

The shuffle into the living room was more than a bit awkward. Both Dumbledore and McGonagall were staring at me now, wary and indignant for what I had said. Still, the two sat down without complaint, the rest of us following suit.

Once everyone was seated, the room remained silent. An unlit fireplace took up one corner of the room, and I could see a small stack of toys in a basket half way tucked behind one of the couches. Dumbledore seemed content to wait for us to start, so I occupied my time by looking at the family pictures that decorated the room. Some of them moved, but plenty more were normal still shots.

Ted and Andromeda seemed to immediately pick up the game Dumbledore was playing, trying to get us to talk first, the latter squeezing Sirius' arm when he opened his mouth. Eventually, after a full two minutes of silence, Dumbledore let out a long breath, sounding like disappointment.

"Sirius, I truly understand why you are reluctant to trust me. But surely the Dursleys can be trusted to take care of Harry? He is just a child, they couldn't possibly-"

"Even if Petunia and her husband loved him with all their hearts, I still wouldn't want them to have him," Sirius responded, rolling his eyes dismissively. "Their child is a spoiled brat, and he is too young for it to be anything other than their fault."

That seemed to strike a chord with McGonagall, who looked at Dumbledore as if waiting for his response.

"He is their first child. I am sure they will learn better habits as they get more experienced," He insisted.

"Or they will continue until he is a fat, spoiled rotten bully," I countered. "But you're probably right. It's not like I know the future or anything."

Dumbledore gave me another appraising look, one with the backing of an intelligent and willful mind. It was cutting, with none of the haze or distraction that usually came with extreme age.

"I'm sure your influence would help with that," The old wizard assured Sirius, turning to look at him. "While Harry must live with his relatives, and you visiting him would put him at risk, the occasional holiday would be acceptable-"

"Ariana would be disappointed in you," I said, shaking my head, deliberately cutting him off.

Dumbledore's head whipped around to look at me, his jaw hanging open in shock. Before his mind could catch up, I quickly continued.

"You are attempting to put Harry into a position that would have made what the neighborhood boys did to her look like nothing," I said, staring him down. "Dumbledore, I don't actually think you're a bad person. I think you're stuck in a world where everyone looks up to you. Where everyone expects you to solve their problems. I think you desperately don't want to put Harry with the Dursley, but you think you have to. You think you have no choice. Am I on the money?"

The room was silent, nothing but the ticking of a large grandfather clock filling the room. Dumbledore was speechless, his eyes locked on mine. I resisted the urge to hold back, to spare his feelings, because as much as I liked Dumbledore as a character in the books, this was real life. Harry was real, and putting him through eleven years of child abuse was unacceptable.

"So let me lay out what Harry's life would be like with the Dursleys, so that there aren't illusions or misunderstandings. Harry would be starved, pushed around, yelled at, and forced to cook, clean, and do yard work way beyond what he should be doing at his age. When he starts doing accidental magic, they will call him a freak and encourage Dudley to bully him for it. They will tell him his parents were drunks who died while driving under the influence. They will belittle him, ostracize him, and spread rumors about him being dangerous and a delinquent so that no one else catches on to their abuse. He will feel no love, no friendship. Does that sound like something that would produce a healthy, kind wizard? Because to me, it doesn't. To me, it sounds like the recipe for an Obscurial."

Andromeda gasped, and I could see that Sirius looked ready to jump out of his seat. Even McGonagall looked like she wanted to yell at Dumbledore. For a long stretch of time, no one said anything, taking what I had said, simply accepting it to be true.

"He needs to be protected," Dumbledore finally said, his voice soft, his demeanor that of a man on the verge of breaking.

"Then protect him. Use a Fidelus, swaddle him in his dad's invisibility cloak, move to America, whatever you have to do. But don't damn the boy to suffer."

The silence in the room was deafening, everyone's eyes moving from mine to Dumbledores. I waited patiently for the older wizard to recover, doing my best to appear calm and confident. After a full minute, Dumbledore shakily rubbed his brow, his face pale. He looked like he had aged a decade since he had arrived.

"I... Very well," Dumbledore finally said. "I-"

He visibly stopped himself from speaking, taking a deep breath to seemingly steady himself before trying again.

"If that is truly how he would be treated... I will not ask for him to be placed in their care," He said, most of the room sagging in relief.

A large part of me wanted to point out that he had no right to ask anything of anyone, but I figured it was better to accept the win gracefully at this point.

"He does need to be protected, however," He said. "Many supporters of Voldemort-"

Everyone save Dumbledore, and myself flinched at his name, Sirius going so far as to stand up and look out the windows. It was mildly interesting to see everyone flinch at once like that, as it had always been a mainstay of the books, and the idea of people visibly flinching at a name was weird. Dumbledore motioned for Sirius to sit down, having the decency to at least look apologetic.

"The Taboo ended with his death at the hands of Young Harry," He assured him. "I tested it myself."

The room seemed to collectively sigh with relief at his statement, though I kept my eye on Dumbledore. He hadn't even flinched when stating that Voldemort was dead. Perhaps he hadn't worked out that he wasn't really dead at this point?

"There are many who would blame Harry for the death of their leader or master," Dumbledore said, continuing from his last statement. "He needs to be protected. Not even the Ministry can know where he is."

"Then perhaps... it's time for one last prank. The marauders send off," Sirius said, looking up from his hands. "Perhaps... the wizarding world needs to think that Harry died at the hands of Voldemort. A spell so powerful it rebounded and destroyed both of them. Dumbledore, could you..."

"That... is something I could push for," He admitted, his hand coming up to stroke his beard. "The right words in the right ears, and most of the wizarding world would believe it. After all, what are the chances a young child could stand up to him completely..."

"I will disappear for a while and raise him myself. Tell the world I ran away in grief and shame that the truth was tortured from me," Sirius said, his excitement rising as his idea blossomed. "We can return when he is older so he can go to Hogwarts. He will be safe there at least, and... I could not deprive him of that."

"This... I should not be surprised. You were always deceptively clever, Sirius," Dumbledor admitted, a small portion of life returning to him as a potential alternative appeared. "With some adjustment, that is a sound plan."

They continued to talk, but I stopped listening as I felt a pull, something outside of the physical world, tugging on me. I could almost hear Sally, her voice tickling my spine like someone shouting on the other side of a soundproof window. I slowly stood up, catching everyone's attention.

"Gentleman, Ladies, I believe that my time to return home has come," I said with a smile.

"Are you sure?" Andromeda asked, looking worried. "It's late. Surely you should wait until morning?"

"I'm afraid that with Dumbledore agreeing to keep Harry out of the Dursleys and with Sirius, my task is complete," I explained, getting a few confused looks. "Good luck, everyone!"

As I talked, I could feel a pulling sensation come over me, going through the same process as before, but now in reverse. Suddenly, I could see in both places at once before snapping back to myself, standing in Sally's heart.

"Holy hell... that is a strange sensation," I said, rubbing my eyes before giving myself a shake, noting a sense of pins and needles in my extremities.

"Apologies, there is only so much I can do about the phantom sensations of connecting you to your Avatar," Sally said, her sapphire bouncing slightly. "Did you enjoy your trip?"

"Enjoy? The repercussions of failing were too serious to enjoy," I explained, shaking my head as the strange sensations faded quickly. "It was certainly interesting, though..."

I spent another minute or so shaking myself and stretching, working out the strange phantom sensations. When everything was back to normal, I straightened up and rolled my shoulders.

"Alright, so how did I do?" I asked. "I went through a Harry Potter phase when I was younger, so I had a bit of an advantage for this one, I think."

"Very well! Your Seer idea worked well, especially considering how seriously Dumbledore takes things like prophecy." She pointed out. "I believe you convinced him quite thoroughly, especially after your sudden exit."

"How did they take me just disappearing?" I asked.

"I was only connected for a few seconds after you, but they were very surprised," She responded, her smirk audible.

"Is it going to happen like that every time?"

"Unfortunately, the best opportunity to pull you back is on the trail of the energy I am absorbing," She explained. "Otherwise, I have to sacrifice some of it to reconnect and pull your consciousness back."

"Damn... I can imagine just vanishing in front of people could cause some issues later on if I start repeating trips to the same reality," I pointed out. "But that's a problem for me in the future. Right now, it's time to pick a reward, right?"

"Yup! Oh, this is so exciting! The first step forward!" Sally said, her gemstone almost seeming to wiggle in excitement. "Okay, so your first reward is a significant decrease in healing time for anyone who calls the Bastion home, including you."

"...And what does calling the Bastion home entail?" I ask, my mind trying to dissect what she was saying. "And how fast are we talking?"

"What do you- Oh! I see what you mean. Unfortunately, just saying that you consider the Bastion home is not enough for it to work. They must have slept in the Bastion, must have a bed that is theirs alone, and the Bastion must be able to support them for at least five out of seven days in a week," She explained. "As for how fast... It will be around.... twenty percent! Oh my, that's a lot more than I expected..."

"Damn, that's going to be hard to beat. And the second reward?" I said, eager to hear the second reward.

"The ability for you to always know which direction the Bastion is. No matter how flipped around you get, you will always be able to point in the direction of home."

I chewed the inside of my cheek, trying to work my way through my options. My immediate instinct is to take the healing and add a compass to my list of things to look out for when I leave the Bastion. On the other hand, I can imagine several very specific scenarios where knowing one direction would be incredibly helpful. Still, speeding up the recovery time of everyone living here was something I just couldn't pass up. I would likely think differently if I ever get abducted, caught in a sandstorm or stuck in a maze, but I can fall off that bridge when I get to it.

"The healing factor," I said. "It's something that will always be useful, whether it's just me or there are hundreds of people."

"Are you sure?" Sally asked. "Once I begin, I won't be able to stop, and it will be permanent."

"Go ahead. As interesting as the compass would be, the healing is too good to pass up."

"Alright! Commencing Reality Adjustment!"

The blue runes set in on every surface of Sally's heart lit up as one, shining bright for a long while before finally fading back to their normal glow, the glow fading last from Sally's gem. After a moment, Sally seemed to return to normal, bobbing slightly.

"Alright, shall we return to the Bastion?" She asked, and when I nodded, she pulsed with light again, and we were both suddenly in my room.

I let out a long breath of relief, wondering if I would feel any different, before realizing Sally had just healed me recently, and I hadn't left the Bastion since then.

"So... how long until you have another jump ready?" I asked, stepping back and sitting at the edge of my bed.

"It's impossible to tell," Sally responded, floating until she was bouncing about five feet in front of me. "The average is twenty-four hours, but that can vary greatly. It could be hours or days, and unfortunately, there is no way for me to know since the process is essentially a random scan through the space between realities."

"Oh..." I trailed off, the room quiet for a long few seconds.

"Perhaps you should attempt to find more survivors?" Sally suggested, which lined up with my own thoughts.

"Yeah... Of course..." I responded, trailing off and staying exactly where I was.

"What's wrong?" Sally asked, sounding concerned. "Did something go wrong? Are you feeling okay?"

"Yeah... I'm fine, Sally," I assured her, letting out another long breath. "It's just that... When I left my apartment, I wasn't being brave. It was a mix of fear and practicality. I needed a place that would actually protect me, and even if I was probably going to die, I should at least *try*. I'm finding it a lot harder to gather up the will to leave now that I'm actually safe."

"Well... to be fair, you're not *really* safe," She pointed out reluctantly, worried she was saying the wrong thing. "Starvation is still absolutely an issue, and the field only protects from low-level creatures and dissuades medium level. While at this moment, you may be safe, threats will be coming, and you are *certainly* not ready for them. Even worse, the repulsing field only works on creatures. If another human notices the Bastion and decides they want it..."

My eyes widened at Sally's final point, and internally, I felt stupid. Even with the motorbike-driving idiot from my first foray into looting, I hadn't even considered the threat of other people. From what Sally had revealed about our situation, the Bastion could very well be

humanity's last chance at survival. I could easily see some idiotic, knuckle-dragging asshole stumbling on us and killing me so he could claim the Bastion for himself.

"Right, well, now I'm terrified," I said blandly, the oddly familiar feeling of fear and determination filling me. "I can work with that."