemort was after your time!”

Tom sneered again, “Voldemort is my Past, Present, and Future you idiot boy.”

He drew out Ginny’s wand and flicked it through the air, writing out his name.

Tom Marvolo Riddle.

Then, with a series of wand gestures, he rearranged the letters.

I Am Lord Voldemort.

The group read the changes in stunned silence.

For a second.

“So this is the dude with Mold in his Shorts?”

Ron gaped at Xander in total shock as Wednesday smirked just slightly and Harry stifled a snicker.

Tom, however, spun on him, “You DARE!?”

“Hey look, you’re the dumb dork who picked a name that easy to make fun of, man.” Xander told him. “You should have stuck with Tom. Hard to make fun of Tom. Of course the Great Dark Lord Tom doesn’t have much of a ring to it, so I guess I understand. Still, man, you should have picked something scarier.”

“Indeed.” Wednesday said simply, “Flight from Death is hardly fear inspiring.”

“It means flight OF DEATH!”

“No.” Wednesday shook her head, “That would be Vol **du** Mort. Vol de Mort is flight FROM death.”

ENOUGH!" The memory of Tom Riddle screamed, stamping its feet with depressingly little effect since he was lacking much in the way of a body.

"I think we hit a nerve." Xander mock whispered.

"I believe you're right." Wednesday replied.

"Silence!" Tom snarled, then turned on Harry. "Now speak! Tell me, boy, how did you survive!? Twice we have met, in your past and my future, and twice I have failed to kill you. What makes you special!? How is it that you, of all people, can survive the greatest sorcerer ever?"

"\*Cough**Arrogant** Cough\*" Xander said into his hand.

Tom ignored him, focusing on Harry. "Speak boy. SPEAK!"

Harry straightened his back, glaring right back at the memory of his parent's killers. "You're not, you know."

"What?"

"You're not the greatest. Albus Dumbledore is! Everyone says so. You were afraid of him when you were alive, and your shade still cowers in some dark hole today, afraid of Dumbledore!" Harry yelled, "You're a coward. You always were, and you always will be!"

Riddle screamed in frustration, "Albus Dumbledore is NOTHING compared to me! I am the most powerful sorcerer of all TIME!"

"And modest." Xander said, looking at Wednesday, "So modest too. Don't you think?"

Wednesday rolled her eyes, "For a certain meaning of the word. He's certainly a modest sorcerer, at least."

Tom glared at her for a moment before her words penetrated, then he let out another scream and spun around.

"Speak to me oh Slytherin, Greatest of the Hogwarts FOUR!"

The sound of stone grinding on stone began to echo through the chamber.

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"Get between the girl and the snake," Wednesday instantly ordered, her wand leaping up, "And close your eyes unless I say otherwise!"

"Our eyes!? What about you!?" Ron blurted.

"My family doesn't petrify easily."

"Amen to that," Xander muttered, eyes slamming shut. "I've seen stuff at their place that would scare the venom out of this thing, trust her."

"Trust her?" Ron moaned, "You're telling me that our lives are depending on someone who can scare a bloody Basilisk, and 'trust her' is the best you come up with!?"

"Shut up, Ron!" Harry snapped, "Do what she says, that thing doesn't sound happy."

"It's insane." Wednesday's voice spoke up again, "As you would be if you were locked for your entire life in a hole like this, subsisting on vermin and magic. Alexander, straight ahead of you, slightly up. Bone splitter."

"Difindo Ossi!" Xander snapped, his wand dancing out. "Did I hit it?"

"No, but you made it turn around."

"I'll take the consolation prize."

"Where is it!? Where is it!?"

"SHUT UP RON!!" Xander and Harry snarled together.

Contrary to her appearance, Wednesday Addams was worried. It was true that she wasn't susceptible to petrification, and even the Basilisk's killing stare would have diminished effect on her, but neither did she have access to anything that would seriously injure the great snake. She watched it as it moved around them, staying mostly to the shadows, but noted that the thing was larger than she'd thought. It was certainly as old as the legends said, and judging from its insane rambling had been locked down here almost the entire time.

For a moment she wished that she were a Parselmouth, rather than just had the gift of tongues all Addams had, but set that thought aside. The snake was quite simply mad. There would be no bargaining with it.

"You're only prolonging the inevitable." Tom Riddle said, shifting his attention to the Addams scion. "Mere students have no chance against a Basilisk, let alone one this powerful."

Wednesday ignored him, though she would much rather have cursed him. "Potter, Weasley, do either of you know any useful spells?"

Silence.

"What would be useful?"

"Oh lord, we're dead." Xander moaned.

"Hey!" Ron bristled, eyes still shut. "We can take you anytime you slimy snake!"

"With what? Rictumsumpra??" Xander countered.

"This is not helping."

"Sorry." Xander said, noting the tone in her voice.

"We just have to hold on," Harry spoke up, "Dumbledore will find us!"

"We're in the Chamber of Secrets, Dude!" Xander countered, "If he didn't find it fifty years ago, what makes you think he'll find it now?"

"Dumbledore is a stupid old fool," Tom Riddle's voice said smugly. "Accept your fate, you are already dead."

"SHUT UP!" Harry snapped, "Dumbledore is a great wizard! The most powerful one alive! He'll find us, and if he doesn't he'll still stop you!"

"You're a deluded child...!" Tom's voice began, only to be cut off when a pure sweet song cut through the air, softening all other noises in the chamber. "What!?"

"It's Fawkes." Wednesday said, eyes climbing to the bird as it circles. "The Headmaster's Phoenix. Watch out, Harry! It's dropping something."

Harry flinched as something landed on his head, but kept his eyes shut. "What is it?"

"Hello again there, Mr. Potter."

"H... Hat?" Harry asked, feeling the rumpled cloth on his head.

"Indeed, The Headmaster's birdie thought you may need something from me. Just a moment now and all will be clear."

Wednesday's eyes widened as she watched the Phoenix turn on the Basilisk, slamming into its eyes and scratching viciously. "I think you can open your eyes now."

The other three blinked, looking around, and soon found themselves enthralled by the battle in progress. The Snake's eyes were destroyed by the bird's assault, but it retaliated with a vicious twist of its body and slammed the phoenix across the chamber.

"Fawkes!" Harry screamed out, charging forward.

"This is the Headmaster's help?" Tom asked dryly. "A battered old hat and a crippled songbird. Even without its gaze you stand no chance against the basilisk!"

Xander and Wednesday had stepped forward, ignoring the blathering memory, and were raining bone splitter curses down on the large snake with depressingly little effect.

"How the hell do you kill one of these things!?" Xander yelled.

"The crow of a rooster," Wednesday replied between curses.

"Oh great." Xander muttered, "And we didn't bring one of those with us WHY!?"

"Someone killed them all weeks ago, there are none for miles."

"Figures."

As they bantered back and forth the snake had decided to take the fight to the two main threats, twisting violently as it rocketed across the chamber directly at them.

"We should move." Wednesday declared quietly as the snake closed the distance in mere seconds.

"Right with you!" Xander yelled, diving into her as the Basilisk drove straight at the Addams girl.

Wednesday sprawled out of the way, leaving Xander in her place as the snake reared up, its mouth opening wide to reveal gleaming and dripping teeth.

"Difindo Ossi!" Xander let out, wand leveled at the snake's mouth.

The Basilisk let out a roar of pain or rage loud enough to shake the world and began to violently curl around on itself as the spell struck on its upper fangs and split it from the beast's mouth. Xander stared stupidly at it for a moment until Ron and Wednesday grabbed him from behind and yanked him out of the way of the mass of muscled coils.

“Whoa!” Xander muttered from where he was sitting on the ground, “Did you see that?”

“Very nice spell, too bad you forgot to move afterwards,” Wednesday told him dryly.

“Yeah, mate,” Ron muttered, “A bit thick, that.”

Xander shot him a dirty look, but was distracted by the snake getting its act together again and rising up to strike at them.

“We’re boned.”

As it crashed down, however, Harry dove in between them with a sword in his hand, driving it up into the snake’s mouth and through its brain pain from the underside. For a moment it seemed to pause, then the huge bugger crashed down on Harry, practically burying him and crushing down on the others.

“Mate!” Ron yelled, lurching to his feet, pushing himself free of the coils.

Xander groaned from where he was pushed into the ground, dragging himself out from under the huge serpent, and glared at Wednesday who had somehow managed to be in the one spot the snake didn’t hit.

“How do you do that?” He asked the serene looking Addams, spitting out blood from a split lip as he bled from multiple scrapes.

“Do what?” She asked calmly.

“Never mind.” Xander sighed. “Yo, Ron! Harry ok?”

There was a long silence.

“Ron!?” Xander started climbing over the snake, stopping when he spotted Ron kneeling over Harry. “Jesus, Harry you don’t look too good.”

The black haired boy smiled weakly back, “Thanks a lot.”

Xander’s eyes followed the blood trail on the other boy, to where the Basilisk mouth was closed over his arm, and saw the tooth that had penetrated Harry’s arm.

“Damn.” He whispered.

“He’ll be dead in moments.”

Xander growled, sending a bone splitter into the memory of Tom Riddle. The spell phased through him easily, leaving the memory to smirk.

“Help me up.” Harry said.

“Mate, you need to stay down.”

“I said help me UP.”

Ron swallowed, but nodded, helping Harry up. Xander grimaced when he saw the tooth still jabbed through Harry’s arm, broken off from the snake itself. The redhead helped his friend out from the mess of dead snake, Harry pale as a ghost as he glared at the memory of Tom Riddle.

“You won’t win. I won’t let you.” He gasped out.

“Big words from a child only moments from death, boy.”

Harry cast around and found what he was seeking. With a surge of strength he broke from Ron’s grip and stumbled to the ground, grabbing the diary from where it lay beside Ginny Weasley.

“What are you doing!?”

Harry jerked the tooth from his arm, smiling a death’s head grin at Tom, and jabbed it into the diary with the last of his strength. The Diary began to smoke instantly, and Tom began to scream. In seconds there was black smoke rising from the ruined book, and a spirit like form erupted from it, howling in pain, and then vanished.

Harry collapsed back as the others stared in shock.

“Whoa.” Xander muttered.

There was silence for a long moment, then the phoenix song erupted again as Fawkes circled around and landed by Harry. The bird looked the boy up and down for a long moment, the tilted its head sideways and shed a single tear into the wound.

“It’s... its closing up.” Ron said, leaning over Harry’s arm.

Xander slumped down on the coil of deadly serpent and let out a sigh. “Yeah. You know what, next year, leave me out of you adventures. K?”

Ron stared at him, gaping for a long moment, but Xander just ignored him as he thumped the side of the snake idly.



“Oh yeah, and just FYI,” He said, “I’m staking a claim here and now, I’m getting me a pair of snakeskin boots out of this deal at the very LEAST.”

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Escaping the Chamber proved to be a bit of a trick, given the fact that the tunnel back to the girl’s washroom was slime covered slide. Ron and Wednesday carried Harry out that far while Xander put the unconscious form of Ginny Weasley over his shoulder in a fireman’s carry like he’d been taught in gym class and followed along.

“How the hell are we going to get up that?” Xander muttered, looking at the slide with distaste.

“I doubt that Salazar would have designed his chamber with this as the only way in and out.” Wednesday replied, looking around.

“That doesn’t help up much,” Ron complained, “Unless the snake over there has some Slytherin secrets to spill.”

Xander and Wednesday exchanged glances, but neither commented.

“Any alternate is probably guarded the same way as this one,” Xander said instead, “So with Harry out cold, unless either of you two can speak snake, we’re looking at the only way out.”

Ron grimaced, and Wednesday shook her head.

“No, the Addams’ never developed a talent for Speaking, per say.” She said, shrugging her shoulders, “We can understand almost any language, and make ourselves understood, but we don’t actually speak the other languages. That’s why Father loves French so much, he’s never been able to speak any language but English but always had a fascination with the romance languages.”

Xander half smirked, “I think your Dad loves French cause your Mom is the one speaking it.”

Wednesday smiled slightly, then shrugged.

“Ok,” Xander looked up the tunnel, “That’s a long way up and we’ve got two people who need medical attention in a hurry. Suggestions?”

“One of us could climb out,” Ron said, brow furrowed, “Go for help?”

“Maybe.” Xander nodded, “You think you could make it up that thing?”

Ron grimaced, “I don’t know, but we’ve got to try, right?”

“Unless we find another option, yeah.”

“So I’ll try.”

“Wednesday?” Xander asked, “Any ideas?”

She looked up the tunnel, shrugged, “Wingardium doesn’t work on people, Mobilicorpus will help for a bit, but that’s well out of its range.”

“We could chain it.” Xander suggested, “Lift each other up in steps.”

She nodded, “true. Or we could ask the Phoenix.”

A trill of amused joy filled the air, startling Xander, who spun around. “Huh?”

“I suspect that he’s been following us for a reason,” She said.

“Son of a... I never saw tweety sneak up on us,” Xander muttered. “How can he help?”

An impromptu lesson in Care of Magical Creatures later, Xander watched as Ron hung on to Harry in a death grip while Fawkes extended a tail feather to him. He grasped it and with a breath of surprise they vanished up the tunnel in a rush. Fawkes was back in instant later and the remaining three were rushing through the air with an ease that surprised Xander. It was like he was floating; even his grip on Ginny Weasely wasn’t weighing him down in the slightest.

At the top he grinned at the bird, “That was a rush, Tweety. Thanks.”

Fawkes trilled out another uplifting note, then pecked him on the head before vanishing in flames.

“Ow! What the hell!?”

“Come on,” Ron cut him off, “We have to get them to the infirmary.”

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They burst into the infirmary, shocking Madam Pomfrey into immediate action as they deposited the two onto the beds and then collapsed themselves. It only took moments for the doors to burst open again, the headmaster leading a whole clan of redheads along with Professors McGonagall and Snape.

"Sir!" Ron blurted, "Mom, Dad! We got Ginny... we found her!"

"Yes, we see Mr. Weasley," The kindly old man said, smiling, "May I ask how...?"

"Weren't you kicked out of the school?" Xander asked his mouth running ahead of his brain.

Dumbledore looked at him intently for a moment as everyone else scowled openly at Xander.

"Indeed I was, Mr. Harris. I came back as soon as I heard of Miss Weasley's predicament."

Xander nodded, laying back as he waited for Madame Pomfrey to have a moment to patch up his minor scrapes. What the headmaster said made sense, he supposed, except that if he hadn't been able to do anything to help the others, what did he expect to be able to do for Ginny Weasley? Probably a family thing, he decided, as he watched the Weasley clan pour over their injured daughter/sister.

Ron was telling the tale, and Xander just tuned him out as he lay back and watched Wednesday from across the room. She was looking back at him with that dark intensity of hers, and for the moment the others in the room faded away. They didn't matter; the only ones who mattered were the ones who went down into the chamber.

Even Ron, Xander thought with a quirk of his lips.

Wednesday seemed to pick up on his thought, eyes turning to the redhead for a moment as he extolled on the 'battle', then she rolled her eyes expressively and lay back to rest. Xander did the same himself, only listening long enough to hear that Harry and Ginny would be fine before he let himself doze off.

\*\*\*\*

The next few days were a blur, people coming through and asking questions, other's celebrating, most just staring at the subjects of the latest rumors. Hermione and the other victims were returned to normal and rejoined the school, much subdued from their former attitudes, and Harry was released from the infirmary to wild acclaim when he joined the school for his first feast since the incident.

Xander was getting the cold shoulder from his house, as was becoming normal he found, since the rumors had him working with Potter and that was tantamount to betrayal most vile. He shrugged it off, spent his days with Wednesday and Hermione, and tried to relax. Harry's awakening was the time they were waiting for, though, so he and Wednesday ambushed Harry, Ron, and Hermione right after the feast.

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"Hey."

Harry turned, smiling, "Xander. How are you?"

"I'm good. You?"

"Better. I didn't see you much while I was in the infirmary," Harry said, sounding hesitant.

"Nothing personal, dude," Xander half smiled, "But I knew you'd be ok, and frankly it's getting dangerous around certain members of my house who shall go unnamed."

Harry grimaced, "Sorry."

"Nothing to do with you. My choice, dude." Xander shrugged, "But look, we've got to talk."

Harry nodded and they retreated to a more quiet position.

"We want to go back down there," Xander said.

"Are you bonkers!?" Ron blurted.

"A Basilisk of that size should not go to waste." Wednesday said calmly.

"Waste? It's a dead snake." Ron countered, "Good riddance."

"Dude, I told you. I'm getting my boots out of this mess, at the least." Xander countered, then shrugged, "besides, I need some magical material for some side projects. I scored a couple unicorn hairs from Hagrid, and some other random stuff, but a thousand year old snake? Come on, tell me that doesn't sound like some powerful stuff?"

Harry shivered, "I don't know, Xander. I don't really want to go down there."

"Don't have to." Xander said, "Just open the door; we've worked out how we'll get back up. Come back later and make sure it's open for us. Deal?"

Harry shrugged, "I guess."

"Barmy, the lot of you." Ron said, rolling his eyes.

Honestly, Ronald,” Hermione cut in, “They’re right, you know. But do you know how to properly harvest the materials? This sounds like something the Professors should...”

She cut off, nearly jumping out of her skin when two large and gleaming knives appeared in Wednesday’s hands.

“I have experience.”

Everyone, Xander included, moved quickly away from the dark girl. Xander shook his head, “Jeez, Wednesday, that’s just creepy!”

“I know.” She smiled.

Harry swallowed, “How long do you need?”

“Five hours if I do it alone, seven if Alexander helps.”

“Hey!”

\*\*\*\*

The plan made they waited until the weekend to execute it. Xander and Wednesday went down alone on Saturday morning, with Hermione fretting and Ron shaking his head as Harry closed the passage behind them. They found the snake again and Wednesday went to work while Xander poked around for the most part, helping only when the girl had a specific job for him.

The Chamber was a mess, all things considered, but that was to be expected he supposed. After a thousand years things were going to be a little run down. Xander checked out some of the side tunnels, and found that they extended out some distance from the castle in all directions.

“I think it’s a bolt hole,” He said, coming back to where Wednesday was joyously cutting into the big snake.

“That is likely,” She told him, excising a venom sac with quick motions.

“No way anyone built this place after the castle was constructed,” Xander mused, “At least not normally. Maybe with magic, I suppose.”

Wednesday was humming slightly to herself, not responding, but he wasn’t really expecting her too.

The day passed quickly like that, until they were done. The materials were properly stored in their trunks, and they made their way back to the tunnel. This time they were ready and proceeded to leapfrog each other, and their trunks, up the tunnel with a combination of mobilicorpus and wingardium spells, along with sticking charms so they could rest for a few minutes at a time.

At the top, Xander knocked on the secret door and it instantly opened to reveal Harry.

“You ok?”

“We’re good. All done.” Xander said, “Thanks, man.”

Harry shook his head, “You two helped save Ginny, thank you.”

“That thing hurt Hermione,” Xander said, glancing at Wednesday. “Nothing hurts one of our friends and gets to brag about it, even if it is a giant snake.”

The Addams girl nodded once in satisfaction, “Exactly.”

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The Final exams were canceled, something that didn’t bother Xander so much on one level, but did leave him wondering how in the hell the school could work out where people were in a given grade if they did that. Hermione, in between bouts of sulking, explained to him that the yearly scores didn’t actually have any impact on their grades.

In actuality only the OWLs and NEWTs counted, and those were tested in their fifth and seventh years. The regular class scores existed merely to allow professors to gage who needed more attention in preparation for those two events.

He filed that away as interesting, especially when he learned that OWL and NEWT exams were standardized at the ICW level.

The remainder of the school year degenerated into a series of practical reviews while they were in class, and hanging out with friends while outside of class.

Two days after they had finished harvesting the Basilisk components, however, Xander and the others realized something shocking.

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In the Great Hall the students were eating supper when Dumbledore rose up and gave a little speech about the Chamber, and the heroics of those who had gone down to save Ginevera, but as he was finishing his speech he paused and looked to his right briefly at an empty seat.

“Alas,” he said, “No luck has been had in the search for our Defense Professor, Professor Gilderoy Lockhart. We can only hope that he is once more out saving lives and doing good in the world.”

A series of snorts and outright laughter echoed through the hall, but Xander Harris was sitting bolt upright with wide eyes. A quick glance around told him that Harry and Ron were doing the same, though Wednesday had already gone back to eating.

Xander looked at the Gryffindors, and they stared back at him, and the same thought blasted through their heads.

We left Lockhart in the Chamber!!

\*\*\*\*

“Should we go after him?” Ron asked when they got together after.

“After him where?” Xander asked, “He wasn’t there when we went down after the Basilisk.”

“Where could he go??” Harry blurted.

“I wandered a bit; there are tunnels ALL through that place, probably going for miles.” Xander admitted. “He could be anywhere.”

“We can’t just leave him down there.” Harry groaned, “Damn that prat. He’s torturing us even while he’s gone.”

Xander sighed, “I guess we’d better tell Dumbledore.”

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They went to the headmaster’s office and were mildly surprised when the Gargoyle jumped aside as they approached. The group had to duck aside when Arthur, Molly, and Ginny Weasely came down.

“I’m very disappointed in you, Ginny,” Arthur scolded his daughter, “How many times have I told you to be careful of intelligent magical items when you can’t tell where they’re holding their minds?”

“I’m sorry Dad.” Ginny said miserably.

“Gin!” Ron blurted, “I didn’t know you were out, are you ok?”

“I’m fine.” She said, sneaking a glance at Harry, then looking straight at him. “Thank you for saving me, Harry.”

“Wasn’t just me, Gin. Ron, Xander, and Wednesday were right there with me.” Harry told her with a friendly smile.

“Well, thank you anyway.” She said, then looked at the other two, “And thanks.”

“You’re my sister, course I was gonna go.” Ron mumbled.

Xander just shrugged, “No problem. I had my own reasons for going down.”

“Well whatever they were, we can’t thank you all enough.” Molly said, gushing. “You helped save our Ginny.”

Xander just shrugged a little, not knowing how to respond.

“Are you going to see the Headmaster?” Arthur asked.

“Uh... yeah.”

“Well go on up, but you’d better hurry,” Molly advised, “I think he’s meeting with Lucius Malfoy later.”

“Ok, thanks.” Harry said, hurrying up with the other two following.

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Albus stared at them, his eye twinkle dancing as bright as ever.

“So, to be clear,” He said, “You broke both of Professor’s Lockhart’s arms and left him to wander through the catacombs under Hogwarts?”

Harry grimaced, “Well...”

“He had it coming.” Ron blurted, “The git was going to Oblivate us!”

“Harry,” Dumbledore sighed, “I’m afraid I’ll have to ask you to open the entrance for us so we can locate our missing professor.”

Harry nodded.

The headmaster chuckled, “it’s just as well, I believe that Severus wanted to go down and see what he could recover from the Basilisk.”

The three student’s eyes bulged and they looked at each other for a moment.

“Uh... Of course, Sir.” Harry blurted, swallowing hard.

Dumbledore looked between them for a moment, then leaned back, “In the meantime, Harry why don’t you stay. I believe that the meeting with Lucius would be very... educational for you. You two may go.”

“Thank you, Sir.” Xander and Ron said together, practically bolting for the door.

Once outside then paused, looking at each other.

“Blimey! Snape is going to skin **us** when he sees that you already got the Basilisk!”

“I just hope we can get out of school before it comes to that,” Xander said, shaking his head. “Maybe we can convince him that Lockhart got to it first?”

Ron grinned, “I’d love to see the ponce run when Snape found him.

\*\*\*\*

The remaining days passed without incident; as Dumbledore had decided to get Harry to open the chamber and leave it open over the holidays so the teachers could examine the forgotten section of the school while they searched for Lockhart. Xander sort of hoped that the idiot didn’t get himself killed, but really what was he thinking running off when the slide was the way in?

He and Wednesday sat together on the train as it pulled away from Hogsmeade, heading back toward London, and Xander had to admit it had been an interesting year. He had learned a ton of stuff, granted most of it hadn’t been from his teachers but what the hell, they’d had some good times, an adventure or two, and things had worked out.

Not too shabby.

He was getting along, more or less, with his house... minor speed bumps like helping Harry in the chamber aside. He had some good friends, and he knew that Hermione and Wednesday weren’t going to turn on him for sure. Harry was an ok sort, and even Ron was starting to seem like a decent guy.

He did have some things on his mind, though. Some worries, some dark concerns.

First, what was he going to do to his Uncle, because there HAD to be some retaliation there. He had an idea, but wasn’t sure if it was over the top or not.

Second, though, was bothering him deeply.

Something Arthur Weasley had said to Ginny was preying on his mind.

Don’t trust magical objects that show intelligence when you can’t see where they hold their brain.

Xander looked down at the book that had been so important to him over the past two years and glared at it. Finally he sighed and opened it to one of the interactive sections, then pulled out his fountain pen.

With careful, neat lettering, Xander wrote in the section.

Who are you?

\*\*\*\*

The trip back stateside was uneventful, and within hours Xander and Wednesday were at Salem, wandering across the campus and waiting for a meeting scheduled with the Headmaster. Arthur Fitzpatrick watched them for a while, observing the two from a distance. He’d heard a lot about both of them, through Professor Hardy as well as others.

The young Addams girl had a frightening intellect, quite possibly in every meaning on the expression, and her records bore that out. Harris, on the other hand, had been an average student in non magical courses by all accounts. According to his teachers he was a slacker, and while certainly not stupid he wasn’t particularly intelligent either.

Arthur wondered if the teachers were incompetent, or if the introduction of magic had changed the child profoundly. While he wasn’t a genius, Alexander Harris had proven to be quite impressive in hands on magic. Various reports indicated that the boy could cast a Protego, Stunner, and some other advanced dueling charms well beyond his experience.

His practical test results bore that out, though his theoretical knowledge was spotty at best. Some people just learned better from doing, Arthur knew well, and he suspected that Mr. Harris was one of those.

The Headmaster of the Salem Institute smiled crookedly and strode out into the quad toward his two wayward students.

“Ah, Miss Addams, Mr. Harris. Good to see you both again.”

“Sir.” They both said, nodding respectfully.

“I wished to see how you both were doing, in the wake of the events at Hogwarts this year. I understand it must have been stressful.”

They glanced at each other, then shrugged as one.

*Franklin, that's creepy.* Arthur thought, shaking off the shiver.

"We're fine, Sir." Wednesday said.

"Good, good. I understand that the Hogwarts tests were canceled this year?"

"Yes Sir. Headmaster Dumbledore believed that the school had been stressed enough," Wednesday told him in a dry, almost sarcastic tone.

"Yes, well, Albus generally does as he thinks best. I would prefer if you two were to take some short practical tests here before you leave for the summer?" Arthur asked, "Strictly speaking, I can't require it, and neither do I want to add to your stress as you said, but it would be very good for your records, and my paperwork, if you consented."

Again the two did that simultaneous glance then head bob as they responded together.

"Of course Sir."

*Creepy.*

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The tests, all Oral and practical, were easily accomplished for the duo and the teachers confirmed on the spot that they were where they should be at least and not to worry about it. As they had been told at Hogwarts, the only test results that counted were first the OWLs, and then later the NEWTs. All other examinations were for internal school use only, and didn't have any real impact upon graduation.

The two spent the rest of their time, while waiting for Wednesday's family to arrive exploring the school grounds and library. Since they had been informed that they could borrow books for summer reading, as any student was permitted, Xander quickly located some books on Wand Crafting for himself, and noted idly that Wednesday was digging into the schools index of rarer potions tomes.

"Will they let you borrow those?" he asked, curious.

"Unlikely, however as we are students here, technically speaking, we can come in at anytime during the year to do research." She told him, "I am merely determining what is available."

Xander nodded, "Cool."

She eyed his books briefly, "Are you intending to replace your wand?"

Xander shrugged, "I don't know. I just want to learn a bit about it."

He drew his wand, flipping it idly over his fingers as he looked at the piece of wood. "Pretty much the only thing that separates us from anyone else out there is this stick. I know I'm not powerful enough to ever learn anything more than the most basic of wandless tricks, so without a wand I may as well go back to Sunnydale."

Wednesday considered his words and while she didn't entirely agree with what she felt he meant, she knew that his stated words were factual. Few wizards ever learned wandless casting, it was frightfully consuming on a Wizard's energy. It wasn't that it required more power, though it did, but rather that the focus required was mentally exhausting.

Only the most powerful AND disciplined minds ever mastered true wandless magic.

She was rather fond of Alexander, but knew that he had neither the power nor mental control required. One of those may be corrected, but short of a very few extremely dark rituals, the other never would. She herself was on the cusp; her mental capacity was likely sufficient, however she didn't believe she had the magical stamina make wandless casting practical.

"I understand." She said finally, "you wish to understand what sets you apart."

"Well, yeah, that and I think wands are freaking cool." Xander grinned.

She resisted the desire to pinch the bridge of her nose and groan, Alexander had a way of testing even the limits of her control.

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The Addamses came later that day for Wednesday and they said goodbye, exchanging promises to stay in contact regularly. Then Wednesday was gone and Xander retrieved the port key that would sweep him across the nation.

A word activated it and in a cyclone of motion Xander landed in the Magical district of Sunnydale California. Not that it was much of a district really. More like a back alley several blocks west of the Bronze, right on the edge of the warehouse district. Perhaps two dozen Wizards in total lived within Sunnydale's city limits, most of them probably wanted by some law enforcement group **somewhere**.

Still, the Alley had wards keeping out non magical people and demons alike, which made it one of the safest places in the area according to what Xander had been told.

He dusted himself off from the landing, nodded to a passing witch who had seen better days maybe a century earlier, and made his way to the edge of the wards. He tapped on the footstone at one corner and waited for the doorway to appear. He stepped out into a dirty restroom that had a permanent 'closed for repairs' sign right under the word 'ladies', grimaced slightly, and walked out into the bar with Fenrir chasing after him.

"Hey Willy," He said, nodding to the man behind the bar.

"Hey kid, back already huh?" The squirmy looking man said, nodding to him.

"Yeah, all good in the Dale?"

"Same ol. No big news."

Xander nodded, not really pausing on his way by. "Well I'll see you later, Willy."

"Be watching for ya, kid."

Xander waved slightly, not looking back. He didn't notice, therefore, that Willy had paused in his wiping down of the bar to jot down a note on a pad he kept nearby.

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"Mom! Dad! I'm home!"

Jessica Harris came out of the kitchen, smiling at her son. "Hey, Honey, how was the trip back?"

"It was a port key," Xander said dryly, pointing to the scuffs on his pants where he'd hit the ground.

She smiled in response, "I remember those. A little dizzy?"

"A bit, it's not too bad. The one from England was worse." Xander admitted.

Jessica nodded, "You went through international boundaries, and probably some hefty wards."

"Oh yeah? They put up wards around the country?"

Xander's mother frowned, "Not exactly, from what I recall. But there are many layers of wards all through New England."

"Oh," Xander shrugged, "Well anyway, it wasn't too bad."

"How did you do in school?"

"Decent, I guess. I'm better in practical stuff than bookwork, so those classes have better marks."

"You're not letting your bookwork slide are you?" She asked sternly.

Jessica was surprised when Xander laughed.

"Mom, if you knew my friends, you wouldn't ask about that."

She was about to ask for clarification when Anthony and Sam came in from the back.

"Son, good to see you home."

"Thanks, Dad. Pretty good to be back."

"Not missing the magical world already?" Anthony Harris asked, a bit of a bitter tone in his voice.

"Nah. Honestly, I'm missing TV right now." Xander grinned.

Sam laughed, "That's a sensible kid. You get my 'present', kid?"

Xander glared at Sam, "Oh yeah, and we need to have words."

"What? Wasn't it enough?" Sam asked, looking genuinely confused.

"Sam! You... You put a..." Xander grimaced before blurting, "SEX drug in my name!"

Tony and Sam burst out laughing as Jessica sighed, rolling her eyes.

"Come on, kid, it ain't that bad. You can't say the money wasn't good."

Xander sighed, "A hundred and fifty thousand galleons? Yeah, that's pretty good."

"Golden Eagles, actually." Sam corrected, "Comes out around a hundred and thirty thousand Galleons, depending on the exchange. Don't know for sure what the going rate is in dollars, it fluctuates according to the value of Gold. That's pretty damn decent though. And it's just the advance;

once that stuff passes the FDA you get five percent!"

Jessica could see Xander grimacing again and broke in, "I don't entirely agree with Sam's actions, Alex, but he did do well by you. And the money will ensure that your future is provided for."

"I just want to know what the hell you were trying to cook up in the first place," Tony cracked, and started laughing.

That broke Sam up, and in a moment Xander and his mother were watching them, one with a resigned look on her face, and the other with one that promised retribution.





# Shadow Council : Preludes Book One

## The Grim and The Raven (part 1)

Who are you?

Narcissa Malfoy stared at the text for a long time, wondering what had brought the boy to a realization that he was dealing with a person.

Few wizards of any stripe would have made that connection, not in a world where self updating books were common and magic seemed to breathe life into the lifeless on a daily basis. It was a penetrating question, one that took her by surprise and made her think.

This one was growing up, she supposed.

Alright, it was time then.

She opened her copy to the index page and pressed a wand to the paper. In a moment a big black dog raced out, panting eagerly as he stared up at her from the pages.

“Alright, Sirius,” She said tolerantly. “You may consider yourself off restriction.”

The dog barked sharply, jumped around on the page, and then ran across the book and off the page on the other side.

Narcissa sighed, smiling slightly at the memory of her cousin, and carefully and deliberately took a quill and began to compose her answer to the young man’s question.

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Xander called Jessie and Willow first thing after he’d unpacked, and in short order the two were over at his place and they were getting caught up on the past year while some of the shows Jessie had taped for him played in the VCR.

“A Prank war?” Jessie cackled, “You’ve got to be kidding.”

“No, these twins are insane,” Xander grinned, “Though I have to admit I almost thought I was dead meat when one of the pranks I set up caught the teachers.”

“You pranked the TEACHERS!?” Willow screamed while Jessie laughed.

“Yeah, but I got it blamed on the twins.” Xander smirked, then frowned as he considered, “Though it did get a little out of hand. The pranks weren’t bad, but one of the teachers reacted kinda... stupid. That made things worse.”

Jessie was still laughing as Willow openly scowled at him.

“Anyway, it was an ok year except for the snake.” Xander said.

“Snake?” The two blurted together.

Xander nodded, “yeah, once got loose and bit some students. Caused a bit of an uproar.”

Willow shivered. Snakes she did **NOT** like. Jessie just whistled softly, “Cool dude.”

“Anyway, it’s summer, I got money, and while I do have some work to do I also want to have some fun. What do you two say?” Xander asked with a grin, “up for a real blast of a summer?”

“Sure, what have you got in mind?” Jessie grinned back as Willow nodded.

“Well, I figure we take at least one day a week and do something awesome.” Xander said, “Theme parks, a day in LA, whatever. Sound good?”

“Sounds cool to me, good with you Wills?” Jessie looked over.

Willow nodded, “I think I can sell my parents on the idea.”

The deal made the trio settled in to watch some more TV until Jessie had to go home for Supper. Willow, who lived closer, lagged behind.

“Xander, were those stories true?” She asked when they were alone.

He nodded, “Just underplayed. The snake was actually a sixty foot long Basilisk.”

Willow ‘eeped’. “You’re kidding!”

Xander shook his head.

“You HAVE to be kidding!!”

"I wish. It petrified a friend of mine," Xander said, frowning. He then smiled slightly and looked up at Willow, "Hermione, actually. She's kinda like English-Willow."

"Hey! I speak English!"

Xander chuckled, "Not what I meant. Anyway, yeah the stories were true."

"Jeeze. Are you sure you want to go back there?"

Xander thought about it then shrugged, "Yeah, I think so. It's awesome, Wills. We're learning stuff you only see in movies and comics. Come on downstairs, I want to show you some of my notes."

Down in the basement that had been set aside for Xander's 'magical studies', he broke out his notebook and showed it to Willow. She skimmed through it quickly, and then looked at him with a curious eye.

"Magical tattoos?"

"It sounded cool?" Xander replied with a weak smile.

She rolled her eyes, "Can I borrow this, Xan? I'll bring it back tomorrow."

"Sure."

"Ok, I'll see you then," She said, getting up to leave. "It's real good to have you home. Bye."

"Bye."

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It took some convincing, but the three of them managed to convince their parents and the first excursion day was set for the beginning of the following week. Xander and the other two settled in to a bit of a routine otherwise, watching TV and doing whatever came to mind. With Willow he found himself working on his projects, as well as a bit on homework, and he spent his time with Jessie pouring over comic books and Jessie's latest obsession, Role Playing Games.

It turned out that, without Xander around, Jessie had started hanging out with Jonathan and the Wells brothers, as well as some of their friends. That group was into the geek scene SO much more than Xander had ever been, but it was fun to be immersed back into a year's worth of total geekdom in just a few days.

The books were cool too, since they gave him ideas for things to research when he went back to his projects.

It was his Uncle who surprised Xander, though. Sam had showed up to make sure Xander was still working out as he'd begun to the year before, and express disgust at how much Xander had slacked off, then he got serious for a bit.

"Hey kid," Sam said after one workout, while Xander was wiping the sweat away, "got someone I'd like you to meet."

Xander shrugged, "Sure, Unc. Who?"

"He's family," Sam told him, "Squib, same as me, from way back. He asked about you after you left last year."

"Oh yeah? How come?"

"Keeps tabs on the family, heard you were going to magic school I guess."

Xander nodded, "Alright. When?"

"Today, if you want. He's out near LA, I'll drive you."

The drive out was peaceful, leaving Xander relaxed as they drove up to a nice colonial style home tucked into the hills maybe an hour out of Los Angeles. Sam brought him in and they found a really old man sitting on the porch, looking out over the Ocean.

"Hello Robert." Sam said respectfully, pausing at the porch steps.

"Sam. This your nephew then?" The old man asked, looking Xander over carefully.

Sam nodded.

"Well don't just stand there, come on up, take a set."

They did, and there was a moment of silence before the old man looked at Xander again.

"I understand the Family has been showing an interest in you."

Xander shrugged, "I suppose so, Sir. I don't really know much about it."

The old man snorted, “Don’t suppose you would. Watch out for the Harris’ son, we’re a sneaky lot.”

Xander smiled weakly at the man.

“Anyway, Sam also tells me that you’re taking schooling abroad?”

“Hogwarts, Sir.”

Robert nodded, “Was a good school in my day, haven’t heard anything much about it lately, but then I don’t keep up like I used to.”

The conversation fell into a lull for a long moment and then just as Xander opened his mouth to ask why the old man wanted to see him, Robert spoke up again.

“So tell me, son, what happened over there this year?”

Xander blinked, “Pardon?”

Robert chuckled, “Last year Sam and your Dad are telling me about how you were a Wizard and all, then this year past the family starts buzzing about you, and just last week you’d think someone dropped a live grenade in the Elder Harris’ lap. You’re causing waves, son, and I’d like to know why.”

“What does it matter to you?” Xander asked, a little put out that his life was being watched so closely.

“Me? Nothing much. To be honest, I probably won’t be around much longer anyway. To the family, though, it may matter.”

“Wasn’t anything much, just a memory of that psycho dark lord.” Xander shrugged, “Loosed a basilisk on the school, didn’t have much to do with me, I just went down with the guy who killed it.”

The old man snorted, “Wasn’t anything much. Funny. And the year before?”

“Hey, I had nothing to do with that.” Xander protested, “That was all Harry and his group.”

Robert chuckled, “You’re an interesting lad, Alexander. What are you studying beyond the basics, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“Nothing really,” Xander said, “I’m signed up for Arithmancy and Runes next year, but those are my first electives.”

Robert nodded, “Any history classes?”

“American Wizarding History and History of Magic,” Xander responded.

Robert exchanged glances with Sam, then turned back to Xander. “Tell me, do you plan on living solely in the Wizarding world, lad?”

“I don’t know, but I doubt it. I’m not giving up my TV,” Xander declared.

The two men chuckled at that, but shook their heads.

“Not what I meant, but it answers the question well enough.” Robert said with a sigh, “You know, most children who go into the magical world never come back. They lose the ability to exist in the realm of mere mortals. Even those who were born to completely normal parents.”

Xander frowned, “How come?”

“Because, from the age of eleven all they see is magic for ten months of the year. By eighteen, the normal world has moved on without them, and that was decades ago. Today you can lose your place in the world in even less time.”

Xander frowned, “How come?”

Xander grimaced at the thought, but another one was pushing to the surface. “Why are you guys so intent on all this stuff?”

Sam laughed, “Told ya he’d ask.”

“So you did, whelp.” Robert grumbled good naturedly, then turned back to Xander. “We’re interested because it suits us to have a contact that can walk in both worlds.”

“Can’t you?”

“We’re both Squibs,” Robert explained, “We know the magical world, but the magical world doesn’t really want to know us.”

“Sounds like those idiot pureblood types in England.”

“To a degree, yes.”

“So what do you guys want?”

“For now? To do you a favour, if you really want to walk in both worlds. Later, well we’ll talk about later when it comes.” Robert said.

“Did the rumours mention I was sorted into Slytherin?” Xander asked dryly, “Cause you’ve got to be cracked if you think I’m going to agree to anything without knowing the end price.”

They laughed, “No end price, lad. We don’t recruit or blackmail children. However, by helping you now we at least have a chance at a future arrangement. That’s something we won’t have if you vanish completely into the magical.”

Xander frowned, he’d never thought about it in those terms.

“Alright, what did you have in mind?”

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Lately it seemed that no matter what Xander did, or which way he turned, he was faced with more work than he’d ever imagined he’d do, let alone want to do. Sam and Robert had offered him some tutoring in subjects more useful in the normal world, including more exercise and some actual fight training this summer, and Xander had accepted.

Then he arrives home and cracks open his favourite book, the Grimoire of the Coven, and found a long note in the interactive section of the book.

*Who Am I?*

*That, young man is an interesting question with a detailed response. Simply, I was Miss Black.*

Xander blinked, looking at the words in surprise. Was? Did she die? Was this something like Riddle’s diary then? He read on.

*Before my marriage that was my name, at least. Today I use another name, one that isn’t important for the moment.*

Xander sighed, grinning a little to himself. At least he wasn’t facing some weird Dark Chick trying to do whatever. Well, probably wasn’t facing that anyway.

*When I went to school, Miss Evans, Miss Prewitt, and I became... unlikely friends. We shared some classes, and some acquaintances, and eventually many things together as we grew from the young girls we were to the women we became. Miss Evans was killed not long after graduating, her family’s opposition to the Dark Lord finally demanding the ultimate price. Miss Prewitt now resides in St Mungos, where she has been since almost the same time, and will likely remain for the rest of her days.*

*They were both reliable and very good friends, and while still in school we made an agreement. We would help any who came across the book you now hold, regardless of their blood or their politics. You see, We three held very different views in those regards, views that ultimately led us down the roads we have taken, to the destinations we each found.*

*The words within this tome are not political; they are not intended to sway your thinking or your actions. They are, however, the opinions of three very different young women who came of age in a difficult time and so are highly charged and should always be carefully considered before being accepted as truth or falsehood.*

*So, the answer to your question is that I am who I agreed to be when I made the pact with Miss Evans and Miss Prewitt. I am who they would be, if they could. I am your advisor, occasionally your tutor, and if it is so required I will be your confidant. Nothing you write in this book will be shared with anyone else on pain of the Oath we took, of that you have the word of the Coven.*

*Narcissa Malfoy Nee Black of the Coven*

*Ps. I do apologize for the plague I have unleashed upon you; however as it is your third year certain agreements have to be upheld.*

Xander gulped.

Plague??

Then he frowned. The plague was scary, but he suspected that it was less than lethal, whatever it was, and so it took second place. First place was taken quickly by the name ‘Malfoy’.

Was she related to Draco? She almost had to be, which made a certain sense as he thought about it. Miss Black was a blood purist, Xander knew from reading her entries. She didn’t have a particularly low opinion of muggle born and all, but she still believed in the superiority of breeding.

No Matter how he looked at it, things were starting to get interesting.

Just as that thought crossed his mind, Xander nearly jumped out of his skin. The coven Grimoire suddenly jumped on the desk, as the large black dog that represented Sirius Black bounded into view. The dog began barking up a storm, its cartoonlike speech bubbles blocking out the page as it seemed to be trying to get Xander’s attention.

His attention it got, and Xander quickly forgot about the note from the coven member at he tried to get rid of the dog that was in the process of befouling his pages.

“No, stop it! I said stop it, don’t eat that! No, I need those notes! You crazy mutt,” Xander screamed at the book, trying in vain to get the dog to behave.

The black dog was jumping up and down, obviously having the time of its life, gleefully ignoring Xander's protestations. After several minutes of this, Xander finally gave up and slumped down in his chair. Shortly after that happened dogs excited rampage, came to a stop. Xander slowly looked back up at the book, and found the dog staring seriously out at him.

For a long moment the two looked at each other, and then the dog slowly began to shift morphing into a bottle of ink, and then finally into a man.

"Now you've finally learned it's futile to fight a marauder," the man grinned up at him, "let's move on to the fun stuff."

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Sirius Black was insane. That was all Xander had to say on the subject.

No, scratch that. Xander had a hell of a lot more to say; the problem though, was that Sirius wasn't listening. Instead the black mongrel of a shape shifter was tearing through Xander's notes and lessons and generally making a pain of himself. Not that he cared what Xander thought, of course.

Still, the man knew his magic.

Practically against his will, Xander found himself learning from the troublemaker. Sirius went in-depth into what he called the noble art of the prank, though to Xander it often sounded like good old-fashioned bullying. That said, while he didn't approve of Sirius's methods of identifying the target, Xander had to admit that the ideas were scary good.

In fact, he shuddered to imagine the twins with the amount and kind of information that Black was feeding him.

The first weekly trio trip, as Xander had taken to calling it, came along not a moment too soon. Between black, his relatives, and Willow, Xander figured he was working harder on his holidays than he did during school. So when, under the supervision of Jessie's mother, the trio headed for LA, Xander was determined to do nothing that even resembled work for the entire day.

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"Disneyland," Jessie exclaimed, "I love this place!"

Xander laughed, draping an arm over the shoulder of both his best friends, dragging both closer to him as the trio walked in the magic kingdom. "This is going to be so cool."

"You know I heard they have great educational..."

"Hey!" Xander cut Willow off abruptly, holding up his hand a stop her in place. "We talked about this Willow, no work, no learning, only fun."

Jessie smirked at Willow, enjoying the outraged look on her face as she turned on Xander.

"Just because we're having fun, doesn't mean we can't learn something to," Willow huffed at him, obviously spinning up for rant.

Xander just grinned at her, "today is not for learning Willow, today's for mindless, totally unproductive, and utterly time wasting, **fun**."

Will crossed her arms, glaring at Xander, who just kept on grinning back at her. Finally, after a long moment, she gave up and grinned back. "Alright fine."

"Yes!" Jessie crowed, pumping his arms in the air in triumph. "Let the fun times begin!"

Xander put his arms back around his two friends, and trailed by Jessie's mother, the trio made their way into the happiest place on earth.

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The three of them spent their day going from ride to ride and show to show, and generally just having fun. For Xander it was the first time, and perhaps as much two years, that he just focused on nothing but fun. That thought struck him as they were leaving the park, and the concept actually staggered him for a moment.

It was insane, where was the slacker he used to be? He and Jessie had perfected their don't care attitude, had spent hours on it even, and now what was he? The horror of horrors was that he was becoming, God forbid, Willow or Hermione.

Now there was a scary thought.

In all seriousness, though, it did worry him somewhat. The idea that he was losing himself kept coming back to him. He couldn't help it though, just the idea of magic and the things he could do, those kept him up at night. He would lie awake, staring up at the ceiling in the dark, and just try to mentally map out all the things he could accomplish.

It was like living in comic book, the wonder, the horror, and the sheer infinite possibilities. It was, in plain and simple fact, a fantasy come true. How could any geek worthy of the title possibly do any less?

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The day after the Disney trip, Willow came over in the morning and the two of them went down to the basement and immediately began to crack open the books.

“Have you been reading over the winter,” Xander asked.

Willow nodded enthusiastically, “I’ve read all the theory, and even managed to practice some of potions, but it was hard keeping it from my dad.”

Xander nodded, “they around more this year?”

Willow shrugged, “not really. But potions stink, so I can’t really do any inside.”

“Yeah I can see that.” Xander responded, opening his notebook on wand making. “It kind of sucks that your dad is so close minded.”

Willow grimaced, neither nodding nor refuting Xander’s statement. “I guess, but I don’t really want to give up my computer classes either. So I don’t know, maybe I’m happier here?”

Xander shrugged, mulling that over. Finally shook his head, “you could be right. Wizards are a little strange, and really backwards it seems. As long as you doing what you love, I’ll be happy for you.”

Willow blushed red for a moment, ducking her head down to look at her toes, “thanks.”

Xander just smiled, and then looked down at his book. Willow took a moment to regain her composure, then looked over at what he was reading.

“Wand crafting?” Willow asked, her voice getting a touch of excitement. “You want to build a wand? Because I would really love to have one, you know if you thought you could do it, but it can be really frustrating reading through the books and not being able try the spells, you know...”

Xander laughed, holding up his hands to stem the flow of words from his friend’s mouth. “Hold on, hold on. I’m just doing the basic reading; we are a long way from building one.”

“Oh,” Willow said, blushing again. “I was just, kind of you know, hoping and all.”

“I know,” Xander said sympathetically, “but it’s supposed to be really hard to make a proper wand.”

“How are they made?”

“Well according to what I’ve been reading modern wands are built with a wooden conduit,” Xander said seriously, “that’s around a magical core.”

Willow blinked, “that sounds simple enough.”

Xander shrugged, “where it gets complicated is the fact that no one knows why or how it works. At least no one who knows is talking. In fact, I think I read almost a dozen different explanations so far and all of them contradict each other.”

Willow scowled at the book, “there are no facts? Have there been any studies? There should be standards, shouldn’t there? If every wizard or witch needs to use a wand wouldn’t it make sense for the wand to be the most studied piece of magic in the world?”

Xander half shrugged, half smirked, “you just used the words wizard, witch, and sense in the same sentence. I’m pretty sure that violates the law somewhere.”

When Willow scowled at him, Xander couldn’t help himself; he broke down laughing much to his redheaded friend’s ire. As he laughed she kept glaring, which caused him to laugh harder, which in turn caused her to glare more. The circular reinforcement continued until Xander was clutching his side painfully, and even Willow was finally beginning to crack a smile.

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“Hey kid, how was the week?”

Xander nodded to Robert, tossing down some of his exercise gear, “pretty good, you?”

“At my age kid, any morning I see the sun, that’s a good morning.” Robert grinned, belying the grim nature of his words. “So how is Sam treating anyway?”

Xander rolled his eyes, suppressing a groan. The aches and pains in his muscles had aches and pains of their own, but it wasn’t something he exactly wanted to advertise.

The old man just grinned at him, “I know that look boy, seen it in my own eyes while looking in the mirror all too many times in the past. All I can tell you is that it gets worse before it gets better.”

This time Xander did groan, not even bothering to hide it. That was about the last thing he wanted to hear, “God man, are you guys sure I need all this? I mean, really, Phys Ed doesn’t seem to be a real big deal in the Wizarding world as far as I can tell.”

Robert fell silent for a moment, looking at Xander intently. “Magic is a glorious thing boy, but like everything else it has its limits. I grew up in a small town in Westmoreland County, Virginia. Spent my first 15 years in the family home. Like you say, working out, making yourself stronger, it doesn’t seem too important to most wizards, not on the physical level anyway. When I left, I learned that strength and muscle, those are things I could trust. It took painful lessons, but they were important lessons, lessons I paid for dearly.”

The old man was quiet for a moment, as if considering what he’d said, or maybe considering what was left to be said.

“The most important thing a man can do right in this world is learn from his own mistakes.” Robert said after a long moment, “but learning from another man’s mistakes, that’s the mark of more than a man. That’s the mark of a leader.”

Xander was silent in turn, considering Robert’s advice. The old man hadn’t given any real examples, but it was obvious he was serious. Xander found himself licking his lips, a little nervous, “what happened?”

Again, Robert was quiet for a long moment, and Xander wondered if maybe he wouldn’t answer this time. Still, however, the moment ended in the old man began to speak, “I joined the Army boy, but back then it wasn’t the same armies you join today. Training consisted of being shown what end of the rifle bullet came out of, assuming you were lucky enough to get a rifle.”

As Robert told his story, Xander listened at first a little confused, trying to work out exactly when Robert had been born. After a short while, however, the confusion faded as he just began to absorb the words.

“Our family was well-to-do, so I had a rifle of my own when I joined. But I come from a magic home, we didn’t hunt for our own food, so my shiny new rifle had never seen use.” Robert said, looking a little lost in his memories, “because of my family’s position, I was groomed for leadership role. That’s not how we do things today, but then it was the natural order of things. My first squad, my first assignment, we were sent out to deal with the minor Indian uprising.”

Robert shook his head, his face tinged with memory, “we were told it was a walk in the park. The superiority of our civilized military assured our victory.”

By this point Xander was spell bound, listening intently.

“We lost half the squad in the first few seconds of the ambush, most of the rest the next three minutes.” Robert said stonily, “I almost died because I couldn’t move fast enough, couldn’t think fast enough, and couldn’t keep a steady hand when I needed it. That was when I learned my lesson, paid my price. Family position, magic, civilized culture... these are wonderful things, but in the real world, where the blood splatters the ground... they mean a whole lot less than we’d like to.”

With that said, Robert rose from his chair and tottered a little unsteadily back into the house. Behind him Xander sat silently, questions whirling in his mind. He heard a sound behind him, and turned to see Sam standing there.

“How...,” Xander hesitated, “when...?”

“Robert was born in 1807,” Sam answered, already knowing the question Xander wanted to ask. “We don’t live quite as long as wizards, at least not as a general rule, but we still live a long time.”

“But then he’d be almost...” Xander trailed off.

Sam nodded, “he’ll see his second Centennial in a few years. The oldest squib I know of.”

Xander swallowed, “and you say wizards live longer?”

“On average,” Sam answered with a nod.

“Wow.”

Sam chuckled, patting Xander on the shoulder as he walked past, heading into the house. “Why don’t you run through the kata’s I showed you kid, I need to speak with Robert for a few minutes.”

Xander nodded dumbly, shaking himself from his stupor, and slowly got down to work.

Inside the home, Sam found Robert leaning on a cane staring out at the boy as he worked in the yard.

“Whose story you telling?” Sam asked quietly.

Robert let out a quiet breath, “my older brother’s.”

Sam nodded, “was a good story.”

“I learned from my brother’s mistakes,” Robert said with finality, “I hope he can do the same.”

Sam just nodded again.

There really wasn’t much else he could do, or anything he could say. Some lessons you had to learn yourself, and the mark of a man was how well you learned them. That said, however, there were bigger things in the world than being a man. Sam knew, as Robert did, but the ability to learn from the mistakes of others was perhaps one of the most elusive, and valuable, qualities to have.

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By the end of the week, Xander’s work out had gotten a little easier. The muscles he’d let go while back at Hogwarts slowly tightened up again, and even showed signs of perhaps not trying to kill him while he slept. He had to admit, he did make sense, or least it seemed it did that being fit would probably benefit him whether he had magic to use or not.



Of course, he supposed that he might see it that way simply because that was what he was told from a young age. A fit mind in a fit body. That was the saying, but it was a saying from a non-magical school.

Still, it made sense, he decided. So until he had evidence to the contrary, Xander decided he was going to stick it out, and deal with his sadist of an uncle. It was something he'd have to look up though, if only to determine what value, if any, the whole routine really had.

His personal projects were moving along better than his workouts, thankfully. With Willow's somewhat obsessive help, Xander thought that maybe they might be getting a handle on the wand crafting thing.

They had actually tried making one already, with no success. The preparation of the word was apparently one of the most complicated parts, all the book seemed to agree on it. The reference material he picked up in the New Salem library indicated that wand blanks were often aged as much as 50 years, which really put a crimp in lot of his ideas.

It was Willow unsurprisingly, who offered him an intriguing alternate path.

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"Are all wands made of wood?" Willow asked, looking up from the book.

Xander nodded, "all modern wands are anyway."

"What about non-modern wands?"

Xander stopped, leaning back from his book, and thought about the question.

"Well," he said slowly, "staves were made from wood, but they often used a crystal focus."

"Crystal?" Willow asked curiously.

Xander nodded, remembering the history book he'd read on the subject. "Actually, there was a time when Crystal foci were pretty trendy."

"What kind of Crystal?"

"Diamonds were the most popular," Xander answered, "I think some other crystals were used as well, but those were very rare."

"Diamonds," Willow mused, falling silent for a moment as she considered it.

Xander recognized the look on her face.

"What is it?" He asked.

"What is what?" Willow blinked, looking up at him.

Xander smiled, leaning forward, "I know that look. You have some kind of idea, and I know you well enough that I want in."

Willow blushed, "well, I don't know if it's an idea... really is just a vague thought."

Xander raised an eyebrow questioningly.

Willow sighed then leaned forward with just a glimmer of a glint in her eye, "it's just that diamonds and wood have something in common."

Xander blinked, "they do?"

Willow smirked, nodding happily at Xander's confusion. "They do."

Xander thought about it for a long moment, then shook his head, "I give."

"Carbon."

Xander looked puzzled, rolling it over his head, "carbon?"

Willow nodded, "carbon is the base material of all life on earth."

Xander nodded, "carbon-based life, right? I remember that episode of Star Trek."

Willow rolled her eyes, "really Xander, life is not a television episode."

"Can I help it if everything I really needed to know, I really did learn from TV?" Xander grinned.

Willow stomped her foot, eliciting a crack that echoed in the basement. "That's not funny mister."

"I beg to differ."

Xander smirked as Willow reddened slightly, glaring at him. Her tolerance levels to his nonsense had dropped markedly in his absence, and he

was really enjoying the fact that he could get to her more easily than he used to.

Willow took a few breaths however, and calmed down. "As I was saying, diamonds and wood have carbon in common."

Xander thought about it, frowning a little as he puzzled it out, "okay, yeah. Diamonds are pure carbon right? But wood isn't. I don't think, right?"

Willow sighed, but nodded, "no, wood isn't pure carbon. But carbon is the most basic element of all life, including wood, here on earth. And if the diamond works as a foci, then maybe carbon is what's important in a wand."

Xander considered it "could be. How do we test it?"

Willow thought about it for a moment, then got an expression on her face and Xander had a hard time recognizing. It was an expression, he realized shortly, that would have been more at home on Wednesday Addams' face. And while he became inured to that look on Wednesday's face, seeing it on Willow's sent a spike of fear up his spine.

Lucky for Xander, he wasn't the target of the expression of pure evil. Not this time anyway.

Willow's face morphed back to one of pure innocence as she spoke up, "well, you know daddy did buy a new set of golf clubs."

\*\*\*\*

Over the next couple weeks Xander and Willow played around with the notes and few details Xander had been able to pick up on the rather nebulous art of wand crafting. As he found out in Europe, there were very few details in the public domain, to the point of it being simply ridiculous. Certainly, the process followed by the three families of wand making was for all practical purposes passed only from father to son.

The lesser art of wand crafting, with all its foibles, was only somewhat more open. The basic process was available to those who wished to research it, however by all accounts the devil was in the details.

In their pursuit of the ideal, however, Xander had to admit to being a little scared of how obsessively Willow was pursuing her goal. Stealing her dad golf clubs, well that showed a good deal more nerve than he really gave her credit for.

In the end, though, Xander figured Willow was just really pissed off over not being able to go to a magic school.

That said, even she wasn't willing to do more than wreck one of her father's clubs. So that was how the two of them wound up crouched over an expensive graphite club, hacksaw in hand. With the club properly dissected, their having gained two pieces about long enough to use for a wand, the duo began to puzzle out how they were going to put it all together.

The core would be easy enough, since Xander had been planning this for several months. While still at Hogwarts Xander had managed to finagle several unicorn hairs from the groundskeeper, Hagrid. He figured that those would make an excellent start for a new wand crafting project.

As the preparations for this little project continued, however, a new force made her way to Xander's summer.

The floo specialists from the California County Bureau of the American ministry arrived and put Xander's special order into effect, opening the Harris home floo to full transport, as well as communications, capacity. With that done, two of the girls in Xander's life were now on a collision course to meet.

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Wednesday tucked in to a roll as the burst of green fire flared in the fireplace, coming back to her feet about halfway into the living room. The dark haired girl glanced around briefly, idly dusting the floo powder from her close as she did.

"Wednesday!" Xander grinned, striding forward and gave his friend a brief hug.

She spared him a brief glare in return, then grudgingly returned the embrace.

"Man, it's good to see you!" Xander said, stepping back and gesturing around. "Welcome to California, home of Hollywood, giant redwoods, rainbow pride, and the Hellmouth."

"Yes..." Wednesday said slowly, as she turned around. "I can feel it."

Xander carefully had a smirk, thinking about how it was strange those things you could get used to if you really had to. From anyone else that comment would have sent shivers up the spine, but from Wednesday Addams it really was just par for the course.

"It's like a cold dark presence," she said, musing mostly to herself. "A chilled blanket, to keep the summer warmth away. Delightful."

And there went the shivers.

This time Xander had to muffle a snicker. Wednesday was of course, purely Wednesday.

"Come on downstairs," Xander said with a grin. "There's someone I want you to meet."

The Addams scion merely inclined her head slightly, and then followed Xander without comment.

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Willow was pouring over one of the wand crafting books, trying to absorb the sections on theory, when Xander and Wednesday walked downstairs. Xander smiled when Willow characteristically didn't even bother to look up, just waiting in his general direction as she mumbled, "hey Xander."

Wednesday, for her part, merely raised a single eyebrow as she took in the near disaster zone of books and papers that surrounded the redhead. "It would appear that I have located the reason for you being so comfortable in the presence of Hermione."

Willow jerked up at the sound of the other girl's voice, twisting around in a manner that really couldn't be recommend, and wound up falling off the chair and flat on her butt.

"Ow!!"

"Just as jumpy," Wednesday noted, "though perhaps a little more clumsy."

Willow pushed the hair out of her face, staring up at Xander and Wednesday with wide eyes, "hey! I'm not clumsy ..."

Wednesday raised an eyebrow.

Willow flushed red; looking around at the mess she had made when she fell, and sighed. "Well, not normally."

Xander snickered.

"It's not funny!"

Xander started to laugh, slumping against the wall as he managed to nod and get a few words in between breaths, "yes it is."

Willow glared at him, Wednesday merely stared, and Xander... well Xander just started to laugh harder. Finally, after several minutes and several hundred gales of laughter, that even Xander would have to eventually admit were over the top, he calmed down.

"Wednesday," Xander wheezed out as he tried to catch his breath, "meet Willow. Willow, meet Wednesday."

Willow, who was still flushed bright red, nodded towards the dark haired girl. "Nice to meet you."

"Likewise."

Wednesday's dry, acerbic drawl left Willow flustered and uncertain as to whether the other girl meant what she said or was merely humouring Xander. The moment of uncertainty caused her innate shyness to kick in, and she ducked her head turning quickly away from the darker girl, mumbling some words about getting back to her studies.

Wednesday glanced at Xander, raising her expressive eyebrow again, and Xander shrugged in return. The Addams scion sighed silently, and then the two of them walked to the table, split apart by mutual consent, and took seats on either side of Willow.

"So," Wednesday said her monotone voice, "what are we working on today?"

"Wand crafting."

Wednesday glanced over at Xander, unsurprised. Xander's interest in wands had been ongoing, so there was certainly nothing new here. She glanced across the materials on the table, taking them in silently as she also took the moment to formulate her thoughts. There were two items that she took to be wand blanks resting in the centre of the table, both of them identical, and both of them looking surprisingly like her own ebony wand.

She reached out, taking one, and realized instantly that really it was nothing like her own.

"This isn't wood." She said as she examined the rod in her hand, "was this from a golf club?"

Willow blushed deeper red, hiding her face behind a curtain of her hair as Xander grinned wide enough to split his face. Wednesday was far from stupid; she could've put the whole story together with a lot less evidence.

"So, just to be clear, you cut up what looks like a brand-new golf club," she drawled dryly, "which I'm guessing, from the look on your faces, you didn't exactly have permission to do. Am I right?"

Xander snickered as Willow just nodded mutely, practically pressing her face into the desk.

"Impressive."

Willow bolted up straight, eyes wide as she stared in surprise at the other girl. "What?"

Wednesday however wasn't someone to repeat herself, so she merely examined the material more closely. "What is your justification for this material?"

Willow swallowed, "well we, I mean Xander and me... that is, Xander and I, we were looking for ways to build a wand when we realized, well actually Xander realized that the wood usually had to be prepared, sometimes seasoned as much as 50 years. Since we didn't really have that much time, I mean I sort of want a wand before I'm 65, so we looked for alternatives. Did you know they used to use diamonds as foci? That's cool, but a bit expensive; I mean I have some money but not like that..."

Wednesday stared over at Xander, her expression practically unreadable, except for the fact that he'd spent two years learning what her expressions meant. At the moment she was caught in the cross roads between surprise and amusement.

Oblivious to the communication between the other two, Willow continued on, "anyway I thought that since diamonds are carbon, and that's the only thing that they have in common with wood, maybe another form of carbon would work as well."

Wednesday raised an eyebrow, examining the former golf club in her hand. "A graphite club? Interesting. Intriguing even."

She said to nod back down the table next to its twin, then nodded to the books and papers, "what have you found?"

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With Wednesday coming through the floo every couple days to help out, they quickly moved the project along from theory to the more practical aspects of testing. Some things of course, were easier theorized than accomplished.

For example, embedding the unicorn hair into the shaft was both simple and complicated at the same time. Simple because the shaft was hollow, and more than thick enough to accommodate the hair. Complicated because the shaft was hollow, and too thick to hold the hair firmly in place.

Xander suggestion of superglue was quickly shot down, much to his disappointment.

"What about a liquid core," Wednesday suggested.

Xander frowned, thinking about it, "The only liquid that would work is..."

"Blood."

Willow squeaked, eyes going wide, "b... blood?"

Wednesday nodded silently.

Xander scowled and thought about it, "Aren't blood cores illegal? I think I read about that in here somewhere."

Wednesday shrugged, "so?"

Willow squeaked again.

Xander thought about it, then shrugged as well, "before we even think about that, I think we should research blood cores. In the meantime, what if we filed down some of the graphite and filled core with powder?"

Willow nodded enthusiastically, happy to be away from the topic of blood. "That sounds like a good idea."

Wednesday sighed, rolling her eyes, "if we must, then we must."

Xander hid a grin as Willow stared wide-eyed at the dark haired and just plain dark Addams scion.

"Excellent," Xander said, clasping his hands together. "We have a plan of action then. Let's do this."

The two very dissimilar girls nodded in agreement as they began to gather the materials needed for their first hands-on project of the summer.

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By the middle of summer, now with a month's worth of goof off days under their belt, Xander, Willow, and Jessie, were finding themselves a little tired of theme parks and the like. Xander had been disappointed to learn that Willow and Jessie had begun drifting apart, as Willow spent more of her time studying and Jessie began to hang around Jonathan and his friends.

Unfortunately there didn't seem to be much that he could do about that, so Xander focused as much he could own spending time with both his friends while he was home. That meant study time and projects with Willow, but for Jessie a different tack was needed.

Thus while his afternoons were spent in pursuit of academia, his evenings, more often than not, were ironically spent in pursuit of evil wizards, dragons, and monsters of a mythical menagerie.

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"Yes! A natural 20!"

Jessie's crowing echoed through the room as he pumped his arms in the air.

The game had progressed, with the players delving deeper and deeper into the dungeons designed by Warren, the group's game master. From Xander's point of view, it was actually rather comical to the point where he was having trouble hiding snickers when they were attacked by giant rats, spiders, and the like.

Having gone down into actual dungeons, and faced monsters a good deal more dangerous, there was a surreal aspect to the whole thing.

Still, as Jessie's fireball torched their enemies Xander leaned back and thought about the difference between the magic in the books, and the

magic in his life. The fireball spell was one example, in school books the closest he'd come to was the incendio. That spell, however, operated in a different fashion. For one thing it didn't waste energy blazing across the intervening space between the caster and the target; rather it lit the target on fire directly.

Xander did suspect however, that there were plenty of spells in the Wizarding world just as wasteful, and just as spectacular.

When the session that ended Xander hung around with the others and read through some of the sourcebooks.

"How much these cost?" He asked glancing over at Jonathan.

"Some of them are pricey," Jonathan admitted.

"Why?" Warren asked with a sly smile, "hooked?"

Xander shrugged, "could be. It's interesting reading at least."

Jonathan nodded enthusiastically, "I love reading through them for fun."

"How many of them are about magic and spells and stuff?" Xander asked.

"For Dungeons & Dragons?" Jonathan asked in return.

Xander thought about it for a moment then just shrugged, "or any game."

"Tons."

Xander raised an eyebrow, looking over curiously, "yeah?"

The whole group nodded furiously.

"Oh yeah," Jonathan spoke up first, "just in DND there has to be more than a dozen."

Warren, who had worn the same scowl almost the entire time Xander known them, rolled his eyes as he spoke up. "What are you just asking the magic? There's lots of cool stuff in these books."

Xander shrugged again, "just like magic I guess."

"For really cool magic," Warren suggested after a moment, "checkout Shadow run."

"Oh yeah, what's in that?"

"Technomancy."

Xander leaned forward, his expression interested, "sounds cool."

That seemed to be the key phrase that set the whole group off, then suddenly each of them were throwing him recommendations from their favourite games. Xander wasn't sure that any of that would be useful, but he hadn't lied about them being interesting reading, and if you got any good ideas out of it well then it would be worth the price of the books.

Before too long, however, the discussion deteriorated into it heated debate about the relative merits of one game versus the others. Xander mostly tuned them out at that point, and only peripherally entered the discussion as he spent most of the rest of the evening reading through various magic sourcebooks.

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Of course while Xander considered most of the time spent with any of his friends to be enjoyable, and thus arguably playtime, his time with his uncle was most certainly not.

The workouts this summer were a great deal more strenuous, leaving him in serious aching pain at the end of his days. The early weeks were particularly bad, which forced Xander to vow not to slacken off so much the following year.

It wasn't that he didn't enjoy the time so much, of course. If he hated it, he simply would not have done it. Even with enjoyment however, it was still damn hard work. By the middle of the summer though, Sam had begun to introduce him to basic sparring, as a lead-in to fulfilling his promise concerning the proper usage of fighting knives.

What that really meant, however, was that in addition to aches and pains Xander now had black and blue bruises to show off to the world.

What really kept them coming back however, were the discussions with Robert, and the stories he related.

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The discussion of the day had begun while Xander was wrapping up his cool down routine, and Sam was heading for a cold beer. What had begun with Robert pulling out some of the flaws in Xander's defence tactics and quickly moved on to a discussion of magical versus mundane defences.

Wards!" Robert scoffed, shaking his head. "Some of the most worthless things around."

Xander frowned, "people seem to trust them?"

Robert laughed, "That's what makes them worthless."

Seeing that Xander was still confused, Robert went on. "Wards are flighty things, you see. They work well enough within their limitations, but most people use them don't bother to learn about them. Your school, Hogwarts right? I expect you've heard of the fidelius, given how famous it is over there now?"

Xander nodded, the fidelius was indeed the most famous defence Ward he knew about.

"That's a funny one," Robert said with a crooked smile. "It can hide a location from any searcher, so perfectly that no magic and no technology so far, have ever been able to penetrate it. Right?"

"I guess so."

"Bullshit."

Xander flinched slightly at the flat tone Robert delivered the curse in.

"How many folk you think can cast that spell?"

Xander shrugged, "dunno."

Robert chuckled dryly, "on the whole planet, only one man. Leastwise, only one man who admit to it. That's what makes that spell so strong; it's never really been tested. At least not in recorded history."

Xander blinked, thinking he heard something in Robert's tone. "Recorded history?"

"Yes boy. That one was a lost spell, until the Evans girl managed to piece it back together from old artefacts. At least that's the public story, or the semi public story I suppose."

Xander perked up, eyes widening. "Evans girl?"

Robert nodded, "the one who married Potter, the mother of the boy-who-lived. The point is that Ward is only secure through obscurity. The more common a ward is, the less secure it is. Do some research, kid, you'll find the most powerful wards of the world are all ancient magic. They're all based on formulas that no one remembers, and no one could possibly recast today. Your school, the major banking centres of Europe, various ministries, they're all the same. They are ancient wards that are only maintained today, never cast."

Xander thought about that for a moment, then a slow realization came to him. "It's not just wards, is it?"

Robert smiled slowly, "what do you think?"

"I think..." Xander said slowly, "I think the magical world is buried in secrets. Wand makers don't seem to ever tell anyone how to do the job. Now you say this about wards, what about other areas?"

"Good, boy. Very good." Robert said with a smile, "that's exactly the point. Secrets are powerful, magical secrets doubly so. A ward is like a lock, the problem is the key to the lock is the one thing that every wizard on the planet carries."

"A wand." Xander said, his eyes opening wide.

"Bang on." Robert said with a grin, "so what good is a lock if everyone holds the key? Of course in this case the locks are really combination based, so that's where obscurity comes in. Never use a ward out of a book if you really intend to protect something, you may as well just hand it over to whoever wants it instead."

It made sense, Xander had to admit, and it matched with the things she was seeing when he explored or researched the Wizarding world. Secrets, hidden formulas, ancient magic, they were everywhere. Why were the best protected places always protected by long forgotten words that were, today, merely recharged by their caretakers?

"Those old magic's, they had come from somewhere..." Xander said softly.

Robert nodded in agreement, "Oh yes, they certainly came from somewhere. There was this time, during the war, when I led my cavalry unit over a ridge. We just crested it when we all felt a tingling down our spines. Most of my boys, they were non-magical, didn't know what it was. I knew I had felt it before just not that strong. It was a chain collapse of multiple ward fields, the most powerful I've ever felt. My men, our horses, they all panicked. Standard my unit, but I was transfixed. Ahead of me, there were these two mountains side by side, and as I watched they jumped apart."

Robert fixed Xander with a piercing stare, "you don't know what it's like to see two huge mountains actually jump apart. I found myself staring into a fertile valley that wasn't there a minute earlier. This valley, held hundreds of hectares of ground, probably a good chunk of the state it was in. Until that day, however, it never existed on the map. Think on that a moment and not how many other slabs of land have been parcelled up and forgotten by the Wizarding world."

Xander swallowed as he thought about it and wondered who or what cultures have developed spells like the fidelius. What if that was a common

ward once in the distant past? How much of the earth was hidden from men, from wizards, from them all?

“Staggering thought, isn’t it?” Robert asked with a knowing smile. “I’ve thought a lot about it myself, since that day. It’s humbling to realize that it’s just possible that the world we live in is only a small fraction of the world we should have inherited.”

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Conversations with Robert always left Xander with something to ponder. The old man, approaching his second Centennial, had a way with words and the way with people. He also had a way of planting seeds with his words, then it is invariably took root and began to push their way through Xander’s thinking.

Secrets.

It was the opposite of how he been brought up to think, Xander realized. You learned from shared information, you built on what other people know, that was how things were done. Airplanes, television, computers. These things couldn’t exist on their own.

People stood upon the shoulders of giants to accomplish these things.

Was it really possible that the magical world was so different?

He didn’t know.

But Xander knew that he would have to find out.

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As summer peaked and began the inevitable march towards fall, Willow, Wednesday, and Xander finished their first test wand.

“Graphite wand blank, unicorn tail hair core, first test.” Xander said as Willow scribbled down the words.

He held the wand in his normal fashion and just flicked it through the air with a casual motion. His breath caught, and Willow gasped, as a moderate shower of sparks erupted.

“It works!” Willow said gleefully.

Wednesday held up a hand, “proceed with the test.”

Xander nodded, shifting his grip on the wand. He turned towards the far wall, a solid cement buttress that was part of the house’s foundation, and cast his first spell.

“Stupefy!”

The result, an uninspired pink pulse of energy hit the far wall a moment later and vanished with a pop.

“Well, that was disappointing.” Xander said, sighing.

Willow frowned, “it wasn’t supposed to do that?”

Wednesday rose, and walked over beside Xander, her own wand in hand. “Stupefy!”

A glaring red blast of energy tore across the room and slammed into the wall before bursting into a multicolour display.

“That is what it should do.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah,” Xander said in agreement, “we’re missing something.”

The three were silent for a moment, until Willow spoke up, “well, what about the other spells? Maybe they’ll be different?”

Xander shrugged, “I don’t see why, but let’s try em.”

He turned to a book on a table, and with a classic swish and flick intoned the words, “Wingardium Leviosa!”

He was surprised when the book was steadily into the air, showing no real signs of instability.

“Intriguing.” Wednesday said calmly. “Try the shield charm.”

Xander let the book down, nodding in agreement, and turned away from the table again. “Protego!”

The shield popped into existence, showing some of the soap bubble lines that indicated weakness and instability, but it was almost as strong as Xander could currently manage with his own wand.

“So... Is that good?” Willow asked uncertainly.

“It seems to be better for charms, then curses.” Xander said thoughtfully.

Wednesday nodded in agreement, “may I?”

Xander shrugged and dropped the graphite wand into her interest hand. She accepted it and gracefully swished it through the air as a test. Her reward was a shower of sparks very similar to the one Xander had created.

“Stupefy! Wingardium Leviosa! Protego!”

The three spells as tried to Wednesday, reacted fairly close to how they had for Xander. When she was done, Wednesday was the one on the table and calmly took her seat.

“Well I believe further testing is required, it would appear to be a fairly functional wand for charms at least.”

Xander frowned, “yeah, but why? Do you think it’s the graphite, the core, or something we did?”

Wednesday and Willow ponder the question, until finally Willow spoke up.

“There’s really only one way to find out.”

Wednesday nodded in agreement, “Try another wand.”

“Right.” Willow agreed, “We try again, then we change one variable. Only one.”

“So we have to find wood for a new wand blank, new material for the core, or we change our construction method?” Xander asked.

Willow nodded, “That’s right. We should try a new core, at least I think so. A different blank will actually introduce multiple variables, since the wood isn’t as pure as graphite. Also, our construction method has too many steps to change in a controlled manner for testing.”

Xander frowned, “Okay, I can see that. The trouble is, I don’t have any Dragon heartstrings, and I sure as hell don’t have any Phoenix feathers.”

There was a long moment of silence, until Wednesday spoke softly.

“But we do have basilisk materials.”

After a moment, Xander let out a long low whistle.

“Never heard of that in a wand, which just makes me more interested to see if it will work.” He grinned.

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Of course, working with basilisk quickly turned out to be easier said than done. One of the few details of wand crafting that Xander’s research had been able to turn up was that wand cores were normally taken from as close to the centre of a creatures magic is possible.

For dragons, their magical core was within their hearts. The feathers of the Phoenix held some of the most potent magical energy in the known Wizarding world. Unicorn tail hairs were an exception to the rule, but only because taking materials from any closer to the unicorn centre of magic would result in the death of the creature, something no sane person would risk being responsible for.

What that meant for this project was twofold. First, they didn’t know for certain what the magical centre of a basilisk was. For obvious reasons, there had been little research on the subject in the past. They could make some educated guesses, which revolved mostly around the giant snake’s eyes and fangs, which were the creature’s most potent weapons.

Those guesses led directly into their second problem. Namely, the fact that those things the trio believed were most potent, were also those things that they had the least of them were loathe to waste.

Finally they decided to start with something more common, with the full knowledge that it was almost certainly less potent.

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“Graphite wand blank, basilisk muscle sinew core, first test.”

Xander again turned to the wall, and casually swept the wand in front of them. A burst of green and red sparks showered out of the end of the dark wand, showing that it was distinctly capable of channelling magic.

That done, Xander shifted his grip and moved on to the first spell.

“Stupefy!”

A deep red bolt flew across the room been splattered into the cement foundation on the other side.

“Wingardium Leviosa. Protego.”

Both of those spells were cast properly, but were obviously weak. The Wingardium was shaky and unsteady, forcing Xander to apply unusual focus to maintain the levitation of the book. And the Protego was the worst he had cast in almost a year.



When he was done, Xander placed the wand on the table beside their other completed model and carefully wrapped a circle of green tape around the end. The green wrapped basilisk wand rested beside the blue wrapped unicorn wand as the trio considered the results of the test.

"I think we need to test them against our regular wands with spells we can easily quantify," Wednesday said simply.

Willow nodded in agreement.

"Okay, we'll have to write up a list of spells to use then." Xander said, "But for now it's looking like we have an answer."

"I think so too," Willow said in agreement, however she held up a cautionary hand, "but it's not proven yet."

"True."

Xander nodded, agreeing with the other two. "Agreed. For now though, unicorn hair seems better for charms, and basilisk muscle sinew appears to be better for curses."

The other two merely nodded in agreement.

"There's nothing about that in the books though," Willow complained.

"Wizards like their secrets." Xander said thoughtfully, his face twisted into a puzzled frown. "Still, it wasn't that difficult to test. There should be some mention of it, right?"

"It was impossible to test." Wednesday corrected, "Until Willow here suggested the use of graphite. Any wooden blank would require several years of seasoning, at least, it would likely introduce several unknown and unknowable variables."

Willow nodded, "I think she's right. Graphite is pure, it's just carbon. We know now that carbon will channel magic, but wood isn't pure. Of course, that may be why our wands don't react as well to you as your own."

Wednesday fixed her with a stare, "Explain."

"What I mean is that the impurities in wood may be beneficial to wand crafting." Willow said slowly, "like how little bit of carbon introduced during forging turns iron into steel."

"You're saying that these graphite wands," Xander said with a grimace, "may never match up to proper wooden ones?"

Willow nodded glumly, "right now it's clear that even in their areas of strength, the graphite wands aren't as good as your matched wooden ones. In other areas, their weaker ones, they're far inferior."

Xander sighed, disappointed, but he had to admit that Willow was right.

"It's not a failure, Xander." Willow said quickly, "we made real wands! They work, that's incredible, right?"

"She's right, Xander." Wednesday said calmly. "We have something new here, it may lead nowhere, but it may just lead some were very interesting indeed. To find out we have to walk the path."

Xander nodded, "I know. I guess I was just hoping for a miracle."

"Miracles are for the weak and the desperate."

Xander had to smile at the cold, bleak tone that Wednesday delivered her statement in. Still, the words had their effect, and he nodded in agreement.

"Alright, ideas then. Where do we go from here? Just brainstorm, will organize the ideas later."

For the rest of the afternoon that was what they did, just throwing out various ideas and jotting down for later organization. The three of them knew that there was a mountain of work remaining to do if they wanted to even bring this idea into the realm of practicality. However, for the moment it wasn't labour, it wasn't work, it was quite simply fun.

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Xander's summer had turned into a hectic one, and he often found himself almost literally running from one activity to the next. Still, by the end of July, Xander realized that for all the running around he'd been doing there were some things on his list that he'd forgotten.

That led to a shopping excursion in Los Angeles' magical district with Willow and Sam.

Three Angels block was a section of LA cut directly out of the city by several advanced Ward schemes that were powered by the geological Ley lines that existed all up and down the West Coast. The trio took Sam's 1952 Chevy from Sunnydale and arrived in LA a few hours later.

To access three Angels they drove up to a barricaded alley where Sam stopped the car and leaned out the window.

"Do you see that?" Willow asked, staring ahead of them.

Xander nodded, "yeah."

Willow twisted around the car, looking behind them, "why doesn't anybody else see that?"

Xander grinned, "Magical sensitivity wards. In Europe they call them Muggle wards; they're designed to hide the area from people who don't have enough magic in them to see through them."

Willow's eyes widened, "oh wow."

"If you like that," Sam grinned as he as he straightened back up, "you're gonna love this."

Willow squealed at Sam put the gas pedal down in the old classic surged forward directly into the barricade.

"Oh my God! We're going to --"

Her squeals were cut off as the car effortlessly penetrated the barricade, actually seeming to be swallowed up as they drove on through. They broke out into three Angels a moment later; bright sunlight from above beating down on them at Sam guided the old Chevy through the immense park they found themselves in.

"Shopping district is over that way," Sam said nodding in the direction he was turning.

"Wha – but how?" Willow stared around in shock, "but we were in LA!"

"Still are little lady," Sam grinned. "Three Angels is a magically expanded area. It started as a single city block back around 1850, but as the city boomed the magical population grew as well. The Ley lines in the area offer a lot more power than most places get, so they were able to engineer some pretty impressive wards and magical effects."

Even Xander, who had seen Diagon alley in London, was awed by what he was seeing here.

"There are only three cities in the states with a significant magical population," Sam explained, "New York, San Francisco, and LA. Most of the rest of the Americas are spread out pretty widely, for a lot of reasons. LA and New York are immigrant towns, while San Francisco tends to draw in all sorts because the city itself was built on multiple Ley line nexus'. You kids will have to visit San Fran sometime, I'm a squib and I can feel the air tingle up there."

As Sam spoke they were approaching a congregation of people and buildings that looked like the shopping district he mentioned. The two kids were surprised to note that Sam's car wasn't even remotely out of place. In fact, neither of them saw a vehicle that seemed newer than the late 60s. When they brought it up, Sam just laughed.

"No electronics." He said by way of reply, "Any magically dense area will blow any electronics you bring into it. Don't know why, just the way things are."

Willow frowned, the idea of losing your computer just by driving through a magical area not sitting well with her. "No one's done the research to find out why?"

Sam laughed again, "Lots of people done research, no one got any answers. There is always some bright young genius, usually from a non-magical family, crusading to find the answer but it's apparently hiding pretty well."

Xander, unsurprised by the response, just shrugged. Willow, however, seemed to take it as a personal insult, or challenge. Xander just grinned as she ranted under her breath, knowing that their little research group had just picked up another project.

Before she could get much steam up Sam pulled the car over to a stop in a nicely shaded parking lot near the shopping district.

"Alright come on kids," the former Navy seal said as they climbed out of the vehicle. "You have your lists?"

The duo nodded, so Sam led the way to the shops.

Willow wanted a wand more than anything; unfortunately they had found that since she wasn't on the list of approved magical school she couldn't legally buy one. Xander had been racking his brains, looking for an option, but had yet to find one. To date, the best he'd found, was to get Willow a tutor as soon as possible.

Without her parents' consent and knowledge, however, the earliest easy time would be when she turned 18.

He hoped that they'd find another option, but in the meantime the redhead had laid claim to the graphite wands they had crafted, saying that they were better than nothing. Xander didn't mind, of course, though it did mean that he needed more graphite blanks to continue experimenting.

He was distracted from his reverie by Willow's squeal as the redhead spotted the bookstore.

Sam chuckled to himself as his nephew was dragged bodily by a girl a fraction of his weight, and decided to wait for them at the Starbucks across the road.

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Xander found himself at the centre of a whirlwind as Willow dragged him from stack to stack, all but drooling over the wealth of information she

found herself surprised by. The redhead quickly tapped out her own budget, picking up copies of the standard book of spells grade 3, and other books recommended in Xander's supply list. Xander had already handed over his books from first and second year, along with many of his notes since most of what felt valuable was stored in the coven Grimoire, or his research notebooks.

Even so, Willow ran out of money long before she ran out of books.

Xander's budget was somewhat larger however. His new bank account, while far from inexhaustible, was more than sufficient to the task of buying all but the rarest and expensive research tomes. So when Willow's list was done, the two of them turned their focus to books that might have answers, or even leads, for the projects they were working on together.

So it was that by the time they were finished Xander was quite certain his new library would rank quite respectably, even in the eyes of the likes of Hermione and Wednesday.

From the bookstore the two made their way across the promenade, waving to Sam when they saw him outside the Starbucks, chatting up a woman they didn't recognize.

"I can't believe they have a Starbucks." Willow said shaking her head.

Xander shrugged, "Money is money. I'm surprised there isn't a McDonald's."

Willow made a horrified face, shaking her head, "at least there's some standards here."

Xander chuckled, "I wouldn't say that until I looked around a little bit more, if I were you. We did just get here; there could be a fast food strip right around the corner."

Willow groaned, but was quickly distracted by the sights through the shops front windows. There were, of course, brooms and Quidditch equipment, cauldron and potions ingredients, and all the things Xander came to expect after seeing Diagon alley. There were also the oddities and unidentifiable objects that he had also come to expect after seeing Diagon alley. These were all mixed in with a smattering of more common non-magical items the two of them were far more familiar with.

Xander for his part quickly located a leather and hide working shop and made his way in that direction.

"Why are we going in here?" Willow asked, puzzled.

"I made a promise." Xander said as they walked in.

"May I help you?" A man asked from behind the counter, as he laid down an awl and strip of leather.

"Yeah, you guys make boots?" Xander asked with a halfway smirk.

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After Xander made his order, the rest of the day progressed fairly quickly and without incident. The trio returned to Sunnydale that evening with bags of shrunken goods fuelling the boisterous good moods of the two children.

"That was so cool!" Willow gushed.

Xander nodded, "Definitely awesome. I never realized there was such a large magical community this close."

"Nature of the beast," Sam replied as they walked into Xander's house.

"What's the nature of the beast?" Anthony Harris asked from the couch as they approached.

Sam dropped and the couch beside his brother, snagging an unopened beer right out of anyone's hands. "Secrecy and magic."

"Hey!" Tony growled, grabbing the beer back. "Get your own, you moocher!"

Sam grumbled, starting to get up off the couch, but was stopped when Willow jumped up.

"I'll get it for you," she said in a rush as she ran for the kitchen.

Sam settled back down smirking at his brother, "I could get used to this."

Anthony just rolled his eyes, "So why the talk about secrecy and magic?"

"I was just saying that I was surprised that there was such a large magical community so close to us."

Tony nodded, twisting the cap off his beer and taking a drink, "yeah, three Angels. Been a while since I've been there, would have liked to join you today if I didn't have to work."

Xander shrugged, smiled, "it's alright dad, we just did some shopping anyway."

Sam nodded, "spent most of the afternoon drinking coffee."

Tony shrugged, "yeah I guess. As for secrecy, three Angels has to hide from 12 million people right on the doorstep. Not too hard to imagine why we never hear of it here in Sunnydale."

Xander nodded, knowing that it made sense. He'd only known about the magical world going on three years now, and most of his experience in it was halfway around the world. It was plainly obvious that there was a lot to see, much closer to home.

"You get all your shopping done, son?"

Xander looked up, shaking from his thoughts, then nodded after a moment. "Unless they change the books on us again this year, but no big deal if they do. I'll be able to pick up what I need in Diagon."

Tony grunted, "Going back to Hogwarts then?"

"I think so," Xander said. "I've got friends there now, and I'm doing pretty well in my studies. No reason to change it now."

Tony nodded reluctantly, "just don't like the stories coming out of that place."

"What stories?" Sam asked as Willow returned with his beer.

"Petrifaction of students, and the boy here being involved in some fight with a basilisk." Tony responded.

Xander grimaced, "they told you about that?"

"Damn right they did." Tony said crossly, "Something you should have done when you got home."

"Wasn't a big deal." Xander shrugged, "it's not like I was a target anyway."

Sam leaned forward, "target? Would you mean target?"

"Professor from Salem seemed to think that they have a terrorist problem over there." Tony answered, "probably the same group from 15 years ago."

Sam settled back, closing his eyes as he thought back that far. "Death eaters then. They've been quiet since their Dark Lord got himself roasted by a baby, what's bringing them out now?"

Xander rolled his eyes, "you remember the baby's name?"

Sam snorted, "hard not to. Every wizard on the planet knows his name, so if you've talked to one of them in the last 13 years, you've heard it. Potter. Harry Potter."

Xander nodded, "you want to guess who's in my year?"

"Jesus." Sam cursed, "You mean to tell me those dipshits have been trying to off a 13-year-old?"

"And failing miserably." Xander responded with a grin. "Since he was eleven."

"Fuck."

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"Dude!"

Xander half turned, looking over his shoulder to see Jessie approaching with Jonathan and Warren in tow. He grinned, waving to the trio as they approached, "hey guys! Right on time."

The trio grinned and nodded to Xander as he turned with them and the group headed into Sunnydale's games and comics shop. Xander grinned as he looked around, nodding to the owner.

"Xan!" Michael Smith greeted him with a smile, "Haven't seen you in ages."

"Boarding school, same as last year." Xander replied, pausing to lean on the counter and chat with the man who had pretty much singlehandedly supplied him and Jessie with years' worth of comics.

"Doing well, I hope?"

"Not bad," Xander said, "I'm not going to take honour spots, but I'm doing pretty good according to some people."

"Good, good. Here for the comics you've missed?" Smith asked, grinning.

"Actually, these delinquents are trying to get me hooked on gaming now." Xander said, grinning back.

"Oh, excellent, those cost **MUCH** more than comics."

Xander laughed, but nodded, "Yeah, well I guess I better see what they're about then, huh?"

“You have any questions, just ask, I’m here all day.”

“And most nights, as I recall.” Melinda Smith, Michael’s wife said as she walked over. “Hello, Xander.”

“Hey, Mel.” Xander nodded.

“Gaming now, is it?” She asked with a smirk.

“Hey, you told us that it was our duty to sucker... err, invite our friends into the fold,” Jessie spoke up.

Mel rolled her eyes, “Subtle you ain’t, McNally. Ok, what game are you interested in, Xan?”

“I want all of them,” Xander smirked.

“What?” Mel blinked, noting with surprise that the others didn’t seem fazed.

“Well, I want details on all the magic systems, spells, stuff like that.” Xander amended. “So any books on magic, at least, plus the core rules I guess.”

“Whoa. That’s going to set you back a little.”

“That’s ok, for this I can afford it.” Xander said, knowing that he’d basically sold the idea as ‘educational’ to his parents, so they weren’t going to make a fuss over the money, even though they still had some control over his accounts until he was eighteen.

“Alright...”

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The day was spent picking up core books and magic based sourcebooks for everything from AD&D to Gurps, from necromancy to technomancy, and everything in between. The hit to his back account didn’t quite break the thousand dollar mark, but only because they only stocked the more popular books.

Mel promised to find more uncommon titles, and even said she would check into older occultist titles if he was interested. Xander wasn’t sure if those would be of much use compared to the books he could find easily in the Magical quarters, but he agreed anyway.

If nothing else, between Wednesday, Willow, and Hermione he was quite certain that any book he bought would eventually be read one way or the other.

He wasn’t buying any of these titles to learn magic, of course, but rather because he thought that maybe he could learn new ways to use magic. There were some cool ideas in the Gurps book on technomancy, if they could figure out why electronics and magic didn’t mix of course.

Besides, it was really pretty fun reading, and more importantly it was something he and Jessie could get together and do to catch up. Xander wasn’t sure he liked the way things were going in Sunnydale, from what he could tell Jessie and Willow were drifting apart, and he was worried about where that left his best gal pal. Wills had never been the sort to make friends easily, all through grade school it had really just been him and Jessie, no one else lasted.

Girls and guys alike were put off by her intelligence, Xander knew. So much so that Willow had gotten progressively shier as the years went by, her bubbly nature being buried slowly under more and more self conscious fears.

Really, he worried about her.

Oh, not in the long run. Xander was pretty certain that Willow would eventually blow past anything the world left in her road, but in the short run she was hurt so easily. He knew she had to be hurting that Jessie was hanging around less, but he also figured that she was hurting because he wasn’t around.

That really bothered him, because he didn’t see any way around it. School mattered to him suddenly, but even so he’d throw it out for Willow, except that Xander knew she’d skin him alive if she did.

Shy and bubbly was one thing, but Angry Willow was a scary sight to see.

“Xander!”

Xander shook his head, looking up, “Huh?”

“I asked which game you wanted to try tonight.” Jessie asked him again, nodding to the stack of books laid out in front of them.

Xander forced a smile, pushing the thoughts aside for another time. “Let’s just stick with your campaign, guys, at least until we read through these more.”

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And so the summer moved on, with Xander’s time being split between his family and his friends. Sam had a contact that secured Xander an ample supply of graphite rods to play with, and even came up with another suggestion for them to pursue.

The former Seal knew a bit about high tech materials, though how and why Xander didn't know, nor did he press on, and had some suggestions to make on his own.

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"So you're using graphite as blanks for making wands?" Sam asked, drumming his fingers on his chin as he considered what Xander had mentioned, "Interesting. Never heard of that before."

"Well, it was Willow's suggestion really."

Willow blushed, "It was nothing, just obvious I think."

"So obvious no one thought of it yet, at least as far as I know." Sam said with a smile, then looked pensive, "yeah, I think I can get you a supply. There's a company that does contract work for Darpa, supplying stuff like that, I know a guy. Have you thought about Carbon Fibre rods, though? Or Carbon rods?"

Xander looked blank, "Aren't they all carbon?"

Sam chuckled, "Sure, but Graphite is a naturally occurring crystal. You might want to figure out if it's the carbon that matters, or the molecular bond."

Willow's eyes lit up, "Of course!"

"Huh?" Xander shook his head.

"Diamond and Graphite are both allotropes of Carbon; they're not 'just' Carbon, Xander." Willow said in a rush, "We should try both of Sam's suggestions and anything else we can think of that might work."

"Alright. So where do we get Carbon rods and Carbon Fibre?"

"Carbon rods are used in a lot of things, including nuclear reactors," Sam said pensively, "But they're not restricted, so we can get a hold of those easily. Carbon fibre rods are a bit rarer, but I know a guy at Lockheed. I'll make some calls."

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So they got new materials and continued the experimentation, with Wednesday regularly coming through the floo to join in. It didn't take long to determine that carbon rods worked fine, but didn't have the flex of graphite, which made them less suitable for charms but quite decent for curses. The common swish and flick motion that formed the basis of most charms movements was enhanced by a little flex in the wand, while curses required a strong steely anchor to properly cast.

Carbon fibre was a mixed bag, though, which puzzled the trio. Some blanks worked exceptionally well, rivalling Xander and Wednesday's matched wands in some areas, depending on the cores, yet others were completely useless and seemed to turn out dud wands as far as any of them could determine.

With continued experiments, though, they were able to start cataloguing different results based on materials used.

Unicorn tail hair worked best with Graphite, particularly when they carefully aligned the hair along the length and fixed it in the precise centre of the blank. The resulting wand was exceptional for charms work, and quite decent for transfiguration, but very poor indeed for curses.

Basilisk material showed promise when combined with pure Carbon rods, and was frighteningly good for curses, particularly the darker ones in Wednesday's repertoire. Xander suspected that a Carbon wand made with core material from Basilisk venom or powdered basilisk eye would be something terrible to behold, indeed. The material was, however, nearly worthless at charms work, and only moderately decent at some transfiguration spells.

Also, while the Carbon rods were tough, they were also somewhat brittle in the size and lengths used. Plenty of drawbacks when compared to their strengths, such that Xander couldn't see one being practical as it stood.

Still, they carefully documented each wand they made, and began to wonder about other core materials.

They finally had to go back into LA and look up some Wand crafters, just to ask their questions.

Phoenix Feather, they learned, was beyond rare. When Xander asked around in Three Angels, the response was unequivocal, phoenix core wands were generally only made once or twice a generation, and sometimes not at all. They were considered by many to be among the most powerful of wands, however, though it was probably more due to those who wielded them than the wands themselves.

Wendelyn the Weird, an exceptionally powerful witch from Spain, who Xander had learned about in History of Magic, was one. Benjamin Franklin was another, as was Nicholas Flamel. Albus Dumbledore himself was rumoured to use a Phoenix core wand, though there was some dispute over that, from what the local Wand crafter had to say. Apparently during his battle with Grindewald, the Arch Mage had indeed used a Phoenix core wand, the same wand he had used all his life up to that point. Afterwards, however, several historians had noted that he began using a different wand in public.

The most powerful wand, speaking of legends, was of course the fabled Elder wand. Made of Elder wood and Thestral Hair, it was one of the so

called Deathly Hallows. Supposedly it made its wielder unbeatable in combat, though it's bloodied history of one dead wielder after another made Xander doubt the stories. It sounded rather Lord of the Rings, to him, with the so called all powerful artefact actually being cursed and not blessed.

Dragon Heartstrings were actually the most common of core materials, since one dragon's heart could supply the material for hundreds of wands. It was this, in fact, that led to Dragons being a protected species by Wizard Kind, since they had been hunted to near extinction by Wizards who wanted to turn their flesh into materials for spells, wands, and other magical artefacts'. Even today, Xander learned, Dragon poaching was a serious problem in many parts of the world.

In the end, though, all their questions came back to one simple truth.

Any magical creature could donate material to create a wand core; some wand crafters had even created functional wands with human hairs from witches and wizards. The key was to take the material from as close to a creature's centre of magic as possible. In many cases wand crafters had to settle for second best, however. In Unicorns the horn would be the ideal, however only the darkest of dark would craft a wand from that, and the consensus was that such a wand would never suit them. Dragon hearts were more potent, because that was the true centre of the Dragon's power, while Phoenix feathers were probably one or two steps removed from the true centre of the avian's magic, which made the potency of feather core wands even more impressive.

What it came down to, Xander, Willow, and Wednesday decided was experimentation. They would have to acquire material from as many creatures as they could, within ethical bounds, and build wands to see what happened.

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"I want you to be careful when you go back to Hogwarts, Alexander."

Robert leaned forward seriously, eyeing his young relative.

"Come on, man, it's not that bad."

"Your parents have told me about the Basilisk, child." The old man replied wryly, shaking his head. "That is hardly a safe environment."

"Didn't hurt anyone really," Xander shrugged, "Besides, we got it."

"A miracle, however welcome, does not a stable world make." Robert returned.

Their current discussion had risen from a brief back and forth between the two on Magical beasts, and their dangers. Robert had only middling experience in such matters, most of his life had been spent in the non magical world, but other than the Addamses, who's opinions on dangerous creatures was suspect, he was the only person Xander could talk to.

Robert had heard all about Hogwarts from Xander's parents, however, and had obviously been looking for an opening.

"When navigating the magical world, remain vigilant Alexander." he said, sounding a little tired. "There are threats there that are utterly inconceivable to the non magically inclined. Especially if you're involving any of your friends from outside the magical world."

"Why?" Xander asked, puzzled.

"Because you're a Wizard, boy. I'm a Squib. That makes us tough compared to most; a non magical person would be dead in a very short time if left on their own in a magical environment." Robert countered sharply, "Even squibs like me don't fare well as a general rule. Hell, boy, only a thousand years ago people we would today call Wizards were cowering in mud huts, pretending to be non magical because it was safer."

That surprised Xander; it was something he hadn't gleaned from his History classes. "Huh?"

"Before wands there were few magically adept who could stand up against even the most mean of magical threats," Robert explained, "without a wand you could be killed by pixies easily enough."

Xander grimaced, remembering the first day of defence class the previous year, and had to concede the point. "Ok, I guess I see that."

"Damn right, and you should. Wands are a force multiplier."

"Ok, you lost me again."

"It's a military term, Alexander." Robert smiled, "It just means something that takes what you have, and multiplies it by a certain factor. Before wands came into common use, for example, humans were often under siege by Goblin rebellions. Even after they came into use the rebellions continued for a time, while Wizards learned to maximize their use. Now, however, Goblins don't stand a chance against Wizards and they know it. Wands are the reason why."

"Really? Why don't they just make their own?"

"Because Wizards have banned non humans from making, owning, or using wands." Robert replied, "Plus human wands don't work particularly well for Goblins, and since they lost the wars, the concessions they had to give up include the right for Ministry officials to perform search and seizure on any suspected focus research."

"Huh." Xander replied thoughtfully, mulling that over.

Don't get me wrong, the Goblins aren't pushovers," Robert went on, "They hold a mastery over warding magic's that's beyond anything Wizards have yet produced, and they know more about ritual magic than most wizards alive. All of which makes attacking them a dicey matter, however if they want to come out of their warrens they have to meet Wizards in the open field, and there they would be slaughtered."

"So it's a balance of power, then."

"For now." Robert nodded, "With the balance tipping somewhat in the favour of Wizards at the moment. While a successful assault on Goblin Warrens would be... Pyrrhic to say the least, Wizards hold the threat of siege over their heads. Cut off from outside supply, the Goblins would be forced to surrender, or stage a final battle, within a few months at best. All because of wands."

"Wow." Xander muttered, rolling the term around in his head. "Force multiplier."

"The military says that the Moral is to the Physical as Three is to One." Robert said, "Napoleon said it first, at least in those terms. That's a force multiplier."

"I don't get it."

"Say you're a soldier," Robert said and waited for Xander to nod before going on. "We'll give you a 'value' of one. That's your mathematical impact on the battlefield, alright?"

Again, Xander nodded.

"What Napoleon meant was that a motivated soldier, one who wanted to fight, had a reason to fight... was automatically worth a value of three. The multiplier of morale, three, times the standard value of one. In theory, at least, it meant that one motivated soldier has the impact of three 'normal' soldiers." Robert explained patiently. "Myself, I think I would rank wands as being a factor of ten. A normal wizard without a wand is worth one, that same wizard with a wand, assuming he knows how to use it, is worth ten. Do you follow?"

Xander nodded, "I think so. So, you're saying that a motivated wizard with a wand is worth thirty normal soldiers? Or normal wizards?"

"Pretty much the same thing," Robert smiled, "Magic is a multiplier as well, but so is training. If you really wanted to work out the battlefield math you'd have to take that into account. For example, a soldier is worth one, but advanced training is perhaps a multiplier of five. And, generally, highly trained soldiers are usually motivated."

"So they'd be worth fifteen?" Xander asked.

"As a base value."

"So, magic is worth... how much?"

"Now THAT is a good question," Robert smiled, leaning forward. "I don't think anyone has ever worked it out because there's no standard value of 'M'. We know that some wizards are more powerful than others, which will affect its value, but there's no chart to calculate from. What is the value of a Merlin? A Dumbledore? A Franklin? Are they exceptional because they're powerful? Or are they powerful because they're exceptional?"

He let Xander consider that for a moment before continuing.

"That said, it's safe to say that even moderate magical power and reserves is at least as valuable as advanced training. So, for your average Constable, we can give the value of magic to be around five. That's really the minimum combat level for magical ability, I would say. For a powerful wizard? I don't know. Could be twenty five. Could fifty." Robert said seriously, "The math just isn't available to tell."

"That would mean that a well trained and powerful wizard would be worth..." Xander blinked, thinking about it.

"Hundreds. Maybe thousands of normal soldiers, assuming the equations balanced." Robert said, "However the math is never the whole story when it comes to human interactions. Those numbers are really based on theoretical averages, what will happen in the long run if you run thousands or millions of battles out to their final conclusion. Individual cases can always surprise you."

"How?"

"Imagine Merlin, today. A supremely powerful wizard, trained to the highest standard imaginable. Give him any value you want," Robert said, "One thousand, ten thousand, a million."

Xander nodded intently.

"Now, on the other side. One soldier. He's motivated, trained, and equipped. Give him a value of maybe 45 for those factors. He's a sniper, that's at least worth 10, so now he's 450. His target, our Merlin, doesn't know he's out there. He will only get one shot, but if he makes it... our little 450 value sniper just eliminated a player worth, at least, twice his value... quite probably more. Does it mean the math was wrong?"

Xander didn't know, he shook his head and shrugged.

"No, it means it was incomplete. There were other factors that we didn't add in, that conspired to increase the value of that one soldier, in that one instance, to an equal or greater level than his target." Robert said seriously. "And that is the danger of the real world. We can't know all the variables, and so things surprise us."

Xander swallowed, but nodded in understanding.



“And that is why I’m telling you to be careful in Hogwarts, boy. You may think it’s not that bad, but I’m telling you now, you don’t know all the variables in the game that’s being played around you.” Robert said suddenly, sternly. “And make no mistake; someone is playing a game there. Probably several someone’s and you don’t want to be drawn into it blindly.”

Xander nodded again, “I’ll be careful.”

Robert forced a smile. “Good. Now go on, get out of here, but think on what I’ve told you.”

“I will, Sir. Thank you.”

The old man watched his young relative leave and thought about some of what he was hearing from the other side of the Atlantic. There was more than one game being played over there, he suspected, with more than a few players. He hoped Alexander didn’t get drawn in, because he was too young to see the game for what it was, and those types of players were rough on their pawns.

There was now family pressure to keep him in Hogwarts, however, something Tony and Jessica had no clue how to fight. The boy was getting close to some heavy duty up and comers over there and the family wanted it that way.

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Xander didn’t know what to think about everything he was being told now; it seemed a little messed up.

“That’s totally messed up!” Willow responded when he told her, pulling a laugh from his throat.

“I think I got that much, Wills.”

“I mean, why send you back there if they’re so worried?”

Xander was wondering that himself, he knew that he parents weren’t happy about it, and now Robert was giving him advice that basically amounted to ‘watch your back, someone has a knife’. He was thirteen for crying out loud, what the hell was he supposed to do about it?

“I don’t think it’s that dangerous, Will,” He said finally.

Her eyes widened, “But... the big snake! And spells, and stuff...”

“None of it was aimed at me,” Xander said, thinking it over. “I involved myself, right?”

“I guess,” Willow said reluctantly.

“It’s not like I’m Harry or anything.”

Willow perked up at the mention of Harry Potter, almost drawing a groan from Xander.

“God, Wills, don’t tell me you’ve joined his fan club.”

Willow blushed red, “Of course not, dummy, but I’ve read all the stories about him and...”

“And from what Harry grumbles about, you now know a lot of very near fictional stories about his life.” Xander grinned wryly.

“Those were HISTORY books!” Willow blurted, scandalized.

“They were written by people who didn’t know much history, apparently.”

Willow looked a little disturbed by that, but didn’t comment further. It brought to mind the similarities between her and Hermione, and Xander had to smile at the thought.

He wondered, a shiver passing through him as he looked at Willow for the first time as a Girl, and realized that she was a lot cuter than he seemed to remember.

Xander shook off the thought, “Anyway, I’m a nobody at the school. What’s more, I’m an American nobody, so I’m not worth killing.”

Willow slapped his shoulder, “Don’t talk like that! You’re Xander; you’re a somebody to me.”

“Thanks, Wills, but that’s not what I meant.” Xander said softly, smiling at her. “I talked with Professor Hardy about it. I’m not worth anything to either side over there, but dead I could cause them a lot of trouble.”

“Why?” Willow scrunched up her face, confused.

“Cause it would attract attention from the States,” Xander shrugged, “And a lot of other countries, I guess. Right now the bad guys are still pretty crippled from what Harry did to their boss twelve years ago, and the good guys are the British government... How much do you think they want a bunch of Yanks sticking their nose into British business?”

“Not much, I suppose.”

Xander smiled, “Dead on. Anyway, I’m pretty safe.”

"Not if you stick your own nose in where it doesn't belong, Mister." She told him firmly, resolve face in place.

"Wills... That snake hurt a friend." Xander told her evenly in return.

Willow paled slightly, but nodded.

That was one thing she knew about Xander, one thing that she wouldn't change. He protected his friends, as best he could anyway. When they were younger he took beatings from Bullies to protect her and Jess, even though neither of them wanted him to. It was just what he did, it was who he was.

She sighed, "Alright, but please... be careful."

"Hey, no worries." Xander smiled, "I'll have Wednesday there, and you know that when in doubt, we lead with bone splitter curses."

Willow rolled her eyes, but nodded.

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Summer was coming to a rapid close, and Xander found himself against the wall as he seemed to be running out of time, but not out of things to get done.

His conversations with Robert continued, with the older man speaking to him a lot about history, especially military history. That was cool, Xander found, because he'd always had a degree of interest in it, and now he had someone to talk to who had actually \*fought\* in the American Civil War. Robert had also been involved in the first and second world wars, and every conflict up until Vietnam, though he had only been an advisor by that point.

Robert had a far different opinion on most of the subjects than Xander had always heard, but a lot of his points made sense, so Xander wasn't sure what to believe. Robert insisted that he had to learn all he could about something, though, and only then form an opinion. Too many people just accepted the common thoughts on a subject, ignoring the facts, and what was worse, ignoring the people who were twisting those facts to their own ends.

Wand research continued, though they didn't make a lot more progress than they had managed already. Willow now had two wands claimed as her own, a Carbon rod with ground Basilisk scale core, and a Graphite model with unicorn tail hair. The two made for a good all round casting capacity, they had found.

Xander had stored all their extra blanks in his trunk, along with his notes and various components. He was already planning his own wand for fighting, based around a Carbon Rod blank and Basilisk eye core. He didn't want to waste the basilisk eye material they had, though, until he had perfected the design, it was far too valuable, especially since he and Wednesday were quite certain that the eyes were the core of the large snake's magic.

He wasn't sure, of course, that he would be able to make anything better than a fitted wand, but it **felt** like they were on the right track, so he was making plans in the hopes they would succeed.

A trip back to Three Angels had won Xander his new pair of boots, which he was certain, would make an impact back at Hogwarts. The new boots were based off a Motorcycle design, with metal clasps that gleamed against the iridescent green flecks of the snake skin material. Almost black, they glimmered green in the right light, and suited his Slytherin colours perfectly.

They had cost him a bit, more so in materials than cash, since he had to provide the basilisk skin for them, but Xander figured it was worth it there. The boot maker had counselled him to use more material than needed, fashioning a larger pair of boots than he normally wore. Charms were then applied to shrink them to a perfect fit.

When Xander had asked why, the answer had surprised him not so much because it was surprising, but rather because it made so much sense.

"Well boy, it's like this," The old man had told him, "Sizing charms can make a cloak, or boots, or whatever, larger or smaller as you need them... but they can't make more material. So they're stretching the material, or compressing it, to fit. In most cases, that don't matter none. But this here, this is basilisk skin, and it has some properties that you don't want to spread thin if you have a choice. Better to make it bigger and then shrink it down, which actually makes the material tougher by focusing its strengths into a smaller area. These'll be as fine a pair of boots as I've ever made, you've my word on that."

With that answer, Xander had simply nodded and told the craftsman to do his best and he would take the expert's advice on the matter.

Xander had to admit, though, that he was looking forward to getting back to Hogwarts. Willow, Jessie, and all were great, but there was just something about a magical environment that was so damned cool. He couldn't believe that he was actually getting assigned **magic** as **HOMEWORK**. It was so insanely cool that Xander could barely contain himself sometimes.

Being a Star Wars geek from way back, it was like being approached and asked to join the Jedi order or something. He honestly couldn't understand anyone who didn't love every moment of it.

This brought him back to the Grimoire.

That book from his first year had unlocked a few levels now that he was about to go into his third, giving him access to spells even further along

than it had before. The release of Sirius Black into his precious reservoir of knowledge, however, was a mixed blessing at best. The Wizard turned Shaggy Dog, or vice versa (Xander wasn't certain which), was a pest that constantly forced Xander to fight him off if he wanted to actually read anything.

The flip side was that Xander was getting better with a lot of rather obscure spells that pertained to enchanted items. He'd also begun to learn more and more about how the book had been written originally.

It was all based around a very old charm known as The Protean Charm, ironically one that Xander knew quite well since he had come across it when researching magical tattoos. It was the same spell that made the base for the Dark Mark on the arms of Chief Mouldy Shorts' thugs.

The Protean was from a very obscure branch of magic that was based strongly around what was called the Similarity Principal. In fact, Xander had learned quickly, that few Witches or Wizards had ever really heard about it, maybe as little as one in ten. Which was ironic, since almost every non magical person on the planet knew of one of its applications, the Voodoo Doll.

Basically, the Similarity Principal stated that like affected like, and it was possible to connect two similar items so that what affected one, would affect the other. That was how a Voodoo Doll, properly made, could affect the person it was crafted to resemble, it was also how Voldemort could inflict pain on anyone wearing the Dark Mark from any Dark Mark within his reach. It was how the book was connected with the one in Narcissa Malfoy's study...

And, more interestingly in Xander's opinion, it was also how a LOT of semi-legal Wizarding objects were made, including one Sirius Black referred to as The Marauder's Map.

Sirius refused to hand over the details on how to make said map, but he had been hinting around it, and Xander was wondering if it were possible to make one of his own. The protean charm was very advanced, NEWT level at least, but much of the rest was relatively easy, though probably long, detailed, and precise in nature. He would bring it up with Hermione and Wednesday back at school, Xander decided. If nothing else, it would be fun to research, especially when he started to think about what ELSE the Protean could be used to make.

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Almost too soon, yet after such a long wait; it was time to leave for school again.

Xander had said his goodbyes, and was waiting for the port key to Salem when his Mom and Dad came in.

Anthony looked serious as he sat down, "Son... we should talk."

"What's up, Dad?"

"We just want you to be careful."

Xander smiled, "I will, Mom... Dad, I promise. If it was really dangerous it's not like I'd be going back, right?"

His parents exchanged a glance, which caused Xander to stare for a moment.

"Some in the family want you there, Son," Tony said after a moment, "They're putting a lot of pressure on us, and the school."

"How?"

"Harris is a big family, with a lot of power," Tony sighed, "And right now, the head seems to think that you getting closer to a few of those kids over there is a good thing. That place seems a little off too me, but I've never been to a magical school, so I don't know for sure. I know that the Wizarding world can be dangerous, or at least seem like it, to normal folk though, so I expect it's not as bad as it seems to me..."

Xander nodded, he'd already worked that out. Well, and Robert had said as much as well.

"So I just want you to know to watch your back, and try to keep your head down, ok boy?" Tony said gruffly.

Xander nodded, "I will."

Jessica hugged him quickly then, and Xander fought off a lump in his throat as she sobbed a little.

"We're both going to miss you, so try and come back in one piece, k?" Tony asked with a wry smile.

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The port key released Xander with all the normal grace he was able to muster, that was none at all, and he slammed into the grounds outside Salem.

"Did that hurt, man? That looked like it hurt."

Xander groaned, pushing himself over, and looked up to see a boy about his age looking down at him.

"You ok?" The boy asked, extending a hand. "I'm Mike."

"Xander." He replied, taking the hand and letting the boy help him to his feet.

“Good, the right guy came falling out of the sky.”

Xander curled his lip up in a sarcastic expression, but didn't reply.

“The Headmaster wanted me to meet you; I'll take you to his office.”

“Thanks.”

The meeting with the headmaster was really just a formality, and Xander breezed through it in a few minutes. His marks, both from the Hogwarts professors and Professor Hardy were adequate to keep pretty much everyone off his case, so really all he was doing was confirming what he already knew.

When released, Xander headed back for the main gates. He'd agreed to meet Wednesday here, as they'd be going on the England together, and despite the fact that they had gotten together a lot over the summer it felt like a reunion of sorts.

“Alexander.”

Xander turned and recognized The Lavelle Matriarch, Jessica, as she approached. “Ma'am.”

“How was your summer?”

“Fine.” Xander said his tone a little uncertain. He wasn't sure what this woman, or anyone else in the family for that matter, wanted with him. But everyone he knew was warning him to tread softly.

“I understand that you are doing well in your classes.”

“I guess so.”

“Excellent. A Hogwarts education carries a great deal of esteem in certain circles, young man. See that you take it seriously.”

Xander nodded automatically, “I do.”

“Have you chosen your courses for the next year?”

Xander nodded, “I'm taking the normal load, plus Runes and Arithmancy.”

“Good choices,” The Lavelle Matriarch nodded approvingly. “Those will open the widest career path in the future. Have you thought that far ahead?”

Xander shook his head, “Not really, Ma'am. Over there it's easy to get caught up in what's happening, but when I come home everything is different.”

She raised one eyebrow, “indeed. I can see how, if you were from England, one might seriously plan on joining The Proud.”

Xander blinked, “The Proud?”

“Sorry,” She smiled slightly, “What do they call it over there? Oh yes, The Aurors. The Proud are the American Ministry's Law Enforcement Branch, well... they're our Federal level group, at least. Unlike the European's, we Americans don't centralize law enforcement to the same degree. Wizarding Constables enforce the laws in their own communities, The Proud exist to handle issues beyond their ability, generally Dark Lord types and Dark Bands.”

Xander couldn't help but smirk, “I didn't know Metallica was a threat.”

Apparently purebloods in the States' weren't quite as separated from normal culture as in England, because that comment earned him a dark scowl from the old lady. “A Dark Band is akin to what you might know as an Outlaw Gang. A group of wizards and witches, and occasionally other creatures, that while individually are not particularly powerful, operate as a group to terrorize communities.”

That brought Xander up short, as he considered it, “Wow. I've never heard of the like.”

“Well, it's not a strictly American invention by a long shot, young man; however our extremely large expanse of territory, compared to population, makes it a viable alternative for outlaws of all stripes. When you combine it with American laws against using military force on our own citizens, you can see how these groups survive.”

Xander nodded, filing the information away. “Why do they call the cops, The Proud?”

She smiled, “Because' they're LEOs, and Lions always travel in a Pride.”

Xander blinked, but was obviously confused.

“LEO, Law Enforcement Officer.” She explained, “The Proud, or Pride, is America's Federal Response Organization. We mandate them to less than one hundred members, but they're the most powerful and well trained Wizards and Witches in the country, some say the world.”

Xander smirked, “Most of those live in the States, I'll bet.”

Or Canada, Mexico, Cuba, and the like,” She nodded with a smile.

“Wha? Wait, why?”

“Why what?” Jessica seemed as confused as Xander suddenly felt.

“Why would Cuba or Mexico say that our guys are the best?”

“Our...?” Her face suddenly cleared, “Oh, wait, I see. You were muggle raised, of course. I apologize; I can see that there are several things you don’t know. For one, there is no Magical Ministry of the ‘United States’. The American Ministry of Magic actually represents Wizards and Witches from Canada, The United States, Mexico... Basically down as far as Panama, and yes Cuba is under the same government on our side of things. Basically all of North and Central America, aside from Alaska.”

Xander blinked, “Why not Alaska?”

“The Russian Magical Federation controls that,” She said with a shrug, “Always has.”

Xander slumped, trying to wrap his mind around it, and failing almost totally. “Whoa.”

“Most political lines in our world doesn’t quite match up with the corresponding lines in the non magical world, child,” She said matter of factly. “In Europe, particularly, things are a horrid mess. All the Muggle wars have shifted the lines around massively from where they originally were, yet few of those wars affected Magical lines of authority. I don’t suppose that’s really much of a concern to the schooling in Hogwarts, however, since magically the British Isles falls entirely under one government.”

“Oh man,” Xander moaned, “You mean I have to learn a whole new set of countries??”

The Lavelle Matriarch suppressed a smile with thin compressed lips, but nodded, “Yes, though most of the countries are more or less the same, just their boundaries have a margin for error.”

“No wonder the world seems to be in such a mess,” Xander muttered.

“I rather think that there other reasons for that, young man,” She told him sternly, “At any rate, in North America at least, it’s part of normal life.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because our ministry is more of a loosely allied group of independent states,” She explained, “So the idea of flexible boundaries of jurisdiction is something you should get used to. There are different laws in different areas of the country, even in different towns in some cases.”

“That sounds... complicated.”

“Wizards and Witches came to America to get away from the iron hands of European rulers, and the ministries they were backing,” She told him, “Central government is anathema to most first Generation Americans, and we’re not yet so far removed from those men and women that we’ve forgotten. In fact, it’s entirely possible that there are a couple of them left, Franklin knows that we’ve misplaced one or two of the Founding Families, and their Founders.”

“Misplaced?” Xander asked, amused.

“In the Magical world, anything is possible, Alexander,” She told him calmly. “Including some truly spectacular ages. At any rate, this is getting beyond the original topic, which I believe was what you intend to do when you graduate?”

Xander shifted uncomfortable, “I don’t really know yet. I’ve been playing with a lot of things, and there are some that interest me, but I don’t know enough about anything yet.”

“Hmmm...” She nodded, accepting that. “I’ve heard about your patent, so perhaps you have a future in potions research.”

“**THAT** was an accident!” Xander protested, flushing hotly. “I was trying to make a joke potion to turn back on some pranksters at school! I swear!”

She chuckled dryly, practically a cackle, “No need to swear in my direction, Alexander. I believe you, but still many great discoveries are made by accident. That doesn’t mean that the people who made them were worth any less in their fields.”

She rose up just as an ancient Rolls steamed onto the school grounds.

“Remember, Alexander,” She said, sparing him a glance before turning away. “The Families are watching you now. We can aid you greatly in whatever you choose to do... or not.”

Xander watched the old woman walk away, his expression darkening at her parting words as he wondered if it was more of an offer... or a threat?

The Rolls Royce came to a smooth halt in front of him, breaking him of those thoughts as the doors opened and the Addams stepped out. He smiled genuinely, and rose to greet them.

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Platform 9 and Three Quarters, London

The trip from Salem had gone as smoothly as any International Port key had ever gone in Xander's experience. That is, he would up flat on his face while Professor Hardy and Wednesday looked down at him in thinly disguised amusement.

"The secret to landing on your feet is to remember that you're moving," Hardy said as he helped the boy up. "Most people, especially non magical raised, expect it to be some sort of teleport. Star Trek, beam me up Scotland, and all that."

Xander barely held back the snicker, though he had to admit that Hardy was a lot better at the non magical references than most Wizards seemed to be.

"It's not, however." Hardy went on, "We're actually moving, and you have to land like your moving. Move your legs to absorb the excess momentum, and you'll land at a walking pace. If you don't, it'll just slam you into the ground every time."

"Thanks." Xander said, shaking himself as he looked around.

The Platform was filling up nicely, students from all over England gathering for their year at Hogwarts. At a glance you could easily tell who was pureblood and who came from a non magical family, irrespective of whether they wore robes or jeans. There was just something about how they walked that gave them away, in Xander's opinion.

"I smell fear." Wednesday said softly, looking around.

"What?" Xander glanced over at her.

She didn't repeat herself, however, instead choosing to study the crowd. "Police."

"Where?"

She nodded to several red cloaked wizards who were moving through the crowd, then again to several others that were moving the same way, but wearing normal robes. Only after did she turn to Professor Hardy, "Has something happened?"

Hardy frowned, "I'm not sure. I heard something about an escaped criminal, but that was weeks ago."

"Hang on, I'll find out." Xander said, spotting someone he knew.

He made his way over, through the crowd, and paused by her side. "Lo."

Daphne Greengrass jumped a little, and then smiled as she recognized him. "Harris. How was your summer?"

"Well spent," Xander returned the smile. Then he nodded around, "What's going on? Aurors running around, both in and out of uniform and people are tense enough to snap if you look at them wrong."

Daphne glanced around and sighed, leaning in closer to whisper, "It's Sirius Black."

"Black?" Xander blinked, honestly stunned.

Daphne mistook his reaction for something else and nodded, "I know. How anyone could escape from Azkaban, I have no idea, but he did it. I take it you just got here from America?"

Xander nodded.

"The Ministry's been pumping it up for weeks, now, even though Black hasn't been seen since he got loose," Daphne said, "My father expects that Fudge is using it to push some unpopular legislation through the Wizengamot."

"What did Black do?" Xander asked, really curious.

"You don't know??"

"American, remember?"

"Ah, yes, well..." Daphne gave him an arched look. "Black is the one who betrayed the Potter's to the Dark Lord. After He Who Must Not Be Named died trying to kill Harry, they say Black went mad, He killed Peter Pettigrew and over a dozen muggles with a single curse and was laughing hysterically when the Aurors found him."

Xander frowned, trying to place that with what he knew of Black from the Grimoire. Sirius was a pain in the ass, but a Blood Purist he was not. At least not by words or actions within the book. Very strange, Xander thought. Of course, Wizards were all nuts, so who knew?

Daphne took his frown for worry and merely shrugged, "I wouldn't worry overly. Daddy says that Black's reputation is overblown anyway, he's really only so widely feared because as the traitor who gave up the Potters he's almost as famous as the Dark Lord himself. He was a good Auror, apparently, but nothing beyond that."

Xander nodded with a quirk of his lips and a shrug, "Hey, I'm not worried. Even if he is some super villain incarnate, he's going to go after Harry first, remember?"

Daphne giggled slightly, but nodded. "That's what everyone says."

Xander nodded, mind racing, and thanked the girl for her help before heading back to Hardy and Wednesday. He quickly filled them in as the students began to board.

Hardy shook his head, "Going to school with that Potter boy seems to keep things from getting dull, I'll admit. Alright, I'll see you at school in a couple weeks. Follow your lesson plans, and do watch your backs."

"Yes Sir." They said together, drawing a smile from the man.

"Go on; get lost the both of you."

The two smirked and clambered aboard the train.

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The train filled up quickly, but Wednesday and Xander had scored an empty compartment with little trouble. Most people who past took one look at Xander's Slytherin colours and moved on and those who seemed inclined to enter paused when they spotted Wednesday before bolting. There was one who ignored the terrifying third years, however, and entered quietly.

"May I sit here?"

Wednesday looked over at the blond girl, recognizing her as a Ravenclaw a year behind them and nodded. "You may."

Luna Lovegood smiled, her expression a little dazed like she wasn't exactly listening to the here and now, and promptly dropped into a seat across from them. "Thank you. I'm Luna."

"Xander." Xander said with a smile.

"Wednesday."

"Oh, I know." She said, "You're infamous in the dorms."

Xander snorted, "She's infamous everywhere."

He grunted under a strategically placed elbow, and forced a smile through the pain. "Truth hurts, I guess."

"Yes." Wednesday replied, "Particularly the person who speaks it."

The train got underway, leaving the three alone in their carriage and to their own devices. Xander spent some time working on his old 'battery' project, using some ideas Willow had given him, while Luna tried to engage Wednesday in a chat about magical creatures.

"I knew I could sense the wrackspurts in this compartment," Luna said, her tone disconnected from her expressions. "They must cling to your terribly."

"You are mistaken," Wednesday returned equally, "Wrackspurts tend not to survive around an Addams."

Luna blinked, "Oh! Then they must be..."

Wednesday permitted herself a slight smile.

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry to hear that."

"Why? I get along fabulously with them."

Xander looked up from his book, his mind having half been on the conversation, and noted that Luna's expression had shifted to one of mild, though wide eyed, apprehension. He made a note to ask what the hell they were talking about later, but after years of experience with Willow, Wednesday, and Hermione, he wasn't stupid enough to ask it now when the two of them could gang up on him and bury him in facts he didn't need, nor particularly want.

So he filtered out the conversation and went back to his notes.

The problem of a Magical battery was a pain, though Xander was starting to think that maybe he had a way around it. Willow had pointed out that there were lots of historical, and current, magical items that did exactly what he was talking about. They stored magical power, and let it out on command.

The problem was that they all used certain things in common with each other. Gold, Silver, and Wood were good at holding a spell, for example, however he didn't want some large clunky item. He was looking for a tattoo, much to Willow's ire.

Oh the rant she's levelled on him over that one, Xander shuddered to even remember it. Still, the conversation did bring up some good points. He **could** use gold and silver, in fact many high end tattoo inks used metals as their base. The problem was that they were trace amounts, not enough to hold any significant charge of magical energy.

That was where Runes came in.

Runes could also hold a charge, and even generate one to a degree. So now Xander was looking into how to work gold and silver based inks,

with runic designs, into his concept. He'd run the numbers by Hermione, then Willow, and see if anything came of it.

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While Xander was reading the train got underway, and sped quickly to its destination. They were closing on Hogsmeade, in the process of getting changed for school, when the train stopped suddenly and threw Xander into Wednesday, and both of them into Luna.

"What the hell?"

The trio got untangled, and Xander was looking around in confusion.

"Is it getting cold in here?" He asked, shivering suddenly.

"Yes."

Xander glanced over at Wednesday, surprised at her answer. He's assumed it was just him, but then he looked at the window and saw what she saw, ice crystals forming quickly along the glass. His wand was out in a second, trailing just behind Wednesday's own. "What's going on?"

"We're being searched." Luna said, her tone clearer than before, but somehow smaller.

Xander glanced over, and was disturbed to see the girl curling up and shuddering on her seat. "Are you ok?"

"No." She said, barely muffling a sob. "No please..."

Xander felt sick to his stomach, the chill peeling through him as the light itself seemed to retreat. "Wednesday... what's going...?"

"Get behind me." She said, pushing him back.

The door to the compartment burst open then, and Xander saw a ghastly thing float in. He shivered, but lifted his wand, the bone splitting curse on his lips.

"Don't." Wednesday pushed his arm down. "It won't work."

"B... b-but." Xander shivered.

"Hold her." Wednesday pushed him at Luna. "It will help."

He slumped into the seat, and almost instantly Luna latched on to him, sobbing into his shoulder. Xander felt cold, through and through, like every good thing in his life had been taken, and would never return. And so he held her back, and it seemed to help as the feeling lessened.

"Get out." Wednesday said, staring evenly at the thing. "There is no one here that you seek."

The thing gazed at her for a long time, then slowly backed out, retreating from their compartment the way it had come. The door closed behind it, and for a moment nobody moved. Then Wednesday Addams took a shuddering breath and slumped, falling into Xander's free arm as he grabbed her and pulled her into the seat.

"W-what the hell was that thing?" He gasped out.

"Dementor." Wednesday said, "Minor demons."

She shivered slightly, eyes burning as she looked at him. "I hate demons."

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The arrival of the Express in Hogsmeade was a sombre, yet frenzied, affair as Auror's rushed the train, and students struggled to get off. Xander and Wednesday pushed their way off, Xander carrying Luna who was still shivering.

"Hey! Can we get a medic here!?"

A shabbily dressed figure rushed over to them and, quickly eyeing the three of them produced a large slab of chocolate and handed it over. "Share this between you. It'll help."

Xander glanced at it, "its chocolate."

The man grinned, "Trust me."

Wednesday accepted the slab and broke it into pieces, handing some to Luna and the rest to Xander after she had taken her own. Xander was surprised at how quickly the warmth returned as the chocolate melted in his mouth, and in a few seconds Luna asked to be put back on her feet.

"Whoa." Xander blinked, "Ok, I can admit when I'm wrong."

"Practice does make everything easier." Wednesday replied dryly.

"Hey!" Xander glare over at her, "That's uncalled for. Probably true, but uncalled for."



Luna giggled slightly, then clapped a hand over her mouth, her wide eyes even wider than before.

“I’m everyone’s entertainment.” Xander sighed theatrically.

“Not everyone’s,” Wednesday said, nodding to another group.

Draco Malfoy was crowing in Harry Potter’s direction, “Fainted, Potter? Really now, I knew you were overrated but come on...”

Xander shook his head as Harry was helped off by Ron and Hermione. “Harry fainted?”

“Dementors affect different people in different ways,” Wednesday said by way of explanation. “Most of our age experiences a mild chill, and a sensation of happiness fleeing forever.”

Xander nodded, “Yeah. That... sounds about right.”

“The worse your experiences, however, the stronger the effect.” The girl went on, “If your life has been hard enough, a Dementor can summon up the very worst thing you have ever experienced and force you to relive it.”

Xander grimaced, knowing that Harry’s life hadn’t exactly been perfume and roses. “You didn’t seem too bothered, not until it left anyway.”

Wednesday looked over at him for a moment, then turned toward the castle. “That... thing had no idea who it was facing. I react differently to darkness than most.”

She was walking away by the time she finished, leaving Xander to stare after her.

“She ain’t kidding, either.” Xander finally said, chuckling as he too headed for the carriages.

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The sorting ceremony was a subdued affair, with the teachers and students both quietly going about their business with very little of the boisterous behaviour of previous years. Xander had mixed feelings on that, since he was having doubts about his planned opening salvo against the Twins.

He’d been planning it all summer, however, and as the firsties were being sorted off Xander finally decided to go for it and surreptitiously began casting.

He used his Graphite/Unicorn Hair wand, because he figured that it wouldn’t leave the same tell tales as his matched wand, and carefully began laying the charms needed on the room. The Great Hall was a spectacular piece of enchantment, something Xander would have recognized even without Hermione hammering it in every year, practically everything in the room was charmed or enchanted somehow. The spells were, in fact, nearly impossible to break or alter in any permanent way, the strength of the magic involved was so great.

However, they were also explicitly designed to accept temporary modifications as a method for adapting the room to different needs. Technically only the Headmaster or a Professor was supposed to be able to make said modifications, however over the years several students had worked out the methodology for doing so... including the Coven and the Marauders.

Now Xander prepared his first sally of the year using their techniques as the hat droned on, sending students to their tables.

By the time the sorting was done, and the Headmaster’s requisite nonsensical words had been uttered, Xander too was finished and the meal appeared.

This year no one was digging in too fast, having remembered the events of the year before, and the upper students were carefully vetting the food. Xander, however, didn’t. He quickly dug in and drew surprised stares from around him.

“Did you check the food?” Daphne nudged him.

Xander shook his head, “nope.

“But... the Twins?”

“If they get me, they get me.” Xander replied, then smirked, “but I don’t think they’re stupid enough to try. Not after last year.”

Daphne considered than, and had to admit that it was likely true. She shrugged and took a sampling for herself, “You think they’ve given up?”

Xander snorted, “Not hardly. But they’ll come from a new direction this year, I’ll bet.”

“That’s hardly comforting.”

Xander just grinned.

The meal progressed with little incident, apparently even the twins were feeling less than eager to mix things up given the events of the day, until the desert course was served. Xander waited until that was petering out, most students looking around more and at their food less, then he tripped his charm string and carefully made a point of digging in to a new slice of pie.

At first nothing happened, then a gasp and series of whispers began to echo back and forth through the hall. Xander looked up, putting on a

confused expression, and looked to where the others were pointing.

On the charmed ceiling of the Hall a large banner was playing itself out.

HEIRS OF THE MARAUDERS, BEWARE.

Xander smirked inwardly, really he felt kinda cheap stealing Mould in his Short's lines, but it was too good to pass up. The tension in the room had cranked up noticeably, and Xander was only mildly surprised to see the twins pale slightly.

He had been wondering if they knew anything about their predecessors, but from what he could tell from the book it was entirely probable so he'd played it out as if they did.

he mused as the ceiling changed again.

THE COVEN AWAKENS, AND WE ARE WATCHING YOU.

It really was all he could do not to grin insanely at the sudden look the twins shot each other, their freckled face paling a little more as they searched the room for their unknown adversaries. That was a memory worth savouring, Xander decided, as he looked around the room himself.

The twin's reaction was exactly what he had hoped for, but it was the **teacher's** reactions that sent his mind into overdrive.

The shabby looking man who had given them the slabs of chocolate earlier was sitting, wide eyed and opened mouthed as he stared up, and **every** other teacher including the Headmaster, was staring at him with suspicious eyes.

Well, except for Snape, who was glaring with killing intent.

Xander wondered, as he wracked his brain for the man's name.

Lupin, he thought. He hadn't been paying a lot of attention when the Headmaster introduced him.

Remus Lupin.

Xander frowned; his focus shifting as he started thinking about the reaction from the teacher's and filed the twins away as less interesting for the moment. Lupin was now shaking his head and whispering intently to the headmaster, obviously denying involvement.

Xander knew that Lupin had no connections to the Coven, at least none that he could think of. So, realistically, that only left one possibility.

Was he a Marauder?

The teachers quickly dispelled the charms Xander had laid, and amidst the whispers of the students, the assembly was broken up and everyone sorted out to their dorms.

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"Well!" Daphne blinked, "What was that all about?"

"Don't know." Xander lied, "Did you see the teachers, though?"

"Yeah, they were glaring at that new Professor. I wonder if he did it."

"Snape seemed to think so."

Daphne cracked a wry grin, "True, however as much as it pains me that may not be a good judge of the situation."

Xander chuckled, but nodded as the two of them let themselves into the Common Room.

"You filthy little worm! What possible excuse could the hat have for letting something like YOU disgrace our great House!?"

Xander looked up and rolled his eyes. Apparently Draco had made it back first, and had quickly cornered a First Year. "God, Draco, it's the first day. Do you **HAVE** to be courting trouble already?"

Malfoy spun on him, "Stay out of this Harris."

"What did this one do?"

"This little mudblood, who belongs in a ZOO, touched my robes."

Having spent a little time chatting back and forth with Draco's mother, Xander had to wonder where the guy got his lines. His mother, while a pureblood supremacist to be sure, at least had style.

"Dude," Xander sighed, "Isn't it enough that two thirds of the school would probably look the other way if they saw you bleeding on the floor? Do you **HAVE** to make enemies in the place you sleep?"

"What are you babbling about?" Draco turned on him, the first year scrambling away.

“Pretty much every Gryffindor hates your guts...”

“As if I care.”

“Which means most of the Puffs hate your guts,” Xander continued.

“Useless twits.”

“And a good chunk of the Claws too.” Xander finished, “I figure that amounts to about two thirds of the school. I don’t know **WHY** you seem to want them to hate you, and I don’t care. But, if it were me, I don’t think I’d be trying to make enemies of people who, A) have been sorted into the house of ruthless cunning, and B) Have access to where I **sleep** .”

Draco looked a little lost for a moment, then paled. “Are you threatening me?”

“Me? Dude, I don’t hate you.” Xander shook his head, “If I did, I wouldn’t be telling you this, I’d just slit your throat or whatever while you were sleeping. Which brings me to my point.”

Draco looked around, noting the people listening to the conversation even as they struggled to **NOT** appear to be listening, and swallowed. “No one would dare.”

“You and I have **GOT** to be using different definitions of the words ‘ruthless’, ‘cunning’, and ‘ambitious’,” Xander said dryly as he pushed past Draco and headed for his room.

Behind him he left a completely confused, and newly paranoid, Draco Malfoy looking around with new eyes.

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“Nice speech.”

Xander glanced up and nodded to Blaise Zabini as the boy entered the room. He didn’t respond, though, having noticed that Blaise tended to be quiet himself, and just went on with unpacking.

“I doubt he’ll take it to heart.”

Xander looked up again, and this time shrugged, “Distracted him long enough for the Firstie to get away. That’s all I was aiming for. If he takes it to heart, that’s a bonus.”

Zabini nodded, not saying anything more.

Xander opened his trunk and pulled out some of his research books to set by his bed. He didn’t take out any of his notebooks or the Grimoire, of course, those remained safely secured. Then he shifted the trunk to another compartment and drew out a change of clothes.

That caught Blaise’ attention, and the dark skinned boy leaned over.

“I say, is that an expanded trunk?”

Xander nodded, “Yeah, why?”

“Surprised to see one.” Blaise admitted, “They’re bloody rare.”

“You have one, don’t you?” Xander asked, having noticed it before.

Blaise nodded, “Sure, but my Grandfather builds them. I’d bet good galleons that we’re the only students in the school with one.”

“You’d lose.” Xander smirked.

Blaise stared for a moment, then nodded, “Addams. Of course. Grandfather Zabini sold two last fall to Gomez Addams. He only sold three all year, and one of those was to a Master Auror who had the standard Ministry subsidy they all get.”

“I didn’t know they were that rare. Aren’t all school trunks a little expanded?”

Blaise nodded, “Yes, but those are child’s play compared to a multi compartment trunk. Those are bought premade from Muggles, then charmed by apprentices usually. True expanded trunks are handmade, and it takes a Master Charm smith and Carpenter to do it.”

“Wow.” Xander said, looking at the trunk again, impressed. “I didn’t know. How much are they worth?”

“That depends on who you ask,” Blaise smiled very slightly. “My Grandfather would say that they’re priceless. I believe the going market value is around twenty thousand Galleons, unless you have the Ministry subsidy.”

Xander blinked, thinking it through. A Galleon was worth about one point three Golden Eagles, and a Golden Eagle was worth... last time he checked, Xander tried to remember the exchange, a GE held 6 grams of pure gold at around thirty dollars a gram... Xander’s eyes flashed opened and he whistled.

That's a lot of cash." he admitted, wondering at how much Gomez had spent on him.

"And now you know why I was surprised." Blaise said simply.

Xander nodded silently, and made a quick promise to return the favour to the Addamses when he could. He also eyed the trunk with a little more respect than he had before, surprised at the value of something he owned.

It seemed that there was more to the Wizarding world than cool toys.

There were **expensive** cool toys.

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## Malfoy Manor

Narcissa chuckled softly to herself as she read the day's entry in the Grimoire, particularly when she reached the part about Remus being caught in the crossfire of the little joke Xander had played on the Twins.

She thought to herself, finding the man's plight to be amusing for a moment.

Then she thought about Sirius and her humour was gone.

How that man had escaped from Azkaban, she didn't know, but it did present an opportunity, if she could get to him before he got himself caught again. Unfortunately Lucius was being no help at all, merely growling at her when she asked him to contact Sirius.

She thought irritably,

From what Fudge reported that seemed to be her Cousin's target, but it could NOT be allowed. Narcissa set her jaw; if Lucius would not help she would have to make some inquiries of her own.

Sirius must **NOT** be caught.

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"Stop playing us for fools, Lupin." Severus Snape sneered, "The very day you step foot back in this school, the name of the Marauders is flaunted across the great hall, do you expect us to believe you had nothing to do with it?"

"I already answered that, Severus." Remus said softly, face pensive. "And to be honest, it's not the Marauder's name that has me on my heels."

"Do explain, Remus." Albus motioned to the tired looking man.

"I haven't heard from the Coven since I finished school, Albus." Remus said pensively, "James and I never did figure out who they were, and Sirius would never tell us. He thought it was a great joke."

"Are you saying that Sirius Black was part of the Coven??" Minerva McGonagall stiffened in her chair, eyes wide as she pinned Remus with a glare from across the room.

"No, but he found out who they were." Remus replied, a touch of a smirk showing on his face, "We waged war with the Coven for three years, and only stopped when Sirius brokered a 'treaty'."

"I remember." Minerva said sourly, drawing chuckles from Filius and Albus. "Particularly since you four had no idea who you were fighting, so you just targeted everyone."

"That was mostly James' idea," Remus admitted with a smile, "We also had to fire twenty times as much in order to make up for the fact that they knew who we were."

"Indeed," Albus chuckled softly, but then grew serious. "However, the fact that Sirius Black has connections to the Coven, and their reappearance now... has disturbing connotations."

Remus sighed, "I know."

"So we must find out who is taking up their mantle," Albus said softly, "Did Sirius ever give any hints at who they may have been?"

Remus shook his head, "Not really. He seemed to think that we knew them, though."

"From my House?" Minerva leaned forward.

"Possibly," Remus acceded, "But I'm not sure that the Coven was just one house. Sirius seemed to hint that they were a cross house alliance of sorts, specifically created to nail us."

"If anyone could drive multiple houses to close cooperation, it would have been you four." Severus said sourly.

Remus didn't rise to the bait, however, and just shrugged in response.

Very well,” Albus said, “We’ll have to watch for any more action by this ‘Coven’. Judging from the choice of names, we’re probably looking at Witches I believe.”

Remus nodded, “Traditionally, a Coven is all or mostly female.”

“Only for the last century or so,” Minerva warned.

“Indeed,” Albus conceded, “The old root simply means to Convene. However, if students invented it twenty years ago...”

Minerva nodded, acceding the point.

“It may be unrelated,” Fillius spoke up for the first time.

“Fillius?” Albus questioned softly, “Do you have information to add?”

Professor Flitwick considered it, “Possibly. Was it just me, or did the message seem to be targeting someone specific?”

Remus scowled a little sourly himself this time, “That’s how it felt.”

Fillius chuckled, “Not you, Remus, I think you were merely... unintentional splash over.”

Several teachers chuckled at that, and Remus seemed to be caught between which was worse, being the target or merely having wandered blindly into the firing line. “Who then?”

“The Weasley Twins,” Fillius suggested. “The ‘Heirs’ of the Marauders.”

“That’s possible,” Minerva conceded, “Those two are surely cut from the same cloth.”

“There is also Harry.”

The room fell silent, all eyes turning to Albus, who went on, “Harry is the only blood Heir of the Marauders, and the message could have been aimed at him. I believe that it would behove us to locate the members of this Coven as quickly as we can, just to ensure the safety of the school.”

The staff nodded in agreement, and shortly thereafter the meeting broke up.

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School went on, the year beginning with a bang but quickly descending into routine as the students found that even with demons floating around outside the wards; things were mind numbingly normal within.

Xander had set aside the wand projects for the time being, not having anything more than a few minor adjustments in mind for them, and those could wait until summer. He instead started interesting Wednesday and Hermione in a new school project of sorts.

“Marauder’s Map?” Hermione frowned, looking over the notes. “These are some advanced spells.”

Xander nodded, “yeah, but think about the final form. A real-time map of the school? Too cool.”

“Indeed. The information value alone is staggering,” Wednesday admitted.

“What you two might want with such a map is, quite frankly, frightening.” Hermione said flatly.

“Could be worse.” Xander smirked.

“How?”

“The twins could have one.”

Hermione shivered, cringing at the very idea. “That’s horrifying.”

Xander grinned and nodded, then turned back to the notes. “It’s all based around this, The Protean Charm.”

Hermione leaned in, “That’s very advanced.”

“NEWT level,” Xander confirmed.

Hermione’s expression wavered between horrified and enthused by the prospect of learning a spell that advanced.

“The tough part is actually going to be linking the charm to the Castle Wards.” Xander admitted while she was thinking, though. “From what I can gather, that’s not easy.”

“Why?”

“You have to do it from the Headmaster’s Office.”

Hermione started, then drew in a breath to scream at him, only to have Wednesday calmly slap a hand over her mouth.

"We're in the Library."

Hermione eyeballed Wednesday for a moment, then nodded as she took in a deep breath through her nose. As the hand dropped away she leaned in, whispering fiercely. "Are you insane?? You can't be serious!"

Xander shrugged, "That's where the keystone to the wards is placed. It's the only place you can finish the map."

"Well then we're not going to be making one, are we?" The bushy haired witch hissed.

"Well, I don't know about you..." Xander grinned.

"You don't have the Arithmancy to pull this off." She said simply.

"No, but I do." Wednesday replied.

"Plus I think I can get some help from others," Xander said with a smirk.

"I'll... I'll tell!"

Xander raised his eyebrows, "Really? Over this?"

Hermione wavered, wincing visibly.

"You won't tell, Hermione." Xander said after a moment, "You won't betray us over this. We're not talking about hurting anyone, or ourselves. Worst thing that happens is we get caught."

"That's bad enough." She objected sullenly. "You could get expelled."

Xander rolled his eyes, "Hermione, Draco Malfoy regularly attacks other students. Harry, Ron, and you are constantly getting into the most idiotic messes... Do you **really** believe that we'll get expelled over breaking into the Headmaster's office?"

Hermione grimaced, then shook her head.

"No."

"Besides, even if we did, Salem would take us." Wednesday said coolly.

"That's fine for you, but I'm not American." Hermione said to that, then let out a breath, "Thank god."

The two just looked at her for a long moment.

"Ok fine," She huffed, "But if we get expelled I'm blaming you two."

"Deal." Xander smirked, pushing the pages over. "Here are the first steps. Do you think we can learn the Protean soon?"

"It depends, I haven't looked at it too closely yet," Hermione sighed, "It's on next year's reading list, to be honest. I'll move it up."

Xander grinned at her. Only Hermione had her reading lists planned out like that, AND could remember them so easily. Well, her and maybe Willow. He wasn't sure about Wednesday, maybe her too, but it was hard to tell. All he ever saw her reading was horror tales.

Xander made a note to introduce her to Horror comics sometime.

For the moment, though, they had a project and he had a rather difficult spell to learn.

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As classes got into full swing Xander began to question his choices when it came to electives, Ancient Runes and Arithmancy both tested his resolve to learn as much as he could about magic, and his interest in same. Until Arithmancy in particular, Xander didn't really think **ANYTHING** could make Magic boring.

Luckily, and unluckily as it were, he already had a base in Magical Number Theory. This was good in that he wasn't struggling in class, but he was even more bored than he would have been otherwise. Good and Bad travelled as a pair, or so it seemed.

The base ideas in Magical Number Theory were fairly easy to grasp. Certain numbers held a power of their own. Three, Seven, and Eleven being the most common and powerful numbers most wizards encountered. It was magically beneficial to do things in a way that related to those numbers, such as brewing potions in batches of three doses, or being the Seventh Son of a Seventh Son.

For an even more pronounced effect you combined them, such as brewing eleven doses of a potion that required seven ingredients in three brewing steps. The real challenge, of course, wasn't in devising the most powerful way to make such a potion, but rather formulating a potion that did what you wanted while also requiring the arithmetic steps. Potions Masters had spent their entire lives carefully reformulating specific potions to take advantage of that common rule of magic.

Madame Vector had carefully introduced them to the Wave Graph of Magical Influence, which was basically what it sounded like a large graph that showed magical potency along one axis and numbers along the other.

"As you can see," She said, looking over the class, "Magical Potency increases as we approach the number three, then declines to its lowest ebb by the number five, only to increase again as we reach seven."

The class nodded, understanding that much from the clearly printed graph, but Hermione quickly raised her hand.

"Yes, Miss Granger?"

"What about Zero, Professor?" Hermione asked, frowning as she looked at the graph, "Your numbers start with one."

"Well you can hardly perform zero steps, or use zero ingredients in a potion, Miss Granger." Vector replied a little testily.

Hermione sank back, shrinking a little as several in the class laughed or sneered at her.

"The Number Zero is one of the most important mathematical concepts in history," Wednesday Addams spoke up softly, her voice still somehow being heard all through the room. "I find it difficult to believe that it has no bearing on Arithmancy."

"Yes, that doesn't mean it isn't so." Vector said calmly, looking around the class. "Scholars have studied magical numbers for thousands of years, since before Wizarding Society came to exist as we know it today. These are tested truths, and while they may not be complete they are as close as anyone has yet gotten. Should you be able to add to this knowledge, you will have truly made an impact on the world."

Silence followed that statement, and she nodded in satisfaction.

"Very well, take out your quills and note this down..."

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The quiet and peaceful school year didn't last long for Hogwarts, of course, since in short order Draco had managed to stir things up while in Care of Magical Creatures. He'd been injured by a Hippogriff and was milking that for all it was worth, promising retribution upon the animal and on Hagrid as the class Professor.

Now Xander didn't much know Hagrid, and he didn't have that class, but what he'd seen of the big guy had been good so he was having a hard time matching what Draco was saying with the man he'd met as a first year.

As it turned out there was a reason for that, which he learned in the Library was studying with Hermione and Wednesday.

"It was really all Draco's fault, you know," Hermione practically growled, her hands flipping pages with near violent motions. "Hagrid told him to be respectful, but he had to be... be..."

"Draco?" Xander asked mildly.

"Yes! Exactly!"

"Shhh!" Madame Pince hissed from behind her desk.

Hermione blushed and shrank down a little, "And I'll bet it's not even a bad injury..."

"It isn't." Xander said dryly, "Draco doesn't wear the sling in the dorms..."

"I knew it!" She hissed.

"That doesn't mean that Hagrid did right, though," Xander went on, "It's like you said, Draco was being Draco. If you're going to do something potentially dangerous, you have to know how people are going to act."

Hermione shrank down yet again, looking glum, "Well, when you put it that way."

Wednesday looked up, eyes narrowing as she pierced Hermione with a stare. "How do you know all the details?"

"I was there," Hermione said hotly. "I saw everything."

"That class was conducted at the same time as Ancient Runes, was it not?" Wednesday said quietly. "The class you attended with us?"

Hermione suddenly got nervous, "I, Um, well I'm not sure. Couldn't have been. Oh my, I have to go, I'll see you later!"

Wednesday and Xander exchanged glances as the girl ran out of the room.

"She's hiding something."

Xander smirked, "Ya think?"

The Addams scion merely rolled her eyes as his amused tone, "I fail to see how she could be in two classes at the same time."

Don't know," Xander shrugged, "Magic?"

That earned him a glare, "Do **NOT** make me hurt you."

Then she paused, considered her words, and smiled slowly. "On second thought, please... make me hurt you."

Xander gulped at her tone, and it was his turn to squirm in his seat as he made a show of looking at his bare wrist. "Hey, look at the time. Gotta go."

Wednesday watched him bolt from the library and shook her head slightly as she smiled. He was such a fool, but not in a bad way she decided. Much like Uncle Fester, perhaps. On the surface Xander resembled her father, but Gomez Addams had a terrifying dark side beneath the clown's facade.

She had seen it once, when she was very young, and it still gave her shivers to this day. Of course, all Addams had their demons, but there was something truly exciting about the true unleashed darkness she'd witnessed that day.

Wednesday shook herself free of her reverie a moment later, carefully returning to her studies with disciplined intent.

Like her father, she too had a dark side. She merely chose to leash it in a different way.

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Defence Against the Dark Arts started off with a bang, literally, when the professor used an incantation that sounded suspiciously like a child's mumbling, or perhaps an African city, to fire a piece of chewed bubblegum straight up Peeve's nose when the Poltergeist tried to prevent them from entering class.

This was the first time Xander had a chance to examine the Professor closely since the opening feast. On the surface there was nothing impressive to relate about the man, other than his old and frayed robes as Malfoy constantly pointed out. He seemed competent as a teacher, though, so Xander was relieved to not be dealing with another Lockhart.

Their first class brought about a new spell and the introduction of the class to a creature known as a Boggart. Lupin brought them up to a Staff room and, after some words from Snape, selected Neville to be the first to try the new spell.

The spell, simply incanted as 'Riddikulus' was, on the surface, nothing but a joke spell. Make fun of someone by casting a simple cantrip to make them look stupid, which made Xander wonder why he hadn't heard of it already until he looked the spell up later and found that it was, pardon the pun, ridiculously easy to stop. Like most cantrips, it actually didn't work properly, if at all, against an unwilling Wizard.

Against the Boggart, however, it worked fine as Neville proved when he turned the image of Professor Snape into a cross dresser. Even many Slytherin's laughed at that, including Xander, though he did keep it a little muffled.

After that the class was treated to a spin of the Wheel of Phobias as Lupin directed them in to face their Boggart and cast the cantrip to repel it.

After Seamus had given his Banshee laryngitis Lupin called out, "Harris!"

Xander moved forward, wand in hand, and blanched slightly as the Boggart became two forms that lunged in his direction. A Black clad jack booted Gestapo Officer glared at him, drawing a Luger, while a gaily coloured clown with creepy face paint grinned at him wildly.

"R... Riddikulus!" Xander snapped, flicking his wand at the duo.

The two merged and in the next instant there was a Gestapo Clown wielding a floppy rubber chicken in a way that could no longer be remotely considered menacing.

"Excellent, back now," Lupin said, nodding to Wednesday. "Addams."

Wednesday calmly stepped forward and the Boggart changed instantly, looking suspiciously to Xander like Mary Poppins. The incantation rang out and Wednesday stepped back as the Boggart became one of the most hideous hags he'd ever imagined, cackling wildly while singing Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious. Xander, alone the entire room, burst out laughing wildly as everyone else screamed at the change.

Lupin, sparing a puzzled glance at Wednesday, stepped in and calmly dispatched the Boggart when it turned into an image of the Moon for him. He moved away, then quickly nodded to Neville again, "Forward Neville! Finish him off!"

Neville did just that, considerably more confident this time as the cross-dressing Snape made its reappearance once more.

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Narcissa Malfoy nee Black slammed the palm of her hand into the corner of a table, her face just slightly twisting into an irritated grimace as she attracted the attention of several others in the pub. Rosmerta looked over in her direction, but she merely shook her head to the inquiring glance.

There was nothing Merta could do to help her, nothing anyone could do, or would do apparently.

Some days she would cheerfully strangle her 'beloved' husband. A word from him and she knew that she could get a meeting with Sirius, Lucius was as plugged into the Dark Lord's network as he had ever been and she knew it. Instead what was she doing? Haunting Hogsmeade and playing muggle dog catcher!



She thought grimly as she finished her drink and left a few coins on the table as she rose.

“Will there be anything else, Madam Malfoy?” Rose asked, stepping up quietly.

“Thank you, No, Rose.” Narcissa said with a tired shake of her head.

Rosmerta leaned in close enough that no one else could hear, “You look like hell, Ciss.”

Narcissa stiffened slightly, but a glance in the mirror behind the bar told her that Rose had spoken the simple truth. She sighed and nodded, “I have things to do.”

“If you’re not going to go home, take a room upstairs for a few hours.” The bar owner suggested, “You’ll do no one, least of all yourself, any good if you collapse in the streets.”

Narcissa grimaced at that image, but steeled herself just the same. She had to find her idiot cousin before he did something stupid to get himself killed. “I don’t have time, Rose, I...”

A scream went up from outside, shocking them both, and they instantly ran to the door to see a group of Aurors herding Dementors through the streets in a hurry, heading in the direction of Hogwarts.

“What’s going on!?” Rosmerta called out to a passerby, yelling above the commotion.

“Haven’t you heard!?” A Man called back, “Sirius Black snuck into Hogwarts!”

Narcissa gasped softly, her knees buckling as the world wavered around her.

Rosmerta was there instantly, a single strong arm holding her up and a concerned look shooting in her direction before she looked back to the man. “Did he hurt anyone?”

“No, he tried to break into Gryffindor Dorms to get at Potter but the Painting wouldn’t open.”

“Did they catch him?” Narcissa asked tonelessly.

“Not yet, this is part of the search party.”

Narcissa shook slightly, breathing a sigh of deep relief as she steadied herself. Rose was eyeing her nervously now, and the two just stood there as the procession moved on up the road to the Castle.

“I think you need to be talking to me, Ciss,” Rose whispered in her ear, her tone hard and with a lot less of the concern she had earlier.

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Xander observed the commotion as he was sequestered in the great hall with some others from his years, not quite able to fathom the situation. That Black had been able to break into the castle wasn’t the problem, from what he knew about Black the man knew more about Hogwarts secrets than most anyone alive.

That, in fact, was the problem he was having.

“You ok?”

Xander started as Daphne came up behind him, “What?”



# Shadow Council : Preludes Book One

## The Grim and The Raven (part 2)

“You look confused.”

“I am.” Xander admitted. “Something about this stinks.”

“How so?”

“Black isn’t a stupid guy by any description I’ve heard,” Xander said, shrugging, “So why go looking for Harry in the dorms during the Halloween Feast?”

“Maybe he was going to wait for him and kill him as he went to bed?” Daphne suggested.

“And attacking the painting to announce his presence fits into that plan, how exactly?” Xander asked sarcastically.

“Don’t get snippy with me, Harris.” She snapped back. “He’s been in Azkaban for twelve years, his brain’s probably addled.”

“So addled he snuck through the line of Aurors and Dementors, then broke through Hogwarts Wards and made it to Gryffindor dorms without being seen? Only to blow it then?” Xander scoffed.

“Look, what do you care?” She rolled her eyes, “it’s not like he’s here for you.”

Xander shrugged defensively, not willing to mention the book or the fact that he’d spent a summer learning all sorts of things from Black’s avatar. “I just think its weird is all.”

“You are weird, Harris. Black is nuts. There’s a difference.” Daphne said with a flick of her hair as she turned away from him and headed for the girl’s bedding pads a few yards away.

Xander sighed, taking a seat by the wall and drawing out his copy of the Grimoire. His fountain pen in hand he carefully noted the events of the day in one of the interactive sections, then entered a one word question.

Why?

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What’s this all about, Narcissa?” Rosmerta demanded in a hard voice when they were alone. “I don’t like your reaction out there one bit.”

“It’s none of your concern, Rosmerta.” Narcissa returned in an equal voice. “This is between me and Sirius.”

“That... murderer... has no business with any decent human.” Rose growled, “Something that, until now, I always believed you to be. Give me one reason why I shouldn’t call the Aurors over here.”

Narcissa’s eyes glinted, the soft blue turning steel grey in an instant as her wand appeared in her hand, startling the tavern owner. “Because it would do you no good, and would likely cost you everything.”

Rosmerta paled slightly, taking a step back. “Narciss... Cissy, why are you doing this? You’ve never been this sort...”

“This is a matter of blood, Rose.” Narcissa said fiercely. “Intervene in my affairs and I will crush you.”

Rosmerta swallowed as the ephemeral blond spun on her heel and strode out, leaving her to consider the words carefully. Narcissa was not joking; she knew that as a fact. Rose left the private room and looked outside for a moment, eyes falling on a passing Auror as her sense of propriety warred with her sense of self preservation.

Finally she stepped back, letting the door close, and mechanically went back to work.

There was nothing she could do against Narcissa Malfoy, and even less for the Aurors to do. There was no crime in being concerned for a relative, even a murderer. She had always thought that Narcissa detested her cousin, though?

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The confusion reigned for that night, but by midway through the next day things were back to normal in the school. Xander’s mind was still running in circles as the facts of reality clashed with everything written in his Grimoire, and he didn’t like it. He was becoming distrustful of the book, and the contents within as his arguments with the Avatars went round and round.

Evans and Black would have screamed his eardrums bloody if they’d been able to, both insisting that it was **IMPOSSIBLE** for Black to have betrayed the Potters, let alone killed Peter Pettigrew. What made that even more confusing was the revelation that Evans was, in fact, Lilly Evans who became Lilly Potter, who supposedly died at the behest of Black himself.

Pettigrew was, along with Black and two others (including, Xander was becoming more certain, Remus Lupin) part of the Marauders.

All Xander knew for sure was that he was being lied to, and he didn't like it.

The intelligences locked in the book were of a limited sort, unfortunately, and that meant that they couldn't answer any of the more relevant questions he had, or had been specifically locked against revealing them. Xander had determinedly locked the book in his trunk when they had been permitted back into their rooms, against the vociferous objections of the book's inhabitants who were demanding more information.

Classes moved on, Snape taking over Defence for a few days and tearing into the Gryffindor's for Neville's cross-dressing Boggart. The next bit of excitement came when the Puffs won their match against Gryffindor on the pitch, largely because a whole group of Dementors had bolted across the field like the demon wraiths they apparently were, scaring the hell out of the school and nearly killing Harry.

As usual, he survived, but the loss of the match had shifted the balance in the scores pretty heavily, which had most of the Kittens looking downtrodden while Draco was puffed up like a marshmallow, strutting around like a peacock.

Xander just shook his head, listening to the whispers behind the boy's back. He wouldn't have looked so foolish if he had anything to do with it, but as it stood Draco just didn't seem to realize that he was making Harry look better and better with every strut.

After all, apparently Slytherin's seeker believed he needed Dementors to take on Potter.

Xander just sighed and let it pass. He didn't understand the game anyway, so what did he care?

Soon it was time for the Hogsmeade visit.

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Xander and Wednesday made their way into the small town with the group of students, all gleefully happy to be free of the castle for a few hours. The walk felt good, though it reminded Xander that he'd started to let his conditioning go again and would pay for it if he didn't find some time to exercise soon.

In the group of students he easily spotted Ron and Hermione as they made their way to town as well, but didn't attempt to approach the group. Tensions between the Gryffs and Snakes had ratcheted up again with Draco's nonsense, and Xander didn't feel like a confrontation with some kittens who didn't know enough to avoid a snake.

"Are you well?"

He was startled by the question, turning to Wednesday. "Why are you asking?"

"You've been sullen, withdrawn, and antisocial for the past week or more," She said, eyeing him intently, "Most unlike you. I was starting to think you were hopelessly... cheerful."

The way she spat the word made Xander laugh, which drew a disgusted look from her and he just shook his head. "I'm fine. Just had some heavy thinking to do lately."

"I see."

She didn't push it any further, and he didn't offer anything else, so the two made their way into town and browsed the candy shops, supplies, and general window shopping they were expected to do.

Xander nodded to Hermione when they saw her in Honeydukes, and she nodded back. She didn't look too happy herself, he noted, but he supposed that he shouldn't be surprised.

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Ron spared a glance at the snake as he passed, "I don't know what you see in that guy."

Hermione rolled her eyes, "He only helped save your sister last year."

"Yeah, he's ok for a snake," Ron said grudgingly, "But still..."

"Honestly." She huffed, shaking her head.

"Leave her be, Ron. Xander's a good guy." Harry said tiredly from where he was standing under his cloak. "Anyway, like I was saying, the Twins gave me this map... it's called the Marauder's map..."

Hermione's eyes widened as she heard that name, looking at Harry's disembodied head in confusion. "What did you say?"

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After the Hogsmeade visit Xander turned his focus back to the arithmetic work needed to construct the Marauder's map. It was both complex and simplistic in nature, since most of it was tied into the Protean Charm. The individual equations were easy enough to deal with, really they were simple addition and subtraction work since the Wizarding world hadn't yet gotten too deep into multiplication and division as far as Xander could tell.

It was weird, in a way, he thought. He had yet to find one single instance of multiplication or division in his Arithmancy books. Everything was

adding this, subtract that. The real complexities of Arithmancy seemed to be in the number selection, as there was a huge difference between three of something or four. In fact, from a magical point of view, you were almost always better off using three instead of four or five, even if logically the situation would seem to call for more quantity.

That bugged the hell out of him on one level, but mostly Xander just shrugged it off. He knew that there had to be something more to it than just what was in the books, but he supposed that it was in the more advanced courses offered later.

Certainly there was a **LOT** of power available in the simple addition and subtraction of magical numbers. In class they had broken down the Wingardium Leviosa spell from first year, analyzing its numerical formula. It was rather surprising to learn that the spell was just a long run of threes and sevens being added or subtracted in what looked suspiciously like a triple meter beat.

He'd brought that up in class, only to receive a strange look from the teacher and a sneer from some of Malfoy's sycophants in the row behind him. He just sighed and went back to work.

Music wasn't something Xander knew a lot about, but he'd taken some piano and guitar lessons in school and had even gotten some lessons with Willow when she learned to play the recorder and flute. He couldn't exactly read sheet music, but he could get a sense of the pace, and he was almost **CERTAIN** that the spell formulae were broken into a triple meter beat.

Tying the numbers into the incantation and wand motion was another aspect of the formulae that Xander found pretty cool, though. Well, actually, the term 'tying' was all wrong. He noticed immediately that the swish and flick motion was actually part of the base formula, and all charms would have similar base wand movements. The incantation, however, was a bit of a puzzle. He couldn't find any connection there at all; it was as if the words had nothing at all to do with the spell.

It was all terribly confusing, but at least Xander now felt like he was really at school. For a while there he had started to imagine he was just getting to play every day.

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Hermione watched, eyes narrowing like a Hawk's before striking, as Xander worked on the next step in the making of the Marauder's Map.

How did he get the instructions for such a thing? Especially since Harry was now holding the original or what she supposed was the original.

And just who were Moony, Padfoot, Prongs, and Wormtail? They had to be brilliant students, she thought, to have devised a map like this, but at the same time it was obvious that they were troublemakers on the order of which only the Weasley Twins seemed to approach.

It was all very distressing, Hermione found. She felt like she was caught between her two groups of friends, not able to tell either group about the other without betraying someone. She was distracted for a moment when she noticed Xander struggling with the Arithmetic formula for part of the map, and realized why it seemed to be so out of place.

"Xander, where's your Grimoire?" She asked.

Xander looked up, his face darkening. "I left it in my room."

"Why? You always bring it..."

"I just did, ok." He said, sharply enough to leave her feeling rebuked, so Hermione quieted down.

Wednesday looked between them, eyes glittering darkly as she measured the conversation but remained silent.

\*\*\*\*

The fall term swung ever closer to an end, and Xander found himself looking forward to Christmas Hols since he knew he would be spending it with the Addamses again. He had, once more, offered to remain at Hogwarts but neither Wednesday nor Gomez would hear of it. Xander hadn't really expected much else, but felt the need to make the offer anyway.

Work on the map was progressing nicely, though it was a lot rougher without the help of the shade of Sirius Black and occasional answers from Narcissa Malfoy. Even so, Xander didn't want to bring the Grimoire out again, not until he knew he could trust it. With the constant fear of Black practically permeating the entire school, even Xander was feeling a lot of paranoia over the figure he'd originally considered a slight pain in the ass at most.

The end result of the paranoia, though, was a steep decline in Xander's capability to manage his 'fun' projects, and a lot more focus required on his school work. That, in turn, made the school work feel more and more like, well work, and left him feeling a little trapped by the drudgery of constant repetitions of the same little thing.

He was really looking forward to the upcoming Break.

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Gomez and Mortisha Addams arrived in the town of Hogsmeade by car, the old Rolls silently appearing out of a fogbank and rolling smoothly down the cobblestone streets much to the shock of the town's populace.

"Isn't that one of them muggle carts?" Mundungus Fletcher drawled slightly as he looked out from his permanent seat in the Hogshead Tavern.

"Can't be." Aberforth Dumbledore said without looking up, "The whole town is under muggle repelling wards."

"Looks like one ter me."

Aberforth sighed, then turned and looked just in time to see the Rolls slide fully past. "My word. Was that a Silver Cloud?"

"No, that was a Cart, I'm telling ya."

Aberforth rolled his eyes and made his way to the door in time to confirm his thoughts. "Good lord, that car is worth more than... well much of the town, I believe. How on earth did it get here? We aren't even connected to the highway."

"What high way?" Fletcher asked, leaning out past him, and looking up as if peering for the way Aberforth was talking about.

The bar owner sighed, "Never mind, Fletcher. Go back to your drink; the car must be enchanted so it's not muggles."

Fletcher shrugged and happily went back to his drinks.

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Elsewhere in town the passage of the vehicle elicited many of the same reactions from the inhabitants of the town, confusion both from those who were aware of what it was, and even more so from those who weren't. At the far end of town one Narcissa Malfoy was tiredly finishing up what had become a near daily routine of Mutt Watching when the vehicle appeared from around a corner and nearly ran her down on its way past.

"Well I'll be!" She gasped, glaring at the departing muggle conveyance. "It's bad enough to deal with those blasted things in London, but what is one doing here!?"

She glowered after it for a while, but it was on its way up to Hogwarts and she couldn't muster up the indignation to chase after it. Frankly, she had her own problems to deal with, and careless fools in muggle toys weren't even remotely on her list of priorities.

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"Quite a stir." Mortisha said, glancing out the back of the Rolls.

"Indeed!" Gomez grinned, slightly maniacal as he waved his cigar around. "They must recognize the Addams car and have come out to greet us. Wave to the nice people, Tish."

She waved dutifully, but frowned ever so slightly, "That blond woman doesn't seem to be the greeting type."

"Nonsense!" Gomez declared, "Why else would she have risked getting so close to the car as we passed by? Why Lurch almost ran her down."

"True."

"Such nice people." Gomez marvelled.

"Perhaps we should consider a home in the area?" Mortisha suggested.

"Capital idea, love. The weather is positively dreary in the fall, perfect holiday weather." Gomez said, "It might be nice to have a home in the Old World again."

Lurch, from the front, glanced back and droned out, "The School."

The couple looked ahead to see Hogwarts Castle approaching as they topped the hill.

"It's just such a..." Mortisha grimaced, "light and airy place for an old castle, don't you think? These are usually so wonderfully dreary."

"Ah, love, not everyone can have the comforts we enjoy," Gomez said sadly. "It's a truth of the world that injustice reigns."

"I know," She leaned into him, "but why must Wednesday endure this?"

"It builds character, love. You'll see."

The conversation was cut off when a dark, dank feeling of hopeless dread filled them, and the two Addamses exchanged glances briefly before Gomez leaned forward.

"Lurch! Stop the car!"

The Rolls slid to a stop, and Gomez was instantly out. "You feel that, Tish?"

"That's not natural," his wife said as she nodded, "Where...?"

"There!" Gomez pointed, noting the darkening form floating in their direction.

"Demons? Here?" Mortisha blinked.

Dementor, unless I miss my guess.” Gomez said his face serious. “The looks keep them as prison guards on some island up the coast.”

“So why are they here, at a school?”

“Some imbecile in government, I suppose. I can’t imagine Mr Dumbles allowing it; he’s far too cheerful a sort to permit this, so it must be someone above him.” Gomez didn’t move as the demon approached.

“Oh dear,” Mortisha said distastefully. “And with Wednesday around too.”

“Yes well, we’ll see about this.” Gomez just barely grunted out, his demeanour changing as he suddenly glared at the demon as it approached, the feeling of chilled air increasing tenfold.

The Dementor paused, hitching in mid flight, and then dropped like a stone to the ground where it crumpled and didn’t move again.

Gomez smirked, “Still got it.”

“Of course you do, Mon Cher.”

The serious demeanour was gone in an instant as Gomez spun around, eyes wide as he stared at his wife.

“Tish! That’s French!”

Lurch only moaned as Gomez vaulted across the priceless automobile, grabbed his wife’s arm, and began to pepper her with kisses.

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The last feast before the hols was well underway when the doors to the Great Hall opened and three figures strode in.

“Mr Stumbles! I would have a word with you!” The lead said, loud enough for the entire school to hear.

“I believe its Dumbles, Hon.”

“Is it?” The man looked confused, “How odd. Never mind that anyway, Just why is the school ringed by demons??”

The murmuring of the feast fell away as the man’s question rang out clearly, causing Headmaster Dumbledore to rise.

“Mr Addams, I presume you mean the Dementors?” He asked with a genial sort of gesture, “I’m afraid that while I am able to prevent their encroachment on school grounds, the Ministry has decreed their presence beyond.”

“There, I told you, Tish,” Gomez shook his head.

“You did, Dear.” She agreed.

“Surrounding a school with demons is stupidity of the highest order, Mr Dumbles.” Gomez ground out as he, Morticia, and Lurch strode up the hall. “It’s a miracle they haven’t hurt anyone.”

Half the school looked over to where Harry was sitting, causing him to shrink from the attention.

“I assure you, the safety of the children is paramount.” Dumbledore said seriously.

“Says the man who left an insane basilisk to run loose in his school last year,” Gomez rolled his eyes, “not that I have anything against keeping pets, Mr Dumbles, but obviously you don’t know how to tend them.”

“Mr Addams,” Dumbledore said with a put upon sigh, “I assume you’re here to pick up young Wednesday and Alexander?”

“Of course I am, man, but stay on subject.”

“I know that you’re also aware that parents are supposed to pick up their children and charges in London.” Dumbledore said tiredly. “This is so as to avoid disrupting the school.”

“You have **DEMONS** surrounding your school and I’m the one disrupting things?” Gomez looked over at Morticia, confused, “Is he insane or am I?”

“Why not both?” She asked lightly.

“True.” Gomez admitted with a sudden grin. “May I enquire as to why...?”

His question was lost in the clatter as the doors to the Hall burst open again, this time revealing a contingent of Aurors with wands drawn, being followed closely by a chubby man in a bowler hat.

“Where is he!?” The man demanded, “We’re here, children, its safe now! Where is Black!?”

Dumbledore sank in his chair, shaking his head, “Minister Fudge, so pleasant to see you. Are you here for a reason?”

“Don’t play with me, Dumbledore! Where is Black!?” Fudge demanded.

“What makes you think that Sirius Black is here?” Dumbledore asked, honestly curious.

“We found a Dementor just outside the grounds,” A tall black Auror said crisply as he and the others carefully covered the room. “Or, we found what was left of it.”

Murmurs filled the room and Dumbledore straightened up, “Left of it? Explain.”

“It was dead, or as close to it as I’ve ever seen in a Dementor,” The Auror said calmly.

“Yes yes, Black is a dangerous one, now where is he!?” Fudge interrupted. “He must be making his move and...”

“Oh that,” Gomez said calmly as he leaned on the Ravenclaw table and picked at some of the food in front of his daughter, “That was me.”

The Aurors spun to look at him, about half of them covering him with their wands.

“You!?” Fudge sputtered. “Impossible! Who are you anyway?”

Gomez grimaced as he tasted a sip of pumpkin juice, setting the goblet down with distaste. “Gomez Addams. And you?”

“A... Addams you say?” Fudge faltered, staring at him.’

“Precisely, now why were demons stationed around the school?” Gomez asked lightly.

“They’re hunting a dangerous fugitive,” Fudge blustered.

“Who?”

“Sirius Black, of course!”

“Black?” Gomez looked thoughtful, “Where have I heard that name from?”

“The paper, dear,” Morticia said lightly from where she was standing, “The escaped prisoner?”

“Oh yes! The very man!” Gomez snapped his fingers, “Escaped from Azkaban, right?”

“Exactly!”

“And you set Dementors on his trail.”

“Precisely!”

“So, just so I understand things,” Gomez went on, “You set Dementors to hunt down a man who’s already proven that he knows how to escape from them.”

“Exac... wait, no, I mean...” Fudge blinked, thinking furiously.

“Indeed.” Gomez pushed off the table, turning to look at his daughter. “Are you ready, my dear? I thought we may get an early jump on things.”

“Of course, Father.” Wednesday said simply, folding her napkin and setting it aside as she rose up.

“Alexander?”

“All set.” Xander said, rising as well. “Just need to get my trunk.”

“Splendid, we’ll be about that then, shall we?”

The two children nodded and as a group they made to leave the hall.

“Hold on just a moment!” Fudge blustered. “You attacked and destroyed property of the ministry, that’s a serious charge and...”

Gomez turned on him, his jovial tone gone and a dead sounding one in its place. “There are no laws in any country on this entire world that protect demonic entities from destruction, Fudge. Try to get one passed and you’ll learn why the Addams name is feared.”

Then, in an instant, the dead sounding tone was gone and Gomez smiled at the two children with him. “Come along then, time to go. We have a wonderful place for the holidays this year...”

Then they were gone, leaving the Minister, The Aurors, the students, and the professors staring in stunned shock at their wake.

“Minister, Auror Shacklbolt, if I may ask... how did the Dementor die?” Dumbledore asked quietly.

Shacklbolt looked over at him, then back at where the Addams had been, “Looked like it starved to death, Headmaster.”

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They retrieved their trunks quickly and Gomez led them out of the school to where the Silver Cloud awaited. Xander had to pause for a moment at the incongruity of the car sitting against the backdrop of Hogwarts, then smiled as he shook his head and moved forward.

"Really, demons at a school. What's next?" Gomez shook his head, "The world has no sense of balance, Tish. If it's not those horrible fairytales with Knights killing poor defenceless dragons, it's allowing demons within striking range of children."

Xander had to admit, the comment about poor defenceless dragons seemed more in keeping with the Addamses he knew. Though Wednesday had also voiced her displeasure with the presence of the Dementors as well, so he wasn't sure.

They stowed their trunks away in the boot, and piled into the surprisingly roomy back of the car, with four people and two familiars. Xander shifted oddly, noting that the car was tilted heavily toward the passenger's side of the old car, and was about to comment on it when Lurch settled into the driver's seat and the car instantly evened out.

He glanced over his shoulder at the large; man he supposed then shivered a little and let it pass.

"Uh, Sir, what's so bad about Dementors?" He asked, however. "I mean, other than the obvious. You don't seem to have a problem with Werewolves, vampires, and all those..."

Xander shifted uncomfortably as they stared at him, and was about to say something else when Gomez spoke up.

"Hardly the same thing, lad." He said, "There is a difference between magical beasts and demonic ones. We Addamses have no truck with demons; they're not to be trusted and certainly not to be permitted within range of children."

"They are unnatural." Wednesday supplied.

"Precisely!" Gomez seized on the comment. "You can feel it when you're around them, if you listen carefully to your instincts. Demons are the antithesis of everything we stand for on this world, they live only to destroy."

"Gomez, darling," Morticia put a calming hand on his shoulder. "I'm sure that Alexander doesn't understand, and you know how bad misinformation can be."

Gomez sighed, "Yes, yes, of course. Demons, my boy, are not from this world. That's one of the key points about them. They're not even from a world remotely like this one. Please, don't misunderstand me here, we Addamses don't expect others to believe as we do but there are some things we hold to be self evident. One of those things is that you don't make deals with those who would destroy you."

"Sic gorgiamus allos subjectatos nunc." Wednesday said calmly.

"Not just pretty words." Morticia smiled.

"Exactly." Gomez said with a flourish of his cigar.

Xander's Latin had, as a matter of necessity, gotten fairly decent over the past three years but he had to struggle a bit to place the phrase.

We gladly feast on those who would subdue us.

Xander cringed, "Family motto?"

"Yes." Wednesday said with a hint of a predatory smile. "Now imagine what we do to those who would destroy us?"

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"How on Earth did that... man..." McGonagall said, obviously using the term lightly. "Kill a Dementor?"

Dumbledore sighed, shaking his head, "I'm afraid I have no idea. The Addamses are an old family line, with possibly thousands of years of family magic to draw on. Additionally, they don't blink at interbreeding with many... beings... that we would consider abhorrent."

"Obviously they draw the line at Dementors." The Head of Gryffindor said dryly in return.

Dumbledore nodded, "thankfully so. The family has long held an active state of open warfare with what they term demonic species."

"What they term?"

"Their definition varies somewhat from most accepted scholars," Dumbledore admitted tiredly. "So it's not easy to say precisely what species they will, or won't, accept without prior experience."

"Lovely." Minerva sighed, "I suppose we should be glad that it was only a Dementor that was harmed, then."

"Far be it for me to wish harm on any creature," Dumbledore sighed, "But I do wish Cornelius would remove the Dementors from the area. They are causing far more trouble than they're worth."

"Why don't you oppose him in the Wizengamot, Albus?"

"That would not be a productive use of my efforts at the moment, Minerva."

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Toledo, Castillo La Mancha, Spain

The Rolls Royce Silver Cloud rolled silently out of the fog bank, slowing to a crawl as Gomez looked fondly, and eagerly, out at the passing countryside.

"Welcome to my home." He said cheerfully, nodding ahead of them.

Xander turned in his seat, looking up the winding road to see a foreboding castle in the distance. It looked hard and dark, a gloom surrounding it even in the bright Spanish sunlight, and he had to admit that it was most certainly an Addams building.

"Castle Addams." Gomez said, almost sounding serene for a moment. "Oh the times we had here, such wonderful times."

"Gomez, darling, we should return more often."

"Right you are, Tish," Gomez sighed, "But we have our responsibilities at home."

"Of course," She said simply, "We are Addamses. Even so, if Wednesday is to be part of the magical world, perhaps we should extend our influences again."

"Maybe you're right, my love." Gomez said thoughtfully, then shook off the pensive nature of his thoughts and smiled again, "For now though, let us enjoy the holidays in true Addams style."

"But of course, mon coer." Morticia responded.

"Tish! That's French!"

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Castle Addams was a huge affair, in horrible disrepair from what Xander could see but the family seemed to love it as it was. As they approached the gates they were greeted by an ethereal blond woman whose hair seemed to flow against the wind with an eerie motion.

"Marietta!" Gomez crowed, spreading his arms wide as the woman grinned in return and stepped into the embrace. "It's been too long!"

"Hello Dear Gomez," Mariette said with a smile, "Welcome back to Castle Addams."

"Wednesday, you remember your aunt Marietta," Gomez said with a smile.

"Hello Aunt Marietta," Wednesday said with a calm look, subtly jabbing Xander in the side as he stared at the woman, in a daze.

He grunted in pain and blinked as the fog lifted from his mind, looking around in confusion.

"And who is this strapping young buck?" Marietta asked with a sly smile.

"This is Alexander Harris," Gomez said cheerfully, "A friend of Wednesday's from school. Alexander, Meet Marietta Addams."

"Nice to meet you, ma'am."

"Ma'am." She chuckled, "None of that here, young man. I am Marietta to you, all of you."

"Of course." Morticia said softly, smiling faintly as she and the others walked onto the ground.

Xander was shaking his head slightly, rubbing his temples, "What was that?"

"Marietta is a Xanas." Wednesday said softly, "distantly related to the Norwegian Veela, they have similar charms."

Xander frowned, remembering only a little about the Veela from somewhere.

"They can enthrall men," Wednesday explained as they began to walk after the family.

"Can they ever." Xander muttered, earning himself a dark look from his friend. "Hey, I'm just saying. That was plain creepy."

"Wasn't it though?" A hint of a smile played at Wednesday's lips, then she turned away from him and began to walk ahead.

Xander watched her for a moment, then groaned as he knew that he had failed some sort of test. "It's gonna be some holiday."

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The initial rush of meeting the Castillo branch of the Family Addams faded away as the holidays moved on, though Xander had to admit that they were every bit as memorable as the American branch of the family.

Hernandez Addams, the Castilian Patriarch was a frightening reflection of Gomez. Moody where Gomez was cheerful, the man seemed older than his looks suggested and moved like he had something sitting on his shoulders. Nevertheless he had greeted his guests with gusto, then almost

Instantly challenged Gomez to a fencing duel that raged across the entire castle while the rest of them settled down to dinner.

His wife, Marietta, was almost the antithesis of Addams. Light fairy hair that blew in the absence of wind, a cheerful pleasant personality that seemed to hold none of the darker aspects of the rest of the family, and a genuine earnest love of everyday things like the perfect rose blossoms that took up the centre of the dining room table. The one thing that marked her as an Addams, in Xander's opinion, was that eerie charm she wielded without even thinking about it.

Xander had managed to acclimate himself a little to the food the Addamses ate, enough so that he was able to pick at the food without worrying about going hungry until he found a MacDonald's, or the local equivalent.

Marietta noticed, but only smiled slightly and pushed some of the more normally accepted foods in his direction as she leaned over to avoid the sweep of her husband's blade.

"Come back here, you lazabout!" Hernandez yelled, chasing Gomez around the table.

"Never!" Gomez grinned, planting a foot on the table and vaulting up to the chandelier, hooking his legs in it and hanging upside down as he fended off his cousin's attacks.

He twisted there for a while, casually parrying sweeps of Hernandez' blade, then abruptly curled up and somersaulted off the chandelier to land squarely in the centre of the table, feet planted on either side of a bubbling gravy mix.

"Alexander, my boy! You're up!" Gomez said, dropping his sword in Xander's direction.

Xander's eyes bugged as he caught the sword on reflex. "What!?"

Gomez flipped off the table, landing in his chair, and began helping himself to a meal. "I'd duck if I were you, lad."

Xander ducked.

The Toledo Steel blade swept over his head, right about neck level, and Xander didn't stop. He rolled to the right as the blade reversed and swept down through the back of his chair.

"Footwork Lad!" Gomez called as Xander scrambled across the floor, "Footwork!"

"I..." Xander gasped, narrowly avoiding a slash.

"Have to..." He threw up his blade, deflecting a lunge over his head.

"Get to my..." He rolled, narrowly ducking a follow up strike.

"Feet first!" he finished, twisting his sword around and driving the point of Hernandez' blade into the floor between his knees. Xander immediately locked it in place with a twist of his blade, preventing the Castilian from moving his own blade.

"Good show lad!" Gomez smirked, "but uh... look down."

Xander frowned, blinking, then looked down to grimace as he found Hernandez' had his Main Gauche just fractions of an inch from Xander's groin. He shuddered and carefully stepped back, letting go of the blade.

"Good reflexes, but your form is atrocious." Hernandez said calmly as he took Xander's sword, then threw both of them casually aside one after another.

They were caught, in turn, by a disembodied hand and thrown back up on the wall where they had come from with an ease that spoke of practice.

"I don't get a lot of chance to practice..." Xander gasped out, resisting the urge to pat his crotch down to ensure everything was still there.

"We only began his lessons last Christmas," Gomez spoke up while he ate. "We'll be continuing them, of course."

Xander nodded dumbly.

"Good lad." Hernandez said seriously, taking his seat at the head of the table. "Blade work is the fundament of a strong and balanced life."

"I don't know that I'd go that far," Gomez said with a smirk. "But it certainly is a fun way to pass the time."

"You never take anything seriously." Hernandez scowled at his cousin.

"Of course not," Gomez returned, "What's the point of that? Sucks all the fun out of life."

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Fester and Pugsley arrived at Castle Addams a couple days later, flushed from their excursion to Bosnia.

"Bosnia?" Xander just had to ask. "What were you doing there?"

"Sweeping mine fields." Fester grinned widely. "Great fun."

“Yeah, it was **AWESOME** .” Pugsley affirmed. “Uncle Fester must have flown fifty meters when he set off that anti tank mine!”

“Those suckers are hard to detonate,” Fester said, shaking his head. “I must have jumped up and down on that for five minutes.”

Xander sat down slowly, rubbing his temple.

Honestly, he was sorry he asked, but he was also really, really curious about the details.

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The Holidays were pleasant, though, as the weather remained beautiful in the area, much to the Addams’ frustration. Xander spent his time fencing with Gomez and Hernandez, reading his RPG books, and playing with Wednesday and Pugsley. Though the third one was by far the most dangerous activity he’d experienced yet, and he was including the Chamber of Secrets in that list.

He quickly learned to avoid certain games, like ‘Innocent Sacrifice’ and ‘Condemned Man’. When games involving electrocution and decapitation came up, Xander begged off to read.

That, of course, attracted Wednesday’s interest and she cornered him quickly to ask about his material.

“They’re game books.” He said, “Role Playing Games, basically stuff written by people who like to pretend they can use magic.”

A twinkling hint of amusement showed in her expression, and Wednesday sat down beside him. “Are they helpful?”

“There are some interesting ideas,” Xander admitted, “I’m reading about technomancy right now.”

“I haven’t heard of that, but I can guess what it means.” Wednesday frowned, “Does it exist?”

“Yeah, a little,” Xander said, pulling out a reference book he’d bought in Three Angels. “It’s kind of a matter of definition, though, I guess. People have been charming cars to run on magic for, well, as long as there have been cars.”

“I know, our car works that way.”

Xander nodded, unsurprised. “Right, anyway, that could be considered technomancy I guess. It worked well right up until microchips started showing up in everything.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, magic makes them stop working.” Xander said, frowning, “The newer ones anyway. Some of the older ones were charmed successfully. But even they weren’t reliable.”

“What’s the difference?”

“I’m not sure.” Xander had to admit. “Whatever it is, it’s pretty clear though... anything electronic is **REALLY** hard, if not impossible, to charm.”

“Curious.”

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As was ‘normal’ with the Addamses, the days passed in swift, if often disjointed and bizarre, fashion. They spent some time in the castle, but also got out to visit the local magical community in Toledo, the Villa Del Brujas, or Witches Street. It was probably about twice the size of Diagon; Xander decided as he walked through the crowded plaza, everyone making room for them as people recognized Marietta Addams.

That was something he was getting used to, the Addams name carried far but where they were recognized by sight it was otherworldly how fast people got out of their way. Xander wondered if it was like that for Gomez and Morticia in America.

Witches Street was much like Diagon in what it had to offer, though Xander noticed a couple smithy shops and the like with swords on display, as well as some items he’d never seen before like a Magic Carpet shop. He paused in front of that one, checking out the advertisements.

Family Carpet Flies Six!

Racing Carpet, Hundred and Twenty mile per hour top end!

And so on, as he looked.

“Interested, young master?”

Xander looked up, startled as the owner of the shop approached. “Uh, no I don’t think so. I’m just surprised; I’ve never seen a flying carpet before.”

The man looked at him quizzically, “American?”

Xander nodded.

“Odd, from what I understand America imports carpets for recreation purposes.”

"I don't have a lot to do with the magical community there, yet," Xander admitted, "I've been schooled at Hogwarts."

"Ah, well that explains it." The man said with a chuckle, "Unlike America, Britain has a ban on carpet imports under their Muggle Items laws."

"Yeah? Weird."

"Not especially. The Nimbus Broom Company is based in Britain, and they have friends in the Wizengamot and Ministry," The man explained, "Carpets were cutting into their business. In America no one uses brooms or carpets enough to matter. They're not really useful for transport when people can live hundreds of miles apart or more, so in larger countries like America they're really just used for sport and hobby."

"Oh." Xander nodded, "You know, I'm not surprised that carpets were biting into broom sales. I don't really love the whole broom experience myself."

The salesman chuckled, "Let me guess, robes bunch up on you?"

"Yeah. What is up with that anyway?" Xander asked, "I mean, I thought I was doing something wrong, but..."

"No, no," The man assured him. "Let me guess though, American Broom?"

"Yeah..." Xander said, confused.

"Thought so, You see the comfort charms are different on European Models, and since you have a British instructor on flying... well, you've learned the wrong grip."

"You're kidding me." Xander blurted, eliciting a chuckle.

"I'm afraid not, get a hand book from your Broom company, it should explain the differences."

"Thanks."

"No problem, young man," The salesman smiled, "I love to talk flying. However, I believe I see a customer, so I must bid you a farewell."

Xander said bye to the man and moved on down the street, thinking about what he'd been told. He stopped again by a smithy, and began to examine the swords and shorter blades on display. A barrel shaped man noticed him and moved around a huge anvil in his direction.

"May I help you, young sir?"

"I'm just looking for now," Xander admitted, "Though I'm thinking that I may like to buy a blade soon."

The man grunted, sizing Xander up. "You carry one now."

Xander looked at him sharply, "How did...?"

"Right boot, outside edge, under your pant legs. I can see it in how you walk."

Xander nodded slowly, impressed. He'd received the blade from his uncle two years earlier, but had only received permission to carry it toward the end of the previous summer. Xander thought that Sam was being a little paranoid, but he'd gotten in the habit of planting the blade in his boot every morning.

"May I?"

Xander nodded and kneeled down, drawing out the Fairbairn Sykes dagger from its sheath and casually flipped it over and handed it to the smith pommel first.

The man took it, glancing it over with a grunt and handed it back. "Muggle made, mass produced. Adequate."

"I'm still learning," Xander said with an easy grin, "I wouldn't know a great blade from a piece of junk, but my uncle said this would serve well enough."

"He's right, it's an adequate design." The smith affirmed, turning to a wall with a lot of blades mounted on it. "This, however, is a real weapon."

Xander accepted the blade from him and twisted it over in his hand. It was about the same length as his own dagger, with a wider blade and bevelled point that gave it a more elegant look. The blade itself was mottled with dark patterns, and its polished gold pommel and rope wrapped grip gave it a practical but artistic look.

"Very nice." Xander admitted.

"Damascus Steel recipe, Toledo Steel workmanship," The man said simply, but with a certain pride in his voice. "The muggles lost the ability to make that material centuries ago when the Persian Ministry finally agreed to sign with the ICW in 1704. It won't dull, it won't break, and unlike your blade it'll hold an enchantment if you're interested in that sort of thing."

Xander nodded, handing the blade back. "I'm impressed. Do you make swords the same way?"

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Narcissa Malfoy tiredly sank into her chair, wearily activating the lamps with a wave of her hand as she considered the situation.

On the plus side, her idiot cousin hadn't gotten himself caught yet.

That was about the only thing that seemed to be going in her favour at the moment, however. Fudge, the imbecile, was increasing Dementor security around the school in response to Sirius' encroachments in the fall.

There would soon be over a hundred of the blasted things infesting the area, and frankly she was beginning to be afraid for the children, her Draco most of all. She was no expert on the beasts, of course, there were few if any outside the Department of Mysteries that could make that claim, but she knew that they weren't exactly the most discerning of beasts and they had already broken through the outer wards of the school.

Fudge swore up and down that it was an aberration and wouldn't happen again, but that was no more or less than she expected of the idiot. She was disappointed in her husband, however, for backing the Minister on this subject. The man she'd married wasn't this **STUPID**.

Narcissa growled, driving her elbow into the chair in a small fit of pique. She was so **CLOSE** to doing something she had given up on ever being able to accomplish, and not only was that little **TOAD** of a Minister standing in her way, but he was also risking her only Son's safety in the process.

It was infuriating!

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Francis Hardy sighed; weary from the complications he was dealing with. This whole exchange idea had sounded like a lark when it was presented to him, a way to travel a bit while keeping his tenure track. He had three students in Beauxbatons, all from Quebec, everything ran smoothly there. There were two in Durmstrang, siblings from a second generation German American family, and everything ran smoothly there although he had to make some hard points concerning their Dark Arts program.

Hogwarts, however, was a yearly headache.

First, he didn't even know why the hell they had anyone there. The blasted course load was antiquarian, which made things all the tougher on the students. The Addams girl didn't surprise him all that much, not any more than anything else at any rate. She was an Addams, after all. Why the Harris lad was there, though, was a real pain.

First it was just a simple matter of following the Addams girl, Hardy suspected. But this year the Harris family had swung some of their weight around, keeping the boy in Hogwarts when a few people wanted to try and convince him to go to Salem.

He was showing some real promise, that one. His little potions accident was fast tracked to being a multibillion dollar invention, and he was showing hints that maybe it wasn't entirely a freak accident. The Headmaster at Salem wanted to bring him in to an easier program, where he wouldn't have to do twice the work of his peers to make up for below par education in classes like Defence, History, and Potions.

The school had the best Charms and Transfiguration programs in the world, as long as you didn't count a few dedicated apprenticeships and the like, but it hardly made up for the shortfalls in the other core programs.

Getting Harris into a better balanced program should bring his marks up significantly, and give them a chance to see if he needed any special help in certain areas. As it was he was holding on with respectable grades in most areas, but Hardy knew the boy could do better.

And now this idiocy with the Dementors.

Honestly.

Who put soul sucking monsters around a Franklin be Damned **SCHOOL ??**

Hardy suspected that it was a simple budgetary decision on Fudge's part, of course. Aurors wanted to be paid, Dementors just wanted to suck people's souls out. No brainer there.

Literally a no brainer, Hardy was starting to think.

He sighed, rereading the official complain Gomez Addams had placed with the American Ministry and the ICW concerning the whole affair. They had no authority to tell the Brits to do anything, but the potential for outrage at home was turning into a fiasco on its own. He didn't even want to **THINK** about what would happen if one of the kids were attacked.

Briefly he toyed with the idea of teaching them the Patronus Charm, but he had decided against it.

The Patronus was occasionally useful, but really it was nothing more than pissing in the wind when you were dealing with more than one Dementor. The things were no geniuses, but they knew enough to split up and attack from two directions at once. So even if he succeeded in teaching two underage children an incredibly difficult and, frankly, nearly useless charm it wouldn't likely do them much good.

So Hardy found himself in nightly meetings arguing with the likes of Cornelius Fudge and Albus Dumbledore over the life and safety of two of his charges.

One way or another, though, he wasn't going to let those two bastards stonewall him on this.

Perhaps it was time to bring Arthur in on it, though. He knew Dumbledore personally and may be able to convince the man to bend a little.

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Christmas came quickly, Xander's days being occupied with exploring, studying, but mostly dodging the Addams' siblings 'games'. Honestly he wasn't sure how the duo survived some of the stunts they pulled off, but he was far from confident that he would be able to do the same, so he did his best to stay out of the way when they started playing games that civilized nations didn't inflict on their worst criminals.

Of course that brought some attention to him as well.

"Aren't you having fun, dear?" Morticia asked him one morning when she found him reading and most certainly NOT hiding from Wednesday's latest 'Game Storm', which involved lethal injection and fire ants.

"I'm great, Mrs Addams." Xander assured her, "I just like to read, that's all."

Back in Sunnydale Willow flinched as a deep chill ran along her spine, and Jessie jumped as if spooked.

"Please, it's Morticia." The elegant, though dark, lady said with a knowing smile. "Are Wednesday and Pugsley's games not to your liking?"

"They're a little more... risky than I'm used to," Xander said with a grin, "But that's ok. I really do like to read, now anyway."

"Now?" Morticia asked, taking a seat beside him as Pugsley tore into the room, most of his clothes eaten through and a large army of red ants chasing him. "But not before?"

Xander tore his eyes away from the direction the Addams heir had gone, looking at Morticia, "That didn't concern you at all?"

"Boys will be boys." She said airily, then raised an eyebrow as Wednesday funeral marched through the room after her brother, a huge needle in hand. "And Wednesday will be Wednesday."

"And the kids at school wonder why no one in Ravenclaw bothers her." Xander shuddered. "Only the Gryffindor's are stupid, I mean 'brave', enough to take a shot at Wednesday."

"Oh? Does my little darling have some lion admirers?" Morticia asked with a hint of a smile.

"Not living ones." Xander said dryly.

"Marvellous."

Xander couldn't help but smile a little as he shook his head. He had gotten somewhat used to the Addams sensibilities, or at least what they put forward for public consumption, but it still amused him every time he experienced it. He wasn't actually convinced that the Addamses were really any different than anyone else; really, Xander often suspected that they just wanted everyone to **THINK** they were different.

Pugsley rolled back into the room, covered in ants and screaming as Wednesday liberally sprinkled him with steak sauce.

Ok, they may be a little different.

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Christmas day with the Addams was about as close to normal as Xander ever saw them act. That morning they settled down like any other family, surrounded by decorated skulls and even more disturbing paraphernalia, and just spent time with each other.

It was almost picture perfect.

Ok, so the picture was a little twisted, but hey Xander had spent some of his past holidays outside in the yard because he didn't want to hear his parents scream at each other. No matter how twisted, there was purity in the familial love that the Addams held that beat that hands down.

Idly, Xander wondered if his parents still screamed at each other on Christmas, or if the reintroduction to the magical world had begun to heal the fractures they'd endured. He would have to spend a Christmas at home soon, he decided. Just to know.

The Gifts of the morning were what Xander had come to expect, from the disarmingly innocent (and generally deceptively lethal, to the bizarre and horrifying. Xander had received a long rapier from Gomez, on that looked as old as the castle they were in, and some assorted bits of explosives, chemicals, and components for his projects from the rest of the family. He had to gape at most of it in awe because, unlike the trunks from last year, Xander knew exactly how much the materials cost and furthermore how hard it would be for him to acquire any of it and he was stunned.

"My god." He choked, "This is..."

"Don't you like it?" Morticia asked softly, "Wednesday made several strange suggestions, but she generally knows about such things..."

"It's... incredible. Are those..." Xander hesitated, "Dragon heartstrings?"

"Indeed. Poor thing," Morticia sighed, "Poachers chased it onto Addams land a few months ago, along with its Pride. By the time the family had finished... harvesting... the poachers, well this one had died of its wounds. Valiant creature, however, it defended its fellows with its life."

"Thank you." Xander croaked, mind still almost blank. "I..."

He just shook his head, still stunned.

He wasn't the only one to be stunned, mind you. As the gifts continued to be passed around Xander's gifts to the family were opened. They were mostly small things, such as a poisonous black rose Xander had managed to get Neville Longbottom to smuggle out of the school greenhouse for him; the cutting had survived and was now growing strong again, much to Mortisha's delight.

"Hear now, boy, that's my wife you're charming!" Gomez chuckled, grinning widely as he slid his cigar back into his mouth.

Morticia rolled her eyes as Xander blushed, but didn't comment as she cooed to the budding rose plant.

Fester and Pugsley got a binary gift of potion flasks that left them confused until Xander suggested they mix them. The ensuing explosion blew both of them out of the room, leaving Gomez black with soot with a smoking stub of a cigar in his teeth as Xander dropped the Protego protecting himself, Wednesday, and Morticia.

"Good show." He complimented the boy, grinning through the soot, "How far do you suppose they flew?"

"Probably back into the snakepit, if I aimed it right." Xander deadpanned.

"And you said you didn't like to play Addams' games," Morticia said with a soft smile.

"No, I said they were a little riskier than I was used to."

She nodded, but held an amused glint in her eye as the Christmas ritual continued.

Gomez was the next to stop as he opened his own gift from Xander and stared. "My boy..."

He numbly drew out a blade in the rapier style he preferred, noting the distinctive mottling of the metal that told him it was Damascus steel and unconsciously whipped it through the air a couple times to test its weight.

Near perfection.

He snapped it to the left, flat of the blade curling around his waist slightly as he caught the tip behind his back and drew it the rest of the way around, holding the sword like a belt around his waist, tip the pommel in the front. Then with a snap he let it go and the blade snapped back straight and true and he stared at it.

"It's beautiful." He said, noting the Addams coat of arms on the hand guard.

Xander smiled, "I'm glad you like it. Figuring out what to get the family who has everything they want, well that's tough."

Gomez smiled again, suddenly, "It's marvellous my boy, simply marvellous."

Morticia clapped her hands slightly, "That said, it's time to eat."

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The Hols moved by quickly after that, and before long it was time to return to school.

They loaded into the car, as they had arrived, and drove off into the mist that seemed to grow up to meet them.

A time later, Xander wasn't sure how long they had been driving through the mist; they broke out into the small town of Hogsmeade and glided to a stop near Madame Rosmerta. Gomez ushered them all inside to where Wednesday and Xander saw Professor Hardy waiting as he sipped on a bottle of butter beer.

"Ah, Mr and Mrs Addams, children." he nodded, setting the bottle down.

"Professor." Xander and Wednesday chorused, drawing a smirk.

"Mr Hardy," Gomez said seriously, "Do you have them?"

He nodded, retrieving a couple hatpins from his pocket. He handed one to Xander and one to Wednesday. Xander looked at his, noting that it proclaimed his love of the Los Angeles Kings hockey team with some amusement. Wednesday looked at her LA Lakers pin with substantially less, however.

"What are these?" She asked disdainfully.

"Port keys," Hardy answered, "They're one way tickets out of Hogwarts wards, straight to the Magical Receiving Zone of the American Embassy in London."

The two children blinked in surprise, but gave the pins slightly more interest.

"They're only to be used in an emergency," Hardy warned, "but if something happens, like those Dementors get on the property again, then don't hesitate. Pull the pin apart, then you have about two seconds before it and anything touching it is dropped right in the MRZ. Don't draw your wand when you arrive, and if you already have it out, drop it on the ground. The Marines there are squibs, and they don't have a sense of humour."



They both nodded.

Hardy knew he was overdoing it with that warning, the Marines were diplomatic protection people and were used to all sorts of folks arriving at the MRZ, but just the same they would react badly to a drawn wand so it was better to have the kids be careful. During darker times, like the last war with Voldemort, the MRZ had been staffed by members of the Pride, not squib marines, and the reception to a drawn wand in those days was a lot cooler.

"Now like I said, those are emergency use only," He stressed again, "it took a lot of work to get those for you, and your headmaster had to create them himself. Don't play with them, wear them all the time, and be careful ok?"

"We will." The two said.

"Good. We'll meet for our first class of the session in a week. We'll be working on Chemistry and Physics. Prepare yourselves."

"Yes Sir."

Hardy stood up, nodding to the Addams. "Mr Addams, Mrs Addams."

"Thank you for your help, Professor." Morticia said serenely.

"It's my job," he replied wryly, "I'm glad I could help."

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Xander and Wednesday found Hermione in a funk when they arrived back in the castle; the bushy haired girl was sitting alone at their usual table in the library. She looked depressed and more than slightly frazzled as they split around her and sat down on either side.

"What's wrong?"

Xander winced slightly, noting that tact was not really Wednesday's forte.

"Nothing."

Wednesday merely nodded, "Alright."

Oh for. Xander sighed, pinching his nose, "We can tell something's wrong, Hermione."

"I don't want to talk about it."

"What happened with Harry and Ron?" Xander asked, sighing.

"How do you know...?"

"It hardly takes a genius," Wednesday spoke up, "You are rarely affected deeply by anything else."

Hermione crumbled then and spilled the whole sordid tale of Harry getting an expensive broom for Christmas and how she'd told the Professors about it and it had been taken away to be examined.

Xander winced, but shook his head, "Yeah, I can see that causing some friction."

"It could have been from Sirius Black!" Hermione defended herself.

"Hey, not arguing." Xander held up his hands, "But you know, Harry? He's not real big on self preservation, remember? Anyway, I doubt Black would try anything like that so don't worry about it, he'll get the broom back."

Hermione looked at him narrowly, "What makes you say that?"

"If Black tampered with Harry's broom it would probably be to make it fly into the girl's showers or something," Xander said dryly, "That man had a real weird sense of humour."

"And how would you know this?" Wednesday looked up with an arcing eyebrow.

Xander scowled a little, shrugging, "Black had a hand in writing the Grimoire."

Hermione's eyes widened, "Xander! You have to tell the Headmaster!"

"Why would I do that? That book was written years before he turned on the Potters," Xander said, then shrugged, "if he turned on the Potters."

"What do you mean, IF???"

"Look, no offense to you since you're British and all, but what I've seen of the local government doesn't really instil me with confidence. They locked up Hagrid last year on no evidence, helped toss Dumbles out of the school when, frankly, we needed every wand we could get in here..." Xander muttered, "I mean really, they threw the most powerful wizard alive **OUT** of the school and locked **US** in here with the freaking **SNAKE** . Does this make sense to anyone???"

Hermione had leaned back, her face shocked at Xander hissing outburst.

He didn't wait for an answer, "And now this year Sirius Black escapes from the Azka-whatsit place, so they think it's a good idea to turn Hogwarts into New Azkaban. No offense, Herms, you Brits are nuts. Frankly, I think we'd have been safer if they just locked the prisoners in here instead of sending us the Guards."

"Indeed," Wednesday said sourly.

"I'm sure that Minister Fudge had a good reason..."

"Fudge is an incompetent fool." Wednesday said simply in response to that.

"Yeah, probably," Xander shrugged, "Incompetent or crooked."

"Why not both?"

Xander snorted as Hermione looked affronted.

"Just because you two are from America doesn't mean you have to look down on our government..."

"No, we look down on it because it's stooped over so low Fudge's nose has dirt on it." Xander smirked.

"I'm not certain that's dirt," Wednesday replied lightly.

Hermione scowled at them again, face flushed as she rose to the defence of her nation, but Xander cut her off with a grin.

"Feeling better, are we?"

She glared at him, then her eyes widened for a moment before narrowing again, "Oooh you..."

"Pleased to assist," Xander said, "And like I said, don't worry about Harry. He'll come around, though next time, Herms, you should tell him first. You ever go over my head before trying to reason with me, I'm going to get real angry too... even if you **ARE** right."

"Agreed." Wednesday added as she reached for a book, considering the subject closed.

Hermione winced, her stomach suddenly clenching. "I suppose that makes sense."

Xander just snorted as he opened up one of his notebooks alongside a reference book and a GURPS magical sourcebook.

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Unfortunately for Hermione things seemed doomed to get worse before they got better, as even though her relationship with Harry stabilized shortly after, Ron seemed determined to make her pay for the loss of the Fire bolt, bringing it up nearly constantly when the three talked. Xander watched as Hermione spent a couple miserable weeks, leading into a miserable month, in which the girl became more and more frazzled with each passing day.

It puzzled him because while she was having trouble with some of her friends it didn't seem to be so bad as to cause what he was seeing. He caught up with Wednesday one morning at the Ravenclaw table for breakfast, that topic on his mind.

The dark girl merely frowned ever so slightly and shrugged when he brought it up. "I'm not certain. I've been wondering too."

"Oh, it's a Tremwurts infestation," A blond to Wednesday's left said airily.

"Huh-wha?" Xander blinked, looking over at her.

"Is it really?" Wednesday looked over herself, suddenly seeming interested in the conversation.

The blond nodded.

"What's a Trem-whatsit?"

A nearby Ravenclaw snorted, and several others giggled.

"Something not to be discussed in front of the plebes." Wednesday said acidly, rising from her breakfast. "I have class, we'll talk later."

Several of the 'plebes' looked affronted, but none of them quite had the courage to challenge the statement. Xander just sighed, confused, and hoped he would understand the explanation.

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Before they could have that conversation, Hermione's problems seemed solved. The broom was returned and there was much celebration among the Gryffs, and a fair amount of griping amongst the Ravenclaw's who were next slotted to play a match with the lions. Said reprieve lasted only a few hours however, Xander found out in the morning, when her pet cat killed Ron's pet rat.

The bushy haired girl was near in tears at breakfast, sitting well away from both Harry and Ron, and her moment of reprieve from the frazzled look she had been cultivating was long gone. She was nervous and seemed tired, often acting like she didn't know where she was supposed to be.

Xander presumed it was a sign of the whatsit infestation, assuming the blond girl had the slightest idea what she was talking about. He hadn't been able to find any reference to it when he looked, yet Wednesday seemed to recognize the term.

Wednesday was another puzzle, he was discovering. She had buried herself in her studies in a way he hadn't seen her do before. Not that she wasn't a good student, she was, she just never seemed to study. Her time in the library with he and Hermione was usually spent on private reading, as far as he could tell, yet now she was pouring over reference books and barely grunted when he tried to talk to her.

Girls.

Well, Girls and Addamses.

Xander figured it would be a bad sign if he ever understood either.

Then, in a rapid-fire assault on the school, Sirius Black made another attempt, this time getting as far as Harry's room where he was caught standing over Ron when the redhead woke up. Xander shuddered at that, the idea of waking up to someone wielding a knife over your head was chilling, but he was also now driven to understand this Sirius Black.

How the man from the Grimoire became a deranged knife wielding psycho was something Xander couldn't fathom. So, in the meanwhile, he steeled himself and returned to his room while it was empty and pulled out the Coven Grimoire for the first time since before the holidays.

\*\*\*\*

Narcissa was nearing the end of her patience.

Her fool of a cousin **INSISTED** on sticking his head into the noose, and there seemed to be nothing she could do about it. Honestly, sneaking into a boy's bedroom to kill him, then **running** away when a twelve year old woke up.

The Black's weren't the noble and kind hearted family in history, Narcissa would be the first to admit, in only in private, so she was fairly certain that several of them were rolling over in their graves at the moment.

Not because Sirius had tried to kill a child, but because he'd failed in so stupid a fashion.

If you're going to kill someone, their Great Grandfather had always said, do the job right the first time. Because your second opportunity may only come at a time of your target's choosing. And that was no way to run an assassination.

Honestly, he could have finished it then and there, Narcissa scowled. She didn't care one whit for the Potter boy, live or die didn't matter to her, so she rather wished Sirius had finished the job. At least then he could put this stupid obsession behind him and maybe they could have gotten the damned fool out of the country and away from the Dementors.

Argentina was nice this time of year, Narcissa considered, and the Black's owned an island off the coast somewhere in that region.

She thought it was in that region at least.

The blasted thing was covered in so many wards that only one person alive knew how to get there, she suspected.

And that one person was trying to get his soul sucked out by the bloody Dementors!

Where she a different person, Narcissa Malfoy would have screamed her frustration to the world then. As it was she merely stiffened her step and made her way back to her rented room over the Three Broomsticks.

Damn her idiot cousin and her moronic husband both.

\*\*\*\*

Xander growled slightly as he pushed his fountain pen into the page of the Grimoire, angrily countering the protestations coming from the embedded personalities. It was an exercise in frustration, unfortunately, since they weren't supposed to be truly independent people, but recorded facsimiles of same.

The process used to embed the personalities into the book was similar to that used to create portraits, a combination of the Protean Charm and various memory spells that caused the book to become 'similar' to the minds of those who had cast the charms on themselves. Xander had to bear in mind that, in magical terms, the word 'Similar' had very specific connotations. It didn't mean similar, it meant **Similar**, with a capital 'S'.

The Similarity Principal of Magic could easily be summed up by saying Like affects Like. That, however, was a kindergarten way of describing the true meaning. It was like saying that the Sun was a burning ball in the sky. It was accurate enough to convey the concept, but wholly inadequate to actually describe the power and majesty that existed in a Stellar object of that nature.

In his reading Xander had been surprised to discover that Normal Science had begun to predict the existence of this, incredibly important and yet underestimated, branch of magic. It had first shown up in his RPG books, prompting him to read into it further in his Physics text.

It was called Quantum Entanglement, a theory which held that certain quantum particles could become entangled with other, identical particles,

and affect each other at any range, instantly. It was Xander thought, rather shocking that Normal Physics had begun to theorize the existence of an entire branch of magical study.

In the here and now, however, it was merely giving Xander a headache.

On the one hand, the book he was holding was supposed to hold several weak imitations of people. People he had been arguing with for several hours and, for all intents and purposes, losing too. They didn't **TALK** like reflections, not once he aroused their interest. They changed from the rote by rote teachers and began to argue that real people, often ignoring Xander's own attempts to enter the conversation in their ire with each other.

Lilly Evans and Sirius Black were adamantly screaming his innocence; while Narcissa Black was playing Devil's Advocate and pointing out that Sirius **HAD** come from a noted Pureblood Family and could easily have fallen into line in his later years. In fact, she pointed out; his infiltrating a noted family like the Potters would be considered a coup worthy of a Black.

Xander had winced when that point was made, he was relatively certain that his ears would have been ringing from the outraged replies.

Alice Prewitt was more muted, offering quieter thoughts on the subject, and sometimes drifting off into confusing and nearly incomprehensible lines of thought that brought nothing but confusion to the topic at hand.

**ENOUGH .**

Xander's heavily scored writing brought a moment of stillness to the book, and he took a few seconds to breathe a sigh of relief before putting pen to paper again.

*These are the FACTS. One, He wrote, the Potters were betrayed and Black was presumed to be the Secret Keeper. Two, Black did get in a confrontation with Pettigrew in which Pettigrew apparently died. Black was thrown in Azkaban and DID recently escape, and DID show up in Harry's room last night wielding a knife.*

Those words burned into the page for a moment before the inked blank dog slumped in place and seemed defeated.

*It's not possible* , the word bubbles said over the dog's head. *I couldn't have. Right ?*

*Of course you couldn't*, Lilly's representation, a delicately inked flower, responded. *We must not have all the information.*

That was possible, Xander conceded. He'd grown to like the annoying troublemaker over the past few months, and just couldn't wrap his mind around Black as a murderous traitor. Of course, that's exactly what the book would want him to think if the book was some evil talisman like the diary from the year before.

But would he be able to think that way if it was?

Xander rubbed his temple, trying not to groan. It was just a pain in the **ASS** .

He sighed, his pen clattering to the desk as he pushed the book away. He'd trying getting answers, but all he got were more questions.

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Narcissa frowned at her copy of the Grimoire. She didn't know why she had brought it with her to Hogsmeade really, though it did provide a link into the school that couldn't be traced, and thus a way to get information out that may be otherwise suppressed by Dumbledore or the Ministry. With Lucius being no help at all on this matter, she needed every scrap of information she could lay her hands on.

The ongoing debate within the pages was just short of ridiculous in her opinion, and she wondered what the boy was trying to accomplish with it? The memories within had no will of their own, and no real information past the day the book had been charmed.

Or so she thought, until she noted Lilly referring to herself as Lilly Potter.

Narcissa scowled, that wasn't right. And why in Merlin's Name was Lilly so adamantly defending Sirius anyway?

Back then they had barely tolerated each other. The Grimoire had been completed at the end of their fifth year, before Lilly and James had started to date, and while Sirius was still detested as the Casanova wannabe of Hogwarts.

She cast her mind back to the spell they had used, wondering if they had forgotten to seal it properly. Perhaps the book was even to this day drawing on their memory connection?

Narcissa shook her head, then quickly cast a few diagnostic spells on it, and herself.

No, no connection to be found.

She sighed. It was quite strange, but not immediately important she decided. She had more important things to deal with in the near term.

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Xander barely muffled his groan when he stepped down into the common room and right into a, patent pending, Draco Malfoy Rant (tm). The blond was roaring about his punishment, saying that McGonagall didn't have the right to punish him and basically going on and on to anyone who'd listen.

It actually took Xander a while to remember that the hell the blond was being punished for, mostly because he rarely paid attention to Quidditch. It hit him when Draco said something about a harmless prank, reminding him of the long Dementor robes Draco and his hangers on had used to try and intimidate Harry during the match.

"Oh not this again," Xander muttered, just before he could stop himself.

"Stay out of this Harris!" Draco snapped, whirling around. "This is none of your business!"

"You can say that again," Xander shook his head, pushing past the group and moving toward the far side of the room. "I just came down to get some air, and I don't mean hot air that's already been blown up everyone's ass."

Several people in the room laughed openly at that as Draco visibly trembled, turning an alarming shade of puce.

"How **DARE** you!?"

"Me? You're bitching about being punished after that stunt?" Xander laughed dryly, "If I were McGonagall I'd give you points for that. You made us look like idiots, and Harry look like more of a lion than ever!"

Draco jerked back, like he'd been slapped.

"It's amazing," Xander said with a shake of his head, "You have to be Harry Potter's best ally; he can always count on you to make him look good."

Draco snapped his wand in his hand in a flash as he snapped it in Xander's direction, "Furunculous!"

"Protego!" Xander replied, his own wand having already been gripped tightly as he recognized Draco's state of mind. "Stupify!"

The red blast of energy crossed paths with Draco's curse in the middle of the room, giving the blond just enough time to drop to the ground as it passed over him and dropped Goyle in his tracks. The Furunculous curse splashed across Xander's shield, dropping its effectiveness but not penetrating the magical bubble.

Xander instantly dropped the shield, killing the power drain, but prepared to cast another.

"I've told you before, Draco, if you intend to **CHEAT** don't get **CAUGHT** ." Xander said clearly, shifting to one side so if too many of them decided to help Draco he could duck out the door into Hogwarts proper. "Getting caught cheating is worse than losing, even if you win."

"Nothing is worse than losing, fool." Draco sneered as he climbed to his feet.

Xander rolled his eyes, "If everyone knows you cheated, you get no respect for the win... and the people you beat lose no respect for their loss. But if **THEY** beat you, and everyone knows you cheated, you lose a **HUGE** amount of respect for having lost despite having the advantage, and they win an equally huge amount for having beaten the odds. By cheating obviously you give the other side all the cards and concede victory to them."

Draco looked confused, then shook his head, "That's nonsense! If you win you win. That's what counts."

"In a war, sure." Xander returned his wand still between them and ready to cast. "But this isn't war. Winning on the field doesn't get you anything off it, unless people think you won fair. Every time you go and do something stupid like the other day you make us look worse off the field, and everyone else look better. **ESPECIALLY** the Gryffs."

Xander moved back to the door and felt it open as he tucked his wand into his pocket.

"Not that I care," He shrugged, "I'm a yank. All this house rivalry crap is meaningless to me."

With that parting shot Xander backed out of the Slytherin Common room and let the stone wall close. He turned and began to make his way up the hall, he really did need to get some air, and then maybe back to the library.

After that little spell exchange he was feeling a lot better actually.

Hermione had cracked the Protean, somehow, he wasn't sure how. She didn't seem to have any **TIME** to do so. But now it was just a matter of preparing the spell to map Hogwarts Wards.

Frankly, Xander felt it was overtime to get himself a Marauders Eye view of the school.

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Daphne Greengrass leaned slightly back as the commotion in the common room began to die down, noting with amusement that several of those who had been hanging on Draco's every word a few moments earlier were drifting out of the room even as the blond picked up a new rant against his housemate.

"He has a way with words."

Daphne looked over at Tracy Davis, one eyebrow arcing.

"Harris, not Draco."

"Ah." Daphne nodded, "I think he's been thinking about that one since first year, actually."

"Still. He has a point." Tracy said with a put upon sigh. "You're closer to the Malfoy's than I am, Daph... is it an act?"

"Excuse me?" Daphne blinked, surprised at the question.

"Draco." Tracy elaborated. "Is it an act? Or is he really this stupid."

Daphne had to stop there, suddenly considering the question. "I don't know. I doubt it's all an act, though. He's been too perfect at it."

Tracy snickered softly, but nodded in agreement. "I hope you're right."

Daphne nodded soberly, "Me too."

Because if it was an act...

She shuddered to think of it.

"Ugly thoughts aside," Daphne said slowly, "I believe that Xander has secured a slight lead in the race."

Tracy nodded thoughtfully, considering the likely repercussions of the events of a few minutes earlier. Certainly his little speech had shook a few of the uncertain allies Malfoy had gathered back to neutrality, but it was very likely that Harris' own little cabal had grown slightly as well.

"I think you're right." She said after a moment, then rolled her eyes, "Do you think either one of them have any idea?"

"Draco doesn't, for sure." Daphne said with certainty, "At least he's shown no sign of even acknowledging that there **ARE** Slytherin's who aren't rich, pure-blooded, and worship the Dark Lord. So long as his core followers are there, I don't think he even knows that the rest of us really exist."

"He knows," Tracy said sourly, "He just doesn't think we have minds of our own. That's reserved for the rich and powerful."

"I stand corrected," Daphne accepted the correction easily. Draco Malfoy simply separated people into two groups, well three really. First were the people like himself, rich or at **LEAST** pure-blooded, and espousers of the Dark Lord's philosophy. Second was, well everyone else. The second group was divided up into people who rightly obeyed the orders of their superiors, IE Draco, and those who didn't. Those who didn't had to be destroyed, or put back into their place. Those who did, well they only existed insofar as they had some use to Draco.

Both girls were quite concerned with what use they would have for Draco in the not too distant future, though their own worries were quite small compared to some in the house. The Greengrass and Davis line were strong enough to make even the Malfoy scion wary of crossing the line of propriety, at least in the current political climate.

Should a new Dark Lord come into ascendance on the Malfoy's side, well then things could get ugly.

Which made them **VERY** interested in the second horse running in what, realistically, should have been a one horse race. Alexander Harris had pretty much literally come out of nowhere, a true dark horse in a House that prided itself on taking others by surprise. His own cabal of followers, or allies, was relatively low on political power but during their Hogwarts years it wasn't political power that counted.

No, it was actual in the hand power. And that was something Harris had on tap, whether he realized it or not.

Since the previous year Tracy and Daphne had taken close notice in his actions and their repercussions. He was one of the more talented students in their year, prone to strange leaps of seeming genius by times, but not really at the top of any one thing. Draco and Potter both had him outclassed in Defence, Granger, Daphne herself, Tracy and many others had him outclassed in the other classes.

Still, when everything was averaged out, he always seemed to be in the top five for their year. Added to that, he was close friends with numbers one and two, Hermione Granger and Wednesday Addams, and was said to have fought at Potters side in the events of the previous year which at least implied an accord with one of the most politically powerful students at Hogwarts.

Within the house he had on several occasions openly challenged Draco's position and actually backed the Malfoy scion down, or at least diverted him from his course much to the gratitude of many in the house.

So, what had begun as a small loose alliance of house rejects was now looking like a solid powerbase at least as practically powerful as the traditional Slytherin cabal. It was true that Draco had a far more potent external powerbase to call on in certain situations, but for all intents and purposes he couldn't fully tap that power except for those very specific situations.

In the long run that political power would likely be the deciding factor in the race, but their class only had four more years to go before graduation. Once free from the immediate proximity of the Malfoy, well options opened up considerably. So neither Daphne, nor many of the smarter students in the house, were truly playing a long game at the moment. They were looking more to the medium terms, and in that range of play Harris seemed to be the top dog.

In many ways the only thing preventing Harris from assuming full leadership of Slytherin house was the simple fact that he hadn't yet demanded it.

All that as a third year, no less.

It was absolutely infuriating that he didn't seem to have the slightest **CLUE** as to any of it. Daphne was beginning to wonder if he wasn't some sort of idiot savant.

\*\*\*\*

It was done.

Xander couldn't help but smirk a little as he looked over the work. Hermione's calculations and spell work had been immaculate, as always. His own numbers confirmed her work, as did Wednesdays. That was good enough for him; the map was ready to be imprinted.

That did leave the very annoying problem of how to get it into the Headmaster's office however.

As a Slytherin he couldn't just get caught doing something bad and get sent there for discipline, Professor Snape handled his own house entirely IN house. Xander figured he'd have to murder someone to wind up in the headmaster's office, and that seemed a little extreme for his current plans.

Basically that didn't leave him many options really.

He could try and break in, he supposed. The fact that the Headmaster used various sweets as the password to his office was no secret, but even so Xander suspected that the system was a little more complicated than that. If he'd been setting it up he probably wouldn't let the password work unless he was sitting in his office or it had been used by someone who was cleared through the wards. Even if Dumbledore was careless enough to do otherwise, he'd damn sure have the wards record entries.

Showing up as having broken into the headmaster's office would be a bad way to keep his anonymity, and since he wasn't a ward breaker that option was out.

That left a Trojan horse, which should be doable, but he'd have to set the conditions carefully. Xander hummed happily to himself as he began to cast small cantrips he'd learned in his first year. Sometimes the best spells were the simplest.

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"Sir?"

Professor Severus Snape paused, half turning as his robes flowed around him, and glared at the young Slytherin coming up behind him. "Yes?"

The second year gulped but held out an envelope, "I'm sorry sir, but I found this."

Snape took the proffered envelop and noted the name on it, one eyebrow rising. "And you bring it to me because?"

"I can't find Xander, Sir." The boy said, "It looked important."

He looked at it again and noted that the letter did indeed have a seal that read Gringotts of America. A markedly different seal from Gringotts, he noted with an odd flash of annoyance. Arrogant colonials. Severus fisted the envelop, however, and drove it into his pocket. "Very well, I'll see to it that he gets it. Be on your way."

"Yes Sir."

Snape didn't even pause to watch the boy run off; he just turned and continued on his way to his nightly visit with the headmaster.

"Milk Duds." He growled out, not breaking stride as the gargoyle leapt out of the way.

In the Headmaster's office he found the other heads of house waiting and nodded curtly, "My apologies for being late, I was stopped by a student."

"No trouble at all, Severus," Albus smiled calmly, holding out a bowl of confectionaries, "Lemon drop?"

"No, thank you." Snape said as he took his seat.

"Now then, let us beg..." Dumbledore began, then paused with a frown to look back at Snape. "Are you aware you're carrying a charmed item?"

Snape stiffened, mind racing, "No, I..."

He calmed quickly, sighing, and fished out the envelop the student had given him. "I was just given this; apparently Mr Harris left his correspondence lying around carelessly."

Albus took it from him, adjusting his glasses, "My my, Gringotts of America. Yes, I see."

"Is it a problem, Albus?" Minerva leaned forward.

"No, no. Merely an identification charm that was activated," Albus chuckled, "I must be getting paranoid."

"Is Mr Harris nearby?" Pomona blinked.

"No," Albus chuckled again, "No it was most likely reacting to me as Headmaster, and legal guardian of all my students. Slightly shoddy spellmanship, but I suppose American Goblins are a little laxer in their work than our own."

He handed the envelop back, "See to it that Mr Harris receives his bank statements, Severus, I understand he's made quite a lot off that little potion of his."

Snape scowled, stuffing the envelop back in his robes as the others chuckled. He didn't need to be reminded of that. The very idea that such a simple potion brew could have become worth so much was, well it was both mind boggling and more than a little infuriating. He'd looked up the patent himself shortly after it became public and was quite disgusted by how so frivolous a brew had become too sought after.

The only thing that saved Harris, in Snape's eyes, was that the boy was quite rightly embarrassed by the whole matter.

Still chuckling at his Potions Master, the Headmaster shifted the topic back to the daily reports and began the meeting in earnest.

\*\*\*\*

Xander was sitting in the Common Room when Professor Snape strode in for his nightly inspection. The Professor spotted him from across the room and smoothly crossed over, parting the students with no effort whatsoever, and unceremoniously dumped the letter in Xander's lap.

"I strongly advise you not to lose your correspondence in the future." Snape hissed softly, glaring down at him. "You may not be so lucky as to have someone return it."

Xander nodded, clearly swallowing. "Thank you, sir."

Snape rolled his eyes and pivoted away, robes billowing around him as he walked. Xander watched him leave before breaking the seal on the envelope and taking out the blank parchment inside.

He couldn't help but smirk slightly as he looked around to make sure no one was too close, then tapped the paper with his wand.

*Deafening Silence ?*

The words flowed onto the page smoothly and Xander smiled slightly, "Sweet Sorrow."

The words faded away, replaced by a series of lines that grew out from the centre, showing a clear view of the Slytherin Common Room with name tags for everyone currently within and slowly grew to encompass the whole school.

*The NewCoven Proudly Presents, A Marauder's Eye View*

Xander idly placed a finger on the map and used it to drag the view around until he could see the Gryffindor Dorms; his eye picking out Hermione Granger's name in what he presumed was her room. Another smooth motion brought him to Wednesday, sitting at her desk in Ravenclaw dorms.

"Mischief managed, Mr Black," He whispered, with a small decidedly evil looking grin. "But not complete, not by a long shot."

Xander tapped the map again, quietly telling it, "Military Intelligence."

The map went blank as he got up and walked across the room to a second year he'd saved from a Malfoy beat down.

"Thanks, Derrick." Xander nodded, "Just let me know what you want from town next weekend, ok?"

"No problem, Xan," Derrick Smythe, half-blood Slytherin outcast said with a small smile.

\*\*\*\*

The next day Xander sat through his classes, barely able to sit still as he thought about the completed map. He couldn't stop thinking about how insanely cool that little piece of spell work was, and what could be done with it. The security, and counter security, uses alone were fantastic but he'd read the copious notes Black had made concerning the map, and those uses were the LEAST of its abilities.

In effect, anything reported by the wards were accessible to the map. Unfortunately it was strictly a real-time device, with no recording capability, but Xander was thinking about how to change that already. Even so, before he'd crashed the night before Xander had accessed some of the higher functions of the map to watch the progress of the Prefects on their nightly patrols.

Percy Weasley had been paired with the Ravenclaw Prefect, Penelope Clearwater. They had an interesting method of patrolling the broom closets on the third floor, a very thorough examination of one in particular Xander had noted with a smirk. The Map didn't have visual capability, of course, that wasn't something that was built into Hogwarts wards, but many areas of the castle, including almost all 'public' areas were monitored by listening charms tied into the ward structure.

The map faithfully rendered various epithets, moans, and groans into speech bubbles coming from the two Prefects and, much to Xander's amusement, Black's addition to the spell work created cartoon caricatures that writhed together luridly as he watched.

The Marauders were brilliant, but twisted Xander noted, and he was hardly surprised that the Coven had detested them on principal. He was certainly glad that Black's supplementary notes hadn't been included in the spell work he'd shared with Wednesday or Hermione. The map construct itself was so complicated that it was all but impossible to really pick out the difference between the more straightforward functions of the display and Sirius Black's 'extra' additions, otherwise Xander had little doubt that he'd have been treated to a game of Human Sacrifice, with two irate girl's wielding the knives.

He shuddered at that, Hermione may stop before actually cutting him in that situation, but Wednesday wouldn't.

Xander shared almost everything with his friends, but he wasn't entirely without survival instincts.



At least after reading the supplementary notes on the Map, Xander had a good idea what it had been age coded to only let him talk to Black when he was at least in third year. A couple years ago he'd have probably showed the map in 'spy mode' to Wednesday for giggles.

That would have gone over SO well, he was sure.

\*\*\*\*

When classes were done for the day Xander headed for the library. While he was going to hold back some functions of the map for reasons of personal security, not to mention an allergy to pain, he had to let the girls know that it had worked.

He found Wednesday at their regular table and immediately noticed that something was up. The dark girl was sitting stiffly, as was her habit, but she wasn't reading. Her glittering eyes were focused on Hermione who was sitting across the room at another table. Xander followed her gaze and paused in place as he took in the normally perky, brightly enthusiastic, girl. Her hair was badly frazzled; looking like it hadn't been brushed in some time, making its normal bushy appearance look like the height of fashion.

Xander exchanged a glance with Wednesday, who nodded and rose from her place. Together they split around the tables and approached Hermione from either side, taking the seats beside her silently and clearly startling the girl.

"You're not looking so hot," Xander said, eschewing any attempt at tact as he reached over and slid her book away from her.

Hermione glared at him, "Well thank you so much for that pick me up."

"If the truth irritates you that much, perhaps you're worse off than you appear." Wednesday said idly as she and Xander looked at the title of the book Hermione had been reading. "Dangerous Creatures Statutes?"

"Interesting reading," Xander said with a twitch of his head. "There's not another big honking snake in the school is there?"

"Don't be silly." Hermione rolled her eyes, "Where would another Basilisk come from?"

"I dunno same place the first one did?" Xander shrugged. "Honestly, I'm not real clear on where that one came from."

Hermione huffed, but Wednesday merely smiled slightly. "He has a point. I presume, however, that this has something to do with Buckbeak?"

Hermione slumped a little, looking tired, but nodded.

"I take it that hasn't gone well?"

"We lost," Hermione admitted, "Buckbeak is due to be executed in a few days."

"I see." Wednesday said quietly.

Xander felt bad for the animal, he knew for a fact that Draco hadn't been as badly hurt as he'd pretended, but the fact was it did attack a student and he was pretty damn sure that any dog that did that on school property back in the states probably wasn't going to last half as long as this Hippogriff had. More to the point, however, Xander had a feeling that this wasn't the core of the issue he'd come over here to deal with, namely why Hermione looked like she was up for about three days straight.

"Herms, that can't be all of it. You really look horrible, are you coming down with something?"

"No." She said sharply, glaring at him, "I most certainly am not. I just haven't been sleeping much lately, thank you very much."

With that she got up in a huff and strode off, leaving Xander to frown thoughtfully.

"Is that part of that Tremwurt thing you and Luna were talking about?" He asked.

Wednesday blinked, looking at him with a genuinely confused look, "What?"

"Tremwurt, remember? Luna said something about that and you said it wasn't to be discussed with the 'plebes'?" Xander asked again, this time he was the one who was confused.

"Ah," Her face relaxed into understanding. "Is that what she actually said?"

"Bwa?"

"Alexander, I've mentioned before that the Addamses have a gift of languages, correct?"

"Yeah, last year."

"Well I didn't hear what she said, I heard what she **meant**." Wednesday said coolly, collecting her books. "Luna is a very interesting person; I don't believe she herself knows the names for the things she sees, so she makes up things to call them."

"Uh... ok. So what did she see?"

"Elementa Aetas." She said before following after Hermione, leaving Xander perplexed behind her.

What the heck does that mean?" He asked of the air around him.

Predictably, he got no answer.

"Great." He sighed, getting up and collecting his own books.

In all the 'excitement' he hadn't even got a chance to show his map to the girls.

\*\*\*\*

"Hermione."

Hermione half turned, seeing the dark Addams scion walking toward her, and sighed. "What is it, Wednesday?"

"You may relax; I'm not concerned with how you're manipulating time."

Hermione's eyes widened and she started to stammer, "I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about... and further..."

Wednesday held up a hand, "Stop. I told you, I don't care. I am interested in helping you with your other problem, however."

"What's that?" Hermione asked suspiciously.

"Buckbeak."

Hermione sighed, "I don't know that there's anything we **CAN** do."

A slightly sinister smile played at the lips of the dark girl, "Didn't I ever tell you that the Addamses are widely considered the world's foremost authorities on magical creatures? We even maintain several private reserves for them."

Hermione's eyes widened, "You do?"

"Let's talk."

\*\*\*\*

Xander sighed, laying back in his room and watching the names move around on the map. Hermione and Wednesday were speaking together near Gryffindor dorms, but even though they were in a public area Xander didn't activate the maps 'eavesdropping' mode. He hoped that Wednesday could help Hermione, but was pretty sure that neither would be appreciative of him listening, or reading, in.

Other students were running around the school in various states of madness, the end of year exams having snuck up on them. Xander ignored them, just randomly sliding the image around. Headmaster Dumbledore was in his office, Professor Snape was down in the dungeons, and he noted Harry and Ron were out on the Quidditch Pitch.

Someone named Peter Pettigrew was running across the grounds outside, and Xander paused on his name for a long moment.

"Peter Pettigrew..." He mused out loud. "I've heard that name before."

He shrugged it off, not able to place it.

Must be a student from one of the other houses. Hufflepuff, probably, he decided. He didn't know any of them really.

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Narcissa looked over the notes in her copy of the Grimoire, puzzled by the sudden interest Alexander had taken in the situation with Sirius. She should have kept his shade locked away she supposed, but it seemed harmless at the time. Sirius was safely locked away, his shade was merely an echo of his Hogwarts self, and was by and large harmless.

Now she had to worry about what the boy was learning, or believed he was learning, about her cousin. Sirius had always driven her nuts in the past, but it was normally in an annoying way, not the tear the hair from her skull way he was currently managing without even thinking of her. She hoped that Alexander didn't do anything stupid if he ran across Sirius.

Whatever the man had been, he was a dangerous felon now.

Narcissa sighed at the lost dreams of her past. The ways they were going to change the world, her, Lilly and Alice. As a trio they had been unstoppable, fighting even the much vaunted Marauders to a humiliating defeat during one of the most renowned prank wars in Hogwarts history.

Ok, it had only been the rout it was because the Marauders never knew who they were and even Sirius didn't find out until Lilly and James were all but betrothed. By that point Sirius had taken the fatalistic point of view that James would never be able to go all out against Lilly, and the equally pessimistic view that Lilly would have no such problem.

Probably the most realistic view he could have taken, Narcissa supposed. Earlier in their shared history the Marauders would have probably dominated the fight, given the fact that they had the greater experience and knowledge of Hogwarts. When the Coven had learned of the Map, well even Lilly had been stunned into silence by the sheer brilliance of the artefact.

As it was, without knowing who they were fighting, the Marauders never even touched Lilly or Alice, and only caught Narcissa herself with secondary splash over.

They had been brilliant, but there was only so much one could do without at least some basic information on your opponents. That was a lesson Narcissa had learned then, and was relearning now in her hunt to bring her erstwhile cousin down before he got himself killed.

Though she was beginning to wonder if maybe letting him get kissed and claiming the body may not be the best avenue. Would certainly result in fewer headaches, she suspected, however it was certainly not her preferred option. She wasn't certain if the Magic would accept an Heir conceived post-soul, and for obvious reasons wasn't eager to find out.

She would be damned; however, if the Black line ended now that she had a chance to save it. Even as slim as chance as it was. Not without ever possible effort being expended on her part.

\*\*\*\*

End of Year exams were on them shortly after that, leaving few of them with any time to do much other than study and test. Xander found himself fairly confident in his classes, not too worried about the exams, which was a nice change from how he ended every year back home, sweating and panting and praying that Willow would save his sorry ass from repeating a year.

Ok, that was possibly a little bit of an exaggeration, his marks weren't that bad but he still went through the horrible anxiety every single year and he was so not missing it now.

Charms went smoothly, his practice with the shield charm gave him a nice extra credit boost on the test, but overall he was sure he'd done pretty decently. The ones that still tripped him up were the simpler ones they had learned, ironically, because he'd pushed on ahead.

Transfiguration kinda sucked, Xander found, but he probably scraped by there. He didn't have the natural hand at it that Hermione seemed to show, but he wasn't as low on the pole as Ron Weasley or Neville Longbottom either, so he figured he was doing ok. He didn't expect to ever get a master ship in that subject, however.

The Defence course was exhausting, a rigged up challenge against various 'dark creatures' that had him sweating by the end but little else. Hermione had been badly shaken by the finale obstacle, a Boggart, which marred her otherwise stellar showing. Harry had, on the other hand, blown through it with an absurd ease in Xander's opinion, like he was testing below his ability.

Some people just made Xander want to grit his teeth.

Potions were easy. Not that he was a budding potions master or anything, but Snape was generally soft on Slytherin's and Xander was no slouch with an Athame and a Cauldron, so he passed. He felt bad for Harry and the others there, since they were working five times harder than he was, and generally got less out of it.

Mind you, if they survived Snape there wasn't a thing in the real world that was going to faze them.

Arithmancy was gruelling. It wasn't so much that it was difficult; it was just so **DAMNED** boring. Take three ones, add seven, and subtract nine. What do you get? A powerful spell that was based on the friggin number you **STARTED** with.

There had to be something else going on there that Xander just didn't understand yet, but for the moment it was just obscene amounts of adding and subtracting with no real correlation to practical applications that he could see.

It was enough to drive a man to drink that is if Xander wasn't massively anti-alcohol.

By the time the exams were done everyone was worn out, but glad to see them go. The Gryffindors were still roaring over their victory on the Pitch, while the Slytherin's were by and large whining about losing.

That was what drove Xander to bed early that night, his mind finally clear of school and still revolving around the mystery of the Grimoire and Sirius Black as he laid himself down to rest.

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Peter Pettigrew!

Xander bolted upright in his bed, eyes wide as he stared into the darkness.

No way.

He shook his head, then lunged across the bed and scrambled over to his trunk. A quick glance over his shoulder told him that no one had noticed his waking, and he quickly fumbled through the lock on the trunk, opening it to the first storage section and retrieved his map.

The map shimmered for a moment in response to his tap, and then the words 'Civil War' appeared centred in it.

"Quiet Riot." Xander replied softly.

The map blanked again, then the lines of Hogwarts appeared. Xander quickly panned over to the Hufflepuff dorms, remembering his thoughts of so many nights earlier, and frowned.

"Pettigrew... Pettigrew... There's no Pettigrew there." He murmured across the Gryffindor with the same result. Ravenclaw was next, and still there was no one by the name of Peter Pettigrew.

"It's not possible, is it?" He licked his lips, zooming the map out so he could scan the grounds. There were a few tags moving around and he quickly scanned over to them. Hagrid was no surprise, but he blinked when he spotted Wednesday and Hermione out and about and heading toward Hagrid's hut. "What are you two up to?"

He scowled at the names, but then scanned around some more. Wednesday was far from helpless, and she generally knew what she was doing, so he wasn't going to impose himself on their company for no reason. Besides, he still had a mystery of his own to solve.

The fact that Ron and Harry were out as well had him shaking his head.

"Does anyone sleep in this damned place?" He muttered.

Xander's annoyance was cut off; however, when he spotted the name he was looking for close to where Ron and Harry were as those two left Hagrid's. He hadn't imagined it.

Pettigrew was alive? But that made no sense. How does someone hide from the entire world for so long? Especially when they've received accolades as a hero in such a small, insular, society? It didn't seem possible.

He was still puzzling that out when another name crossed the ward boundaries, heading dead for Harry and Ron.

Sirius Black.

"Oh hell." Xander muttered, grabbing his wand and robes as he bolted for the door. So much for getting to bed early and resting up

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"There he is," Hermione whispered, pointing to the spot where the hippogriff was tied out. "We don't have much time, they'll be here soon."

"Follow me." Wednesday said softly, breaking position and creeping toward the garden patch Hagrid kept out behind his hut.

The two girls made their way down, keeping an eye out for the ministry representatives who were scheduled to arrive that very night. Hermione wasn't sure what Wednesday thought she could do, but she was going to take any chance she had to save Buckbeak.

"Damn!" Hermione hissed. "They're here!"

"Down." Wednesday responded, dragging her into the pumpkin patch, behind one of the enormous gourds. They stayed crouched as they heard Minister Fudge speak.

"Bad business this." The Minister said as he, Dumbledore, and another man were admitted to the house.

"What do we do? They're going to really do it!" Hermione hissed, sounding halfway panicked.

"Shhh." Wednesday replied firmly. "Wait.

"Wait for what?"

When the face Wednesday had been eyeing in the window turned away, "For this."

She rose and quickly approached the Hippogriff, pausing just long enough to bow politely without taking her eyes off it. Buckbeak returned the bow almost instantly, and then her hands were on the rope, undoing the knots with ease.

"Come." She ordered flatly, leading the apparently docile animal quickly and quietly away from the pumpkin patch.

Hermione, shocked, followed in meek silence.

\*\*\*\*

Xander hit the old courtyard at a dead run, having used his map to dodge the Prefect patrols and Filch. Fenrir was at his heels, tongue lolling out as the young puppy happily ran along with his human. The duo headed straight for the Womping Willow, which was where the names were apparently converging on the map, and arrived just as a scream broke the air.

Xander slid to a stop on the moist grass, eyes wide as he watched Ron just yanked down and under the large tree and Harry dive after him, barely dodging the flailing branches.

"Stupify!" Xander snapped, extending his wand out at the familiar looking black dog. The crimson bolt barely missed Harry, splashing harmlessly and ineffectively on the trunk of the Willow as Xander lost sight of his targets.

"Damn it." He muttered, edging closer. It only took a few moments to determine that he wasn't getting through easily, and Xander didn't like his odds of getting through at all. He sighed, and backed off.

"Where's Dumbledore..." Xander muttered, drawing out the still active map and starting to slide the image around.

He paused a moment later when he noted that one Remus Lupin was rushing across the grounds, heading for the main gate.

"What the..." Xander scowled, trying to make sense of things.

Everyone seemed to be on the move, Xander tried to puzzle it out but couldn't. Still, the defence professor was the closest teacher so he bolted off in that direction.

Xander arrived at the main gate in time to see Remus pause just outside, then vanish with a loud crack.

**"FUCK."** Xander cursed, not for the first time in his life perhaps, but certainly the loudest. He pulled out the map again and glared at it. "Where'd they go??"

Unfortunately the Womping Willow was right up against the castle wards, and whatever passage lay under it apparently led straight out and beyond the map's range. Xander sighed, looking out in the direction it seemed to lie and noted that it wasn't quite in the direction of Hogsmeade, but it was close.

Xander turned to head back but was brought to a stop when Professor Snape rushed through the gate, not looking to the side even slightly, and vanished with a similar crack before Xander could say a word.

"Alright, what the hell is going on??" Xander growled, glaring at the spot the Potions professor had occupied a moment earlier. "Does everyone know something I don't?"

Fenrir yipped once.

"Shut up, you." Xander half smirked at the dog, then sighed and started panning the map again, looking for Dumbledore.

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"Did you hear that?" Hermione asked softly.

Wednesday nodded, "Sounded like a gunshot."

"At Hogwarts??"

"I said like, not that it was one." The dark girl replied. "I don't know what it was, but we're a little busy at the moment, no?"

"Right. Sorry."

"We will have to fly Buckbeak out," Wednesday sighed, "The closest reserve is on the Continent, it will take several days to arrive."

"What? But..." Hermione was aghast. Missing several days of school, without permission? "We'll be expelled!"

"Shut up. You'll get us caught." Wednesday hissed, then sighed. "I'll do it."

"But... you can't, you'll be..."

"Salem will take me; if not well my family will home school me." Wednesday shrugged, "They won't question my choice."

Hermione swallowed, stomach rolled into tightly chorded knots. "I'll... I'll come too."

"No, you will not."

"I can't let you take the responsibility for this, it was my idea!" Hermione hissed.

Wednesday smiled slightly, "Only one of us can go, Hermione. Buckbeak can't carry us both that far. And since it can only be one of us, do you know where the Addams Range is?"

Hermione grimaced, but shook her head.

"Precisely. Rest assured, it will be handled."

The duo were skirting the Forbidden Forest as they led the Hippogriff away from Hagrid's hut and it's legally mandated grisly fate. Wednesday wanted to be well clear of the area before flying Buckbeak off, not wanting to be spotted by anyone, especially so early in her flight. They were close to where she intended to leave from when a shadowed figure appeared, heading straight for them.

Hermione and she drew their wands, but were surprised to see the figure hold out his empty hands.

"Whoa, whoa, I come in peace!"

"Xander," Hermione growled, irritated as she slid her wand back into her robes, "You scared the hell out of me."

"Yeah well, that's the least of our worries." Xander muttered.

"What do you mean?" Wednesday asked, eyebrow rising.

“I just watched a big black mutt drag two students into a tunnel under the Womping willow,” Xander explained.

“Who??” Hermione blurted.

Xander just stared at her for a minute, “Which two students are not present and are also known for getting into this kind of trouble??”

“Oh God, Harry.” Hermione gasped.

“And Ron. What’s worse, I’m pretty sure the mutt was Sirius Black.” Xander said his face deadly serious.

Hermione cried out, her knees buckling. Before she could fall, Wednesday had her by the arm, “Get a hold of yourself.”

The Addams scion turned back to Xander, “What makes you think it was Black?”

“This,” Xander produced the map, already active. The two girls looked at it and saw their names centred on it, “You can change shape, but you can’t fool the wards that easy. Here’s the weird thing, though... They weren’t alone. Peter Pettigrew was with them.”

Hermione stared at him for a moment, eyes clearing as she dredged up the memory. They widened a moment later, “That’s impossible!”

“That’s what I thought, but he was in Hogwarts last night too, I didn’t put it together until a little earlier.”

“I don’t know this Pettigrew person.”

“He’s the man Sirius Black supposedly killed after betraying Harry’s family.” Xander explained.

Wednesday nodded, remembering the story then. “Interesting. Well, this is all fascinating, but we should act.”

“We need to tell the teachers!”

“Yeah, good luck finding one.” Xander muttered, “Dumbles is nowhere in sight, Snape and Lupin both left the school, and the others are on the other side of the grounds... **ALL** the way on the other side.”

“Show me the tunnel.” Wednesday ordered.

Xander winced, but nodded. The trio, plus one Hippogriff, rushed off. At the Willow Xander pointed to the tunnel entrance as they stood back at a safe distance. “Right there. It goes off in that direction, if it’s straight.”

“What’s out there? Hogsmeade?” Wednesday asked.

“No,” Hermione frowned, “It’s the Shrieking Shack.”

“You sure?”

“That’s the only thing in that direction.”

“Very well,” Wednesday nodded, handing her the reins they’d put on Buckbeak. “Take these for a moment.”

Hermione accepted the reins, then Wednesday walked calmly into the Willow.

“Wait! You can’t!” Xander lunged after her, but missed as he realized too late what she was doing.

She ignored him, ducking one swinging branch then stepping into another and petting it softly as she murmured something they couldn’t hear. In a few moments the tree drooped and made a sound that seemed suspiciously like a sigh of contentment.

After a moment she looked up, “Xander. Go through the tunnel, be careful. We’ll meet you on the other side.”

Xander hesitated a moment, then nodded. “Right.”

In a few seconds he was gone.

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The tunnel was dark, dank, and generally sucked but Xander pushed through as the cobwebs brushed the side of his face. He cast a Lumos, lighting up the length of the tunnel, and increased his pace.

Xander grumbled to himself as he moved as quickly as he could.

He slowed down as he came to the end of the passage and looked up to find a wooden trap door above him.

“Well, end of the line.” Xander whispered, then grimaced, “Hopefully not literally.”

He took a breath and grabbed the rungs of the old wooden ladder that led up to the door above. He winced as it creaked under his weight, but made his way up to the top where he started to hear voices murmuring beyond. He paused at the top, listening, but couldn’t make out the words just that the emotions were running pretty hot beyond.

Xander hooked his hand in the ladder and looked at his wand, wondering how he was going to do this. He shoved the wand into his teeth and then reached up for the trap door. As it opened a crack he could hear the words beyond.

“Expeliarumus!!”

Xander started to surge up as a thud sounded above him, then suddenly a second thud struck the trap door and slammed down on Xander’s head, knocking him off the ladder. He hit the ground on his back, stars spotting in his eyes as his wand flew from his mouth and clattered down beside him.

“Ohhh crap...” He gasped for air, rolling over, “That sucked.”

He gasped for a few moments, sucking at air that wouldn’t come in, then finally managed to fill his lungs with a long, ragged, influx of oxygen that burned as much as it tasted good. He got to his hands and knees, then picked his wand up off the ground and glared at the tooth marks in the wood.

“Just friggin great.” He muttered, shaking his head as he climbed to his feet.

He looked up at the door above him again, then determinedly shoved his wand into his robes and started climbing again. This time at the time things were quieter, so Xander tested the door and found it free of obstruction so he slowly pushed it open and climbed up into the room beyond.

Xander drew his wand as he knelt there, and looked around. The room was dark and empty, whoever had been there had left while he was gasping for air down below. He got to his feet and started for the door when a yip from below startled him.

“Fenrir!?” He hissed, looking down. “Shut up!”

The puppy growled up at him, jumping up onto the second rung of the ladder.

“Alright, alright, give me a second.” Xander muttered, holstering his wand as he climbed back down and hooked the pup up into his arms. “Pushy little mutt.”

The puppy growled at him, but Xander ignored him as he heaved the puppy up over the threshold and into the room beyond. Xander then pulled himself up and rolled onto the floor and up to his knees where he redrew his wand.

“You ready, mutt?” He asked wryly, looking at the pup.

Fenrir yipped once in response.

“Shhh!”

Xander got to his feet and quickly crossed to the door, looking outside cautiously. Everything seemed clear so he and Fenrir made their way out from the Shack and looked around. Xander could see the lights of Hogsmeade in the distance, and those of the castle glowing off over the crest of the hill.

“Great. Where the hell did they go?”

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“Oh my god, we’re going to die!” Hermione wailed into the night as she clung to Wednesday, the two flying over the Forbidden Forest to the beat of the big Hippogriff’s wings.

Wednesday didn’t respond, merely taking the time to guide the direction of the beast beneath them, leaning Buckbeak’s back and guiding him into a dive. Hermione screamed as her stomach leapt up into her throat and tried to strangle her.

“There’s the shack.” Wednesday pointed ahead of them.

“Don’t let go! Hold on! Hold on!”

“Calm yourself.” Wednesday intoned darkly, looking back over her shoulder.

“Watch where you’re going!”

Wednesday glared at her coldly, then turned back to the front. “Look, there are people walking there.”

Hermione grimaced, whimpering slightly, and forced herself to look down. After the vertigo started to fade, being forced back by nothing by her determination alone, “I see them. Can you tell who they are?”

Wednesday shook her head, “No. It’s too dark. They’re levitating two people.”

“Do you think Harry or Ron are hurt?”

“One looks like an adult. The other may be small enough to be Ron...” Wednesday shrugged, “I don’t know.”

“They’re going back to Hogwarts.” Hermione decided, “That’s good right?”

“I don’t know. Look at the shack.”

Hermione pulled her attention away from the group and looked to the shack. Another person moved out of the shack, pausing to look around.

“Xander.”

Wednesday nodded, “Yes, I see Fenrir as well.”

“We have to signal him.”

“Agreed.” Wednesday drew his wand, “Lumos.”

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Xander hesitated, trying to determine what direction to go, when a light flashed above him and he looked up. A glowing light moved across the sky, and Xander could occasionally make out the silhouette of wings. He smiled slowly, then nodded.

“Right. Back to school then.”

Xander turned toward the glow of Hogwarts and started off at a light jog. Above him the light went out as he started to move, so he picked up the pace and set his jaw as he jogged off into the night.

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The clouds above them were clearing, Hermione noticed, and she looked up to see the full moon appearing in the sky above them. Below the forest was awash in a pale light, shocking the young witch with its beauty.

“My God.” She whispered, awed.

“It looks like Harry and Ron are fine.” Wednesday said, nodding to the ground.

Hermione looked down, recognizing her friends and sighed in relief. “Thank God.”

Even as she said that, however, Hermione could tell something had changed. The group stopped, shocked and turned towards one figure that seemed to stagger. A howl echoed through the night and her blood froze.

“Did Xander say he saw Professor Lupin run out tonight?” She asked with Dread.

“Indeed.” Wednesday replied softly. “This is very bad.”

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Xander bolted when he heard the howl and screaming, Fenrir running alongside.

“It’s always something.” He muttered, cresting the hill with wand already tracking. He spotted the group ahead of them, scattering away from a furry form in the middle

Xander skidded to a stop, staring as his stomach dropped.

“Oh please tell me I’m just having Flashbacks to Snape’s Defence lecture.” Xander froze, swallowing hard.

The group scattered below them, the large wolf man growling and slaving as it turned about. Xander watched as it gave chase and grimaced as he caught sight of Harry in its path.

“Crap, crap, crap.” He muttered, breaking into a run, “I have got to be the stupidest person I’ve ever heard of. Why the **HELL** am I chasing a werewolf??”

He led with his wand, snapping it out in the motion for the stunning curse.

“Stupefy! Stupefy! Stupefy!”

Three red bolts lanced out, the first splattering against the ground, but the remaining two striking the wolf dead on for what little good it did.

“Oh great, I pissed off Shaggy and now he’s looking at me.” Xander skidded to a stop again as the wolf man turned in his direction. “Harry! Run!”

The wolf began to lope in his direction, causing Xander to backpedal.

He thought desperate as he clenched his wand and started casting bone splitters.

“Difindo Ossi!” He snapped out, praying for any kind of edge.

The spell splashed off the wolf, barely phasing it as it sped up.

“Xander!? Xander get out of here!” Harry screamed from where he and another man were scrambling up off the ground. “He’ll kill you!”



**"I KNOW THAT!"** Xander stumbled backwards, still casting bone splitters with desperate speed.

The yipping of a small dog startled Xander for a moment until he remembered that Fenrir had been with him, and he panicked as he recognized the small mutt bolting in from the side on a collision course with the wolf man.

"Fenrir! No! Run!" He screamed, his throat hurting from the effort as the small dog leapt into the air.

Xander tripped back, falling on his ass as the yipping sounds gave way to deep growling snarls, the fifteen pound puppy gone and a four hundred pound wolf slamming into the wolf man's side like a locomotive. Xander gaped, shocked beyond words as he looked at the wolf that had been his puppy and saw an animal over a meter tall at the shoulders snarling and wrestling with the werewolf.

"Fenrir?" He blurted, shocked. "Is that you?"

"Xander!" Harry ran up to him, "What are you doing here? Are you alright?"

Xander snapped to look at him, "What am I doing here? I'm trying to save your idiot Gryffindor ass! What brain cell were you using when you dove after Ron anyway? The one you keep in your backside, I'm assuming!?"

A snicker from one side snapped Xander's head around and he recognized the face from his Grimoire.

"Black!" He blurted above the growls of the two wolves, his wand snapping out in reflex. "Stupify!"

"No!" Harry knocked his hand to one side, sending the stunner into the ground at Sirius Black's feet. "He's innocent. It was someone else who betrayed by parents."

Xander glared for a moment, then got up, one eye on the wolves. Fenrir seemed to be holding his own, leading the werewolf away from them.

"Ok fine. Pettigrew, I assume?" Xander asked.

Now it was Harry's turn to gape, along with Black. "How did you know that?"

Xander smirked, holding up a piece of parchment. "Coven secret."

"You..." Sirius blinked, "The Coven, but Lily and Alice... Narcissa? She helped you?"

Before Xander could say anything a shout came from above, and he looked up to see Buckbeak winging low enough to recognize the riders.

"Xander! Harry!" Hermione screamed, "Dementors!"

The three on the ground turned to see a dark cloud visible in the night sky, and growing.

"Oh Crap."

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"Bolt for the wards!" Xander snapped, shoving Harry towards Hogwarts.

The three of them broke into a run, the frost chill rushing along ahead of the Dementor line as they raced on ahead of it.

"They're going to catch up!" Sirius panted out.

"Change into Padfoot!" Harry yelled, "You can outrun them!"

"What about you!? I'm not leaving you!"

Harry paused, twisting around, and snapped his wand out. "Expecto Patronum!"

A silver mist formed, flowing out from his wand in the direction of the approaching monsters, but it only slowed them slightly.

"Damn it! Run!" Xander grabbed Harry by the shoulder and pulled him along. After they were moving he glanced over his shoulder, "What was that anyway?"

"Patronus Charm!" Sirius shouted back, "only spell known to affect Dementors!"

"Hard to cast?"

"Devilishly tricky."

"Great." Xander muttered, weighing options as he ran. After a moment he glanced over, "Can I assume you know it, Mutt?"

"Used to." The wanted man puffed out.

"Here." Xander flipped his wand over and thrust it over in Sirius' direction.

The dishevelled man blinked but took it as they ran, then glanced back. “Thanks.”

“Just get them off our ass.”

“Right. Harry?” Sirius said, slowing. “You up for a little Godfather/Godson bonding?”

Harry broke out into a smile and nodded.

“On three then.”

“THREE!” They shouted together, flicking their wands out, “Expecto Patronum!”

Two silver beasts, a prancing stag and panting grim like dog rushed out and charged into the midst of the oncoming Dementors, scattering them somewhat.

“That bought us some more time,” Sirius said, “How far to the ward line?”

“Not sure, we’ll have to cut through the forest to get there, though.” Xander said as he looked ahead.

Sirius winced, “not good.”

“We can make it.” Harry said, sounding more confident than any of them were really feeling. “We have to.”

“Alright, let’s go.”

The three broke for the forest, leaving the milling monsters behind to regroup from the Patronus charge. They reached the forest line before the Dementors gave chase again. The thick undergrowth slowed them, but it also kept the wraiths from dropping down on them from above, so they were thankful for the scratches they endured as they moved.

“Will the wards keep them out?” Harry asked, panting with exertion.

“They didn’t last time.” Sirius muttered.

Xander shook his head, “Dumbles was pretty pissed over than, my money says he’s done something about it.”

“That’d be fine if it were our money you were betting.” Sirius muttered.

“Got a better option?” Xander snapped.

“Guys!” Harry growled, “Can we not do this now?”

“Right. Sorry.” Sirius muttered, “And no, I don’t. So let’s move on.”

They all nodded in agreement and pushed towards Hogwarts ward line with as much speed as they could muster.

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Fenrir was no fool, in fact the wolf rather thought highly of himself and his intelligence, which many may not consider meaning much but those people were prey more often than not so their opinions didn’t exactly count. That said, tangling with a cursed wolf was not on the young wolf’s list of things he loved to do.

Life with his human had so far been pretty quiet, quiet enough that the wolf had to admit that he was becoming... domesticated.

That explained why the tussle had gone on as long as it had, and Fenrir decided that it was time to maybe consider a little exploration of his wolver roots. Later. Like when he wasn’t fighting off the dripping maw of a cursed wolf.

Ignorant mongrel.

Fenrir twisted, rolling them along the ground as he got his teeth dug into the cursed wolf’s flank and growled out a statement of dominance.

**MY** turf, lapdog!

The Cursed Wolf wasn’t one to give up, however, and Fenrir felt its claws rake along his own flank, drawing blood as his flesh was sliced open. Its mangled howl filled the night air as it responded in badly accented wolver.

Me Alpha!

Fenrir snorted through the tainted blood filling his mouth. That would be the day. The damned Curse Born couldn’t even speak the language, and it wanted to be Alpha? Fat chance.

In the words of my Human, Bring it on Mutt.

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"A... are they ok?" Hermione asked, chilled both in spirit and flesh.

They were flying above the Dementor wave, unnoticed by the creatures, and while Hermione wanted to rush down to save Harry and the others, Wednesday refused. The Addams girl knew that while she may be able to stand off a single Dementor, even her father would have difficulties with the massive wave of them below.

"I do not know."

"We have to help them!"

"We will. When we can." Wednesday responded, "At this time, we cannot. We don't know where they are, but then... neither do the Dementors, from what I can tell."

"Then... they're ok."

"There are more dangers below than Dementors."

Hermione looked down again and swallowed as she finally noticed how close they had strayed to the Forbidden Forest.

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"Difindol!"

The spell lashed out, cutting an Acromantula in twain as Sirius spun around and looked for more targets. "Bloody hell! Where did these things come from?"

"Aragog's nest," Harry replied. "He's a friend of Hagrid's."

Sirius stared for a moment, then barked out in laughter, "That just figures. I don't remember them being here when I was in school."

"They were probably smaller in number then," Harry shrugged. "And Aragog was younger, more in control. Their nest is a long way east of here, that was probably just a scout."

"Sorry if I killed a friend of yours," Sirius said, half seriously as he wondered just what the hell his godson had been getting into.

"Don't worry about it," Harry sighed, "without Aragog around we couldn't reason with them, and even with him it would be touch and go at best."

"We need to keep moving," Xander said, feeling a little twitchy without his wand. He would have to start carrying backups, he decided.

"Right." The others agreed.

Sirius sighed; he had to get Harry and this other boy... Xander... back to safety before he could leave. With Peter escaped, he was still a wanted man with no way to prove his innocence. The dishevelled man ground his teeth at the thought of his onetime friend. Peter would get his comeuppance that was destined like the rising of the sun. If he had to hunt his old friend from this life to the next, he would make him pay.

"We're almost through," Xander said suddenly.

The three broke out into the open and looked up to see the lights of Hogwarts in the distance, only to be blinded when a score of Lumos spells erupted around them and they looked to see men and women in Auror's robes approaching.

"Sirius Black, you're captured. Give it up!"

Sirius looked around slowly, grimacing.

"He has hostages!"

"No!" Harry screamed, jumping in front of Sirius, "He's innocent! He's..."

"Stupefy!"

The red bolt dropped Harry in his place, causing Sirius to snarl and start to flick his wand outward. A hand locked on it, plucking the wand from his grip at the last second and he looked back to see Xander shaking his head as he gripped the wand in a ready grip.

Sirius looked down at Harry, then sighed and lifted his hands.

"I surrender."

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The trudging walk up to the castle was a grim one as the Aurors kept Sirius under wand point the entire way and refused to enervate Harry on the belief that Sirius had confounded the boy. Xander kept his peace, knowing that he wouldn't be believed anyway.

At the castle they were met by an entourage of people that included the Minister for Magic, Lucius Malfoy, and the Headmaster among others. The Minister was puffed out, immensely proud of having captured Sirius Black, while Malfoy merely smiled an oily sort of smile that was filled with

satisfaction. A blond woman behind them looked sick, but she was alone in that as even Dumbledore was more focused on Harry's state and gave no indication that he had even noticed Sirius' presence.

"Black! You'll have the Kiss for the trouble you've caused us." Fudge announced pompously.

Sirius just glared at him, then looked back to Harry, but said nothing. What was there to say? They hadn't listened to him after he was incarcerated, why would they begin now?

"Hey Black," A younger voice spoke up, one that Sirius would pay attention to; "I need to know something, before you get what's coming to you."

"What is it, Xander?" Sirius asked.

"You really kill all those people?"

"Of course he did, boy." Fudge blasted out.

Xander and Sirius ignored him, just looking at each other.

"No." Sirius said finally. "I didn't."

"Liar!"

Xander just nodded, hand reaching up to scratch his collar. "When you get where you're going, Black... Take some advice. Ask them for asylum."

Black looked confused, as did everyone else but Albus Dumbledore who looked up in alarm and started to move toward Xander. "My boy, don't...!"

Xander snapped his hand out, throwing something at Black, who caught it on reflex. His eyes widened as he felt a tug at his navel and was suddenly yanked away by port key.

Everyone gaped for a moment, then the place exploded into chaos.

"What have you done!?" Fudge roared, "Aurors arrest that boy!"

"Where did he go!?"

"What happened!?"

"My God! Black escaped!"

Xander didn't say anything for a moment as the Aurors turned on him with their wands. Then he let his clatter to the floor and slowly interlaced his hands behind his head.

"My name is Alexander Harris and I am a citizen of the American Ministry of Magic. As I am a minor please contact my embassy or my legal guardian, Professor Hardy from the Salem Institute."

"Embassy!?" Fudge sputtered, "You'll get Azkaban for this!"

"You can't, Minister." Dumbledore said, eyes blazing. "He's a minor; all you can do is kick him out of the country."

"But... but...!"

"Minister, if I may," Dumbledore said slowly, "I think that the boy may be safely ignored for the moment."

"But he let Black escape!"

"He sent Sirius Black to the American Embassy in London, Minister." Dumbledore told him, "Even now, Black is being taken into custody by the Americans. The faster you demand extradition, the faster this is ended."

Cornelius Fudge blinked, "Are you certain?"

"I made that port key myself, Minister. The Americans were rightly concerned after you let the Dementors barge onto the grounds the last time."

Fudge reddened, "Ah, well... nothing to be done now then. I have to get to London!"

Fudge turned and rushed out, Aurors following along with Lucius Malfoy. The blond woman stayed behind for a moment and nodded at Xander. Then she too was gone.

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Jennifer Simmons sighed when her secretary informed her that the British Minister for Magic was in the waiting area outside. She'd been expecting him, but that didn't make dealing with the idiot any easier. Officially, Jennifer was assigned to the American Embassy in London as a senior secretary who, for some reason no one not in the know could figure out, didn't actually work for any of the ambassador's people.

In truth she was the Ambassador for the American Ministry of Magic, and represented the rights of any Canadian, American, Cuban, or Mexican Witches and Wizards visiting England. Oh, and a smattering of Caribbean nations as well.

For the most part it was a dull job. London was a reasonably safe destination for American Witches and Wizards, and that translated to the rest of England. Compared to Bulgaria and other Eastern European nations Britain was a free thinker's paradise.

And then, earlier in the evening, one Alexander Harris' emergency port key tripped. The Marines on station had been told that a couple kids had been issued those, but it was no kid who showed up. A rather confused looking Sirius Black had landed, roughly, in the middle of the Magical Receiving Zone and been greeted by a half dozen M-16s and eight very burly Squib Marines who wanted to know where their kid was.

All things considered they hadn't roughed him up too badly; at least he'd been able to speak in order to ask for asylum with the American Ministry. She almost wished that they'd broken his jaw, however, because this was looking to be an international incident.

"Send him in." She said, pressing the button on the intercom.

Minister Fudge bustled in the door, followed by an aristocratic looking blond, which was in turn followed by another aristocratic looking blond. Jennifer sighed as softly and unobtrusively as she could.

Purebloods.

It was worse than she'd feared.

"Ah, Minister Fudge." She forced herself to smile, rising from behind her desk to offer her hand. "Please take a seat, I've been expecting you."

"I should hope you have," Fudge blustered. "We've come for Black. Release him at once; we have Dementors waiting to administer the Kiss."

Jennifer stiffened, her smile vanishing. "Minister, surely you are aware of American legislation concerning 'Cruel and Unusual Punishment'?"

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"The American Ministry ruled that the use of demonic entities as punishment for crimes qualifies, Minister."

"This is London, Woman! Not the back woods of the colonies!"

"This is American Soil, by treaty agreement," She returned coldly. "This means we have a problem."

Fudge was about to blow when the blond man stepped smoothly in, "Perhaps, Minister, if we were to guarantee that Black would merely be returned to Azkaban?"

The Minister looked between them for a moment, then back at Jennifer, who shrugged. No need to remind them that the mere presence of Azkaban guards qualified. So long as they guaranteed not to administer a death penalty, it would make things smoother on the legal side of things.

"That would simplify matters on a legal level; in that case we merely need to begin extradition processes."

"Finally." Fudge muttered.

"Now, I'll need the court records of Mr Black's trial," She began, only to trail off when the Minister went a very ugly shade of white. "Minister? Are you alright?"

"F... fine. Why do you need those?" Fudge stammered out, "Everyone knows Black was the right hand man of the Dark Lord."

"Aside from the fact that it's required for my paperwork, Mr Black claims otherwise."

"Of course he would!"

"He has also volunteered to undergo Veritaserum questioning."

"Which can be beaten by a skilled occlumens," the blond man said smoothly.

"This is why we have Master Legilimens on call to perform interrogations." She countered, rolling her eyes.

What was it with these people, trying to tell her how to do her job? Despite public belief, Veritaserum wasn't some infallible source of truth. There were many ways to spoof it, including Occlumency and Judicious use of Oblivates. Either of those could be detected by a skilled interrogator, however, and she had a few names in her rolodex that were known to be **VERY** good at what they did.

"That being established, we'll need to see the court documents of his trial as part of your request for extradition." She repeated herself, "Access to any evidence you still have, his wand in particular, would also be highly useful to your case."

Fudge, still that pasty white, stammered again, "H... His wand was snapped."

Jennifer grimaced, but wasn't particularly surprised. That was standard procedure in Britain, as well as many of the old world ministries. The Pride were screaming right about then, since American LEOs didn't believe in destroying evidence. Old World Aurors, however, operated on the other side of the debate, believing that separating a wand from its wizard permanently would significantly affect the wizard's ability to use magic on any level.

It was even true, in the short term. That was a well researched effect, for several hours to days after the snapping of a bonded wand, a magic user's powers were severely reduced. American LEOs didn't believe it was worth destroying evidence of spells cast for most cases, however.

"Very well," She said calmly, "The court documents, then?"

When the minister continued to pale and didn't answer, an ugly thought crossed her mind.

"Minister, there **WAS** a trial, correct?"

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Xander let out a long slow breath as he sat on the stone wall just outside the front gates, thinking about what had just happened. He was very possibly in deep, deep crud but honestly he was more worried about Wednesday.

Hermione had shown up shortly after the fireworks calmed down, but had immediately been hustled into the infirmary to see Harry so he couldn't ask her where Wednesday was. Most everyone involved in the mess was back, everyone except Lupin and Fenrir. Xander hoped his dog was ok.

"Well Mr Harris, an eventful evening I dare say."

Xander started, then glanced back to see Albus Dumbledore coming up behind him. "Yeah. So, am I to be booted out of the country?"

The headmaster chuckled, "I think we can avoid that outcome, though I dare say you may want to avoid the Minister for a while."

"I doubt that'll be a problem."

"Indeed. I thought I would inform you that Miss Granger and Mr Potter are both fine."

"I know. Harry was just stunned by the Aurors." Xander shrugged, "He's lucky they were competent. Cops in LA might have shot him dead for doing that, you've got to be touched in the head to jump in front of twitchy people with guns... err... wands. Whatever."

The headmaster chuckled again, "True, true. I will, in fact, try to impress that on young Harry."

"Good luck." Xander said dryly.

That brought a sharper laugh from the old man, "I see that you hold the same confidence I have in his ability to learn that particular lesson."

Xander just snorted.

The Headmaster sighed after a moment, "May I ask if you too support the story that Mr Potter has told me?"

"What? About Black being innocent?" Xander shrugged, "Don't know."

"I see."

"What I do know is this," Xander paused, frowning for a moment. "Peter Pettigrew is alive. Sirius had Harry and his friends under wand point several times last night, and not only did he not attack them, he defended Harry. I also know that the ministry snapped Hagrid's wand for something he didn't do, then later threw him in Azkaban for something he, again, didn't do. You do the Arithmancy, Headmaster, what answer do you get?"

"You make very cogent points, Mr Harris. This is why you gave Mr Black your port key?"

"The guy deserves a chance to be heard. I don't know if he'll get it at the embassy, but he sure as hell wasn't getting it here."

Dumbledore nodded, then frowned slightly as movement on the grounds caught his eye. "What is...?"

"Fenrir!" Xander grinned, jumping up and rushing out.

He and the Headmaster rushed out to meet the wolf, noting that Fenrir was dragging the battered and bloody body of the school's defence teacher. As they arrived the wolf dropped Lupin's arm and barked at Xander.

"Boy... is that really you?" Xander whispered, kneeling as he looked the huge wolf in the eyes. "God... you look... big."

The wolf seemed to grin, teeth glistening in the lights from the school behind them and Xander grinned back as he lunged in and hugged the big wolf just as it shrank and reverted back to the puppy he knew.

"Most fascinating." Dumbledore said, looking over from where he had examined Lupin. "I don't believe I have ever seen a more complete familiar bond, Mr Harris. Save perhaps... well, another time. Come now, I must get Mr Lupin back to the infirmary, and you can't stay out here alone."

Xander nodded and got up, carrying Fenrir back to the school as the headmaster floated Remus Lupin along with them.

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By morning, when most of the school was just learning of the excitement, Xander was well down off the adrenaline rush and mostly ignored the rush of questions. There were a couple, however, that he couldn't avoid.

“What did you do with him?” Harry was angry as he approached his wand in hand and clenched tightly. “No one will tell me anything except that you did something.”

Xander blinked, then looked down at the wand in Harry’s hand. “You planning on using that, Harry? Don’t miss.”

Harry looked down himself, then flushed. “What happened to Sirius!?”

“I sent him to the American Embassy in London.” Xander shrugged, “It was that or the kiss. He’ll get a chance there, I figure.”

“A chance? A Chance!?”

“Harry!” Xander snapped, “What else was I going to do?”

Harry slumped, but nodded. “I know. I... I’m sorry.”

“Yeah. Don’t worry about it. I get it, ok. If I hear anything, I’ll let you know as quickly as I can.”

Harry nodded, “thanks.”

That was the first encounter Xander couldn’t ignore. The second, well that came from a different place.

“What were you **THINKING** you traitor!?”

“Gee, Draco,” Xander didn’t look up from his food. “I didn’t realize that I was in any kind of alliance with you.”

“You’re a Slytherin! You can’t go helping Gryffindors!”

Xander glanced around the table, noting that everyone was listening. “Dude, you’re raving. You’re also spitting in my food, cut it out.”

Draco turned an alarming shade of puce, then slowly ground out, “Why would you help them??”

“Hermione’s my friend.”

“She’s a mudblood!” Draco hissed, glaring at him.

“Wouldn’t matter if she were a House elf or a Goblin, or anything else.”

“What are you talking about??”

“Think about it, it’ll come to you eventually, Draco.” Xander sighed as he pushed his food away and got up.

“Don’t you walk away from me!”

Xander ignored him, or at least appeared to. In fact he kept one eye and both ears on the people around him. When a firstie gasped, Xander stopped.

“I’m going to tell you the same thing I told Potter, Draco. Don’t miss.”

When nothing happened for a moment, Xander kept on walking.

Behind him, Draco was gripping his wand tightly as everyone in the Great Hall stared at him.

Xander, for his part, was just glad to be going home. It had been a long year.

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Xander packed up his things, thinking again about how Wednesday was. He’d gotten the story out of Hermione, and figured she’d be fine, but just the same he was a little worried. There was, however, not a thing he could do about it. He didn’t even have a way to call Gomez to let the family know.

Xander paused; frowning for a moment, then dropped the armful of stuff into his trunk and changed it over to a different compartment. He pulled out a wood covered sketchbook and flipped it open, quickly drawing out some lines and then made some notes.

“Could work.” Xander mumbled before dropping the heavy book back into the case.

The train was due to leave shortly, so he hurried things up and with a flick of his wand levitated his trunk, telling it to follow him.

He really loved magic.

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“I’d say that Harris won the year.” Daphne said idly to Tracy as they settled into their compartment on the express.

“If he’s allowed back in the country.” Tracy countered dryly. “The Minister was distinctly displeased.”

Daphne nodded, conceding the point. The Davis family was closer to the Minister than the Greengrass', but it didn't take a genius to realize that the Minister was going to be unhappy if the rumours were true. Of course, the question was which rumours were true exactly. Still, Xander had managed to annoy the Malfoy's, the Minister, and at first it seemed Potter and his faction as well.

Now **THAT** must have taken some fancy footwork, Daphne half snickered. You had to do something really bad to annoy all three of those groups.

The rumour mill ranged from helping Sirius Black escape to assaulting the Defence professor, though no one was entirely certain why either of those scenarios would so annoy all of the above groups.

One firstie had suggested he did both, but that was so stupid he got laughed at.

"Still," Daphne said out loud, "assuming he returns, I think Xander has the edge now."

Tracy considered, then nodded. "Agreed. Daring Draco to curse him in the back was brilliant... well, that or insane."

Daphne laughed, "Too true. Still, it was in front of everyone, including the teachers. Draco couldn't do much, or even Snape wouldn't be able to get him out of it."

"Brilliant then. For timing and location, if not actual action." Tracy conceded. "You're right; I think that Harris has control of almost a third of the house now. Draco's cabal is... a fifth?"

"If that." Daphne shrugged, "Probably only that high if you count the fence sitters as being on his side."

"They may as well be," Tracy countered, "You know they'll come down in his favour at the slightest prompting."

Daphne nodded, accepting the point.

The two girls continued to offer point and counter point as the train shook and left Hogsmeade. It was something they did every year, for each house. When they got home, they would be quizzed by their parents and evaluated. Such was the life of a pure-blooded scion of a political family in England.

This year would show some upsets, however. Slytherin especially, but Potter seemed to be moving into the lead in Gryffindor a little earlier than they'd expected, given his last couple years. For a celebrity, that boy was downright antisocial, and it had made them wonder if maybe he'd just skulk through his school years largely unnoticed.

This year he'd started to come out a bit, though, and both girls knew that control of Gryffindor was Potter's for the asking. All he had to do was stand up and take it.

Diggory was undisputed now in Hufflepuff, which was entirely expected. The Puff's were solid like that, rarely was there ever a real power struggle in that house. Ravenclaw was... confusing.

"So what do you think is happening in the Claws?" Tracy asked, finally bring up that house.

Daphne grimaced, "I have no idea."

That wasn't going to go over well, the two knew. Their fathers would be distinctly unhappy with the confused information they had on the Claws. Until this year it had been fairly clear that Cho Chang was heading the up and coming power, while the sitting power was the prefect, Clearwater.

Something had changed, though, and for the life of them they couldn't figure out what it was. The Claws were shifty suddenly, nervous. Paranoid one might say, particularly Chang and her group. The problem was, no one seemed to know why.

It was damnably annoying.

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The train arrived at Platform 9 and 3/4s on schedule, and the platform was soon swamped in kids anxious to get home.

After watching Harry being hauled off by the overweight guy he met every year, Xander quickly found Professor Hardy where the man was waiting and greeted him as he moved over.

"Uh... Wednesday is..." Xander grimaced.

"She's fine," Hardy said dryly, "I was contacted yesterday. She shouldn't have left without telling anyone, but that's neither of our problems at the moment. You, however, have some questions to answer about your port key."

"Yeah... about that..." Xander grimaced for the second time.

"Causing an international incident is **NOT** something we encourage our students to do, Mr Harris." Hardy sighed, "Still, judging by what the Ambassador told me, you probably didn't have many palatable options."

"Couldn't let them suck the guys soul out, not if he was innocent."

Hardy nodded tiredly, "I know. Come on, you have some interviews to do before we can get you home."



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The interviews turned out to be fairly friendly, Xander found, but long and pretty dull. Mostly just retelling his story over and over, omitting a few details to protect... well, himself. He didn't feel like letting them in on the map, it was his. Ditto for the Grimoire.

They let him talk to Sirius, perhaps surprisingly, and Xander found the guy to be in good spirits and looking better than he had a few days earlier.

"So you found the Grimoire, huh?" The man asked with a crooked smile.

Xander nodded, "it's got me through school."

"That's what they made it for," Sirius nodded, then smiled, "Well that and teaching the art of counter-pranking. Lilly was scary good at that."

"Yeah, well I've done a few things," Xander admitted with a half smile. "But mostly I use it for study."

"I'm having a hard time accepting that a Slytherin was helping Harry," Sirius admitted, sighing as he sat back.

"As I tell people, I'm a yank remember?" Xander said easily, "I don't have any house prejudices. Neither does Harry, not too many anyway. But I didn't help him for him, I helped him because Hermione is my friend, and she's his friend."

"I don't know her." Sirius admitted, "What's she like?"

"Scary smart, her parents are dentists," Xander said, shrugging, "She's a girl, what do you want?"

"Your girlfriend or Harry's?" Sirius asked, smirking.

Xander threw up his hands, "Whoa, friend. Not girlfriend. Don't know about Harry, but I think the same. She helps me study; I help her with what I can."

"Right."

"Yeah, your Sirius Black alright." Xander rolled his eyes, "You know, your damn mongrel avatar destroyed half my notes in the Grimoire? Rewrote most of the other half. Since they let you loose, I've had to keep my notes in other places."

"Bet you don't leave em lying around anymore, though?"

"Mutt." Xander growled, shaking his head. He sighed, then half smiled again, "You know what's going to happen with you?"

"Weeks of red tape," Sirius admitted, "After that... don't know."

"Well, if they let you out to play, I'm from Sunnydale. California, that is." Xander said, "Look me up. Chances are I can get word to Harry for you."

"Thanks."

Xander nodded, then got up. "I've got to go. See you around."

Sirius nodded soberly and watched as Xander left, knocking on the door to have the guard unlock it and let him out.

Outside, Xander glanced back through the glass, and was surprised to realize that he kinda liked the annoying bugger. He'd lived with him for nearly a year, in a manner of speaking, and had long since gotten used to the mutt.

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