

To the Rescue V: Into the Next Summer

By

DrT

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Chapter I

Friday, February 14, 1997
The Ysgol

"You look nervous, Ron," Leroy said.

"First date jitters, you figure?" Bill teased.

"Naw, who could be nervous with such a demure, sweet-tempered, young lady as Sabrina?"

"Get stuffed."

"Ah," Bill said. "That must be that suave British charm we've heard so much about."

"No wonder he's so successful with the ladies."

Ron rolled his eyes. "Shouldn't you two gits be fetching your dates from the Oranges?"

"The man is right," Bill admitted.

Leroy patted Ron on the shoulder as he went by. "Don't worry, Ron," he said seriously. "You'll both have a good time."

"Why have a dance on Valentine's Day? Nothing like putting pressure on a bloke!" Ron protested.

"I think it's worse when the spring dance is in late April," Bill said. "It just makes their expectations build longer."

"Look, you have her flowers, you dressed up well, and all you have to do is dance. . . ."

"Dance!"

"It's the Spring **Dance**," Bill reminded Ron. "She will expect at least a few."

"I'm doomed. I'm not very good. . . ."

Leroy shrugged. "I don't know what kind of dancing you guys do over there, but most of what we do here is rather . . . unstructured. Keep a beat, and you'll be fine."

"Come on," Bill said, taking one of Ron's arms. "We can all be brave together."

Tuesday, February 18, 1997
Malfoy Manor

"My, you look like you've had a hard time recently," Draco said in a taunting tone.

Michael Corner glared at Draco, who was lounging in a leather arm chair with a brandy snifter and a smirk, with bloodshot eyes. Despite the temptation, Michael said nothing.

"My lovely and well-tempered auntie been after you?" Draco needled. "Or perhaps your master got bored and tortured you for fun recently?"

"Sod off," Corner said in a rough voice. "Do you have something for us, or not?"

"Of course I do," Draco said in a calming tone. "Fifteen hairs from Potter, and a dozen from Granger. My people also collected six hairs they believe are Potter's, but which they can't swear to, four very short hairs from Longbottom, and some from Lovegood and the Weaselette, although those can't be used for over a year. We have three dozen other hairs from various people around Potter. They're all marked, and in that satchel over by that sofa."

"Thank you," Corner said in relief.

"So, has he managed to recruit many more followers?" Draco asked, curiously.

"I wouldn't tell you either way," Corner pointed out.

"True," Draco agreed. "I was just wondering. The dementors must be getting hungry." Corner merely shuddered.

"I thought so," Draco mused. "I also received some other interesting information, by the way."

"What was that?" Corner asked despite himself.

"Potter seems to have had a surge in his power of some sort. It's not clear if it's permanent, or a flare." Flares of power were not unknown, especially in Muggle-born and second and third generation wizards and witches. Sometimes this showed the person's final power level, sometimes that final power did not meet the power of the flare. "There is also some suggestion that he, Lovegood, and Granger have formed a menage of some sort, possibly with Longbottom and the Weaselette. I'm sure I'll hear more. I told them to do more than collect gossip."

"I'll come back before Easter."

"Fine," Draco said dismissively. "Have you had any news from America, by the way?"

"Not that I know of. Why?"

"I'll let your master worry about Potter for now. I wouldn't mind having the Weasel's head mounted on my wall."

"If we get the opportunity, we'll send you a present," Corner said. He had his own minor grudges against the Weasleys.

"Thank you."

Thursday, February 20, 1997

Harry Potter stood on a low, grassy knoll, overlooking a tropical beach. It was a fairly bright day, with hardly a cloud in the sky. Harry was watching four figures who were on the beach, perhaps thirty yards away. They were paying no attention to him whatsoever.

One was a tired looking young man with prematurely graying hair. Normally, there were fatigue lines around his eyes, but he was asleep in a hammock, strung between two palm trees. He was relaxed for once in his life. The sun seemed to be healing some of the man's almost innumerable scars, clearly visible, since all he had on was a speedo.

An attractive red-headed woman was seated under a coconut tree, sipping some sort of exotic drink. She sat in the shade, wearing a silk beach robe to protect her from the sun, and she was watching two young men. They were playing tag in the surf, and at times a large wave would sweep the legs out from under one or the other man, much to the amusement of the red head, whose laugh could be clearly heard.

"I admit I am impressed, Harry."

Harry wasn't terribly surprised to see a middle-aged native Australian walking towards him. "Master J," he acknowledged. "Why? what's impressive about it?"

"Why? for one reason, the detail, especially the colors. This is a much more complex dreamscape than most people could conjure up in their own minds. I am assuming you have never been to such a place."

Harry gave his teacher a wan smile at that. "Hardly. I may have seen similar scenes on the telly, though."

"That's true," Master J acknowledged. "Still, unless you saw such a scene with similar action, it is still fairly impressive. Why aren't you joining them?"

That made Harry pause and think that through. "I'm not certain," he said after a few moments thought. "I think it's because I really don't know how my parents would actually act. I don't have any real memories of them, visual ones I mean. There are just little scenes in wizarding photos." 'And their screams, right before they were killed,' Harry thought.

"I understand."

Harry turned back to the scene. "It doesn't matter though. I don't need to talk with them, or interact with them. I just need to see them safe and happy." Harry smiled.

Harry faced the dreamwalker again. "Was there another reason this was impressive?"

"Oh, yes. There are many reasons we dream what we dream, and even I, perhaps the most learned person alive on the subject, wouldn't claim to know more than a small fraction of the reasons. This dreamscape of yours is satisfying your needs. Even if you weren't directing this dream, you would still be dreaming something with the same symbolic meanings, although no doubt much more disguised."

"And this isn't?" Harry asked.

"There are almost always many layers of meanings to dreams," Johnson agreed. "What do you think another meaning would be?"

"This represents what I've lost: my family and their loyal friends. I haven't had them in my life like they should have been," Harry pointed out.

J considered that for a moment before he responded. "Is that another reason why you're not there?"

Harry shrugged. "Maybe. More importantly, it probably stands for what I hope for most, even more than wishing for a better past."

"And what is that?"

Harry waved his hand. Remus stayed much the same, although Tonks joined him in the hammock. James and Sirius morphed into Ron and Rina, still playing in the water, although now Neville and Ginny had joined them. Lily turned into Hermione, with Luna sitting next to her.

"Your ideal future?"

"Exactly."

"You're still not in the scene," Johnson pointed out.

"I don't want to go from a dream into fantasy," Harry said simply. Seeing the Dreamwalker's question coming, Harry added, "I don't want to live in a fantasy world, which is what this would be if I injected myself into the scene."

"Very wise, Harry."

The dreamscape bled back into the original scene. "Are you just here for a visit, Master J?"

Johnson the Dreamwalker smiled. "Of course not. I shall meet you in your dreams every Thursday and Sunday morning, at least through Easter. You have learned the basics of controlling mundane dreamwalking very well. It is time to go beyond that. In addition, it is time you started to learn Legilimency."

"Really? I'm surprised anyone would trust someone my age to learn it."

"I do. Tabitha, Henry, Tudor, and Dumbledore do. I know of no one else whose opinion was sought."

"Who will I be practicing on?"

"You shall be practicing first with Tabitha. I understand she has arranged for a volunteer, whose mind she says will be open to you. We shall then teach him Occlumency, and we shall build your power that way."

"Who?"

"Unfortunately, all your friends are now moderately to totally immune from mental attacks. . . ."

"Who?" Harry asked again.

"A young man named Colin Creevy."

The dreamscape disappeared, replaced by a gray mist. "What!"

"Is that a problem?"

Harry materialized a stool and sat down heavily. "I really don't want to see what thoughts are in Colin's head!"

Johnson frowned. "Why?"

"I tell you, I've had Colin following me around for over four years, all over the school, including the showers! Especially the showers! With a camera! Now do you understand?"

"Oh. . . . well. . . . Yes. . . . We'll try to avoid those thoughts and memories, Harry." Johnson frowned. "Would Professor Jones or Professor Snape have known?"

"Professor Snape probably would have. I don't know about Professor Jones."

"I see. I'll have to look into that. Anyway, I'm sure, since Mister Creevy might like the idea of you in his head at first, it will help you take the first steps in the delicate art of Legilimency."

"Oh, joy."

For the next four weeks, Harry was kept remarkably busy. All of his classes were piling on the research. Even Percy Weasley, although his classroom demeanor had drastically improved, hadn't let up on the research and the writing required. Quidditch practice restarted in early March, apparation continued for Harry and most of the Sixth years every Friday afternoon. He practiced dueling with the Sixth year dueling club and against various people (aurors, sersiants, and staff) every Friday morning. Every Thursday morning, Harry delved into Colin's mind. Every Thursday afternoon, Harry practiced drawing power from the group. He also had patrols to make as the prefect and Security prefect (he and Neville had split Ron's prefect position between them), and he of course tried to find as much time as possible with Luna, while not forgetting to spend some time with his close friends, especially Hermione.

All his friends were nearly as busy as Harry. Luna and Ginny of course were in their O.W.L. year. Hermione had organized the Gryffindor Fifth years study groups, and some of the Fifth years from other Houses had joined them, including Luna. Hermione was even talking of organizing the Sixth and Seventh years as well. Neville was trying to keep ahead in his classes while becoming the lead volunteer in the greenhouses for several special projects. They all had their exercise times and prefects patrols on top of their school work.

Hermione should have been the busiest person of all. No one had taken eight N.E.W.T.-level classes in recent memory, plus she had Apparation, her workouts and patrols, her work with Harry, and her work with a variety of different study and self-defense groups. She was also working with Professors Lawrence and Spellman on ritual magic and learning the basics of the Old Belief. On top of all that, Hermione made certain that she scheduled two one hour 'prime time' sessions every week with each of her three best friends (Ginny, Luna, and Harry) and extra time late at night with Harry.

These six hours and the ones she spent with Harry late at night were about the only times Hermione allowed herself to really mentally, physically, and emotionally relax. True, she let herself physically relax a bit during the Saturday morning 'beauty' sessions to some degree, and every evening she wasn't patrolling, between 10:45 and 11:45 she would sit in the common room, knitting, usually sitting snuggled next to Harry, who would be reading. But during these times, Hermione rarely totally let her guard down. Only Ginny, Luna, Harry, and sometimes Neville were now allowed to see the fully human side of Hermione, and then only if no one else was near by. The rest of the students only saw the aspects of her that Hermione allowed them to see.

Now that Draco no longer was there to harass her, Ron was gone, and Harry was controlling his temper, Hermione had no reason to allow cracks in her created persona to show in public. She knew she had to relax those safeguards sometimes, however.

The students were for the most part, frankly, puzzled by the quintet. Ginny and Neville, and Harry and Luna, were obviously close and affectionate couples. Seen as individuals or as couples, they seemed to fit into the usual Hogwarts patterns. Granted, some people still wondered what the famous Harry Potter would see in the odd Luna Lovegood, or what the pretty, vivacious and down-right buxomly sexy Ginny Weasley might see in the staid, laid-back, if now-muscular Neville, but there were equally odd couples spread throughout Hogwarts.

Seeing the two couples together would hardly seem unusual, either. Harry and Neville had always been friendly, as had Ginny and Luna. What confused people was the role of Hermione in all this. In addition, none of the quintet had been tactile people before the previous term, and had hardly seemed that way even then. That the couples could now be seen holding hands in the corridors was hardly surprising, but now the entire group was touching.

All five now always greeted the others with a kiss, except for Harry and Neville. Similarly, they were the only two not seen holding hands at various times. Still, Neville often put his hand on Harry's shoulder in greeting, and Harry would grip Neville's upper arm. It especially fascinated Parvati, Lavender, and Colin to watch the quintet interact.

One morning, Parvati and Lavender had found Neville waiting in the common room. Ginny came down, and the couple had hugged and kissed deeply, if briefly. Hermione had come in just as they broke off the kiss. Neville and Ginny took turns embracing and kissing Hermione, Ginny perhaps more passionately than Neville.

By then, Harry had joined them. Harry and Neville exchanged their manly shoulder/arm grab, then Harry hugged and kissed Ginny and then Hermione. They left the common room, Neville and Ginny first, holding hands, followed by Harry and Hermione, also holding hands.

Parvati and Lavender had followed.

Luna was waiting for the Gryffindor quartet near the entrance to Ravenclaw. Ginny, Neville, and Hermione each embraced and kissed Luna, and then Harry had kissed her with more passion. Harry and Luna had then led the way, hand-in-hand, while Neville walked arm-in-arm with Hermione and Ginny.

The observing pair carefully crushed any rumors that came their way. It was clear to them that, whatever else was going on, this was almost certainly fairly innocent, at least in terms of sexual overtones. The five obviously cared for each other in ways that were normally far outside the experience of the vast majority of sixteen year olds.

The two friends therefore resorted to their strengths, and conducted a serious session of tarot readings and crystal gazing. What they saw troubled them, for it involved pain, dangers, and death, although they weren't certain whose. Above all, it told them that the only chance the group had for a future was by staying together.

That was enough for Lavender and Parvati. They put all their efforts into seeing that the quintet was viewed with the most sympathetic light. When they had discovered that most of the nastier rumors about the quintet were still coming from Cho's Clique, they organized a counter-group, basically trapping the Clique back into its own little support group but keeping their poison fairly-well contained. There wasn't much they could do about the remaining rumors, which were mostly coming out of Slytherin. There, Tracy Davis and Daphne Greengrass helped them out by making certain the pro-Harry interpretations were spread in Slytherin as well.

Colin Creevy also watched the quintet.

While Colin was friendly towards nearly anyone who wasn't hostile towards him, he knew how to keep secrets. He was willing to exchange some of his observations with Lavender and Parvati, and was certainly happy to help them quash any of the nastier rumors about his hero.

Colin had a slightly better idea of what was going on than Lavender and Parvati, but not by much. Colin had no illusions about Harry. Harry would never love him like he loved Luna. Harry would never love him like he loved Hermione and Ginny. He knew that Harry would never even care for him like he cared for Neville.

It didn't matter to Colin. He was helping Harry. It was embarrassing, having his secrets peeled away, layer by layer. In some ways, by the end of term, Harry would know more about Colin than Colin did.

Colin had been afraid that Harry would use him and despise him. After all, everyone has, at the least, little fears, phobias, and secrets that could be embarrassing, even if not everyone recognized them.

Harry didn't ever mention what he learned to anybody. Colin was sure, if Harry had, Luna or Hermione or someone would have at least given him a funnier look than usual. None had.

Harry rarely commented about what he had learned from Colin. The other four members of the quintet knew what was going on, of course, and Harry sometimes directed one of them to help Colin with some class assignment Harry had learned Colin was having problems with. Once Harry had even told Colin that the fantasy he had just uncovered looked more uncomfortable than a turn-on. That was as far as it had gone.

If anything, Colin was now slightly closer to Harry than anyone other than his four companions. He was well-aware of the divisions, and didn't try to cross them.

If this was the role fate had given Colin in helping his hero win what might be the battle of a millennium, then Colin would accept it.

Chapter II

Rumors continued to fly around Hogwarts in February and March. Most were still about Harry Potter. Many were still rumors about his sexuality. These were again mostly stopped by three Gryffindors: Lavender Brown, Parvati Patil, and Colin Creevy. There were other rumors that Lavender, Parvati, and Colin couldn't stop, however. Harry's power jump was now noticeable in all his applied classes. The Charms, Defense, and Transfiguration classes had witnessed a few extraordinary performances, although Harry tried very hard to keep things under control.

It was this type of rumor that worried Albus Dumbledore and all of the Hogwarts staff who were paying attention to the situation. For all of them but one, the reason they were worried was because the more Harry demonstrated his abilities, the more chances Voldemort would have to get ready for him. Even though the staff were all fairly certain that Harry was now more powerful than Voldemort (and perhaps even Dumbledore), if only by a bit, the Dark Lord had fifty years of experience on Harry. Harry would need every possible advantage to come out ahead.

Severus Snape felt trapped. He really couldn't believe a boy could beat the Dark Lord who had so easily humiliated both himself and other wizards whom he considered Potter's superiors. On the other hand, he could take no comfort or joy in the idea that Potter might actually win.

At heart, Severus Snape was as much a Purist as he had been the day he had taken the Dark Mark. He now would grant that Muggles played their part in the world, and that the Muggle-born had to be trained. However, they and their half-blood seeds needed to know their place.

By and large, the Muggle-born did know their place in his opinion. It was the half-bloods, especially the half-bloods raised primarily in the Muggle world, that he especially disliked. Muggle-borns, even those rare few stand-outs like Granger, were generally confused and awed at first and knew enough to try and fit in. It was the half-bloods who caused the most mischief, along with the Pure-Bloods who should know better.

That the best example of a Pure-Blood who should 'know better' was Albus Dumbledore was a fact that Snape usually managed to totally ignore. About the only thing Snape was grateful to Harry Potter for was the information that allowed him to classify the Dark Lord as one of the half-bloods who caused more trouble than the entire group was worth.

He had decided that it would be up to him to save the wizarding world from Harry Potter, now the most powerful half-blood of them all.

Harry of course wasn't really paying much attention to any of this. He concentrated on developing his new powers, listening to his mentors (Tabitha, Cadfael, Tom, Lloyd and Remus; Toby had dropped out of tutoring Harry and his friends, although he still spent a great deal of time tutoring the Fifth and Sixth year duelists).

When the Easter break started on March 22, Harry was ready to take the next steps. To most of the students remaining at Hogwarts, it didn't seem terribly strange that Harry and Hermione

seemed to have left for the break. As usual, nearly the entire Fifth and Seventh years stayed. Neville said he was staying to help Ginny, Luna, and their friends study Herbology.

Harry and Hermione did not leave via the train, however. None of the students saw the pair leave, which wasn't surprising since they left under Harry's invisibility cloak. No one noticed the strange movements of the whomping willow, as it was stilled.

Once in the tunnel, the pair removed the cloak. "It's a bit . . . weird being back here, isn't it?" Harry said softly.

"It is," Hermione agreed. "We thought it a bit of a tight fit three years ago."

Harry looked at her. "Are you sure you want to go through with this?"

"Bit late to be worrying about that now, isn't it?" Hermione teased, holding out her hand.

"I guess," Harry agreed. Harry took her hand, lit his wand, and the pair wound their way through the long tunnel to the Shrieking Shack.

When they arrived, Harry pushed open the trap door, and to Hermione's shock, put his hands on her waist and boosted her up to sit on the floor, squealing in surprise as he did so.

Hermione suddenly went silent, and Harry came up as well, wand at the ready. He relaxed when he saw that Tabitha and Master J were smiling at them.

"I thought you said you wouldn't be here until tonight," Harry said. "It's not even Nine."

"That's what you get for being early," Tabitha retorted. "The students are just leaving for the station. We thought you'd be along a little bit later. I was just showing J here the set-up and we were double-checking the charms. We were just leaving."

"I hope it's been fixed up a bit since the last time we were here," Hermione said hopefully.

"It has been," Johnson answered. "However, we can't afford to have any smoke, so you'll have to use a lot of heating charms. We should have insulated things well enough that what little snow that's left won't melt from it."

"There's plenty of food," Tabitha told Hermione, "and if I know you, your backpack is filled with work and research, so go ahead and get to work." She turned to Harry. "There's a small work-out area. Try not to make yourself too mentally tired. You're going to need your wits about you tonight, but physical workouts might be good."

"Alright."

Besides working out, Harry did work on his Regs and Medical homework in the morning and afternoon. By 4:00, however, he had put all his homework away. Hermione was still working on a research paper, so Harry went to cook dinner, Muggle-style.

Tabitha and Johnson were back at the Shack after dinner.

"Are you two ready?" Tabitha asked.

"It's not too early?" Hermione asked.

"To really travel into other minds, yes, in every respect," J answered. "What we are going to do tonight is help Harry project his mind and see where he can go from there." He led the students into a small room, where there were four cushions. J shut the door and gestured for the other three to sit.

Johnson then lit candles under small clay pots. "These do not contain any truly hallucinogenic substances," he said as he lit them. "They will help us relax. However, neither Hermione nor Tabitha will be projecting, and there is the chance Tabitha might should we use any of the herbs that enhance the projection power, since she will be deep in meditation. Tabitha will monitor our spirits, while Hermione will keep her attention on our physical selves."

J took off his robe, pulling an object out of his pocket as he did so. Hermione and Harry were a bit surprised to see it was a plastic spray bottle. He handed it to Hermione. "Should you decide you must bring any of us out of our trances, spray us in the face. Hit Harry first, no matter what happens. Even if one of us is in more trouble, we have more experience, so hit Harry first. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Feel free to put a chilling charm on it," Tabitha said. "It's more effective that way."

Hermione smiled at that, while Johnson said, "Then let us begin."

Harry was deep in meditation. He had lost touch with his physical self, as he had many times over the previous few weeks. He had never taken that next step however. He was ready.

Harry found he was hovering above his physical shell.

The room looked different. It had been illuminated by three candles and the tiny flames under the clay pots. Those now barely glowed. Instead, the room was now filled with light coming from Hermione, who glowed in all the colors of the spectrum, with innumerable swirls of color surrounding her. Harry saw his own body and J's were barely glowing a dark red, while Tabitha's was glowing in reds and oranges.

"The red is our body temperature," Harry heard Johnson say. He turned, and his guide was with him. Johnson's form was the usual one, but it was now a fully shifting pattern of colors, although with no reds.

"I am impressed yet again, Harry. Well done."

"It feels a bit like it did when I used to travel to Voldemort, and could see over his shoulder," Harry said, "although I didn't see like this."

"The simple explanation is that this is the difference between leaving your body and being dragged out unwillingly," J answered.

"I guess that makes sense," Harry said.

"Observe our friend Tabitha. How does she appear?"

"Reds and oranges," Harry answered.

"Look more closely, and what do you see?"

"Oh! There's a pair of small dark pink swirls, each one touching us."

"Exactly. That is her monitoring us."

"Why do I still look like me?"

"No one is certain why we appear to still look like ourselves to ourselves," Johnson answered. "I assure you, you are very colorful to me."

Harry thought about that. Johnson smiled and held out his hand. "Are you ready to fly as you never have flown before, Harry?"

"Yes, sir." Harry took Johnson's hand, and they were off.

If Harry had been consciously breathing, his breath would have been taken away.

"The speed of thought does not equal the speed of light," Johnson said, "but at times it feels like we can almost approach it."

In less than a minute, they had flown across the Atlantic, and Harry realized they were slowing down and approaching what had to be the Ysgol. "Feel your connection to Ron," Johnson commanded as their spirits hovered above the castle.

Harry thought of Ron, and slowly they were tugged away from the castle out to the grounds. "What's that?" Harry asked as they approached a playing field that wasn't for any sport Harry recognized.

"That, my dear boy, is Quodpot. It looks like the Greens are playing the Reds."

"There are Ron and Sabrina," Harry pointed out when they got to the stadium.

"Very good," Johnson said. "Now, feel for young Mister Creevy."

"Huh?" The change of subject was too much for Harry.

"You have been connecting to Mister Creevy's mind for some time. You may or may not be able to bring us to him from this distance tonight, but you **can** do it."

"Really?"

"Really."

Harry reached out for Colin's mind, and a silver thread seemed to appear, which then drew him, and Johnson, away from Ron and towards Colin.

Harry soon noticed, however, that they were going very slowly. "How do we move faster?" Harry asked.

"It's partially a matter of experience, but distance is also a factor. The point is that you managed to create the connecting thread of thought at this distance. Well done." Johnson took over, and they moved as fast as they had before. "We'll work on speed another day. We've been gone for less than fifteen minutes, but that is quite long for the first out-of-body projection, considering the power you just expended."

Their speed increased, and suddenly Harry realized he was back in his body. He opened his eyes, and then tipped over, feeling dizzy, and also coughing from the incense.

Harry was disoriented. He knew Master J and Spellman were talking, but he wasn't sure what they were saying. He could hear Hermione murmuring, but didn't recognize that she was performing the basic diagnostic medical spells.

Finally, Harry understood what they were saying. "What's wrong with him?" Hermione asked.

"It takes a few tries to get the hang of being easily reconnected to your senses," J told her. "I've never known it to take more than six tries, and there has never been anyone to get it on the first try."

"You weren't gone long," Hermione pointed out.

"No, but the first time is the most disorienting, and Harry also expended a lot of power doing a test. If he had just hovered here, it would have taken many hours to equal what he went through."

"He did well?" Tabitha asked.

"He performed with near perfection."

"Well, I don't like this part of it," Harry said in a weak voice.

"That's a good recovery time, Harry," J told him. "With luck, it won't happen more than one more time; perhaps not even then."

"That would be nice," Harry admitted. "I don't think I really want to sit up yet."

"The inner ear takes the longest to adjust. It often takes up to ten. . . ."

"I'm ready," Harry stated, sitting up on his own. The other three shook their heads. They remembered that the surest way to motivate Harry was to tell him not to do something.

"Well, Harry. Normally, these lessons would take a month to six weeks. After seeing you tonight, I believe we shall be able to complete the basics this week."

"And when will I be able to track down Voldemort?" Harry demanded.

Johnson glared at Harry, and Harry stopped thinking of his tutor as a kindly, slightly eccentric man in his later middle age. In his own way, Johnson could be a very dangerous man. "Harry, you shall **NOT** try to track Voldemort on your own. You should not even practice this without myself or Tabitha being with you."

"When?" Harry demanded.

"If you do everything we tell you, if you do nothing foolish, if you progress as I suspect you will, then on your birthday at the earliest, Halloween at the latest."

Harry thought about that. "That's fair," Harry said. "Thank you for being up-front with me."

"The temptation is to protect our charges," Johnson admitted. "We are trying to learn from the mistakes of our British friends."

Harry and Hermione smiled at that. "We shall practice again tomorrow night, and take your friend Miss Lovegood, if she has the ability. After the break, any Saturday evening which are not excluded by some external matter, Tabitha here will travel with you, and Miss Lovegood if she is able. Miss Granger shall watch over you."

"Yes, sir," Hermione said.

"None of the other faculty or witches have the ability?" Harry asked.

"No," Johnson said simply. "Well, one never knows what Dumbledore can and can not do."

"Can I combine this power with Legilimency?"

Johnson looked at Harry. "Possibly. More likely, you will be able to project emotion into Voldemort."

"And making him feel Harry's anger will hurt him?" Hermione asked.

"Yes, a little, but that is not what would really hurt the evil one," Johnson said, looking into Harry's eyes.

"Then what?" Hermione demanded.

"Voldemort's power is based on fear and anger," Tabitha said softly. "What then must Harry's be based on?"

"Voldemort possessed me at the Ministry, right at the very end," Harry said in a dull, almost lifeless voice. After a few seconds, he spoke again, and all three felt the raw pain of Harry's deepest feelings. "I . . . I wanted to die. I was hurting; I was . . . in despair. He took me over almost completely. And as I was dying, I was happy."

Hermione started to silently cry.

"I was happy because I would see Sirius again. I might even see my Mum and Dad." Harry looked at Hermione. "All the love I had for them just sort of . . . welled up inside me. It drove him out of me."

"Love," Hermione said softly over her tears. "'The Power he knows not.' Love, and compassion. Emotions that are totally beyond him now."

"Emotions that he gave up to become what he is," Tabitha said, almost as softly. "He is barely a he. He's more of an 'it', something beyond nature. He is evil and hatred and anger. He feeds on those emotions. Harry . . . Harry is powerful, but more importantly, Harry loves."

"Dumbledore doesn't really understand what he almost did to me," Harry said, his voice raw. "He knew love was likely the weapon that would destroy Voldemort, but he trapped me in a house where there was no love to spare for me, where there was nothing but contempt and neglect."

"I'm surprised at how much compassion you have in your heart, Harry," Johnson agreed. "You could easily be a very bitter young man."

"He almost destroyed it again last year," Harry went on. "Would it have ruined his master plan if someone had . . . if anyone had ever loved me before now?"

Hermione couldn't resist any longer, and threw her arms around Harry. "I'm so sorry, Harry. I should have told Viktor and Ron to go to hell and loved you. No, I should have held you right after you saved me from the troll and never let you go." She cried on his shoulder, and said, "I do love you, you know. We all do."

Harry gave Hermione a half smile and put his arm around her shoulders. "I don't think that would have worked at the time, but thanks. I guess it's mostly worked out for the best for all of us."

"Mostly," Tabitha said bitterly.

Something in her voice made the teens look at her. "You wanted to take me, didn't you?" Harry asked. "After . . . that Halloween."

Tabitha nodded. "Your mother wanted either Tudor or myself as the backup after Sirius. Your father didn't want you taken from Britain, which would have rather defeated the purpose of giving you to one of us. Dumbledore wouldn't override James' objection, insisting that you had to be put with the Dursleys. Still, there's no use fighting about that now. Maybe things will still work out in the end this way." She shrugged her shoulders. "Life isn't an experiment. We can't go back and reset an initial condition and rerun the test."

"Well, we can hope for the best, but this isn't the best of all possible worlds," Hermione nearly growled.

"No, Pangloss, it isn't," Tabitha agreed, earning her a strange look from Hermione. "No, they don't read Voltaire at the Ysgol. Remember, I do have some Muggle university degrees."

"Oh, right," Hermione said. "I'm just not used to people getting Muggle literary illusions."

Michael Corner was very frightened. He had been hunting for homeless Muggles to feed to the dementors a few days before. Suddenly he had been surrounded by figures in white, and his world had gone gray.

He had woken in a windowless stone cell, lit only by a soft magical flame. There was a pallet to lay on and a water bucket that refilled itself to drink from. There was a covered bucket he preferred not to think about except when necessary. Every once in a while, some sour bread appeared.

While objects (like bread and water) could be transported in, and the waste bucket was transported out, Corner could not disappear. True, he wasn't very good at it, but the Dark Lord had found a follower to teach him the basics, so Corner knew whatever the problem was, it wasn't really his fault.

He had no idea how long he had been in the cell. His guess was six days, although it was really only four and a half. He was pacing the cell because there was nothing else for him to do, other than to be scared.

"You have good reason to be frightened."

Corner stopped and stared. Three men in white robes were in the small cell with him. "What . . . who . . . where. . . ?"

"Add 'why' and 'how,' and you would have all the basics covered," one said with an evil smile. "You know 'when,' after all."

"We needed a wizard, and you'll do," another said, more gently. "I believe your seventeenth birthday was March First, correct?"

Corner looked at them, wondering why anyone would ask such an inane question.

"Answer," the first one commanded. Corner nodded his agreement.

"Good, you're of age. We have need of you to fully reactivate our power in this area. Not very pleasant for you, unfortunately, but it's really no where nearly as wrong or evil as what you have been doing for your Master."

"I don't know what you mean."

The three men smiled coldly. "Nonsense," the second man said. "You got your sillier Housemates in trouble last year, you helped direct the dementors attacking the Muggles at Potter's house just before Yule, you have been serving as a conduit between your Master and young Malfoy, and worst of all you've been collecting homeless and run-away Muggles to feed your Master's dementors. We are therefore going to use you."

"How?"

"There, I knew you'd get there," the nastiest man said.

"Who are you?"

"Some might call us druids," the second man said, "although our order pre-dates the druids by several thousand years. The druids were an off-shoot of our beliefs, and even included a number of Muggles and squibs. We stayed in the background, studying magic and delving deeper into the practical aspects of magic than any others."

"Some matched or exceeded us in some philosophical and astral matters," the first man said a bit ruefully, "but not in most practical applications."

"So that is 'who.' 'Where' is deep in what would you call the Forbidden Forest near Hogwarts. 'How' is also easy. We have more power, collectively at least, than you or even your Master can even guess. As for 'why,' well, we need to sacrifice you. As for 'when' . . ."

"What!"

"I knew I'd missed one."

The third man said, "The equinox is less than an hour away. At that moment, we will slit the major artery behind your left ear. You should lose consciousness in less than a minute. Your blood will be absorbed by the bloodstone. As your soul escapes, we shall capture it and use it as well. As deaths go, it is less unpleasant than most."

"Please. . . ."

"There is nothing you can say or do to save yourself," the second man said. "We would have to wait until the solstice if we spared you and then kill you or some one else, and that just won't do."

Michael suddenly had his wrists bound behind him. He looked in desperation at the three men. "Please," he begged the youngest of the three robed figures who had been silent.

Cadfael ap Tudur ap Mawrth ap Rhys looked at Michael Corner without pity. "Unlike our ancestors, who would have taken any not of the Hidden for sacrifice, we take only those who threaten us or ours."

"How do I threaten you!"

"You have chosen to serve the self-proclaimed Lord Voldemort, who would threaten all. And he, and you, threaten one I have sworn to protect, and whom we have elected to protect."

"Potter!" Corner spat.

"Yes. Now you will render a service for those who oppose your Master. It is time. I wish you a safe journey to your next life, and hope your soul has absorbed the proper lessons."

Other than his own curses, those were the last words Michael Corner heard in life.

Chapter III

Saturday, March 23, 1997

Hermione sat down after checking the vital signs on Master J, Professor Spellman, Harry, and Luna.

"Rather boring isn't it, here all by yourself?"

Hermione tried to jump up from the cushion and pull out her wand all at the same time, but wound up rolling on the floor instead.

"It's alright, it's just me!"

"Professor Lawrence! You . . . you startled me."

"Sorry about that." Tom kept his hands raised. He helped Hermione sit up and stepped back. Hermione gestured for him to sit.

Tom sat down near Hermione. "Not much company, are they?"

"No, not as such," she admitted. "Although Luna and Professor Spellman are more in deep meditation than, well, out-of-body." She sighed. "Still, it's rather boring."

"Well, that's the problem with people like us. We rarely get the glory jobs. Still, what we do enables the other people, the people like Harry and Henry and Tudor, to have a real chance in the fight."

"I'll have you know I've held my own," Hermione said.

"I know you have," Tom agreed. "So have I. But like you, when I have, it's usually been as part of a group. I don't get to play of part of solo hero." He smiled. "Good thing, too. I don't think I would be very good at it."

Hermione smiled back, and the pair sat back to get to know a bit more about each other.

As Easter came and went, many people assessed their situations. Draco Malfoy, for example, was curious as to why Michael Corner never returned. It was some time before anyone else contacted him, and Corner's fate remained unknown.

Harry had been very surprised at his progress over the Easter vacation, as was Tabitha. Master J and Dumbledore were pleased with Harry's progress, but by know they had learned to expect the unexpected from Harry. Luna had progressed at a slower pace, but was also well along in her lessons.

Everyone concerned was now convinced that whatever Harry's power was that could lead to the defeat of the Dark Lord was in his possession and being developed, although they argued about which power, or combination of powers, it might be. Each person was commanded by

Dumbledore to speak less about it, and to think more. They would discuss the possibilities at the beginning of summer.

At the beginning of the year, Dumbledore had been concerned about the Old Believers being openly at the school. About three dozen students had come to the hear about the Old Belief, starting shortly after the beginning of the term. Eighteen students remained by the Easter break: the quintet, Lavender Brown, Natalie Macdonald, Colin and Dennis Creevy, William Lloyd, Susan Bones, Hannah Abbott, Eloise Midgen, Sally-Ann Perks, Geneva Driver, Morag McDougal, Tracy Davis, and Anna Lloyd. Of those, Hermione, Lavender, and Tracy seemed the most interested.

Dumbledore watched over the group, and satisfied himself that it wasn't overly influencing the students. The only faculty member who had had strong objections had been Snape. The Potions instructor hadn't realized that Tom and Tabitha were within the druid hierarchy until the start of term, and was unpleasantly surprised when they easily out-argued him about the presence of the Old Belief.

A casual comment had informed Dumbledore that those two knew the Hidden had reactivated the stone circle. Neither would say what that had entailed, or what it might bode for the future. From what Dumbledore knew of the ancient cults, he wasn't certain he wanted to know.

To his surprise, the centaurs had not complained to him about the druids in the forest. True, they had mostly withdrawn after their confrontation with the Umbridge the previous June, but they had not gone too far away. When Dumbledore had sought them out in early March, they had even seemed to almost welcome the return of the druids.

As far as Dumbledore could see, and he could see further than most, April and May continued even more normally, if not positively, than the previous few months had. There were fewer points taken for troubles between the Houses than there had been over at least the previous six years. Whatever frustrations there were between the students, both within the Houses and between them, all of them seemed to settled in the dueling clubs or by some other reasonable manner. While it couldn't be said that the remaining Slytherins were popular, at least they weren't openly hated. There were even fewer complaints about Professor Snape's favoritism towards Slytherin and high-handed discrimination towards the other Houses.

Severus Snape, in fact, had largely withdrawn into his private laboratory when not performing his duties. He also seemed to have a bit of a permanent smirk on his face which worried Dumbledore at times, especially when that smirk widened so slightly when Snape gazed at the Gryffindors at meal time.

The April Quidditch games were rousing but surprisingly friendly. Gryffindor beat Slytherin 150-0, when Harry caught the snitch just six minutes into the game. The Ravenclaw-Hufflepuff game was at 210-210 tie, as Cho Chang had been able to fool a Hufflepuff beater and out manoeuvre the Hufflepuff seeker to catch the snitch in an amazing dive that even Harry and Ginny publicly admitted had been spectacular.

The game in later May, Hufflepuff-Slytherin, finally showed that the Slytherins might have some potential for the next year. They still went down in defeat, but a ninety minute game that ended 240 - 120 showed the Slytherins had some real offense.

The last game between Ravenclaw and Gryffindor, on May 31, the Saturday before the O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s started, was the only time the entire term that real dislike was shown between the Houses and even within a House.

For Hermione, the time between the Valentine's Dance and the weekend before the start of O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s was the most enjoyable time she spent at Hogwarts to date. Certainly somewhere 'out there' was Voldemort, laying in wait for Harry with who knew what evil plan, but Harry was now fairly able to at least protect himself and had more protectors than ever before.

That was the only darkness in Hermione's life. She was caught up, if not ahead, on all of her classes. Nearly the entire Sixth year now looked to her to organize study sessions for the N.E.W.T. subjects. She had also regimented all the Fifth and Seventh year Gryffindors to help them study for their O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s, and fully half of the other Fifth years and a third of the Seventh years had joined the Gryffindors. If this was what it took to become Head Girl, Hermione was going to do it.

Hermione also found the time to study the Old Belief. The druids assured all the students that upon the satisfactory completion of a year of study and a statement of belief, they could join the Open Believers. The druids also informed them that small information centers would be formally opened in Hogsmeade and Diagon Alley that summer.

While Hermione knew she didn't have to go through that period of study (thanks to Cadfael the previous winter), she was never one to cut corners when it came to gathering information. She was happy to learn that she would be accepted that coming summer, and that the other members of the quintet would be as well.

Hermione made certain that she had time for Harry, of course. They both missed having Ron in their lives as a friend. As close as they were with Ginny, Neville, and Luna, that still did not replace the synergy the original trio. At least three nights a week, Harry and Hermione could still be found sitting on one of the sofas near the fireplace between 10:45 and 11:45, after they had showered and changed into their dressing gowns. Hermione would be knitting while Harry would be reading his adventure novels. They both found great comfort in just being next to each other, and rarely had to say much.

Of course, Harry also found his way into her dreams at least twice a week. When Harry and Luna had finally figured out Hermione's attraction to Professor Lawrence over the Easter break, they had also started bringing the pair of them together early Sunday mornings, so they could at least spend time together in their dreams.

Hermione was glad that Tom was working out. He had dropped close to two stones of excess weight since they had met the previous August. She felt if he could drop a few more pounds, he would be very presentable, no doubt looking like a wizard of 30 instead of 40 when she

could finally introduce him to her parents. Hermione was hoping that this would be sooner than they had agreed on, but knew she would have to play that by ear.

The last Friday in May, as Hermione made her way down the stairs in her dress robes to the last dance of the year, she felt her life was under control. Harry was waiting for her, along with Neville. Ginny and Natalie were still getting ready. Hermione preened a little for her two male friends, and both of them kissed her on the cheek.

Neville and Hermione watched Harry leave, on his way towards Ravenclaw to pick up Luna. "How much longer do you think this will last?" Neville asked.

"How long will what last?" Hermione asked.

"These golden weeks," Neville answered, to Hermione's shock. "These have been the best few months of my life. Haven't they been for you?"

"They have," Hermione admitted.

Neville smiled. "Well, at least we know there are 'the good old days' as we're living through them."

These months really had been golden as far as Neville was concerned. If anyone had told him, right after the disastrous Yule Ball of his Fourth year, that he would duel with the torturers of his parents; help save Harry, Ginny, and his other friends; become one of the top duelers of his year; move to the upper 10% of his class in his current academic standing (although not the overall standings, since his performance had been so poor his first four years); and have Ginny not just as his girl friend, but as a lover and be nearly engaged in everything except name; Neville would have thought it an hallucination.

Neville was the person most of the younger students came to for advice on dueling and even most everyday matters (if only because Harry seemed too famous and Hermione too busy). Even some of the Slytherins now sought him out. Neville swelled with pride when McGonagall, Flitwick, Sprout, and Hagrid had all told him how his father had been looked up to in much the same way when he had been a Sixth year prefect and Head Boy. Neville didn't think he had much of a chance of being Head Boy, even though he had split Ron's regular prefect duties with Harry, but just being compared to his father that way made up for a lot of lost opportunities for him.

Unlike his friends, Neville knew what he was going to do with his life. The Longbottoms were not a very wealthy family, despite their long ancestry, but they were well-off. Neville had an estate to run. While wizards often live more than twice as long as Muggles, the steward Neville's great grandfather had appointed in 1911 wanted to retire by his hundredth anniversary. It could take nearly ten years for Neville to learn all the details that he would have to learn.

No, life was good. Hearing steps, Neville looked up and smiled at Ginny, who smiled as she came down the stairs.

Ginny smiled when she saw Neville smiling at her. She couldn't help it. It had taken her almost a year to realize exactly how much Neville loved her.

In part, that was because she had always remembered that she had been Neville's second choice for the Yule Ball two years before. Granted, Neville had also been at best her second choice at the time, but she didn't count that. After all, Neville hadn't made any move that next term that she was aware of, and he had written only twice the next summer.

And yet Neville had come to try and rescue her when Umbridge's goon squad had grabbed her the previous June. Had there only been the three Slytherins who had attacked her, between the two of them they could have beaten them back. Crabbe jumping Neville from the back had led to their capture.

Still, it wasn't Neville's attempted rescue that had made Ginny realize that Neville was either interested in her, or had perhaps never really lost interest. It was his concern for her after they had hexed the Slytherins. It was the number of times he had visited her in the Infirmary, and the flowers and chocolates he had brought her. It was the letters he had sent her, and the attention he paid exclusively to her that summer.

Ginny had liked Neville by the time they had finished at Little Whinging. She was very happy dating him seriously during the autumn term. It was seeing Neville seeing her through others' eyes over Christmas that had really opened Ginny's eyes.

Neville loved her. He loved her in a way that was far beyond what she had felt for Neville, and much more seriously than her amazingly long-term crush on Harry. It was when Ginny realized how much Neville loved her that all her defenses had finally crumbled, and she had fallen totally in love with him.

Ginny didn't know when they would be leaving for their summer training, but she was hoping that she would have time to go to Neville's. She now suspected that there was a good chance that she might be spending her life there.

So when Ginny reached the bottom of the stairs, she took Neville's hand in hers and melted into his very powerful arms. Neville was never going to be a story-book hero, or a sports champion, or slay a dragon, or any of the childish things Ginny had once dreamed of. He would instead be an everyday hero. He would be one of the workers making certain that people like Harry had a chance to succeed.

Ginny knew that should she ever again need rescuing, Harry would do so, just as he would rescue any who needed it. If Neville rescued her, it would be first because he loved her, and only second because it needed to be done.

She was the most important person in Neville's life, and now he was the most important one in hers.

Luna ignored the snide remarks of the Clique as they glided down the stairs to the Ravenclaw common room. She had made certain she was **in** the common room before they came down. They weren't above a bit of shoving on the stairs, unless it would wrinkle their robes.

Luna gathered up the various girls who were waiting for their dates to arrive from other Houses, in such a careless manner that not one of them realized that they were being as expertly herded as any sheep in a trial. As she got the other seven girls out into the corridor, she saw three of their dates were waiting. One, of course, was Harry.

Luna smiled. She had never realized how lonely her life had been until Harry had been added to it. The harassment of the Clique and her own straight-forward approach to life had left her more separated from everyday life than she had realized.

Luna had compensated for it. She had always been in the top 5 students of her year in every subject. She had roamed around the school at night in her dreamwalking, discovering quite a bit about the 'secret' lives of many of the students and staff. She knew what each member of the staff liked as late-night snacks. She had seen enough snogging and petting and oral sex and even some sodomy to turn her off from the subject until she fell in love with Harry. She had seen much friendship, and a near-equal dose of cruelty, in the halls of Hogwarts.

For Luna Saw. She Saw the motives of those around her. She knew of the failed attempts at valor and the pettiness, cowardice, and avarice that drove too many of the people around her.

Then she truly met Harry.

Harry was far from perfect, of course. He was moodier and more temperamental at times than the vast majority of students. Yet Harry cared. He cared for justice and honor and love. He cared that right should be done in general, not just for him.

Harry had also drawn a number of similar people to him, all flawed, as all people are, but honorable. Ronald Weasley, overly-proud, but always rooting for the underdog. Ginny Weasley, always ready to pounce on a bully. Neville Longbottom, then still fearing to stand up for himself, and now trying to protect others. Hermione Granger, then self-righteous in the cause of liberty to the point that the ideological Muggles of the French and First Russian Revolutions would have been put to shame by the comparison to her at times, although she seemed to be mellowing a bit since Ron had left.

There was a group that she could respond to.

It wasn't that Luna didn't know her own limitations and faults. She was passive, rarely confronting people she felt were wrong or mistaken, unless they were attacking her father. She had allowed herself to be pushed into being something of the House clown, which didn't really bother her, but which also meant that when she tried to argue for a point, people automatically thought her idea had to be off.

None of this group, not even Hermione, ever tried to put her down, at least not to her face. Her ideas, yes, but never her as a person.

There were so many points that had brought her closer and closer to Harry. There was the organization and meetings of the DA. There had been the time right before Christmas her

Fourth year, when she had tried to kiss Harry under the mistletoe -- she was **still** wondering what had inspired her to try that!

Most importantly had been those two nights in June. Luna regretted much about the night she went to the Ministry, but she would never regret having gone. The six students had barely survived until help had come for them. Had there been only five, there was an excellent chance at least some of those five would not have made it out alive.

Of equal importance to her relationship with Harry had been the last night of the school year, when Harry, deep in his own pain and mourning, had offered her comfort for her petty problems. That's when she had realized some of what she had felt for Harry since the previous December.

That night, she had dreamwalked to Harry's room, and found him in a middle of a nightmare. She had joined him in his torment and comforted him. From that moment on, she vowed that she would give her affection to Harry, if he would have her.

As the last of the errant beaux came to claim his Ravenclaw, Luna smiled at Harry and took his arm. She was glad to be linked with Harry Potter.

As Harry escorted Luna towards the great hall, he smiled at the changes of the last eleven months and twelve months. Twelve months ago, he had been fearing the O.W.L.s and his ego had been badly battered. Eleven months before, he was in an emotional hell. If objectively all of his major problems and burdens remained, he now knew how to handle them, and how to share the burden with his friends and his lover.

If life was still far from good for Harry, at least it was manageable. Compared to his life over the previous two years, that was a change to be satisfied with.

Harry and Luna missed seeing Professor Snape lurking in a dark corner as they made their way to the dance. Harry had wondered why Snape had never taken up any of the challenges he had been allowed.

Snape had been tempted many times, including this night, but he knew he couldn't take the risk. If Harry Potter was powerful enough to destroy the Dark Lord, then Harry Potter was too powerful to be allowed to live.

Severus Snape had sworn to take care of that problem.

Chapter IV

Saturday, May 31, 1997

The day Gryffindor played Ravenclaw for the Quidditch Cup dawned stormily, but cleared up as the morning progressed. All the Gryffindors and most of the Hufflepuffs were waving Gryffindor pennants and signs. So were a few Slytherins, for once. No one outside of the House seemed to be rooting for Ravenclaw, other than Zach Smith (who had recently started dating Marietta Edgecombe) and only about a third of the Ravenclaw students seemed very enthusiastic for their own team. Still, not even Luna or the other Ravenclaws dating Gryffindors wore anything but their House colors or sat anywhere but in the Ravenclaw sections.

Harry didn't like the strange gleam he saw in Cho's eye when they shook hands.

The Ravenclaws looked even more off than usual as the game got started. While not crisp in formation, all of the Ravenclaws were still excellent individual flyers. They seemed hesitant on their brooms, and seemed to be maneuvering for some sort of positioning other than for any Quidditch play that Harry knew about.

The Ravenclaw flyers didn't even seem to mind when Ginny scored less than two minutes into the match. Even their keeper, although seemingly more alert, seemed distracted.

Harry's eyes grew wide as an idea popped into his head. He quickly flew high above the Gryffindor hoops, and let his mental shields drop. Then he extended his mind in a light probe he had just been taught and brushed against Cho's.

There was no doubt about it, Cho was being possessed by Bellatrix Lestrange.

Harry scanned the crowd. His mind touched Tabitha's.

Tabitha jumped slightly at the touch, but acknowledged Harry's information. While Harry kept an eye on the players and reestablished his mental shields, Tabitha whispered to Dumbledore, and then to Snape, Tom, Lloyd, Tobias, Flitwick, Sprout, and Remus, and then over to Henry and Tudor who had made the trip to see Harry play. Remus had also made his way over to Professor McGonagall while Tobias talked to Vector and Sinistra. McGonagall stopped Denis Creevy's play-by-play as she slowly stood up and whispered into his ear. Denis nodded, but said nothing as he turned back to the magical megaphone.

Meanwhile, Snape and Dumbledore had used their own Legilimency to test the seven Ravenclaws. They decided that all but the keeper were under some form of possession

Twelve of the adults stood, and six stunned the Ravenclaws in unison. The other six cushioned their fall. Denis made the announcement of what had happened and why, and as the crowd's reaction changed from surprise and shock towards anger and panic, the security people and aurors stepped in and directed the crowd out of the stands, aided by the faculty other than Dumbledore, Snape, Tabitha, and Tom. They, Madam Pomfrey, and Lloyd headed down to the field. Harry was already taking the Gryffindor team, and the shocked Ravenclaw keeper, back to the changing rooms.

"Imperius?" Madam Pomfrey asked.

"Unlikely," Snape stated.

"Search them," Tom said. "Look for anything crystal, especially any with an orange tinge. Try not to directly touch it."

"Then how. . . ." Tabitha started, but she quieted down when she saw Tom patting down one of the beaters.

It quickly became apparent that each had a small crystal pendant, all slightly tinted an opaque orange. Henry and Tudor glanced at each other. Tudor ran off the field, while Henry said, "We need to check on that keeper, just in case." He then took off on a run.

Harry steered George Runnell, the Fifth year Ravenclaw keeper (who was dating a Fourth year Clique member and chaser) into the Gryffindor boys' changing area. "You don't mind, do you Runnell?"

"No," the boy answered easily. "What happened? What did Creevy mean by possessed?"

"Yeah," Will Lloyd, the Gryffindor security prefect and keeper asked. "What's it all about?"

Harry smiled and looked at his two Fourth year beaters, Paul Robinson and Jason Prince. "Boys, you trust me, right?"

"Of course."

"You bet."

"Great!" Harry said jovially. "Grab an arm and pin Runnell up against the wall."

Both boys blinked, but then did as they were told. "What?" George cried out as they shoved him against the wall.

"It's strange that the other six flyers were possessed, and you weren't," Harry said conversationally. "Now I'm sure it's very possible that Voldemort left you out, so that the team's flying didn't seem even more out of place than it did, but you didn't do your usual decent job. I mean, come on, we scored three goals in less than seven minutes!"

"I swear, Potter! I had nothing to do with it!"

"But what do you know about what happened?" Harry demanded.

"Well . . . it might have been those necklaces that Marietta gave us, I suppose."

"What necklaces?"

"She gave us each a necklace last night. She said they would bring us good luck, but something about it seemed . . . creepy."

"And you didn't think to mention it to anyone? I mean, after all, things have been so normal these past few months."

George shrugged. "When has **anything** been normal around here?"

"Good point. Where's the necklace?"

"Left pocket."

Harry started to reach for it, and then stopped himself.

"Good thing you stopped yourself," Tudor said from the doorway. "I would have hated to have had to petrified you."

"Take off the robe, son," Henry said. "Don't make any sudden moves."

"You sound like an American cop show," Harry teased.

"Smart ass," Henry said with a smile. He and Tudor came into the changing room. "The crystal channeled Death Eaters into the other players. Was Edgcombe wearing one when she gave you the necklaces?"

"Not that I saw, but I could have missed it."

"Was Zach Smith with her?" Harry asked.

"No, we were in the common room."

"We'll still have to take you in for questioning," Henry said. He gave Harry a dirty look as the young man snickered at him. "Great, now you have me talking in cliches."

"Well, Harry would be about the only one here who knows that," Tudor said as he frisked George Runnell.

"Where are the three of you taking him?" Harry asked. "Down to the station."

"Three of us?" Henry asked. Tudor looked up.

"That druid, Cadfael ap whatever, was right behind you," Harry said, puzzled. "I didn't see him leave, though. I thought he was with you."

"Well, never mind that now," Tudor said through clenched teeth. "You boys go ahead and change. Get back to the castle as soon as you can. Go as a group. We'll tell the girls to go with you. Okay?"

"Yes, sir," Harry said.

"What the hell just happened?" Will demanded once the two hit wizards left.

Harry explained what little he could.

Somehow, he was not too surprised to learn that all the Clique members denied knowing anything about the plot, and that Marietta couldn't be found; neither could Zach Smith. The Ravenclaw team would be questioned further, however.

The students were in something of an uproar all Saturday evening and Sunday. However, Sunday evening the Examiners showed up. O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s would start the next day, while the regular exams were scheduled to start the following Monday.

Even for Harry, thoughts of the war and trouble at the school receded at least slightly.

The same was not true of Tudor Myrddin, Henry Dorff, Tobias Jones, Tabitha Spellman, Tom Lawrence, Lloyd Trowbridge, or Albus Dumbledore. The seven of them met in Dumbledore's office Sunday afternoon.

"We have no way of knowing if Edgecombe disappeared on her own or was taken by Voldemort's people, assuming she wasn't working for them, or if she was captured by the Hidden," Tobias pointed out. "Smith was seen portkeying from just off the groups by three different people."

"We can always ask," Tabitha said.

"What?" Tobias spat, "do you think the Hidden will just say, 'oh, yes, we have her. Here, you may have her back'?"

"Of course not," Tudor agreed. "They will, however, confirm whether or not they have the young woman."

"Student," Dumbledore stated.

"Young woman, over the age of seventeen," Henry pointed out.

"That hardly matters!" Dumbledore nearly shouted, standing up. His eyes gleamed and power radiated off him.

"Neat trick," Tobias said.

"You do it well," Tabitha agreed.

"We've all seen better," Tudor added.

Dumbledore's attitude flared, and he nearly lost his temper. The magic flashed much brighter, and the air actually crackled.

"Ah," Lloyd said in a subdued voice, "now that was real."

"Just who do the six of you think you are?" Dumbledore demanded in a quiet, dangerous hiss. "A student may have been abducted. Yes, that student may have gone over to the Enemy, she may even be of age, but that does **not** change my responsibilities towards her until it is proven." He glared at the three teachers. "The same is true of the three of you."

"I think I'm the wizard who was appointed to start cleaning up the mess here in Britain that wouldn't have gotten nearly this bad if you and people like you had cleaned up your own act," Tudor calmly responded. "Since you didn't want the responsibility of running things, try not to interfere too much with those of us stuck with the job. I also think we're the ones that pointed out you were making a fundamental mistake back in 1981 in dealing with Harry, one that you've compounded many times since then."

He turned to Tobias. "And Tabitha is right. We need to ask the Hidden. They're a very arrogant bunch; if they have her, they'll say so and spit in our eye, or try to."

He turned to Tabitha and then to Dumbledore. "Tabitha and I have to be the ones to go. My question only is, could Harry go as well?"

"Why?" Tobias demanded.

"So Harry **is** a Key!" Tom exclaimed.

"The Hidden believe he is," Tudor said.

"A Key to what?" Dumbledore and Tobias both demanded.

"Some of the Hidden are very close to the sources of Higher Magic," Tudor explained. "Not many, maybe as few as a couple of dozen, maybe as many as a few hundred out of the many tens of thousands of the total Hidden. The rest support the Centers, as they would be called in English. They support them materially, and give them the political muscle they need as well. It does tend to make the whole bunch rather surly and arrogant at times. That's where some of them get that bigoted idea of the scouring from."

"You mean some really do hope to exterminate all humans from Europe?" Tobias asked, shocked.

"No," Tabitha said, "they believe the peoples of Europe will do that to themselves. There was a lot of rejoicing amongst the Hidden during the Second Grindelwald War, or the Muggle Second World War if you prefer."

"Anyway, the Centers are very powerful. Most have always been located in Europe, near secret circles that have never been polluted. The rest are at the newer circles in America."

"Unlike the greatest of them," Dumbledore added, unable to stay out.

"Exactly. Stonehenge was in many ways the greatest," Tom acknowledged. "It fell in a battle between the ancestors of the Hidden and the Druids. The Hidden were shocked that such a place of power could fall, and the druids were shocked at the damage they had done when they realized the power centered there. The two sides came together and reached the compromise that has kept them together for over twenty-seven hundred years."

"Over time, nearly all their beliefs have bled into one another," Tudor added. "The difference is, the Hidden know their leaders have access to special powers. The Centers are the Hidden Elite."

"And Cadfael has just become a Center, here at the small ring of power near Hogwarts they reactivated," Tabitha said.

"And that means what? And what is a Key?" Tobias demanded. He had never liked the Old Believers as a group, and the Hidden even less. This discussion was doing nothing to lessen his distaste.

"It means Cadfael will be able to access even more power, and direct it towards Harry," Tabitha said.

"But Cadfael is not part of Harry's group," Tobias protested.

"The Heart of magic is life, the Key to the Heart is love'," Dumbledore stated. "I had heard that over a century ago, and never knew what it meant before." He looked into Myrddin's face. "The Heart of Magic. That's what the Hidden claim to have access to. Harry's power is the power of love."

"Exactly," Myrddin said. "I wish we had known this back in '81. If we had brought him up in a loving household, Harry probably would have had enough power to destroy Voldemort in their confrontation over the Philosopher's Stone, since Voldemort was in such a weakened state, instead of just destroying the host he was sharing."

Dumbledore crumpled. "Then I was even more wrong than I thought. I placed Harry in a situation where he got abuse instead of love. It almost crippled him. As strong, as tempered, as it made him in a few ways, it also made him exceedingly fragile."

Tom smiled. "Well, that's why history is neither a science nor fiction, no matter what some of my Muggle colleagues wish to believe. We can't reset a condition and rerun the experiment. We all made choices back in '81, now we have to deal with those consequences."

"True," Dumbledore admitted. He turned to Tudor. "How can Cadfael channel power into Harry?"

"I don't know. I do know that the circle was reactivated at the equinox."

"I think perhaps you two, and Harry, if he is willing, should pay a visit to our . . . associates," Dumbledore said.

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"I'm a **what**?" Harry demanded.

He was meeting with Tudor, Henry, Tabitha, and Tom, along with Hermione and Luna.

"A Key, Harry," Tabitha explained. "Wizards of great power and greater heart, around whom events center themselves."

"People keep saying that I have a lot of love and such stuff. I don't love any more than the rest of you!"

"Harry," Hermione said, "you've seen The Wizard of Oz, haven't you?"

"Once, at Mrs. Figg's," Harry admitted.

"Then remember what the wizard said to the Tin Man."

Harry looked confused.

"Something like, the size of your heart isn't judged so much as to how much you love, but how much you are loved by others," Luna said. "You do care for people more than most others, you do inspire love and affection more than others, and you have the knack of channeling that love into magical power."

Harry blushed.

"She's right, Harry," Tom said. "You have a great compassion and sense of justice, although you don't always have a great deal of empathy unless you stop and think about it. You have charisma, and you inspire love and affection."

Harry was about to object, when Hermione said, "And don't bring up Malfoy or Professor Snape or someone else who dislikes you as a counter argument. If I ever found anyone universally loved, I would hope I had the fortitude to distrust them anyway."

"Very good, Hermione," Tudor said. "Now, Harry, would you accompany Tabitha and myself into the Forbidden Forest? Hermione, Luna, Henry, and Tom will wait here and monitor."

"If they have Marietta, would they have . . . harmed her?" Luna asked anxiously.

"Probably not," Tom answered. "If they have her, I wouldn't place a bet on her living past the solstice, though, if she allied herself with Voldemort."

"Ah," said a druid the trio didn't know. "We were wondering when you would show up. And you brought the . . . Mister Potter."

"Yes," Tudor growled, "we brought the Key." The trio enjoyed the look of dismay on the druid's face.

"Come, Mercher, you didn't really think we'd be able to fool the Hogwarts group, did you?" Cadfael asked, approaching the group from out of the forest shadows. "Tabitha knows almost as much about us as a full druid would, Tom soaks up information like a sponge, Tudor is now the leader of the Myrddin, and Dumbledore is, well, Dumbledore."

"I really wish people would tell me when they're using me," Harry complained.

"We have not used you, Harry," Cadfael swore. "When you are fighting for your life, we will give you the power you need to destroy the Dark Lord, should you need more than even your group can provide. That is all. Beyond that, our motives are what we have said. We intend to see the True Faith planted back in Europe. We wish to reactivate eight more minor circles, like the one here. Even if the Hidden must remain hidden and the Strict must stay strict, it is time for the Open Believers and moderates to bring the Faith back home."

"And just how did you fully reopen the power of the circle?" Tudor demanded.

"You know very well how," Cadfael said.

"I don't," Harry reminded them all.

"Our dragons, that is our guards, captured a murderer," Cadfael said simply. "Remember, there are ways wizards may determine guilt without error or torture."

Harry was puzzled. "What would you want with a murder. . . . You killed him?"

"We sacrificed him, yes," Cadfael agree. "Michael Corner. We managed to capture another errant moth as she tried to escape."

"Marietta?" Harry demanded.

"Yes. We were literally seconds away from capturing Smith. He, with another, has already lured a young run-away Muggle for the dementors. Should we catch him, we will execute him as well."

"And are you sacrificing Marietta at the solstice?" Tudor demanded.

"We are considering it," Cadfael replied mildly. "She has practiced dark magic, she has allied herself to the Dark Lord, she has whored herself to his followers, she has planned murder, and she is of age. On the other hand. . . ."

"She hasn't actually accomplished quite enough to earn the death penalty," Tabitha pointed out.

"It's a fine line," Cadfael admitted.

"May we please have her?" Harry asked politely.

"Is the boy serious?" Mercher asked, incredulous.

"Would you stand before the Key and deny him a reasonable request?" Cadfael asked. "In a few years, when this young man has grown into his full powers, he will be the most powerful wizard since the great Myrddin, although not as widely talented as some others, keys or not, have been. Add in the power of the community spell and, well, I at least am willing to negotiate with his friends."

"Very well, I won't object," Mercher grumbled.

"What do you want?" Tudor asked.

"We have obtained all the useful information we are likely to get," Cadfael said. "We shall give you the girl, and a copy of the information. You shall not inform the Ministry or its functionaries and minions that we had her. She will not remember anything from the time she fled into the Forest to try and activate her portkey."

"Did you capture anyone at the portkey site?" Tudor demanded.

"Yes. We captured two bully-boys, both guilty of multiple murders. We shall **not** be turning them over. Alas, their portkeys were coded to them."

"You will turn all the information they revealed over to us," Tudor stated.

"Of course. After all, you are going to give us a copy of your intelligence files as well."

"Very well."

"But. . ." Harry started to object.

"You can't save all those on the wrong side, Harry," Cadfael said. "You might also be interested in knowing that all of what is called the Clique and their boy friends, except for a girl called Su Li, had a good idea what was going to happen. Edgecombe merely picked up the necklaces from a dead drop in Hogsmeade."

"Then why allow themselves to be taken over?" Harry demanded.

"It was an experiment, to see if the spells could penetrate the Hogwarts defenses, wasn't it?" Tabitha demanded.

"Exactly. Which is why we allowed it to work."

"**WHAT!**" all three shouted.

"We would not have allowed them to actually send off any dangerous curses. We wanted to see if any of the seven, or the others, would run and where they would run to. So far, they haven't, so you may pick them up. They no doubt believe themselves safe because they had Smith and Edgecombe put them under a mild memory spell."

Tudor frowned. "That does beg the question of how that keeper managed to remember Edgecombe giving him the necklace."

"No, they were expecting to get caught. This was also a test of the memory spells. There are a number of phrases that would partially or completely free up the bespelled person. The boy remembered what he was meant to remember."

Seeing Harry looked a little confused, Cadfael went on, "It's not easy to set up, but it is easy to understand and maintain. If you are a spy, how do you prevent yourself from giving up information if captured? Well, if you willingly take a potion and allow yourself to be bespelled -- notice, this must be of your free will! -- then you are a passive spy. You do not know you are working for the 'other side' until someone on **your** side gives a password. One

will allow you to be freed entirely of the spell. Another will allow you to report and then be put back under the spell. A third will allow you to report, but **you** must decide if you wish to go back under."

"Now there were eight girls, Third through Seventh years, involved in this, and five of their boy friends. We are not certain how many of them knew they were spying for Voldemort, other than Edgecombe and Smith, although as I said most had at least a very good idea. With the information we shall supply, you will break the spells, find out, and inform us."

"Very well," Tudor agreed.

"Go get the girl," Cadfael ordered. Mercher grumbled, but went.

"I thought I could trust you," Harry said to Cadfael.

"You can trust us to do what we believe is right for the world, Harry," Cadfael stated, "and we will not lie to you. We do not believe in total free will. Those with total free will most often end up on the same path as Tom Riddle did, although they rarely get so far along."

"So that gives you the right to use me?" Harry demanded.

"We haven't used you yet, Harry," Cadfael assured the young man yet again. "Our ends are identical, even if we disagree about means and paths. We agreed to help you access power, and will allow you to access more, should you need it. Just remember, you can still lose through miscalculation and stupidity."

"I still have to kill," Harry growled.

"If there were a way around it, I would tell you," Cadfael stated. "If anyone else destroys Voldemort's body, he will merely be disembodied again. If you had had access to more power, if you had been loved as a child, you would likely have destroyed Voldemort's spirit back at the end of your first year. That you couldn't is not your fault."

"I understand. Thank you."

"No, you do not," Cadfael said. "You have never yet set off to do harm to anyone, Harry, but you are partially responsible for the death of this Quirrell, and you destroyed the avatar of Tom Riddle, which wasn't fully human by any definition, but which was sentient. You have, in a very real sense, killed already. That you do not take the death even of a murderer like Voldemort lightly speaks well of you, but do not think this is something you are incapable of."

Harry certainly looked downcast and surprised by these ideas.

"Cheer up a little, and good luck to you, Harry Potter. May you find a House as wise and as powerful as the Myrddin." Cadfael smiled. "We Hidden need watching."

Chapter V

Saturday, June 7, 1997

Harry knocked on Professor Flitwick's door right after breakfast. Harry smiled as he entered. Professor Flitwick was one of his favorite professors. In fact, Flitwick was one of nearly everyone's favorite professors. "Good morning, Professor. You asked me to drop by?"

Harry was surprised to see that the diminutive professor looked very troubled, rather than having his usual cheerful expression. "Thank you, dear boy. Please sit down. Are you ready for exams? I'm not keeping you from studying, am I?"

"Oh, no sir. We're coaching the Fifth years in Defense after lunch, but they're doing Arithmancy this morning."

"Good. Good."

Harry saw Flitwick looked distracted. "What's wrong, Professor?"

"Do you really have to ask me that question, Harry? I have failed the students here. . . ."

"But you're an excellent teacher! I've never heard any student say anything bad about your classes. . . ."

"And I have the highest percentages of students getting O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s nearly every year," Flitwick agreed. "However, I have failed as the Head of Ravenclaw. I showed that Clique far too much leniency. Miss Lovegood and several other students suffered for that. There were two active young Death Eaters in my House at the beginning of the year, and I had no idea. Nearly half the Clique went over to the Death Eaters over Christmas, and convinced the others to enter into that hare-brained scheme last Saturday."

"What are you saying, Professor?"

"I just thought I should apologize to you, Harry. I shall do the same at the farewell feast, when I make my farewell."

"No, Professor! You can't!"

"Thank you for saying that, Harry, but I really must."

"Professor, we need you in the class room. . . ."

"I just meant I would just be retiring as Head of Ravenclaw." Flitwick smiled. "I am very elderly, Harry. Not quite in Albus' cohort, but his younger brother, Aberforth, was a Seventh year during my First. I have apparently grown lax in my House duties. Your friend bore much of the pain, and you have born a great deal of the responsibility of cleaning up my mess. Professor Vector deserves the chance to show what she can do."

"But, sir. . . ."

"No, Harry. You have done me very proud. I rather wish you and Miss Granger would return to Hogwarts as teachers someday. You, teaching Charms or Defense, Miss Granger teaching

Transfiguration, Charms, or Arithmancy. Still, you will both find your own paths, as will your other friends."

Harry was shocked. "But I only got an E on the theory. . . ."

"I was quite surprised you did not score an O plus on the practical and an O on the theory. You know the subject area better than you think. I have great hopes for you in the exams next week." Flitwick smiled his gentle smile. "We have not been close, Harry, yet I am very fond of you, and very proud of you."

Harry blushed slightly. "Thank you, sir. But why. . . ."

"Why burden you now, Harry? We haven't ever really talked, have we?"

"No, sir."

"Your mother was the one student I had before you and Miss Granger whom I had thought might be a good replacement for me. I grew to know her quite well." He paused in thought. "Perhaps her death marks when I started my downwards slide." He shrugged. "No matter. I was also the person who most often had to undo the mischief your father and his friends caused. They served many detentions with me. So did your grandparents and great grandparents, some of whom, I might add, were in Ravenclaw. I also went to school with three of your great great great grandparents. I even had a crush on one, although she was three years younger than I."

"Really?" Harry said eagerly.

"If you aren't busy this morning, Harry, you could join me for coffee and biscuits. Oh, wait, you probably don't drink coffee. . . ."

"A house elf friend of mine, Dobby, learned a really nice iced coffee and whipped cream drink. . . ." Harry said, hesitatingly.

"Good! I believe I shall try that, too. My sweet tooth is nearly as bad as our esteemed Headmaster's. If you don't mind, my young friend, see that photo album third row over, fifth from the bottom? Let me show you the great great great grandmother of you and two of your third cousins."

"I didn't know any of my relatives were alive, sir!"

"None of the close ones, alas," Flitwick said, "and none known closer than a fourth cousin on your mother's side, which would have been a relief to you to have had some closer, I dare say! As for your father's family, there were many massacres of those who opposed the Knights, where Grindelwald emerged, between 1912 and 1917, and again between 1937 and 1945, not to mention during the 1970s. Still, you have many cousins, third cousins and further, on your father's side. All of the Pure Bloods, and the Potters are a fairly old family, are related somehow, through marriage if nothing else. The Potter name has died out, except for you, but there are distant relatives. No, Maria Brown married Alexander Potter and had a son and three daughters who survived to adulthood. Alexandria didn't marry. Joyce married Frederick Weasley . . . yes, those Weasleys' ancestor. Victoria married Geoffrey Longbottom. Frederick's sisters . . . what was their name . . . ah, yes, there were twin girls. Claudia married

Jacob Diggory and Julia married Max Lovegood. Frederick, the only son, is the direct ancestor of your classmate."

Harry spent an interesting morning, and promised to come back to visit the next two Saturdays, and the next year.

Harry was glad to have spent the morning with Flitwick that Saturday morning, and that while the professor would be retiring from Head of Ravenclaw he would still be in the class room.

Harry had been given many things to think about since Christmas. Although very intelligent, he was not by nature an introspective lad, nor was he often going to sit down and think things through. When various people had commented on Dumbledore's and Voldemort's talent being greater than his, although the Dark Lord's and Headmaster's power was both slightly less, Harry understood what they meant.

He had to think about what his new level of power meant for him and his future, should he triumph over Voldemort. He had to think about what that triumph might mean. He had to think of the community which had formed around him. He had to think about the many implications of all this, on the political situation in Britain as well as his own life.

He didn't like it, but it did it.

Fortunately, Luna and Hermione were there to talk to him about the basics, and Tabitha and Tom had had a few conversations with him as well. Dumbledore had invited him to the office a few times, but he had not insisted Harry take him up on the invitations until that morning. He had then insisted on setting Harry up with a meeting on the last Tuesday of the term, June 24.

In Harry's own mind, he had reached no conclusions, with one exception. He was still trying to understand the other problems. When he had decided that first of questions, on the last Monday of the term, he went to sit in front of McGonagall's door, waiting for her to open it slightly, showing she had time to talk with any student who needed to.

As best Harry could tell, his friends had all done well on their exams of all types, and therefore he had no academic worries as he met with the Head of his House. He and his fellow Sixth years would only have to wait until that Thursday to get their grades, while the N.E.W.T.s would come out in early July and the O.W.L.s in late July.

"You wanted to see me, Mister Potter?"

"Yes, please," Harry said, moving into McGonagall's office and taking a seat at her gesture.

"What did you wish to discuss with me, Mister Potter?"

"Next year's Quidditch team, Professor."

McGonagall relaxed slightly. "In what respect?"

"I don't really see either of the beaters being capable of being Captain in two years, Professor."

"Nor can I, at least at the moment. Your point?"

"I can see Natalie becoming captain, but not before two more years. So, I was wondering what you might think of Ginny Weasley being captain for two years. I think she could do a marvelous job."

McGonagall gave him a stern look. "I see. And what do you plan on going next year?"

"I hope to stay as seeker, Professor."

"Have you mentioned this to anyone?"

"No, Ma'am!"

"Are you sure about this, Potter?"

Harry shrugged. "Well, it wasn't much of a cup win this year, due to the last game, but my name does go down as the winning captain, or at least co-captain, right?"

"It will, with Mister Weasley noted as the keeper and co-captain for the first game, just as you are noted for being the seeker in the first game last year."

"So my name's down three times on the cup plaques already, once as captain." Harry shrugged. "It would be better for the team if Ginny had the position, and I'm not greedy."

"No, you are not," McGonagall agreed. "I tell you what, Mister Potter. If Miss Weasley scores enough O.W.L.s to take five N.E.W.T. classes, I will approve."

"Thank you, Professor. And of course I won't mention it to anyone."

"That goes without saying. You said you plan on keeping the job of seeker, correct, Mister Potter?"

Harry understood what she was asking. "I have every intention of returning next year, Professor."

"I am glad to hear it. Are you still planning on being an auror?"

"To be honest, I'm not certain if I would want to work within the Ministry. Even so, I think I need that training, no matter what happens, don't you?"

"An excellent idea. Is there anything else?"

"No, Ma'am."

"Thank you, Mister Potter. I appreciate the difficulty of your decision."

Tuesday, June 24, 1997

"Come in, Harry, come in."

"Thank you, sir." Harry looked around the office. There seemed to be just as many gadgets and instruments as there had been the year before. Harry threw off that thought, and stroked Fawkes, who trilled under Harry's touch.

"I fear, Harry, the time has come when we must talk of many things."

"Of shoes and ships and sealing wax?" Harry asked, thinking of the Alice books he had given Luna the previous Christmas.

"Alas, no. Nor cabbages and kings, I fear. This July, you turn seventeen. You of course have also passed the minimum of two O.W.L.s. You become an adult wizard."

"So Voldemort can challenge me openly," Harry said simply.

"Actually, it means he HAS to challenge you directly. If he does not, I am certain many of his few human followers will at least attempt to desert him. It is difficult to say what the dementors will do, but if there are no Death Eaters to round up Muggles to feed them, they will drift away. I am certain they are restless in any event. They prefer . . . magical meals."

"I see. Thirty-seven days, then."

"At the minimum," Dumbledore pointed out. "There are ways to challenge you; there are even a few spells which may compel you to meet and duel with him."

"And which of those have you allowed his stooges here to get started on?" Harry asked casually. When Dumbledore gave Harry an uncharacteristic scowl, Harry pointed out, "You directed me where you wanted me to end up during in my First year at least. You sent me the cloak, made certain I found the Mirror, sent the stair cases and corridors in motion so I would meet Fluffy." Seeing Dumbledore about to object, Harry said, "Come on! I know the stair cases, doors, and some of the corridors and such all move, but you could have passworded that set to prevent anyone you didn't want to have access. I should never have gotten close to Fluffy."

Dumbledore gave in. "True."

"And was it a coincidence that not one being, not even Mrs. Norris, was killed by the basilisk? I don't believe in that much luck. You know most of what goes on here. You must have known Ginny was being possessed by Christmas that year, if not before. You were testing me and tempering me. You were forging a weapon to use against Tom Riddle."

Dumbledore said nothing.

"Come to think of it, that makes me wonder if three students could really have become animagi without your knowing it. One I could believe, but three? A rat could be overlooked, but when one was a stag? Tell me, did you know Sirius was innocent all along?"

"I did not, Harry. I swear it. I figured it out over your Third year."

"And the Tri-Wizard Tournament?"

"I was quite shocked when your name came out," Dumbledore claimed. "I had suggested reviving the tournament because I had hoped a Hogwarts champion would emerge who could act as a student mentor to you. Had he lived, I would have invited Cedric to return the following year to run a club that would have had elements of the dueling clubs of this year and the DA from last year. I only realized that the Defense teacher was polyjuiced into Moody after the death of Crouch Senior. I had no idea that it was Barty Crouch Junior. Of course, there were a number of other possibilities."

Dumbledore shrugged. "That was the beginning of the true unraveling of what I have since realized was a very flawed plan on nearly every level. I had thought the faux Moody had arranged for you to meet with an accident within the maze and planned accordingly. I was quite shocked to realize that he was helping you. I had hoped to keep you from directly confronting Voldemort again until this summer, and Crouch managed to whisk you away and Voldemort reanimated himself. Add in those fools Fudge and Umbridge last year. . . ." Dumbledore trailed away and shrugged. Harry just looked at the Headmaster for a few moments.

Dumbledore sighed. "I could have fought much harder to keep the International out and away from you this year. I may have lost had I done so, but I could very well have won. I chose not to do so. My plan was not in tatters last July, but it was close. Therefore, I gave the initiative to them. I hope they have given you the confidence I could not."

"You still haven't answered my question, sir. Which way has Voldemort planned on forcing me to confront him?"

"A few of the Slytherin and Ravenclaw girls collected your hair when they kissed you before Valentine's Day. I have notified the Ministry and the International, so that they will know that someone may try and polyjuice into you. I believe Voldemort is more likely to try an old summoning ritual. It is found in the same old book he likely lifted the ritual which reanimated him. If you are within several hundred miles of him when he casts it, you will be compelled to go to him."

"Why hasn't he used it yet? I can't believe he's that honorable."

"He is not. It summons a person to a duel, so only works for those over the age of consent."

"And at a few hundred miles . . . well, I'll be out of range through at least part of August, won't I?"

"I hope so. Would you consent to going back to America? Not to Carantuan, but further west? Master Johnson is arranging a place, and even I am not certain exactly where it is. Your four friends and Mister Weasley may also go, if you and they consent."

"Alright," Harry said, much to Dumbledore's surprise. "What? You thought I would argue?"

"Quite simply, yes," Dumbledore admitted.

"I want to win; I want to survive," Harry said. Before Dumbledore could go on, Harry asked, "Who else will I know at this training base?"

"Tudor Myrddin is probably the most skilled magical warrior alive," Dumbledore stated. "He will be in charge. Professors Spellman, Lawrence, Lupin and possibly Professor Jones will also be there, as will Mister Trowbridge and Miss Tonks."

"Not Mister Dorff?"

"No, he shall take over the main hunt here for Voldemort's forces. Professor Jones may stay and help him. I understand that is still being decided."

"When would I go?"

"You would go this Friday," Dumbledore told Harry, "unless you wish to visit the Dursleys."

"I'd rather eat soap," Harry said.

"I thought as much," Dumbledore said, that annoying slight twinkle reappearing in his eyes. "Mister Weasley will join you Saturday. Miss Spellman shall spend three weeks or so with you as well, and then she has her druidical studies to attend for three weeks. I shall speak to your other friends today. They will be spending at least a week with their families. After that, they may join you whenever they wish."

"I hope they all come," Harry said, and then a look of incredible guilt washed over his face.

"Oh, my boy! That is nothing to feel guilty about! Begging them, forcing them in any way, that would be one thing, but not desiring their company."

Harry stood up quickly. Dumbledore was afraid Harry was going to leave but he just turned his back on Dumbledore. "It's hard," Harry said softly.

"What is, Harry?"

"Having all this power. Having all these people dependent on me. Knowing that I'll probably be fighting like this the rest of my life. Not having a life of my own."

"Well, that's all very understandable," Dumbledore said a little lamely. "Why do you think you'll be doing this the rest of your life? You don't have to an auror."

"I'm sure you know, even better than I do, that the ritual that linked me to the others has an obligation to protect the community built in to it, sir."

"True," Dumbledore acknowledged. "That doesn't mean you have to roam around the world, looking for wrongs to right."

"That's true, but on the other hand, who am I to pick and choose?" Harry pointed in one direction. "You, you I'll help." He pointed in another. "You? Sorry, you have to suffer." He dropped his arms. "I know, I can't right all the wrongs in the world, but how do you pick and choose between people's lives?"

"You must remember, the more you get involve in disputes the more likely you will be fooled into interceding for the wrong side," Dumbledore warned.

"I know," Harry said, his shoulders sagging. "I also know it's presumptuous to worry about it before I've won this war."

"Actually, it's not," Dumbledore said firmly. "Still, if it does end in late August, it will give you your Seventh year to decompress. If you go through the auror training, that will give you several more years to decide how to handle the problems." Dumbledore hesitated for a moment, then said, "May I give you one serious piece of advice?"

"Of course, sir."

"Never use force when there is any real possibility of a political solution. That is the greatest temptation for wizards such as myself, and now you. We can force many a solution, but when they are forced, they multiply the problems. I grant you, hoping for the politicians and public to come around to some reasonable point between absolute right and the best interests for all concerned is sometimes a forlorn one."

"Even hopeless," Harry said, remembering the events of the last two years.

"Sometimes," Dumbledore acknowledged. "However, when you resort to force, people merely see force as the answer. It is almost never, ever, right to use force first."

"Hermione, Luna, Ginny, and Neville all tried to explain that to me one afternoon," Harry complained. "I thought I understood it until they explained it. All I knew after they explained was that I had a headache."

"But you all agreed?"

Harry shrugged. "Of course."

While Dumbledore's largest worries still remained (that Harry might lose to Voldemort or that he might die or be seriously injured while winning), he felt a large worry disappear from his shoulders.

Unfortunately, he never thought to convey his relief to Severus Snape.

Chapter VI

"Good afternoon, Miss Granger."

"Headmaster," Hermione answered, looking around. She had had a few very brief forays into the Headmaster's office, and found it more fascinating each time.

Dumbledore smiled as he saw the darting eyes. "Some day next year, if things have settled down at all, I shall give you a full tour of all the instruments."

"That would be very welcome, Headmaster." Hermione frowned. "Are we finally going to be discussing this summer?"

"Yes. Your parents agreed?"

"They agreed to allowing me to leave in early July," Hermione said, picking her words with care. "They obviously hope I can spend some real time with them in late August."

"So do we all, Miss Granger."

"It . . . it's likely to be over by then, isn't it?"

"Likely?" Dumbledore pondered that for a few minutes. "There is really no way to tell. Voldemort will engineer a confrontation at some point between Harry's return to Britain and Halloween. When, I can not say. We do have a few low-ranking spies amongst Voldemort's followers, and by all reports, he has not decided when, either."

"And then?"

"Obviously, both sides would like to triumph in that confrontation. We shall have to wait upon events to see what transpires."

"I wish I could go with Harry whenever he leaves," Hermione said, frowning.

"I understand that, Miss Granger. However, you need some . . . what is a current Muggle phrase? Ah, yes. You need some down time." Seeing the look on Hermione's face, he added, "Leave? Time off? Shore leave? Rest and. . . ."

"Yes, sir," Hermione said. "I understand. I was just surprised at the idea. I mean, it's not. . . ." She went silent.

"It is necessary," Dumbledore said. "You have not just been a student. Since at least the middle of the Tri-wizard Tournament, you have been Harry's personal coach." Seeing the look on Hermione's face, he asked, "What is it?"

"The new term is personal trainer, sir."

"Thank you. I do try and keep up, or else I would sound much like an early Victorian novel."

"I thought you were more a mid-Victorian, sir," Hermione teased.

Dumbledore smiled. "As you probably have observed, much of wizarding slang is merely out-of-date Muggle slang."

"I had, actually."

"You need to get away from the magical world, to ground your self. It will only be for a week, but hopefully you can get some rest."

Hermione started to protest, but Dumbledore cut her off. "Rest, Miss Granger. Tell me, do you have any clothes at home?"

"Yes, why?"

"Then perhaps you should just take your wand and your cat. Read for fun, if you must read. Why not just try to relax, if you can?"

"That might not be easy. My parents. . . ."

"Professor Spellman has had a few talks with them," Dumbledore reminded her. "Spellman had spoken with the parents of all of Harry's friends that term. She has not reported any problems."

"That's good to know," Hermione admitted. "Harry needs us with him."

"He does," Dumbledore agreed. "You will all be learning some very sophisticated locating spells, and you, Harry, Neville Longbottom, and Ron Weasley will also be given the final apparation exams. You will be allowed to get your license early."

"Thank you!"

"It seemed like an obvious idea," Dumbledore pointed out.

The smile suddenly disappeared from Hermione's face. "There is just one problem."

"And what might that be?" Dumbledore asked, although he was fairly certain of the answer.

"When does Harry get some down time? For a week in August? Next summer? After auror training? When?"

"A very good question. One that I asked Professor Lawrence and Mister Dorff, and one that Miss Lovegood, Miss Weasley, and Mister Longbottom each asked me today, as they sat in that very chair. Long term? I do not know. I truly wish that I did. Over the summer, however, they will schedule at least thirty minutes every day for Harry to fly alone. In a sense, his spirit needs to soar, to break free of all the every day concerns and worries."

"I admit, I don't see how being off the ground with just a stick holding you up can be very restful," Hermione said, "but it works for Harry. I guess that's all that matters in this situation."

"Very true," Dumbledore said. "If it makes you feel any better, Professor Spellman agrees with you. She can do it, but she really prefers not to."

"I knew I liked her," Hermione muttered. She looked up. "I guess I should go get my grades. They should be posted by now." Envelopes with the grades other than N.E.W.T.s and O.W.L.s were placed on the House notice boards.

"All the possible grades are up, except for yours," Dumbledore said. "I have yours here." He handed her the envelope.

"Thank you, sir." Hermione sat back but hesitated.

"Go on," Dumbledore said with a smile. Hermione ripped the envelope open.

Apparation.120
NEWT Arithmancy111
NEWT Charms105
NEWT Defence.102
NEWT Law & Regulations. . 99
NEWT Medical.120
NEWT Runes. 99
NEWT Transfiguration. . .114
NEWT University Prep. . .120
.109.41

Hermione glared at the total, until she remembered that Apparation only counted as half a class.

"Very impressive, Miss Granger, especially with eight N.E.W.T. classes. We rarely see averages that high with six regular classes, let alone seven."

"Thank you, sir."

"Now, unless there something else, why don't you let your friends go and congratulate you, and you can see how good a tutor you really are."

"Yes, sir."

Hermione ran into Neville and Ginny first. They were on their way to sit by the lake for a while. They would have already been there, except Neville was trying to show everyone his grades along the way. That was unsurprising, since his best previous yearly average was just over an 84.

Hermione took the time to look at Neville's grades --

Apparation. . . . 87
NEWT Accounting . 96
NEWT Charms . . . 90
NEWT Creatures. .102
NEWT Defence. . . 96
NEWT Herbology. .120
NEWT Medical. . . 90
. 98.08

-- and congratulate him, and then went looking for Harry. He wasn't in the common room, and it took Hermione over half an hour to wade through the thanks of the various House mates who wanted to thank her. She did have a Second year check on Harry's dorm, and he apparently was nowhere in Gryffindor. The Second year did say that all of Harry's things seemed to be packed. A glance out of a high window in the Tower showed there was no one on the Quidditch pitch.

Hermione checked on those 'hidden' rooms she knew of. She even checked the library. No sign of Harry, or even Luna, nor did either show up at the farewell feast.

After the feast, Hermione hurried down to the kitchens, hoping that Dobby might know where Harry was. Just before she got to the entrance, she was shocked to be grabbed out of thin air.

"Relax," Harry said, "it's just me."

"Don't **do** that!" Hermione could feel Harry's cloak.

"Sorry." Harry's head appeared. "Luna and I have been together, and we'll be staying together. I just wanted to say goodbye now, since I won't see you in the morning."

Harry handed Hermione the envelope with his grades. "Here. Thanks for your help. If you're not Head Girl, they're crazy." Harry gave Hermione a hug and a kiss, and then disappeared.

Hermione shook her head, as if to clear it. She hadn't been able to say much, but decided she would let it go and live with it. She took out Harry's grades.

Apparation.	90
NEWT Charms	105
NEWT Creatures.	90
NEWT Defence.	120
NEWT Law & Regulations.	87
NEWT Medical.	96
NEWT Transfiguration.	96
.	98.31

"Not as much of an improvement as Neville, but quite excellent," Hermione said to herself. She went off to make certain the younger students were packing.

After helping direct the students onto the train the next morning, Hermione, Neville, Ginny, and Luna collapsed in the same compartment.

After a moment of silence, Ginny said, "I **hate** this."

"What?" Neville asked.

"This just isn't right," Ginny said. "It was right in September. Harry and Ron should be here."

"We'll all be together next Saturday," Luna pointed out.

"Cold comfort," Hermione grumbled. "Do we want to know where you and Harry were all yesterday afternoon, evening and last night?"

"Well, you might want to know, but I shan't tell you where we were or what we were doing," Luna answered simply. "If you really wanted to find us, you could have, you know."

"How. . . ?"

"You're the center for the group," Ginny reminded her.

"That's how Harry knew you were looking for us," Luna said. "You need to learn how to keep in touch with the flow of magic within you, not just directing it."

"I know," Hermione admitted. "I know that's what I'll be working on this summer."

"I wonder what the rest of us will be working on?" Neville pondered.

"Ron, Harry, you, and I will be working on perfecting our apparation," Hermione said. "Beyond that, I don't know."

"Do you think there's any chance for the two of us?" Ginny asked.

"Apparating early? I don't know," Hermione admitted. "It depends on what else they have us doing."

"We're not going to be left behind," Luna stated.

"That's for certain," Ginny agreed.

Across the Atlantic Ocean, Ron and Sabrina were curious about what they were going to be doing as well. Over the previous semester, Sabrina had slowly come to realize what she was getting involved with. Ron's stories of the Philosopher's Stone, the Basilisk, and the Battle at the Ministry brought home what she had of course known intellectually but really hadn't fully grasped. This wasn't a game, this wasn't fiction. She, or those she cared about, could be seriously hurt or even killed.

This realization had certainly shaken Sabrina, and accounted for her allowing Ron to draw a bit closer physically than she had planned on going before the following Christmas. It had also inspired her to work even harder on her courses. She was not just planning to continue an ancient life-style, she could literally be battling for her life. That certain gave her some incentive.

Ron had also worked hard. He had never realized how much he relied on Hermione organizing his life until she was no longer there to do his study-planning. While she had almost never allowed him to directly copy her homework, let alone her research papers, she had sometimes given him her notes when he had had a good reason for missing or not paying attention in class. More importantly, she had motivated him (although he had called it nagging at the time), planned his study times, kept track of his assignments, proof-read his work, and

usually at least gave him hints when he got lost. Looking back, Ron realized that Hermione had probably done between 20 and 25% of his total work. Not continuing his Law and Regulations class had basically made him about even in his work load.

He had managed to let Sabrina understand this without her getting (very) jealous. Once Sabrina understood that Ron was missing Hermione more as a tutor than as a girlfriend, she relented and encouraged Ron to buy Hermione something nice. Consultation with some of his most studious new classmates led Ron to several interesting reference books that were unlikely to be available in Britain, especially two on house elves. Fortunately for Ron, Henry Dorff had arranged to have his post office account transferred to student credit union at the Ysgol.

Ron also was wise enough to take the advice of his suite-mates and bought Sabrina a suitable gift as well (a green jade broomstick pendent on a red gold chain).

Ron had just given Sabrina the present as they sat waiting for a house elf to transport them to wherever they were going. Most of the students were already gone, and Sabrina was giving Ron a most enthusiastic 'thank you' hug.

"Good thing I'm the one who came to collect you, instead of your parents," Lloyd Trowbridge said to Sabrina, coming up from behind them.

Ron and Sabrina sprang apart, both blushing.

"We were waiting for the elves," Sabrina managed to mutter.

"Sorry, no elves. We have a long-distance portkey. Now, first, let me gather up all your luggage and stick it together."

"Can you tell us where we're going now?" Ron asked.

"No, because I don't know," Lloyd said cheerfully.

"Why not?"

"It's an enchanted place. The native Australians first saw it in their astral Dreamwalks. They later identified the actual place, and warded it so that it is almost impossible to find. In fact, it may be the hardest spot on Earth to find. Only they can make the portkeys. We're going there by their invitation."

"Oh."

"Are you ready?"

Ron looked at Sabrina, who shrugged. "As ready as we can get, I guess," Ron said. They each put a finger on a piece of luggage and another on a small flat stone Lloyd held out. At Lloyd's command, they disappeared.

Harry and Master J had arrived at the island a few hours before Ron and Sabrina. "You could not find this island on any map or chart. Even the most advanced Muggle satellite images slide over us here. We are but a blip on the Southern Ocean. No doubt, since all of you have studied astronomy, you could figure out our latitude. Miss Granger, and some of your teachers, could no doubt come within a few degrees even without any devices other than their brains and eyes. They might even be able to calculate from weather patterns and climate a longitude within a hundred miles. It would make no difference if I were to write down the exact coordinates. You still could not find your way here, using either magical or Muggle means." Master J stopped for a moment and smiled.

"What is it, sir?"

"Well, perhaps I am wrong. You seem to have a knack for doing impossible magic."

Harry frowned. "I wish people would stop saying things like that."

"Like what, Harry?"

"That I'm special! that I'm the Boy-Who-Lived, the Key to whatever, the Boy Who Must Do the Impossible! I'm not some ancient god, or demi-god for that matter. I'm just me!"

"Harry, while I am happy your ego is still a reasonable size, you **are** special. You are at the center of many paths of probability and power. You don't have to like it, but your life will be easier once you accept it." Johnson smiled. "You can't tell me this is the first time you've been told this."

"No, but I still don't like it," Harry protested.

"Has anyone you trusted ever told you that you **should** like it?" Johnson asked gently.

That made Harry think for a few moments. "No," Harry finally said. "Of course, Sirius suggested once it should be a good way to meet girls. . . ."

"Was he, well, serious?"

"No, no I don't think so," Harry admitted with a slight smile.

"There you are then," Johnson stated. "In part, you are right. You have no greater rights, no greater say, in the way the world works than anyone else. That is what some beings, magical and Muggle alike, fail to understand. We are all on this limited little place for a limited little spec of time. Even the longest-lived, even the so-called immortals, live nothing like a mountain chain. A mountain chain lives nothing like as long as this planet. This planet will live nothing like the vast ocean of time of this universe, and who can say how long that might last? Who can know what might come after? All we can do is have faith there is some higher purpose."

"And if there's not?"

"And if there is not, why should one being live in comfort and power while billions of others toil and quake under his lash? But while people in general should not be nearly as passive in

the face of evil as they often are, not everyone can take as active a role in defeating evil as others. You have been placed in a central place at an important time, Harry."

"Dumbledore was placed in situations that allowed him to make several great advances in knowledge, but that also meant his family was thrust into Grindelwald's quest for power," he went on. "In many ways, all his hard work did was earn him losses greater than any you have yet been burdened with, although at ages when he was better able to bear them. He regrets the losses, but does not regret taking up the burdens of leading the fights against Grindelwald and Voldemort. He buried himself at Hogwarts, hoping that the world would forget him. It did not; it came after him there. No matter where you go, the world will find you somehow. Even if you were to bury yourself here, or were somehow able to recreate this isolation somewhere else, the burden would still be there."

"And after?" Harry said bitterly.

"I don't know," Johnson admitted. "There is little fair about life, Harry. There are many pleasures, and many compensations, but it is not in any way fair. How these balance out, the unfairness and the rewards, is up to you."

Harry frowned.

"Let me ask you one thing, Harry. Suppose it were in my power to grant you one thing: that at the end of your first year, when you defeated Voldemort, he had died at that point. None of the events of the last five years would have happened. Would you take it? Knowing that while Sirius would still be alive, he would also still be in Azkaban and you would never have known him?"

Harry thought about that, and said, "Actually, he would still have seen the photo of Wormtail in Fudge's Daily Prophet. He would have still broken out."

Johnson knew the background story. "Perhaps not. With no diary and entrapment in the Chamber of Secrets, perhaps the Weasleys would have used their winnings for some other purpose. Similarly, you might never have met Miss Lovegood, you would not know Tonks or Lupin, or any of us from the International."

Harry shook his head, and finally said, "I think I would do it, if only to save Cedric and all the other people killed. Not to save Sirius or anything like that."

Johnson smiled. "I wish I could grant that, then, Harry. You are a wise young man."

Chapter VII

Ron didn't see much of Harry during their first week on the island. Ron had never been a very good morning person, while Harry was up and exercising at 6:30 local time, when it was actually still dark at the high latitude. They spent an hour every morning practicing apparation together, with Tom Lawrence as their tutor. While no one could apparate to the island group, it was possible to apparate on the island itself, and to five smaller islands, all within just a few miles of each other. Once the other students arrived, they would be practicing even longer, and making their first jumps off island.

Tudor Myrddin would coach Harry in advanced dueling techniques all afternoon, while Ron and Sabrina were coached by Lloyd Trowbridge, Remus Lupin, and Tom Lawrence. Tabitha and Tonks would be arriving with the other students, and the students' dueling would intensify. Master J would take Harry aside every evening after dinner, and work with him until it was time to go to bed.

To Ron's disappointment, he didn't have much free time with Sabrina, either. Tom was coaching him through his homework, while Lloyd was going the same for Sabrina. As Tom had pointed out, "If things pick up this August, you don't want to be behind when things settle down again. Work now, fight later, and then you can do your N.E.W.T.s."

Ron wondered if life would ever get easy.

The only time Ron and Harry had any real time together was during the period before lunch. Every day, after apparation drills, Harry would take to the sky on his Firebolt. The weather didn't matter (since they didn't have any thunder storms). Rain or shine, no matter what the wind, Harry flew. Ron preferred not to fly in very bad weather. Their third day had a downpour with heavy winds, and Ron stayed in a shelter, watching Harry challenge the elements.

"I thought I had seen the best flyers around until I saw him," Tudor said, coming up to Ron.

"He is amazing," Ron agreed. "I just hope he doesn't get blown off the island."

"I don't think he will," Tudor said proudly. "Too bad the ocean is so cold. Do you know the Muggle sport called surfing?"

"No, what's that?"

"It's a way of riding the breaking waves while standing on a specially constructed board," Tudor answered. "It's quite exhilarating. Harry would enjoy it, and there are wizarding versions that I think Harry would get a real kick out of."

"Is it anything like wave-skipping?" Ron asked.

"Not really -- that's more trying to fly low enough to touch your toes to the top of the wave without dropping in. Don't use a good broom for that."

"Personal experience?"

"Regretfully, yes."

"I know Harry will win," Ron said after a moment's silence. He switched from watching Harry to looking Tudor right in the eyes. "What are the odds of his coming out of the confrontation alive and . . . unbroken?"

Tudor thought that over. "I don't know, Weasley. That worries me. He's been under so much pressure for so long at such a young age." The older man shook his head in regret. "If we include his extra training from the time he started practicing for the Third Task in the Tri-Wizard through the end of this summer, he will have crammed something like a minimum of six years of training into these few years, maybe more. Still, part of me really hopes that any final confrontation will wait for a year or more."

"Could Harry hold out that long?" Ron asked.

"I don't know," Tudor admitted. "That's why only part of me wishes for that. We have a lot of people researching options for Harry, no matter when he wins."

Ron smiled. "In a hurry, aren't we?"

Tudor held Ron's eyes, and Ron flinched a little. "Your whole culture seems to glorify the amateur, Mister Weasley. Everything done on a shoestring, with a strong belief in muddling through and done on the cheap. Take your father, for example. His old office should have had a minimum of two administrators, three clerks, and at least eight investigators. He was half the entire staff." He shook his head.

"How many did you leave it with?" Ron asked.

"One administrator, two clerks, and five investigators," Tudor said ruefully. "We did the best we could with the time and resources we had. I hope what little we did accomplish won't be undone in a decade."

"Any raises?" Ron asked.

"For Department heads on downwards," Tudor replied. "The senior people were so overpaid the positions shouldn't need to even think of a raise for thirty years or more."

"Somehow, I don't think it will take that long," Ron said.

"The people we left in charge should be good for at least twenty years, if not a lot longer," Tudor said.

"If we're lucky," Ron pointed out.

"If we're lucky," Tudor agreed.

Harry swooped in front of them. "I know it's wet, but the wind makes it a lot of fun!" he called out. "Come on! We can all take some Pepper-Up when we finish!"

"You're crazy!" Ron called back.

"Since when have **you** been sane when it came to flying?" Harry demanded.

Ron looked at Tudor, who grinned back. Ron grinned and grabbed his broomstick. "I'm daft if you are!" he said to the older man. Tudor grabbed his broom and did a running take-off. As he passed by Harry, he slapped the teen's shoulder. "Tag! You're it!"

"Honestly! I can understand when teenage boys like Harry and Ron do something incredibly stupid, but **you** should know better!"

"You weren't supposed to be here until later tonight," Tudor complained.

"As if I would leave poor Rina alone for long with you testosterone-poisoned lunatics. Flying in a nearly-freezing downpour like that! And allowing those two. . . ."

"But!"

"Hush and get your feet into that bucket of hot water and potions before I dump it on your head!"

"Yes, dear."

Ron and Harry peeked around the door frame.

"Come in boys, and meet the wife. She's going to be here until Monday."

In her own quiet way, Gwendolyn Myrddin was as strong and determined as her husband or the rest of the band of friends Harry had grown to respect from the International. She did not overwhelm Harry with affection, as Molly Weasley tried to, nor did she even have the slight maternal overtones Tabitha Spellman projected at times. Instead, Harry quickly came to think of her manner as 'auntish' -- just the right level of feminine solicitude for his welfare, balanced by the knowledge that she didn't have any real authority over Harry nor did she want any.

Sunday afternoon local time, the other students and adults showed up. The adults all greeted Gwen enthusiastically, and the entire group went off for coffee and chit-chat. Ron and Sabrina quickly went off on their own, leaving Harry to welcome the other Hogwarts' students.

Many Hogwarts students would have recognized their greetings. Harry hugged and kissed Hermione warmly, exchanged the ritual handshake/arm/shoulder grab with Neville, hugged and kissed Ginny on the cheek, and then fell into Luna's arms.

When Harry came up for air, Hermione asked in a bewildered tone, "Where are we?"

They were obviously on a shoreline. While it was day, dusk was unequivocally not too far off in the cloudless sky. The sea in front of them was unbroken (the smaller islands in the group were not in the line of sight), and the waves were breaking on the rocky beach with some power.

Behind them, short jagged cliffs of basalt rose. Like the mountain they had stayed in over Christmas, this area was also obviously riddled with tunnels.

"Well," Harry said, "Master J said this is the about the most unplotable place on Earth. It's a small group of islands, somewhere in the Southern Ocean. My guess is that we're somewhere south west of Australia."

"I thought we were going to America," Ginny complained.

"I think that's what they told Dumbledore," Harry said. "I think the only people who know we're here are the people here, and maybe a few of Master J's people."

"You can't mean they don't trust Dumbledore," Hermione said, slightly horrified.

"I don't know," Harry said frankly, "and I really don't care." He looked out over the open sea. "I like it here."

The three girls looked at each other, startled. Luna put her arm through Harry's and took his hand. "Come on then," she urged gently. "Give us the grand tour."

The tension in Harry's face and posture melted. He took Luna's hand and smiled. "Alright."

Harry didn't take them around the entire island. It was not large by any stretch of the imagination, but neither was it that tiny. The island group had obviously been a large sea volcano that had destroyed itself at some point in the distant past. The major island was perhaps a mile across at the widest and four and a half miles from tip to tip. The group of six islands formed almost half a circle, with the largest one in the center. The largest of the other five islands was only a few hundred feet off the tip of the major one, with a next to smallest trailing behind it. The other three were off the other end of the island, the smallest really was just a large rock, its base partially eroded away by the tides, sticking some fifty feet above the waves at high tide.

Hermione looked at Harry, as he looked over what had been the great caldera of the volcano. The sun was almost set, the waves showed small whitecaps as the breeze picked up to a real wind. "Harry?"

"Yes?"

"Why do you like it here?"

Harry thought about that for a over a minute. "I'm not certain. It's beautiful. It's natural, in many ways. I also think it's because I know what I'm supposed to be doing, and I really do trust the people training us."

"They have their own agendas, Harry," Hermione pointed out.

"They probably do," Harry agreed. "Don't think I hate Dumbledore, because I don't. I just think we all put him on too high a pedestal. We expected too much from him, and he let us down, or at least he did me."

"I can understand that," Hermione admitted.

"There aren't any overtones here," Luna said into the short silence that followed Hermione's remark.

"What do you mean?" Ginny asked.

"This island has obviously been inhabited," Luna pointed out. They all nodded their agreement. The amount of tunneling into the highest bluffs showed that. "In places where people have lived, there are echoes of their lives, and especially of their deaths. I wonder if it's possible that no one has ever died here?"

"None have died a violent death, or even led a violent life, at least," Master J said, coming up to them. "Few people have ever lived here for any length of time, either. My people's ancestors, and the ancestors of the other native peoples of Australia, have been coming here through projection for tens of thousands of years. We first traveled here physically, according to legend, just over eleven thousand years ago." He looked at Hermione. "You no doubt doubt that, considering what you know of Muggles at the end of the last great Ice Age and the lack of written documentation."

Hermione flushed slightly, but said nothing.

"I apologize," Master J said to her.

"No, you're right," Hermione admitted. "I never knew how much oral tradition and such were preserved by the Old Believers, which has been proven mostly true by magical archeologists. How can I doubt your oral traditions are any less valid?"

"But it's not easy for you, is it?" Master J asked kindly.

"No, it's not."

Master J smiled. "And that is a good thing. Blind faith is not always a good thing, any more than total skepticism is. Finding a balance is rarely easy."

"Perhaps that's why we rubbed each other the wrong way at first," Luna said. "We were both too extreme at the time."

"Maybe," Hermione agreed. "We both had blind faith in some things, and too much skepticism in others, just in totally different areas."

"Wasn't there one area you both had great faith in?" Master J inquired. Luna and Hermione looked at each other, slightly puzzled.

"Of course you did," Ginny told them. "Just like I did." The two teens transferred their puzzled expression to Ginny.

Ginny sighed, while Neville laughed. "I don't get it, either," Harry complained.

"Of course you don't," Neville said with a grin. "That's because the one thing we all have faith in, if not blind faith, isn't a thing at all. It's you."

"That's true," Hermione said, while Luna and Ginny nodded. "Even when I was asking you to go slower and think things through, I still had faith you would lead us and lead us very well."

"And we all know how well that went," Harry grumbled.

"You haven't always succeeded as much as you wish you had," Hermione told Harry, "but you have never, **ever** failed."

"You have never failed me, or anyone else," Ginny added.

"These moments of self-doubt are perfectly natural, Harry," Master J reminded his pupil. "You are getting much better at over-coming them."

"Thank you," Harry mumbled.

"Are you ready to come in and have dinner?" Master J asked.

"Our rhythms are a bit off, but sure, why not," Hermione said after a glance at the others.

"Good. We have a potentially interesting discussion scheduled afterwards," Master J told them.

Quite a large group assembled that night by Master J: Tudor and his wife Gwen; Remus; Tom; Lloyd; Henry (who would be leaving the next day), Tabitha, and Sabrina; and Harry and his five friends.

"Now is the time we must start a discussion," Master J intoned. "Voldemort has the power to summons Harry to his presence once Harry returns to Britain. He could not do it before, as Harry was underage. To put it simply, the spell is based on a potion, made with Harry's hair, which was gathered by some of the Fifth year girls last February." That caused a bit of a rumble from the students as they figured it out.

After they had quieted down, Johnson went on. "At our best guess, Voldemort has enough to try and summons Harry five times at most. He will no doubt try at least once if not twice

while Harry is still here. Those will fail, as we doubt it can work at distances more than a few hundred miles. Voldemort is unlikely to try a third time until Harry is assured to be within the summoning area."

"Meaning the First of September and after," Hermione stated.

"Correct," Johnson agreed. "Because of Harry's power and the community spell, he can learn to fight it."

"And why wouldn't he wish to?" Luna asked. Seeing the surprised looks around her, she explained. "Harry must fight Riddle some time. It is very stressful to just wait, and Harry is mentally ready to fight now." She held Harry's hand, while he looked down at his shoes, embarrassed. "The longer he waits, he will be stronger magically, but the stress will have taken its toll as well."

"If Harry is just taken, Voldemort will be totally ready, but Harry could be disoriented," Ron pointed out.

"True," Luna agreed.

"And if Voldemort fails, at least the first time or two, he'll lose face with his followers," Ginny pointed out.

"Also true," Luna acknowledged. She looked at Johnson. "Now, what's the main reason?"

Master J smiled ruefully. It was hard to fool a seer like Luna when she was concentrating on a person. "If Voldemort fails on that third attempt, we believe he will likely wait until September Nineteenth."

"Which means those hussies turned over some of my hair as well," Hermione stated. "I won't be able to resist. They'll kidnap me, and force Harry to rescue me."

"Most likely. However, no matter where you are, no matter what the wards, Harry can come to you, and then draw the rest of his community," Master J stated.

"So, you want Hermione to be kidnaped, tortured, and possibly killed, just so Harry can materialize and bring us in, rather than having Harry taken and bringing us in before then?" Tom demanded angrily.

"No," Johnson said calmly, "I am merely pointing out those seem to be our two options."

"Nonsense," Tom spat. "I can anchor Hermione to Hogwarts no matter what the summoning spell is."

"Can you really?" Johnson asked, surprised.

"Of course I can," Tom retorted. "I didn't know you had so little respect for my powers."

"I can assure you, that is not true," Johnson said.

"Let me show you the spell he's using later," Tabitha said. "Then we'll know our options." Tom nodded.

"In any event, should we let Harry. . . ." Johnson saw the look building in Harry's face, and changed his line of thought. "Excuse me. Should we **all** decide that Harry may be taken or lured, the question then is, what should be his plan of action, other than swearing to bring in the rest of his community?"

"In other words, how should I plan on killing Voldemort?" Harry restated the question.

"Exactly."

"Harry, I think you need to start keeping a small knapsack magically attached to you at all times," Tudor said. "No matter where you are whisked away to, the knapsack will follow."

"The downside to this is that it can never be more than twenty feet away from you, or else it not appear next to you," Henry added.

"It should have that stone bottle that Cadfael gave you, to send any captured dementors off," Tudor went on, but this time he was interrupted by Tom.

"If you should disembody Voldemort, you can also use it against him."

Tudor glared, but went on. "True. We can also pack it with a few things, like water and chocolate, just in case, and a spare wand." He pulled a short wand out and handed it to Harry. "Give this a swish."

Harry glared at the adults, but took the wand and did as he was told. As he grasped it, he realized that it felt good. He swished the wand hard, and an entire rainbow of sparks erupted from it, stunning most of the people watching, not to mention Harry himself.

"What's it made of?" Harry asked.

"The wood is hickory," Tom explained. "Instead of using a single magical ingredient, the Hidden have somehow learned to distill the power of multiple objects down. How they do it is not known, but it works. Only wizards of great power, magical and personal, can make them work. They always have twenty-seven ingredients. This one has eighteen different phoenix feathers, including one from Fawkes, a heart string from two different dragons and a griffin, a hair and a feather from your friend Buckbeak, a feather from your owl -- they try to use something from a familiar if they can get one, and one hair each from your friends Firenze and Dobby, and one from Luna."

"Oh, that's what you wanted that for," Luna said.

"That is not just any wand," Tudor said in amazement. "Only the Hidden Centers have them. I've never heard of anyone, not even another Hidden, having one."

"There was at least one," Tabitha said.

"Who was that?" Hermione asked, since most were too stunned.

"Merlin," Tabitha replied. Total silence followed that.

"Will this wand help me destroy Voldemort?" Harry finally asked.

"It will help you duel Voldemort," Tudor stated. "Because it has the essence of the same type of phoenix feather as Voldemort's wand, any of his curses, even the Killing Curse, can be stopped by a strong enough shield."

"I thought nothing could block the Killing Curse," Hermione protested.

"Nonsense," Henry answered. "You can duck, of course. The AK doesn't chase you around. You can block it with a physical barrier, although it will certainly be damaged. Harry blocked it when he dueled Voldemort right after he was reembodied. Harry and Voldemort's wands locked, even though Voldemort had cast the Killing Curse. That led to some very tricky testing, and behold! Using this wand, Harry can block the Killing Curse cast by Voldemort's wand."

"That doesn't answer my real question," Harry reminded them. "How do I destroy Voldemort?"

"If you cast the Killing Curse, you will more likely disembody him than totally kill him," Tom told him. "However, you can then send him to the Hidden, just like you can the dementors. They can destroy his essence. So, there's one choice."

"The same is true if you kill his body in some other way," Lloyd added. "If you ran him through with a sword, for example, you'd likely have to send his essence on as well."

"You can engage him in a Legilimency battle," Henry said. "If you can project the power of your positive feelings into his soul, you will likely burn him out. You hurt him badly last June, Harry. You're strong enough now to destroy him that way."

"If wouldn't have to even be a Legilimency battle per se," Tabitha said. "If you can make a bit more progress on your astral powers, you might be able to trace your link to him back to him. Using the powers of the group, we might be able to destroy him that way, or at least really hurt him."

"That would be the best scenario," Master J stated. "That way, we don't have to worry about Death Eater or other interference. It would also mean you wouldn't have to bear the burden of destroying him on your own, like a Legilimency battle would."

"Why is that?" Ron asked.

"In a Legilimency battle, we might be lending Harry some power, but the will and the feelings would all come from Harry," Tabitha explained. "In the scenario we'd prefer, well to put it simply, all our feelings and wills would be channeled through Harry."

"I don't want you to all have to become killers!" Harry protested.

"We don't all have to," Tabitha said. "Those of us in the group have the choice of contributing all, contributing real power, or just contributing a bit of power passively. You still have some time to go before we can even try that."

Harry looked at Master J, his unasked question obvious.

"If you keep working as hard as you have, you should be ready for the Legilimency battle by the time we go back in August," Johnson said. "We aren't certain if the astral battle will work, or if it will merely injure Voldemort. It has never been tried before."

"And if I'm not quite ready then, shall I stay until I am?" Harry asked. Seeing the surprised looks, he said, "N.E.W.T.s aren't that important. We need, I need, to be ready for this confrontation before the Nineteenth of September."

"Harry. . . ." Hermione tried to protest.

"No," Harry said simply, yet with a decisiveness none wanted to question. "I will **not** allow you to be kidnaped, not when we know it's a real possibility." He looked at Tom. "No offense, but if Voldemort failed on the first attempt, he'll just figure out some other way to kidnap Hermione or someone else."

"Then you want to go for the astral attack as Plan A?" Johnson asked.

"Is that the one most likely to work?" Harry asked in return.

"Mostly likely? To destroy Voldemort, yes, in theory. That would still leave Bellatrix Lestrange, any number of Death Eaters, and the dementors to deal with."

"Wouldn't that be true of the other plans as well?" Ginny asked.

Tudor shrugged. "In a big battle, almost anything could happen. I **think** we could bring in enough forces to wipe them out, but we'd take casualties as well."

"Couldn't someone like Master J here tag along, sort to speak, and identify where we're taking Voldemort down?" Lloyd asked. "Then those forces could move in before they realize Voldemort's been neutralized."

"Neutralized?" Tabitha asked, an eyebrow raised. "You've been reading to many Muggle briefings again."

"Nonetheless, the idea has merit," Johnson said. He turned to Henry. "You will be able to arrange 'forces' to be available?"

"Yes, sir."

"Inform Cadfael early," Tudor instructed. "His forces, the International hit-wizards, and a few people from the British Ministry."

"Yes, sir."

"Do we set a target date?" Lloyd asked.

"Not yet," Johnson said. "We'll consider a date on August Fifteenth. We'll refine and rethink things as we go along."

Harry nodded his understanding. It was good to know where they were going.

Chapter VIII

Harry worked hard for the rest of the month. He was determined to be able to end Voldemort's terror no matter what, and if possible then move on with his own life. It quickly fell to Ron to get Harry to relax in his few free moments so that the tension didn't build up too far during the day and evening.

Most of this short-term daily relaxation was still done by flying. None of the others could keep up with Harry, although some, organized by Ron, tried. To Ron's chagrin, Ginny came closest, followed by Sabrina. He and the two former (adult) beaters were all excellent flyers, but were missing that touch of brilliance the two girls had and that Harry had in abundance.

Luna said simply that she would take care of relaxing Harry at night. Neither she nor Harry let on how that was done, and no matter how curious the others might be, none, not even Tabitha or Hermione, dared intrude into the couple's privacy enough to find out.

Despite these precautions, by the time Sabrina had left for her druid training towards the end of July Hermione was becoming concerned for Harry's welfare, and considered taking those concerns to Tabitha. Hermione consulted Luna first, who took a closer look at Harry and then sent Hermione off to Tabitha immediately. The older woman agreed with Hermione's concerns, and the pair cornered Master J and Tudor and made them understand the depths of their concern while Luna made certain the meeting was unseen by the others, especially by Harry.

"Harry has been looking tired," Tudor agreed. "I don't think it's the dueling that's tiring him out. It must be the extra astral work and whatever he's doing at night."

"I agree," Master J said, as if this was restarting a standing argument, which it turned out was true. "Still, that work is what Harry needs most, not learning some new hex that Harry won't have time to use in a firefight anyway. That's why I want you to free up at least an extra hour. He can rest part of it, and meditate the rest. Harry must be centered. . . ."

"Harry must be prepared. . . ."

"Harry must not be worked into ground," Hermione stated, interrupting both men, surprising them. She was usually the most respectful of the students. "Since you two insist on using most of Harry's time, to his detriment, some one else should be in overall charge of scheduling his time." She turned to Tabitha. "I suppose Luna and I can trust you to do what's best for Harry? For the short term as well as the long term?"

"I shall do my best," Tabitha said with a grin. She faced the two scowling men. "Now, the current schedule will stay in effect through the twenty-ninth. Harry will have at least the Thirtieth and his birthday off. I expect the two of you to have plausible schedules, along with rationales, ready for me by the afternoon of the thirtieth. Alright?"

Both men looked ready to object. Tabitha's face hardened, and said, "I **SAID**, is that alright?"

"Yes, Tabby."

"Yes, Tabby."

The two women smiled at each other and left the room.

"I **hate** it when they do that," Tudor complained.

"It reminds me why some of my friends are celibate and lead lives of near-solitary contemplation," Johnson agreed.

"Does that help?"

"No, it merely reduces the number of times it happens."

Zach Smith cautiously made his way out of Malfoy Manor. While he was paying fairly close attention to his surroundings, since there were numerous traps and wards, he was also berating himself.

He now knew he had made a serious miscalculation the previous summer, when Corner and Cornfoot had recruited him to serve the Dark Lord. To be fair, Corner, Cornfoot, and the Ravenclaw Clique had all made the same miscalculation. Zach now knew that every description that portrayed the Dark Lord as evil incarnate had been understated, not merely propaganda, like he had always thought they had been.

All throughout that previous year, Zach had observed Dumbledore and his golden child, Harry Potter. He had, to his chagrin, found Potter powerful for his age, but also as totally uninspiring as a leader as he had suspected him of being from years of casual observation. He had always thought Dumbledore a bit odd, and the ease which Umbridge had taken over the school that year, even if she had ultimately failed to keep that control, made Zach think that Dumbledore was leading the losing side.

Zach and the others didn't hate the Muggle-born, and most were barely Full Bloods, let alone Pure. What they had thought they had understood was power. They had thought Voldemort was more likely to get it than he was to lose, and they wanted to be on the winning side.

It had taken Zach less than a week of directly serving the Dark Lord, along with his few attendant followers -- nearly all either as mad as Bellatrix Lestrange or the dregs of the Wizarding world, or both -- to understand what evil was. To understand that he had been horribly, tragically, wrong about nearly everything.

It had taken even less time to learn that there seemed to be no way out that wasn't likely to end in a painful death at the hands of his Master, or a long stretch of imprisonment on the off chance he was able to survive.

Neither was a pleasing prospect.

For that matter, dealing with the sardonic Draco Malfoy once every week or two, didn't make Zach's life any easier. As he exited the final wards surrounding the Malfoy estate, Zach sighed and looked back. "There's got to be some way out of this mess."

Zach then fell over. Three men in dark grey robes came out of the shadows, picked Zach off of the ground, and disappeared, all without a sound.

"You're going to have the next two days off," Master J reminded Harry the evening of the 29th.

"What are we going to do?" Harry asked.

"I thought it was to be left mostly up to you," J pointed out. "All I know is, no practicing anything besides the minimum mental exercises."

Harry frowned. "Not even apparation?"

"No," J said firmly. "You will all be practicing on the First again, and then taking your final exams on the Second."

"Are you sure, sir?"

"About taking your exam on the Second?"

"No," Harry said, "taking two full days off. I need to practice. . . ."

"Well, to tell you the truth, Tudor and I have mixed feelings, but Luna, Hermione, and Tabitha are certain."

"Ah," Harry said. "I understand." He thought. "What's the weather supposed to be like?"

Since it was winter at the islands, weather could be varied, to say the least. Some days were very warm, some nights nearly freezing. Heavy, cold rain was also not uncommon, day and night.

"Cool and windy the next three days, and it should be nice for your apparation tests. Then things will get nasty again."

Harry nodded. "Then I'm sure Hermione already has everything planned, with approval from Luna and Tabitha."

"No doubt," J agreed.

Harry sighed, knowing that someone was always trying to run his life, with the best of intentions, of course.

"Where am I?" Zach asked.

"It does not matter," a voice said from the shadows.

"Who are you?"

"One who has the power of life and death over you."

"Well, that hardly narrows things down much these days," Zach managed to snap, although his heart was pounding from raw fear.

"There is some truth to that," the voice agreed. "Your Master will likely kill you if he finds out we captured you, even if we were to let you go. His more insane followers would do it for fun, and all the rest, even your friend Cornfoot, would kill you because they would be afraid not to, just as you would kill them if you had been ordered to."

Zach hung his head in acknowledgment. "You're those Americans, the druids, right?"

"We will answer to that. We are the Hidden. The being you chose to follow is an abomination."

Zach winced. "Well, I know that now," he said.

"A bit late for that, isn't it?"

"I suppose."

"And do you think that since you know you chose poorly, even stupidly, this will let you escape punishment?"

"No," Zach admitted. He looked towards the voice in the shadows. "You caught Michael didn't you?"

"We did."

"Is he . . . did you. . . ?"

"He is, we did," the voice said. "Do you wish to attempt to escape execution?"

"Yes."

"Why should we help you?"

Zach sighed. "You must want something from me." He looked up. "I take it you at least won't make me torture anyone, right?"

"True," the voice said. "You may have to kill some of your fellow Death Eaters, however."

He shrugged. "Better their blood than all those Muggles. None of us are innocent anymore." He looked into the shadows yet again. "How long have I been here? I'm supposed to be capturing some Muggles to feed to the dementors tomorrow, or what would have been tomorrow."

"It is only two hours since we captured you. We have some innocent-looking Muggle criminals for you to feed the dementors. First, you will tell us everything you have learned,

especially what your mission was to Malfoy." The Hidden already had sifted through Zach's mind, and would compare what he said with what he had already revealed and what they knew through their excellence surveillance of Malfoy Manor.

"Alright."

"If you are then willing, we will turn Voldemort's spells against him, and allow you to take the volunteering spying oath. We will intercept you when you make your trips to Malfoy's."

"Cornfoot more-or-less alternates with me," Zach said.

"We know. He's the one who convinced us we should give you this chance rather than executing you."

"I'll have to thank him when this is over," Zach said.

"Let's hope you can."

Harry enjoyed his first day off, but felt rather miserable on his actual birthday. Luna and Hermione both told him it that his body was unused to relaxing, and that he was probably suffering from not being on edge every minute.

Harry shrugged. "If you two agree, who am I to argue?"

"You can still fly," Hermione pointed out. "Your party isn't until lunch."

"Come on," Ginny said. "A good game of tag will get your blood moving again."

Harry smiled. "Good idea!" The flyers took off on a run.

"Crazy, aren't they?" Tabitha asked Hermione with a smile.

"But they're happy," Hermione said. "That's what's important."

Voldemort surveyed his pitiful force of Death Eaters. How powerful they had been, seventeen years before! His Death Eaters had numbered just over a hundred, and his other supporters had numbered in the low thousands. Not enough to take over the magical portions of Western Europe yet, but he had been well on his way. He had felt it only a matter of months at most before he would start piling up followers, which would have led to his ultimate triumph.

Then the enlarged force of the Old Believers had shown up, and for months, he had suffered his first major set-backs, as they had combined with the Old Man's Order and the united forces of several Ministries. He had planned well, and by the spring of 1981, his forces were recovering.

Then, he had been brought news of the prophesy.

His plan for dealing with it, right up to the moment he had cast the Killing Curse at the toddler named Harry Potter, had also seemed to work to perfection. Until some of Draco Malfoy's employees had managed to acquire a copy of the arthimatical schematic the Americans had created a few months before, Voldemort had not been able to begin to understand how even the powerful magic Lily Potter had managed to cast on her son by her sacrifice had destroyed his original body.

Even now, that wasn't totally clear to him (he didn't dare show schematic to anyone else to help him figure it out), although it made some sense. There were still some missing factors, and Voldemort still wondered if the lost prophecy had contained some clue as to what Potter's powers might be.

No matter. If he were to triumph any time soon, Voldemort knew he had to first destroy Harry Potter, and to do it himself. If he failed again, only a few of his more insane and thuggish followers were likely to even consider remaining. Voldemort knew if he did not succeed in the following weeks, he had best plan on a long exile. After all, he had survived a Killing Curse and being blown up, even if both had taken dark rituals to restore him.

As egotistical as he was, even Voldemort had realized that his current plans might not work out. His solution was to begin creating a fallback position. If he could not triumph while Harry Potter was alive, and could not manage to kill Harry Potter, then he would have to retreat and wait.

Voldemort knew he was not really totally immortal. Still, he was probably closer than any mortal being had ever been before. If needs be, he could actually afford to wait a few hundred years, until Potter died. It was far from his first choice, but Voldemort decided it was a necessary precaution.

He put all his doubts behind him and stepped forward. "Tonight, we make our first attempt to summons Potter!"

The small group managed to make a ragged cheer.

"If Potter is relatively unwarded and within three hundred miles, he will appear here," Voldemort stated, marking the spot were a small bronze cauldron boiled. "If he is too well-warded to be summonsed, his image will still appear, tinged with red. If he is further away than three hundred miles, it will be tinged with blue. The fainter and more colored the image, well, that shall tell us how far away and warded he is. If no image appears, then Malfoy's agents are worthless." He wanted to make certain that any failure was expected and well-explained.

Voldemort knelt over the cauldron, dropped some of Harry's hair into it while chanting an incantation, and then thrust a knife into the cauldron as well. As the cauldron boiled and smoked, Voldemort stood up and backed off, drawing his wand.

The billowing smoke slowly took the shape of a human body.

"What's wrong Harry?" Tudor asked. Harry was in the middle of his apparation practice, since where he was it was the morning after his birthday, with a time zone difference between where he was and Britain.

"I think Voldemort is using that summonsing ritual," Harry answered. "You know, the one they stole my hair for."

"You're totally safe at this distance, although I guess, to be safe, you shouldn't apparate while it's going on."

"That's what I thought." Harry stood there, and put himself through his meditation exercises.

"What's up?" Ron asked, apparating near the pair. Tudor signaled the rest of the group in his line of sight, and when they had gathered, explained.

"What's he doing?" Neville asked.

"He's testing the connections of the ritual," Master J said, slightly worried. "I think we should join him," he said to Tabitha.

Tabitha nodded her agreement, and the pair prepared to join Harry in the astral realm. Luna frowned, and joined them as well.

Harry smiled, and made his arms move. Ron caught on first, and shocked the others by his reaction.

Back in Voldemort's hideaway, the smoke-figure had slowly become recognizable as Harry Potter. Voldemort was a bit surprised for a moment at how much the boy had grown. It was easy to believe that Potter was now a young man.

The smoke was mostly blue, shot through with dark reds. It wasn't really showing Harry or a real image, showing that Harry was thousands of miles away. It also showed that the ceremony would work when Harry was close enough and unprotected enough.

Bellatrix laughed. "We might not have him today, Master, but we **will** have him! Won't he be surprised!"

The smokey image turned slightly, so that it faced both Voldemort and Bellatrix. Lestrage stopped laughing. The figure's right arm raised, and then two fingers went up in an unmistakable gesture. Just in case it was better understood, Smoke Harry's index finger folded in, leaving the middle finger extended.

"Somehow," Voldemort said drily, "I do not think the boy is going to be as surprised as we thought he might be." Voldemort flicked his wand, and the cauldron tipped over, ending the ritual. "How could he have learned what we were up to? There is no way anyone could tell they were being summonsed at such a distance, unless he was expecting it."

Voldemort was looking at his followers closely. "Smith? Cornfoot? Do either of **you** have an answer?"

"No, Master," Zach said, "I do, however, have a pair of suggestions."

"And they are?"

"Either Malfoy is playing both sides, or his agents were observed gathering the hair and the Old Man added things up."

Voldemort nodded his head. "Two reasonable suggestions. Do you know who gathered the hair?"

"I am uncertain, Master." Zach thought hard, and said, "I know all of the Fifth year Slytherin girls were involved in some way, as was one of the Ravenclaws but I don't know which were in on the hair grab and which were used by the others as cover. I do know that those that gathered the hairs turned them over to Parkinson, and she sent them to Malfoy."

"Well, Zacharias, I think you and your friend should pay a visit to Miss Parkinson."

Smith and Cornfoot both bowed low.

"Question her if you can. Learn the names of the girls who gathered the hair. If you decide she let it slip or betrayed us, give her to the dementors for their next meal instead of a Muggle. If you decide it was one of the other girls, feed her to them instead."

"And if they all pass, Master?"

Voldemort smiled nastily. "We are done with our lair here if we need to leave. If we decide it was young Malfoy, well, then Bella can question her dear nephew." Bellatrix cackled in sadistic joy, anticipating 'questioning' Draco. Usually, when Bella 'questioned' someone, there wasn't much left afterwards.

Voldemort scowled. "Well? You may or may not be able to question Parkinson at this moment, but I want it done as soon as possible!"

Smith and Cornfoot bowed to their Master, and hurried from the room, glad they had so far gotten off lightly.

Back on the island in the Southern Ocean, Ron Weasley was still laughing.

Chapter IX

"Should we be surprised that the house is so well-warded?" Cornfoot asked.

"Probably not," Smith acknowledged with a twisted expression. "Considering the circles that family have been trying to get into, they would have to be careful."

"What do we do now? The Master seemed rather . . . impatient."

"True. Although it's never been easy to know when he's totally serious and just threatening to . . . motivate."

"Also true." Cornfoot paused, then said, "It's not quite dawn. I suppose we can wait and see if she goes out of the wards today. I'm sure we have at least until midnight to bring her back, if she's guilty."

"Actually, we have until the next feeding. If we ship Pansy off to them, that can wait until tomorrow night. You know they prefer playing with us instead of Muggles. They can probably feed off her for a day or two before one finally Kisses her."

"If she's guilty," Cornfoot pointed out.

"True," Zach agreed. "I rather hope she and the girls aren't."

"Because then it's that pest, Malfoy," Stephen agreed. Neither teen liked Draco at all.

"Best of all would be all of them."

"All of them!"

"Hush!" Zach commanded. "You're right of course. I'd be happy with Parkinson and Malfoy."

"Of course, in that case, the Master might have even worse things for us to do than feed the dementors once a week," Stephen pointed out.

"True."

A voice behind them stated, "Mallow cup." The two teens blinked, coming out of the spying spells, and saw it was one of their Hidden contacts. They knew none of the Hidden names.

"You two are a talkative pair," he said.

"How many people can sneak up on us as easily as you lot seem to be able to?" Stephen retorted.

"Not very many, I grant you," the Hidden agreed with a slight, superior smile. "From what you're saying, your Master believes Draco, Parkinson, or the Fifth year Slytherins may have turned informer on the hair-collection scheme, correct?"

"Correct," Zach agreed.

"when, of course, as you both now know, it was the two of you."

"Oh. . . ." Zach said.

"Shit," Stephen agreed. "that rather takes some of the fun out of this."

"What's the solution?" Zach asked.

"I suppose, since there is no other solution that can be easily faked, Voldemort will figure out that one or both of you must be spies under these spells. So, I should just reinstitute them and let him kill you."

"WHAT!"

"Quite right, that would be cruel. I suppose you should at least know what's coming, so you can try and escape his wrath. If he's chasing the pair of you down, that should keep him distracted."

"You can't be serious!"

"You can't just abandon us!"

"I can," the Hidden said.

"You bastard!" Zach snarled.

Stephen gave his friend a dirty look and then turned back to the Hidden. "Look, we both were wrong, and we've both done terrible things, although about half of them were done while spying for you! Even though we both deserve to be punished, don't you think being tortured to death is . . . extreme?"

"Perhaps," the Hidden allowed, "although, considering your crimes before turning, about the only people who wouldn't consider death a worthy punishment for your crimes would be those who dislike the death penalty on principle." He smiled nastily. "I am not one of those."

"No mitigation for what we've done for you since?" Stephen demanded. "You had mentioned exile with full magical rights."

"Perhaps. Would Voldemort really condone your killing Malfoy? That would force him off of that protected island."

"He says he's ready to move, if he has to," Zach said quickly. Stephen gave his acquaintance a dirty look. Zach was trying to win points by giving up information too soon.

"If we decide it was Draco, Lestrage will go and torture him to death," Stephen went on. "She's a member of his family, after all, and can still access Malfoy Manor."

"Voldemort is getting sloppy," the Hidden said. "Draco was confined to the Manor only until his seventeenth birthday, which is tomorrow. Yes . . . this will work out nicely. Draco has been playing both sides against the middle, hoping to create a situation where both Voldemort and Potter will be severely injured if not killed. We shall provide you with some information,

slightly improved upon, which will be all you need to send LeStrange after Draco, while insuring Draco isn't there. The intent that LeStrange will have as she enters the Manor will cause Voldemort and his people to be trapped on the island if they are still there."

"I'm sure the Dark Lord knows that," Zach pointed out.

"Almost certainly," the Hidden agreed. "if not, well, then he's trapped. If he leaves, then he will not be under those powerful wards. Either way, that works to our advantage. You two will be under suggestions to get away if you can as well as supply him with the information. Voldemort will quickly decide you betrayed him after that. If you both pull this off, we will protect you, and will not execute you. Do you both agree?"

Zach and Stephen looked at each other and shrugged. They really didn't have much of a choice. A life of exile in the Hidden communities of North America was better than any of their likely alternatives.

Two nights later, Cornfoot and Smith were kneeling in front of Voldemort. "So," the Dark Lord hissed, "young Malfoy has betrayed me!"

"That is the best evidence, Master," Stephen answered. "It is the only explanation, unless Parkinson was just plain careless, and our friends in Slytherin, Ravenclaw, and Hufflepuff didn't notice anything that they reported. We didn't wish to approach Malfoy or even Parkinson more directly with any questions without your approval."

"Why?"

"If they have any guilt, they would run, Master," Zach pointed out. "We would at least need reinforcements to help prevent that, not to mention help breaking down those wards we described."

"True." He eyed the two teens. They were the best of a poor lot. Still, they often showed just the right amount of initiative. "We shall move off the island tomorrow night. Bella will question her nephew the following night. There will be a lot to do. Do you have a preferred assignment?"

"Where ever we may be of the greatest service, Master," Zach said.

"No desire to help question Draco?"

"Anything beyond questioning is beyond our expertise, Master," Cornfoot admitted. "However, we will go as you command us."

"Very well. Go back to the Parkinsons the same night Bella goes after her nephew. Ten dementors shall meet you at Eleven. They can cross the wards you described. When they have feasted, show the Dark Mark, and one of the Dementors will lead you to my new lair."

When the two teens had acknowledged their orders, Voldemort ordered them to take two of the chests of cash Voldemort had to their own hideout. They would return it in three nights. The two bowed and left.

"Do you believe them, Master? They could be the traitors," Bella pointed out.

"Possibly, but if so, they must be under heavy enchantments. The Old Man would not contenance it."

"But the Druids?"

Bella shrank slightly when Voldemort snarled at her. He quickly recovered, and said, "Then perhaps those chests will prove a trap instead of a treasure." He thought a moment. "Do you believe your nephew that trustworthy?"

"No, he has proven he can be trusted only to think of himself," Bella agreed, openly torn between her desire to protect her nephew and her urges to slowly torture the pretty boy to a bloody, helpless pulp. "Still, unless he has chosen the other side entirely, this does not seem likely."

"Agreed. Still, we shall see."

The next day, Draco opened his eyes to greet the noonday sun. As usual, he had been up drinking well into the night.

Seeing three wizards in druid robes holding wands on him was not a very assuring way of waking up.

"Good afternoon, Malfoy," one said.

"Who are you three?" Draco managed to demand, his heart beating hard.

"He doesn't know who we are?" one asked.

"Remember, he's not very bright."

Draco started making protesting noises.

"Quiet, boy," the second man said. "Who we are, if you are too stupid to figure it out, is not important. We've been keeping an eye on you. What? You thought once you were convicted everyone would forget about you? We no more forgot about you than Voldemort has. We know of each contact he has made with you, and what you've done for him. If we wished, we could have your parole revoked."

"Why don't you?"

"Well," the third man said, speaking for the first time, "there is really little reason to. You see, in a sense, you have told us everything we needed to know about your dealings with

Voldemort. No," he broke in over Malfoy's protests, "you didn't directly tell us, but we have watched, and therefore we have learned. Voldemort will not care about the difference, and that he has been nearly as sloppy as you. In fact, we have learned he has decided you are most likely the leak he has been looking for. Therefore, Voldemort has for the most part already left that all too-safe little island retreat you provided for him, and your Aunt Bellatrix will be visiting you in a day or two."

"We have used you, so we thought we should pass that along," the first man added.

"If you wish to try and explain this to her, go right ahead," the second man said slyly. "Perhaps you'll find her more sympathetic than we imagine."

Draco shuddered.

"You've just passed your seventeenth birthday a short time ago," the third man pointed out. "You might consider moving to some other property, especially if there is one your aunt is unaware of."

"My mother probably would tell her if she was questioned too closely," Draco said, worriedly.

"Perhaps she could join you, under the circumstances," the second man pointed out.

"In any event, that is up to you," the third man said. "We thought we should mention what was coming." The three men started backing out of the room.

"Wait!" Draco called. "Can't you help me?"

"We could," the first man answered, "why should we?"

"In other words," the second man asked, "what do you have to offer us?"

"Offer?"

"We don't like you," the third man stated. "Most of us think you would serve the world best by leaving it. You have made our tasks in Britain more difficult. You have endangered the Key to the destruction of Voldemort."

"What key? Do you mean . . . Potter?"

They ignored that. "So, why should we try and save you more than we already have?"

"There must be something specific you want from me, otherwise, you wouldn't be here!"

"Really?" the third man said with faux-friendly smile. "You are not that important, powerful, or interesting. We did what we had to do. Perhaps, if we find need of you, we shall contact you."

"And don't worry," the second man said with a nasty smile, "we WILL know where you are, and what you are up to."

"If you manage to leave without alerting Voldemort's forces, we might take out your aunt," the first man said in a musing tone. "Still, that's up to you."

"Good luck, boy," the second one said. "You might wish to be gone by dusk." The three men disappeared, despite the disappearance wards.

Draco stared, and then leapt out of bed. He had to get moving. He was certain that whatever had changed, his aunt wasn't likely to be any more sane than the last time he had seen her.

"That ought to get the little shit moving," Mercher said to the others.

"It should," Cadfael agreed. "The trap is set for Lestrage?"

"Yes, Master, the traps are set both there and here," the third man answered.

"You are ready to track Malfoy?" Cadfael asked.

"Yes, Master," Mercher answered. "No matter where he goes, we will be able to bring him in when the time is ready."

"Why are we bothering with him?" the third man asked. "I mean, I understand why we're keeping an eye on him, but why haul him in?"

"He hopes Voldemort is destroyed, so that the Pure-Blood movement can concentrate on what he regards as its rightful program -- keeping power in the hands of people like himself," Mercher answered. "We are going to be voice of tradition in Europe, and the Open Believers will become the voice of integration, just as we are in North America. Therefore, the Pure-Blood point of view he claims to represent must be discredited. Malfoy will therefore disappear into the frozen communities of the north Yukon. He can argue with Cornfoot and Smith, but he won't ever be leaving. If he marries, then the Malfoy assets will be added to those of his wife's clan."

"And in the end, Europe, like much of North America, will have two view points, two faces of the same coin, with all agreeing on the fundamentals," Cadfael stated, "just disagreeing on interpretation."

"And he dared plot against Potter, right?" Mercher asked.

"That is correct," Cadfael agreed. "We don't like that."

That evening, forces credited to the International (according to [The Daily Prophet](#)) captured Bellatrix Lestrage and several of the more sadistic new Death Eaters. All managed to commit suicide, rather than revealing Voldemort's new locations. A number of dementors were also noted as being destroyed.

Saturday, August 16, 1997

Albus Dumbledore shuffled into the Headmaster's office late that morning. This was, to say the least, unusual. Although he was aged even by the most liberal magical standards, Dumbledore was normally as spritely as any Muggle dancer in their fifties.

This past year or so, Dumbledore's body language had slowly caught up to his age. Several of the staff had remarked on it amongst themselves. Had it started as early as the Third Task of the Triwizard Tournament? Had the Headmaster never fully recovered from the Battle at the Ministry?

Both were partially true. Those who knew Dumbledore best, and who knew the situation nearly as well as the Headmaster -- Snape, McGonagall, Moody, and Dumbledore's younger brother -- knew that the rate of aging had certainly increased when the International had appeared, and especially since the Hidden had reactivated their Circle of Power.

Aberforth wondered if perhaps Hogwarts itself had somehow been keeping his brother youthful in some aspects. If that were true, then perhaps the Hidden's Circle was somehow draining that power.

Snape knew that Dumbledore had only started to shuffle a few days before, when a message had informed the Headmaster that Potter's trainers would be meeting him on August 16.

That meant that they had decided if and when Potter would be facing down Voldemort.

Dumbledore had seemed age twenty years in as many hours.

Dumbledore sighed, sat in his chair, and closed his eyes.

And opened them almost immediately. "You could come in the normal way."

In one of the chairs sat Cadfael. "Where's the fun in that? Admit it. If you could do it, you'd love doing something similar."

Dumbledore almost managed a smile. "Perhaps."

"Who all is going to be here?"

"My brother and Moody. I am not certain who the International is sending."

"I would imagine Dorff." Seeing the question in Dumbledore's eye, he explained. "Johnson, Tudor, Tabby and the others training the boy are too close to him. Like you, they know what young Harry must do, but when you become too close, it becomes difficult to send a wonderful boy like him off to face evil."

"And Mister Dorff can? You can?"

"We can. We don't like it any more than you do, but we still have just enough objectivity to do what needs to be done. The needs of the many and all that, you know."

"I never liked Utilitarianism."

"There are many things and ideas which I care little for which I find I must use to do my job. There are worse things to believe than any of the beliefs and values that either of us hold."

Dumbledore could only nod his agreement.

"You know, the period of your youth has much to answer for."

"what might that be, in this context?"

"What you European wizards called 'Pure-Blood Ideology,' which was simply the combination of what the Muggles called Social Darwinism, Eugenics, and what passed for physical anthropology at the time."

"How to justify bigotry through mystical ideology on the one hand, and pseudo-science on the other."

"Exactly."

"And are many of your group any better?"

Cadfael scowled, but admitted. "They are not, merely more antique in their prejudices."

"In any event, there are three people arriving."

Henry Dorff, Aberforth Dumbledore, and Alastor Moody came in less than a minute later.

"Good morning," Dumbledore said in a tired voice.

"You sound awful," Aberforth told his older brother. "Still not sleeping well?"

Dumbledore glared. "I am sleeping quite well."

"Then why do you look like you spent the last week without sleep?"

Dumbledore simply ignored his brother and turned to Henry Dorff. "Harry's trainers have decided?"

"Harry is as ready as he is likely to become," Henry responded. "He will of course continue to get stronger, and to master his astral powers, and his wandless magic and mind magic, but the stress he is under will undercut those advantages. We all feel we need to finish these over the next week or so."

"What are the boy's chances," Moody asked, "and I want a realistic appraisal."

"One on one, in a straight-up duel, I would say Harry would have about a twenty to twenty-five percent chance at best."

"But it won't be a straight up duel, will it?" Aberforth demanded. "Add in the Death Eaters and dementors. . . ."

"Do not worry too much about the Death Eaters," Cadfael said. "Voldemort had, as best we could tell, thirty-six Death Eaters two months ago. We have taken that number down to nine as of this morning, and we hope to take care of those over the next twenty hours."

"That leaves the dementors," Moody said.

"True," Cadfael agreed.

"Harry will launch a combined astral/Legilimency attack on Voldemort, supported by Master J and Tabitha. Luna and one of Master J's people will be coming along with them. They will be tracing the link and identifying Voldemort's location. If Harry can destroy him then, fine. If not, then Voldemort should be rendered unconscious. Tudor, myself, and at least a dozen North American hit-wizards and a dozen aurors from North America and Britain will then portkey to that location to try and secure it, along with a few others." He turned to Cadfael. "We would welcome your people to help destroy any dementors."

"You shall have it."

"If Voldemort survives the astral attack but things otherwise go perfectly, Voldemort will have been disabled, held in check by Harry. We just have to be careful. If we try and kill him in that state, it could harm Harry nearly as much as Voldemort. We must leave the final fight, or at least the final stroke, to Harry."

"And then?" Dumbledore asked tiredly.

"Harry and the rest of his support group will portkey in. The act of portkeying will break the connection between Harry and Voldemort if Harry hasn't broken it before. We believe that it will take some time for both to recover, and Harry's group should easily get him going first."

"And if that happens, Harry executes Voldemort?" Dumbledore demanded.

"Ideally, yes."

"I shall be coming with you," Dumbledore declared.

"As you wish."

"Where is the boy now? If he's still in whatever secure location he was training at, that is probably some distance to portkey," Moody pointed out.

"We all arrived in Britain a few hours ago," Henry stated. "Tom has Harry securely anchored, should Voldemort try the summoning ritual."

In the cellar of #4 Privat Drive, Ron Weasley turned to his friends, his eyes staring but unseeing.

"All the pieces are in play; If all Light's forces play their part, Then victorious they will be over Dark. Should Light's players fail their tasks, Ashes shall be what remains at last. Victory of Light shall not safety bring; A touch from a grey one could bring death's sting. Yes, all the pieces are in play."

Chapter X

Monday, August 18, 1997

Sabrina Spellman walked down from the once pristine parlor of #4 Privet Drive and into the cellar. A group there was watching a battle that she could barely understand. She knew that Harry had engaged Voldemort in a battle of mental magic. Supported by her mother, Luna, and Master J and another native Australian, Harry was trying to pin down the Dark Lord.

The battle had been going on for over twenty minutes, which was longer than any of the experts had predicted. Still, from the slight expressions on the astral warriors' faces, things weren't going badly, although it did mean that Voldemort would not be destroyed this way. Sabrina decided not to resume her position sitting next to Ginny Weasley yet and instead let her attention and curiosity roam as she stayed standing.

She could hear the people in the rest of the house. There were thirty-six aurors and hit-wizards, and fifteen members of the Hidden. There were also fifteen people who would act as medics. Even though they were trying to keep fairly quiet, fifty-one warriors and fifteen medics on the upper two floors could make a lot of noise just murmuring, shuffling their feet, and taking turns in the bathrooms.

She turned her attention to the cellar. Granger and Tom Lawrence were keeping a close watch on the astral warriors. They seemed to know what they were doing, although under other circumstances seeing Granger with the plastic squirt bottle in her hand, looming over her mother and the others, would have amused Tabitha a great deal.

Her father, Master Cadfael, Lloyd Trowbridge, and Tudor Myrddin were sitting on the stairs, waiting to relay any orders to the warriors upstairs. Ron and Neville were standing between the stairs and Granger. Off in a far corner stood a very disturbing-looking man called Mad-Eye Moody, as well as the very imposing Albus Dumbledore. Ron's brother Percy was almost hiding in the shadows, behind stacks of boxes merely labeled "Dudley's".

Master J suddenly made a movement, drawing all eyes to him. He opened his eyes and held out his hand. Dumbledore handed him a large sack, as the other astral explorers other than Harry came back as well.

Master J said a spell and then held out the sack, saying, "Everyone take a marble. You all know which wave you are to enter with. Right?"

Everyone, even Dumbledore, nodded their agreement as they took one. Master J handed the sack to Sabrina's father, who pocketed his own marble and then went up the stairs after Master J had whispered a few sentences to him.

Tudor called after him, "The first wave leaves in six minutes!"

"Right!" Tudor waved his wand, and four hour glasses appeared, representing each wave. Sabrina was sure similar hour glasses appeared on the other floors.

"If anyone needs to use a toilet, get in line now," Tom Lawrence said. Neville nodded, and he and Luna left the cellar as well.

Sabrina looked at the hour glasses. She knew she was leaving in the final wave. The second wave would leave three minutes after the first, and would include Harry and Ron. The third group would leave seven minutes after the first, and the fourth would leave fifteen minutes after the first.

"We managed to subdue Voldemort," Master J stated. "We had of course hoped we could destroy him, but his defenses were too strong. He should be unconscious for some time, however. As best we could tell, the dementors are nearby, and there are just three Death Eaters. However, there are a number of the Muggles which were Kissed by the dementors. They are likely to be under Voldemort's control. Should Voldemort recover before the first wave arrives, they will have to subdue them. If he doesn't, they will be destroyed quickly."

"So we will have to deal with the dementors, and may have to deal with Voldemort and perhaps these mindless zombies?" Dumbledore asked.

"Exactly. Still, if those are all we are dealing with, we should have the numbers to deal with everything with minimum dangers."

"Let us hope," Dumbledore said.

Luna came back down the stairs just as Harry came partially out of his trance (he was still keeping Voldemort from completely waking up). Harry's community started to gather around him.

Harry and most of the community would be leaving with the second wave. Despite her protests, Granger would be leaving with Sabrina and Ginny in the final wave. As the center, she would actually function better outside of the danger zone. It had taken a fair amount of arguing to get Granger, Ginny, and Tabitha permission to go at all. Harry had finally had to intervene on their behalf.

Just before the first group portkeyed out, Harry and Hermione initiated all the mental and magical links.

The first group portkeyed out.

The group gathered even more closely around Harry, and embraced. Sabrina could feel the strands of power, and the feelings of love and affection, between them. Some strands, like those from Percy to most of the group, were comparatively weak (except to Ron and Ginny). Some were immensely powerful, such as those between Harry and Luna, and her mother for her.

Sabrina tested the connections, and was surprised at how strong nearly all of them were. Except for those to her mother and to Ron, hers were generally the weakest. Then she touched one of amazing potential.

It was Harry.

It was a Harry that she had never sensed before.

The connections the previous January had been strong, but had grown even stronger over the summer. Now that the group was preparing for battle, all their feelings were fully exposed and

feeding the links. Somehow, Harry had the ability to more fully process those emotions into raw magical power than anyone had anticipated.

Sabrina flinched as the second group moved out. She couldn't tell what was going on, but knew that Harry was drawing no extra power.

The third group portkeyed out.

The minutes between the third group and the final group was the hardest wait for Sabrina (and Ginny and Granger, for that matter). The three teens stood behind the old sofa in the cellar, wands drawn, and they were just touching each other back to back, forming a triad that could launch an attack in any direction, just in case they were misreading the situation.

"Nobody seems hurt," Hermione muttered.

"Ron is very nervous," Sabrina said.

"Neville is more angry than nervous," Ginny put in.

"It's almost time," Hermione said simply.

"See you all there," Sabrina told them, and they disappeared with the rest of the fourth wave.

Sabrina arrived facing a cavern wall. She blinked and turned around.

It was a large cavern, perhaps once a large mine gallery, and was not very high, ranging irregularly between eight and fifteen feet. The cavern floor was fairly even, and it was a roughly rectangular 30 by 80 meters.

The cavern was fairly, perhaps amazingly, uncrowded, with just a knot of people in a far corner. Approaching, the knot of people showed all familiar faces: her parents; Tudor, Master J, and Master Cadfael; Dumbledore, Lupin, and Moody; Tom and Lloyd; Ron, Percy, Neville, Luna, and Harry.

They were all standing in a semi-circle, and Sabrina wasn't totally surprised to see they were standing around a tallish figure, laying on the ground. The being looked almost as much like a snake as it did a human. It would have made an excellent alien in a cheap movie.

"I guess it's time," Harry said thickly. Sabrina could feel the tremors of Harry's emotions through the links. He was upset to the point of nausea.

"I'm afraid so, Harry," Remus answered.

"Does everyone have to . . . well, watch?"

"The more witnesses the better, I'm afraid," Dumbledore said.

"We're all sorry it has to be you," Henry said.

"We'd all prefer to take the burden from you," Tudor added.

"Well, I wouldn't," Sabrina said, making every stare at her. "Well, I wouldn't. I don't mine sharing the responsibility, though."

"Right," Ron said. "We do it together."

"If anyone's hex is a split second ahead of the others'," Dumbledore started to warn, but Hermione interrupted him.

"The group will do it together," Hermione told him. "Harry and I have worked together controlling the actions of the whole often enough to insure we do it right."

"And, should Voldemort's essence somehow survive, we have the means of trapping him until the end of time," Cadfael added.

"Are you sure this is really him?" Moody asked.

"Yes!" Harry, Dumbledore, and Cadfael chorused.

Hermione and Tabitha went into deep conversation, discussing the exact placements needed for the group curse to work. They placed each member precisely, and told them where to aim.

Part of Sabrina's mind wanted to scream, and she knew her thoughts were being echoed by Granger and Lovegood at the least, and possibly by Harry, Ron, and her mother. This was all too clinical. This was so many things: the ending of a reign of terror; the ending of a life; an execution.

Whatever Sabrina (and most of the others) had expected at the end, it hadn't been this. They had expected blood, violence, and the end coming in the heat of battle.

Sabrina could feel Granger and Lovegood struggling with this as well. She was willing to bet that under almost any other circumstances, both would be against the death penalty. 'It's easier to be for or against something like this when it's abstract,' she thought.

A voice echoed in her head. 'It is. Don't feel you have to dirty yourself,' Harry's voice said.

'I have found my match in Ron, and Ron will fight for you at least as hard as he would fight for me. My parents love you like a foster son. Tom, Lloyd, and Tudor do, too. I have sworn my self to your community, Harry Potter. It's too late to have doubts just because the job has gotten dirtier than we'd hoped.' Harry smiled grimly at her, and turned his attention back to the petrified Voldemort. Sabrina, looking at him closely for the first time, could see Voldemort was now struggling to break the enchantments.

Tom saw it as well. "We have about six minutes before he breaks free."

Cadfael walked over. "Tom Marvolo Riddle, who has called himself Lord Voldemort, you have been condemned for numerous crimes against the wizarding and Muggle world by the Council of Old Believers and by the International Confederation of Wizards. Let the punishment for these crimes be exacted."

Harry led his community, and together they exacted a small amount of vengeance for almost thirty years of horror. Together, they cast the Killing Curse

"AVADA KEDARVA!"

The elders gathered around the body. Hermione bit her lower lip, so as not to make an inane remark.

Cadfael and Dumbledore confirmed that Tom Riddle was no more.

Saturday, August 23, 1997

In the kitchen of the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, the house elves were having a grand time preparing the greatest feast in the recent history of Hogwarts. That recorder of all things epicurean at the school, the Hufflepuff ghost known to most as the Fat Friar, was already rhapsodizing about the upcoming event.

Down deep in the dungeons, Severus Snape sat, contemplating what should be his final achievement.

He had many achievements, although some were so dark, done for the now-fallen Dark Lord nearly twenty years before, that Snape had preferred not being credited with their creation. A few of the others would have made him famous, although he had not released any of them. He glanced over at his greatest achievement, considered purely professionally.

It shone silvery white in the gloomy dungeon, the private lair of a very private man. Any werewolf who drank that potion would be able to instead transform into an animagus wolf instead, and, if it tested out as Snape thought it would, after a year or so of taking it, the werewolf would never be infectious again.

No, he had sworn not to release that while he lived, as long as Lupin lived. Snape's mouth quirked, wondering, if his plan worked, if Lupin would now avail himself of the discovery.

Irony. And revenge.

He forced his attention to the innocuous, frothy, almost cheerfully pink potion in front of him. If he drank it, he would become a weapon when the potion became fully effective, which would take about an hour. The first human he touched should die in less than three minutes. There was no antidote possible. Of course, once he touched that person, he would also die in about three minutes.

Snape had written up his reasons for assassinating Potter. He wouldn't want his act to be thought of in any way as an act of revenge for Potter's killing the Dark Lord. No, Snape was grateful Potter had succeeded, and he said so.

Potter had succeeded, because he had been given too much power. Snape could not imagine trusting anyone with that much power, not even Dumbledore. Certainly not 'The Boy'. Snape had also written a claim that he was not doing this out of revenge for Potter's father and the other "Marauders," although in truth, even he was a tad less sure of his motives there.

Snape took a deep breath, picked up the vial, and drank the lethal pink potion. He smiled, thinking of all the awful tasting potions he had brewed over the years. How ironic that his last one, in many ways the most deadly one, tasted so pleasantly of wintergreen and cinnamon.

Minerva McGonagall looked the great hall over with a critical eye. The head table was enlarged to its maximum size. The Minister and a few other officials from the Ministry, the International, the Order, and the main honorees would sit there. The other honorees would sit at the Gryffindor table. There would be more Order of Merlins passed out this night than in any other entire year in the history of the Order.

McGonagall smiled. Harry Potter would receive the first Order of Merlin (as opposed to First, Second, or Third class) in over two hundred and fifty years. She hoped that after the publicity of the evening, things would calm down under the relentless normality of the upcoming school year, finally giving Harry a chance to decompress a little. He would be going off to a secluded location with his friends, with a few adults to chaperone, in two days, to spend the time before school started.

McGonagall turned her attention back to the House tables, glancing to make certain there was a place card for each setting. Ministry officials and VIPs from around the world would fill the Ravenclaw table, while lesser contributors to the cause (such as McGonagall herself) would be seated at the Hufflepuff table. The press and others would be sent to the Slytherin table.

McGonagall sensed someone behind her more than heard them. Turning, she was only slightly surprised to see a very tired Harry Potter. "Good evening, Potter."

"Hi, Professor," he responded.

"Are you that anxious for the ceremony to start? Or perhaps you're just getting hungry."

Harry smiled slightly at that. "After that lunch, I am not going to be all that hungry tonight, although I think Ron is. No, I'm sure you know how I feel. The sooner this thing starts, the sooner it will be over."

"How does it feel to have your whole life in front of you?" his Head of House asked.

"Empty," Harry answered. "Believe me, I'm glad it's over, but I really haven't felt this way before in my life."

"Really?"

"Really," he affirmed. "Even before things got started my First year, no matter how much I loved this place, I knew I would have to go back to the Dursleys. I never intend to step foot in that house again."

"Are you cutting them off?"

"No," Harry admitted, "at least not right away. No matter where I go after next year, I'll set up a Muggle postal address for them to send me mail, if they ever want to. If they don't, well, that's up to them."

"That's good. Still up for auror training somewhere?"

Harry shook his head. "No. The International and the Old Believers will be giving me some training in North America after Luna and Ginny leave. Tudor and Henry have convinced me to spend a year on the dueling circuit before going."

"Really? I'll place my bets now, then."

Harry grinned. McGonagall smile back. "Go finish getting dressed."

"Yes, Ma'am."

Twenty-five minutes before the presentations were to start, Albus Dumbledore sat in his high-backed chair overlooking the great hall. Nearly all the guests, dignitaries, and press were present. Dumbledore smiled towards one corner, filled with the complete Weasley family and their escorts. It was good to see that the family had not only survived the war intact, but had healed earlier divisions, now that the war was over.

Another corner brought a slight frown. The press had certainly become much less gentlemanly over the course of the twentieth century, Dumbledore mused. Given the chance, they would mob poor Harry, and perhaps provoke his power in accidental ways.

Dumbledore smiled as Tabitha Spellman repelled the press by the sheer force of her personality, and then the bulks of Tudor Myrddin, Henry Dorff, and Tobias Jones prevented the press from swirling around the irate redhead. 'No,' Dumbledore observed, 'there goes one around the end.' He smiled as Hermione Granger halted the news hound in mid-stride, wand raised. Would she dare? Yes, there he was now, turned into a rather frightened-looking Chihuahua. The press retreated further away as Luna Lovegood's loud laugh echoed through the hall, and Harry doubled over in laughter.

Dumbledore's eyes roamed around the hall, taking in faces, most of whom he knew. With one exception, the staff of Hogwarts was doing their job, mingling with the guests.

'Ah, there he is,' Dumbledore thought as Snape came into the room and started making his way towards the corner with Harry in it. 'Poor boy. He always looks rather constipated. Perhaps I should do a little slight-of-hand and put that rather interesting new Wheeze into Severus' wine tonight. That would clean out a giant, let alone Severus. Still, I doubt it would improve his over-all disposition.'

Dumbledore snorted in amusement, but fortunately no one noticed. 'He must be torn,' Dumbledore went on. 'How anyone who knows Harry cannot at least tolerate him is beyond me. He is such a good boy. I'm glad a little of the tiredness has left him. Harry needs that rest. He and Severus could both use a little more color in their cheeks. Severus looks worse that

usual, even if he's always dressed in black. Tonight he looks worse than his usual pale, he looks positively gray.'

Dumbledore sat up with a jerk. "Gray?" He remembered Ron's last prophecy. There was no way he could stop Snape. He couldn't yell, the hall was far too noisy. He couldn't drop Severus with a hex, it was too crowded, and he might not be believed. There was only one thing to do.

Dumbledore moved to intercept Snape, trying to read his intentions as he did so. Snape had been practicing, however, and it took several subtle tries before Dumbledore could read enough of Snape's surface thoughts to realize what the Potions genius had done.

Dumbledore was appalled, and grew ever more shocked as the tendrils of thought connected him to Snape's chain of reasoning, and his own part in that chain. Dumbledore realized that he had to do this alone. Involving anyone else would risk them touching Severus, and he could not risk an innocent's death.

The eddies finally brought Dumbledore and Snape together only nine feet from Harry. Harry was just starting to turn towards Snape, a puzzled look on his face, when Dumbledore reached around a stray Potter-fan and grasped Snape firmly at the nape of his neck.

Snape froze, horrified, and turned to see who had violated his personal space in such a fatal way. "Oh, no," he whispered, "not you of all people."

"Yes," Dumbledore said sadly, "it is I. And while I forgive you my own death, I can not forgive what you have tried to do. I presume there is nothing to do and little time in which not to do it?"

"About three minutes. It should not be very painful."

"What's happened?" Harry demanded.

While Snape quickly explained to Tabitha, Dumbledore turned to Harry and said his last words. "If you forgive me my mistakes, and try your best, know that I enter the next great adventure with a clear resolve."

"I forgive you everything," Harry answered, "and I'll do my best." With that, the greatest wizard of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries passed on to his next adventure in the arms of the greatest wizard of the twenty-first.

Epilogue

Wednesday, September 1, 2004

Minerva McGonagall looked around the staff table as they gathered for lunch. She had rarely seen it this full since her own days as a student. The magical baby-boom of the 1980s and 1990s had swelled the school, and these days there were two professors for each of the required classes. There had been little doubt whom she had wanted for the extra positions, and this year they were all there.

Tabitha Spellman and Lloyd Trowbridge shared the Potions classes. Harry Potter taught dueling and split the Defense classes with Remus Lupin, when he wasn't on 'special assignment' for the Ministry, the International, or the Old Believers. Ivy Sprout and Neville Longbottom shared the Herbology positions. Hermione Lawrence was one of the Transfiguration professors, while her husband Tom taught a class in Ritual Magic and still split the History classes with Binns, who just would not go away.

Ron Weasley was just limping into the hall with a smile on his face. He had managed to live his dream as Keeper for the Chuddley Canons, but had been such a daredevil player that he had had to retire just this past spring, when his injuries had started to become too serious to repair even with magic. He had agreed to come as the Flying and Apparation Instructor, although his wife Sabrina was still flying with the Harpies. Behind him came Luna Potter and Ginny Longbottom, who helped run the daycare needed by the married members of the staff, a great change from the more monastic conditions of the previous few decades. Of course, with Tabitha's four year old, Hermione's three children (one born just three weeks before), Luna's three, Ginny's three (with a fourth on the way), the little group supplied more than half of the staff children, and all were planning more.

McGonagall was distracted by Harry's laugh. It had taken him most of the Seventh year to really recover from the execution of Voldemort and Dumbledore's death. He had spent Luna's last year on the dueling circuit, but also in tracking down Voldemort's associates and supporters, exposing them to the light of publicity if nothing else.

He and Luna had then mostly disappeared for a year and half, only contacting Lupin, Hermione, and Luna's father. Whatever he had done was never spoken about, but she had become aware that whatever it was had put a real scare into what remained of the Pure-Blood Movement. Even Draco Malfoy, who had been trying to bring the various factions together into a political movement across Europe, had retired from the Movement. Draco led a quiet life these days, married to a European Pure-Blood he had met in his travels.

She frowned at the instructors of the Old Belief, all talking in a group. She had no prejudices against the Belief, or against the staff who had belonged or who had recently joined, but she couldn't help but wonder at those who tended the Circle year 'round. They just didn't seem quite so trustworthy.

Still, Harry had told her that they formed both a dike against the more radical Pure-Bloods and would help maintain traditions while helping the Muggle-born integrate into the magical world. "The O.B.s might have high hopes for some real political power," he had said, "but I doubt if they'll ever have as much influence as they do in North America. At least they won't while I'm keeping an eye on them."

Coming from any other twenty-four year old, McGonagall would have shaken her head at their arrogance. Harry was far from perfect, but he was still far from arrogant, and still tended to underestimate himself.

Looking at her Gryffindors, her wonderful trio and their friends, McGonagall allayed her fears. She knew, at least for the rest of her life and beyond, no matter what the crisis, Harry Potter would always come to the rescue.

THE END